

December 26, 2004

## **Our Challenges in the Year Ahead** **What we learned from three years of war.**

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*Private Papers*

*A shorter version of this essay recently appeared in the Australian Financial Review.*

No American President this century suffered the level of slander as did George Bush in the recent campaign. Yet despite Moveon.org, George Soros, Michael Moore, European hysteria, and the Hollywood elite, Mr. Bush won both a clear popular and electoral majority. He increased Republican control of the Congress, strengthened margins in the state legislatures and governorships, and is poised to reconstruct the Supreme Court. Blue-state America is left licking its wounds of rejection while the Democratic Party is about to engage in a bloody round of finger pointing and intra-party strife. If no incumbent has been so slurred as George W. Bush, not since Franklin Roosevelt has a sitting President so tightened his hold on the reins of government.

Although Mr. Bush has moved swiftly to reconstitute his cabinet along more uniform ideological lines, and is preparing conservative legislation running the gamut from entitlement reform to school choice, conventional wisdom suggests he will pause and take a breath in the war on terrorism. Because of worldwide furor over Iraq, and with American combat dead now exceeding 1,000 and the US military down to its last combat reserves, most might think that the neoconservative misadventure is over and the United States will return to a more multilateral, realist approach reminiscent of the four years of Bush senior's earlier term or perhaps even Bill Clinton's quietism.

Such perceptions are misplaced. What little quiet that will follow is because, rather than despite, of past muscularity. Precisely because the United States removed both the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, there is now a growing sense of American willingness to fight. Indeed, unpredictability about how America might react allows renewed opportunity for allies and neutrals to play good cop to our bad. Thus the Europeans raise the American unilateral bogeyman to head off through diplomacy the Iranian mullocracy's acquisition of nuclear weaponry, while a consortium of nations parley with North Korea in fear that otherwise the United States might act alone to ensure its West Coast is not in range of Pyongyang's nuclear-tipped missiles.

In addition, while critics continue to flay away at the President, the world is changing in ways that bolster the Bush worldview. Pakistan is no longer an enemy, but a neutral. A shaken Libya volunteers information about its own roguery. The Gulf Sheikdoms are not only hunting terrorists, but talking of constitutional reforms. Afghanistan has real elections for the first time in its 5,000-year history, even as Syria is apprehensive that the world is finally eyeing its illegitimate occupation of Lebanon.

The earlier ostracism of Yassir Arafat was widely condemned by Mr. Bush's critics here and abroad, but it was critical to marginalizing the corrupt leader and ensured that his subsequent death would be met with quiet relief even in the Arab world rather than Nasser-like deification. John Kerry and Jacques Chirac harped that America was alone in its clumsy war against terror, but, in fact, millions in Australia, Eastern Europe, Great Britain, and Japan are actively combating terrorists. Billions more in China, India, and Russia see Islamic radicalism in the same dangerous terms as does the American-led coalition.

The United States has not experienced another 9-11 mass murder. Perhaps this is due to increased homeland security, cooperation with allies in hunting down terrorists, and the scattering of al Qaeda leaders from sanctuaries in Afghanistan. But the reason may also be that a number of radical governments are beginning to worry that if terrorists who operate within their borders, or receive indirect aid from their coffers, are traced to any future killing of Americans, Mr. Bush is perhaps the type of leader that will hold them collectively responsible first, and worry about nuances and niceties later.

The President realizes that such momentum is fluid and events can easily slide in reverse—if the radical Islamic world, or other keen observers like China and North Korea, senses a return to Clintonian finger-shaking and occasional cruise missiles in lieu of real deterrence. And far from thinking elections are naïve flights of utopianism in such a rough part of the world, George Bush sincerely believes that constitutional government in Afghanistan and even Iraq will eventually become the norm of the region—thus isolating failed autocracies and lessening the chance of war between like democratic neighbors. In this regard, note his recent three-hour discussion with Natan Sharansky, when he sat receptive to the latter's gospel of Middle East liberalization.

Iran and Syria may sound defiant in the Islamic media; yet, the world around them in Israel, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Iraq is either democratic or moving in that direction. Their support of terror and desire to acquire dangerous strategic weapons, in the President's view, means that the larger war cannot be won unless both cease and desist or see their regimes changed—preferably through either diplomatic coercion and multilateral pressure or *in extremis* American force.

While the democratic stew brews in Afghanistan and Iraq, expect a number of Bush initiatives that will turn up the heat. The UN, reeling from the Oil for Food scandals, the Secretary-General's nepotism, and the organization's tolerance for mass murder in the Sudan, is under enormous pressure to democratize its membership, expand the Security Council, open its books—or face a de facto American disengagement. That is no longer a right-wing pipe dream, not when a majority of Americans now voices no confidence in either the efficacy or morality of such avatars of world governance.

The Palestinians likewise are facing an impending dilemma. Either with American support and aid they embrace real democracy and give up tribal Arafatism to negotiate as a legitimate interlocutor with the Israelis, or they will face a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the completion of a security fence, continued destruction of extremists and the recognition that

they will lose their window on the West through Jerusalem, and instead stew in their own juice with their like brethren in Syria and Egypt.

Nor will the Bush administration cease its reexamination of its superpower responsibilities. The American people believes that there is no longer any strategic or political logic in stationing thousands of soldiers in Europe, but plenty of reasons—economic, political, and psychological—to remove the vast majority of them at a time of troops shortages closer to the front. NATO has become as impotent as it is widely praised, especially when it fails to honor commitments in Afghanistan and abhors involvement with Iraq. This obstructionism is in sharp contrast to the prior European desire of American-led military intervention—without UN or Congressional sanction—to remove Slobodan Milosevic. Having learned belatedly the wisdom of talking more quietly while carrying an even bigger stick, America may continue to offer praise for the status quo trans-Atlantic relationship, while unobtrusively promoting wider bilateral relationships—like those with Australia—based on shared commitments to freedom and the need for collective security against statism and totalitarianism in all its many guises.

What may stymie the Bush Administration's efforts to press ahead with radical changes in the Middle East and a global war against regimes that support terror is not ever depressing news from the Sunni Triangle or additional terrorist attacks. Rather the rub will be financial pressure fueled by poor savings and investment, coupled with unrealistic spending—and fired by a national policy that rewards debtors and punishes savers.

The United States might be able to fight an expensive war abroad and enact massive tax cuts, but not simultaneously increase federal spending, with new mandates and entitlements. Spiraling trade deficits, a weak dollar, mounting national debt, and enormous annual budget shortfalls are creating a perfect storm of sorts. If these crises don't quite yet destroy the confidence of allies abroad and embolden opportunistic rivals like a cash-flush China, the news increasingly depresses Americans—without whose confidence the war abroad can not be carried out in full to its final success.

Supply-siders and economic libertarians may or may not be correct that the public's worry over a sinking dollar and mounting debts is the superstition of the unsophisticated. But mastery of econometrics and world finance is not the same as warcraft, in which the spiritual is every bit as important as the material. The United States may well have the money to defeat the terrorists and change the Middle East, but if its people think otherwise, we may still falter in this war even when victory is on the horizon. Unless things change quickly, what George Bush wants to do these next four years increasingly will hinge on what his people think he can afford to do.

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