

A Turning of the Tide?

by

William R. Polk

Since September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush has seemed invincible. Wrapping himself and his administration in the flag, he derided his Democratic Party opponents as weak, ill-informed, disorganized. He was right. They were. And to cap his lead over them, he also accused them, when they dared to voice any criticism of his policies, as unpatriotic. In the rhythm of American politics, he had a long head-start before the public could take his measure. Now, there are signs that his political tide has reached its highwater mark and perhaps has begun to turn.

As president, Bush used the nearly two years after the attack on the World Trade Center to put into place not only a new team in Washington and throughout the United States – in the Senate, the House of Representatives and the federal judiciary, but enabled fellow-Republican local and state officials throughout the country to ride on the wave of his “wartime” popularity. For the first time since Lyndon Johnson, a single party dominated American political life. From this commanding position, Bush and his Republican and Neoconservative teams have effected what is practically a revolution.

In foreign affairs, the two dozen or so Neoconservatives staked out a new doctrine to replace containment, the policy that had illuminated American actions since the late 1940s. The new doctrine replaced containment with preemption. No longer would America seek to deter rivals; it would seek them out and if necessary destroy them. It denigrated the United Nations and the European Union, replacing multilateralism with unilateralism, reliance on the massive military and economic power of the United States. And, while previous administrations, both Republican and Democratic, had emphasized military power, the Bush administration carried it to heretofore unmatched heights of “shock and awe.”

Pursuing the terrorists who had attacked the World Trade Center, the Bush administration first overwhelmed Afghanistan. That campaign devastated the few modern facilities of that poor, backward, and remote country. Then, flying under a variety of excuses, it turned its guns on Iraq: first it maintained that Iraq had in hand a vast arsenal of lethal weapons which it was ready to unleash on America; then it charged that Iraq was in league with the al-Qaida terrorists and planned to or already had turned over to them chemical, biological and even nuclear weapons; when evidence for these claims was called into question, it brought forward the wretched aspects of Saddam Husain’s regime as the excuse to invade.

The regime in Iraq was speedily overwhelmed. This was no surprise. While more modern and better organized than Afghanistan, Iraq was effectively (that is, minus its Kurdish and Shiite minorities) a country of just 5 million inhabitants with a still-crippled (by the 1991 war and the continuing UN sanctions) economy, a small and

obsolescent army on which it could devote something like 1 5,000th as much as the United States devotes to its army. In the short campaign, the United States killed an untold number of Iraqis – the more or less official figure is somewhat over 3,000 while the real figure may be ten or even twenty times that number – and did something on the order of \$100 billion worth of damage. It was rightly named “shock and awe.”

But, shock and awe aside, the campaign has proved a failure. The Iraqis are not, apparently, willing to give up. However they may feel about Saddam Husain or the Baathists, nationalism is still their dominant political sentiment. Few welcomed the Americans and, increasingly, Iraqis of all political persuasions, both creeds and the three ethnic groups want Americans to get out. “Winning the hearts and minds” is proving as elusive in Iraq as it did in Vietnam.

If Vietnam was a quagmire, Iraq is becoming a bed of quicksand. As attacks by Iraqis are producing American casualties at a rate of almost one a day, there is evidence of increasing American disquiet. The most recent *Washington Post*-ABC News poll indicated that for the first time a majority of Americans found the casualty rate “unacceptable.”

By the new strategic doctrine, promulgated by the Bush administration under the tutelage of the Neoconservatives, Afghanistan and Iraq are only the first steps in a global crusade. Intervention, war and occupation appear to be limitless options – or obligations. The Neoconservatives inherited from their Trotskyite past the idea of permanent revolution which they have re-defined as continuous war. And, since they define “terrorism” to include the quest of suppressed nations for self-determination, virtually the whole world has become their battle ground.

As General James L. Jones USMC, head of the European command, said, “As we pursue the global war on terrorism, we’re going to have to go where the terrorists are. And we’re seeing some evidence, at least preliminary, that more and more of these large uncontrolled, ungoverned areas [roughly the whole “third world”] are going to be potential havens for that kind of activity.” Thus “a family” (in General Jones’s expression) of bases, training facilities or intelligence gathering posts already exist or are being set up in Morocco, Tunisia, Mali, Algeria, Senegal, Uganda, Ghana, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Gabon, Namibia and Zambia. This is to focus just on Africa. In addition, outposts and troop emplacements already exist or are being planned for dozens of other places in the Middle East, Central and South Asia, the Pacific, Central and South America and on a scattering of strategic islands.

Roughly half the fighting force of the American army is now tied down in Afghanistan and Iraq at a monthly cost of nearly \$5 billion. Reports from Washington indicate that the Pentagon is considering calling up elements of the National Guard and, perhaps, taking other measures to provide more soldiers.

Relatively little attention, and pitifully few resources, have been devoted to the political aspects of American foreign policy. The assumption of the Neoconservatives is that raw power alone will cow the nations of the world to do Washington’s bidding, that

no other states, with the possible exceptions of Britain and Israel, are reliable and that, therefore it is fruitless to pay attention to the desires and fears of others.

Where this irresistible force comes up against an immobile object – as it has in North Korea – consternation reigns. Attacking countries that have the will and the means to defend themselves – particularly if they already have nuclear weapons -- involves “unacceptable” cost. So what to do?

One answer, that put forward by the Neoconservatives, is to attack other countries before they acquire the means to defend themselves. That is preemption. The other side of that coin, obviously, is that knowing this to be American policy, countries have every incentive to acquire weapons of mass destruction as quickly and secretly as possible. Korea did just that; Iran is probably doing it. Others will surely follow.

The Bush administration has no answer for the danger posed by existing nuclear powers. But, over the last half century, other administrations, both Republican and Democratic, have evolved what are essentially two categories of answer: first, work to create conditions in which such weapons will not be used in fear and, second, work toward disarmament. Both of these have been cast aside.

Rather, the answer is an escalation of armaments. New weapons programs are being pursued that would enable the United States, without having to send large numbers of troops abroad or to fear retaliation, to devastate any area from outer space by command and control systems operated from within the United States. Such systems are expected to become available in the coming ten to twenty years.

These programs may be technically feasible, but with costs almost as unacceptable as nuclear war: they will turn the whole world into a target with everyone else living in fear of American anger. Moreover, the vast cost of creating these “star wars” and other programs will divert resources from social, educational, health and other programs and so drastically alter the very nature of American society.

What these domestic programs are, how the Bush administration’s military program has impacted upon them and what the American voters’ reactions may be is the subject of a second article.

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