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Steal My Ideas, Not My Line

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December 1, 2010

[Benjamin H. Friedman](#)^[2]

In February 2008 Cato published "[Learning the Right Lessons from Iraq](#)^[3]," a paper I wrote with Harvey Sapolsky and Chris Preble. The paper aimed to refute the idea that the occupation of Iraq could have gone well given better plans, wiser leaders, or proper counterinsurgency doctrine. Our point was that Americans lack the power and wisdom to forcibly organize the politics of states like Iraq, at least at a reasonable cost. So we should leave Iraq and avoid repeating the error by doubling down on troop levels and nation-building efforts in Afghanistan.

One line in the paper summed up our view this way:

"The military gives us the power to conquer foreign countries, but not the power to run them."

I remember thinking that was a good line when I wrote it. So, evidently, did Richard Hanna, a Republican who just got elected to Congress representing New York's 24th District. In the [speech](#)^[4] he gave announcing his unsuccessful candidacy for the same seat in 2008, he said:

"The military gives us the power to conquer countries but not the power to run them."

He then wrote the same thing a [couple](#)^[5] of [times](#)^[6] when explaining his position on Iraq to a local paper. He did not use our line in his 2010 campaign, it appears. Actually, from what I can tell, he got through the campaign without expressing a clear opinion on either war, which tells you a lot about the election.

I found out about this because I had our intrepid interns assemble a database on all Congressional Republicans' positions on the war in Afghanistan and defense spending. And there was my quote, under someone else's name.

I do applaud Mr. Hanna's, or his aide's, editing. They cut the word "foreign," which was not needed before "countries." But the formation is otherwise identical. Especially given the timing, the similarity makes me confident that either our paper or one of the op-eds that we spun off from it was the unacknowledged source. That's plagiarism.

Because it's just one sentence, I probably would have been inclined to let this slide were it not

for the fact that, on all three occasions, Hanna used my words right before other sentences that contradicted the ideas they carried. Each time he went on to say that we have to stick around Iraq and try to sort out the factional fighting. Once, he knocked his opponent for wanting to “retreat.” Another time, he said we should send more troops to Afghanistan, the exact kind of thing our paper meant to discourage!

In other words, while I dislike having my words stolen, I especially dislike having them stolen to support policy positions that they attacked.

More by

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