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The End of Cowboy Diplomacy

WHY GEORGE W. BUSH'S GRAND STRATEGY FOR REMAKING THE WORLD HAD TO CHANGE

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The dress code at George W. Bush's White House is cuff-linked and starch collared, reflecting the temper of a President with a reputation for no-nonsense, alpha-male decisiveness. That's why the 200 guests gathered at the White House on Independence Day were surprised to learn that Bush had decided to rip up protocol. It was an early 60th-birthday party for the President, attended by former classmates from first grade to Yale, and Bush was in high spirits. He waved to supporters on the South Lawn who had assembled to watch fireworks. They serenaded him with a hurried rendition of Happy Birthday. But instead of the usual starch, he wore a red-and-white Hawaiian shirt for the occasion.

Six years into his presidency, Bush can't be blamed for wanting a change. All the good feeling at the White House on July 4 couldn't hide the fact that he finds himself in a world of hurt. A grinding and unpopular war in Iraq, a growing insurgency in Afghanistan, an impasse over Iran's nuclear ambitions, a brewing war between Israel and the Palestinians--the litany of global crises would test the fortitude of any President, let alone a second-termer with an approval rating mired in Warren Harding territory. And there's no relief in sight. On the very day that Bush celebrated 60, North Korea's regime, already believed to possess material for a clutch of nuclear weapons, test-launched seven missiles, including one designed to reach the U.S. Even more surprising than the test (it failed less than two minutes after launch) was Bush's response to it. Long gone were the zero-tolerance warnings that peppered his speeches four years ago, when he made North Korea a charter member of the "axis of evil" club and declared at West Point that "the only path of safety is the path of action." Instead, Bush pledged to "make sure we work with our friends and allies ... to continue to send a unified message" to Pyongyang. In a press conference following the missile test, he referred to diplomacy half a dozen times.

The shift under way in Bush's foreign policy is bigger and more seismic than a change of wardrobe or a modulation of tone. Bush came to office

pledging to focus on domestic issues and pursue a "humble" foreign policy that would avoid the entanglements of the Bill Clinton years. After Sept. 11, however, the Bush team embarked on a different path, outlining a muscular, idealistic and unilateralist vision of American power and how to use it. He aimed to lay the foundation for a grand strategy to fight Islamic terrorists and rogue states by spreading democracy around the world and pre-empting gathering threats before they materialize. And the U.S. wasn't willing to wait for others to help. The approach fit with Bush's personal style, his self-professed proclivity to dispense with the nuances of geopolitics and go with his gut. "The Bush Doctrine is actually being defined by action, as opposed to by words," Bush told Tom Brokaw aboard Air Force One in 2003.

But in the span of four years, the Administration has been forced to rethink the doctrine with which it hoped to remake the world as the strategy's ineffectiveness is exposed by the very policies it prescribed. The swaggering Commander in Chief who embodied the doctrine's aspirations has modulated himself too. At a press conference with British Prime Minister Tony Blair in May, Bush swore off the Wild West rhetoric of getting enemies "dead or alive," conceding that "in certain parts of the world, it was misinterpreted." Bush's response to the North Korean missile test was equally revealing. Under the old Bush Doctrine, defiance by a dictator like Kim Jong Il would have merited threats of punitive U.S. action--or at least a tongue lashing. Instead, the Administration has mainly been talking up multilateralism and downplaying Pyongyang's provocation. As much as anything, it's confirmation of what Princeton political scientist Gary J. Bass calls "doctrinal flameout." Put another way: cowboy diplomacy, RIP.

So what happened? The most obvious answer is that the Bush Doctrine foundered in the principal place the U.S. tried to apply it. Though no one in the White House openly questions Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq, some aides now acknowledge that it has come at a steep cost in military resources, public support and credibility abroad. The Administration is paying the bill every day as it tries to cope with other crises. Pursuing the forward-leaning foreign policy envisioned in the Bush Doctrine is nearly impossible at a time when the U.S. is trying to figure out how to extricate itself from Iraq. Around the world, both the U.S.'s friends and its adversaries are taking note--and in many cases, taking advantage--of the strains on the superpower. If the toppling of Saddam Hussein marked the high-water mark of U.S. hegemony, the past three years have witnessed a steady erosion in Washington's ability to bend the world to its will.

Despite appearances, the White House insists that Bush's goals have not changed. "The President has always stressed that different circumstances warrant different responses," says White House counselor Dan Bartlett. "The impression that the doctrine of pre-emption was the only guiding foreign policy light is not true. Iraq was a unique circumstance in history,

and the sense of urgency on certain decisions in the early part of the first term was reflective of a nation that had to take decisive action after being attacked."

Nonetheless, a strategic makeover is evident in the ascendancy of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who has tried to repair the Administration's relations with allies and has persuaded Bush to join multilateral negotiations aimed at defusing the standoffs with North Korea and Iran. By training and temperament, Rice is a foreign policy realist, less inclined to the moralizing approach of the neoconservatives who dominated Bush's War Cabinet in the first term. Her push for pragmatism has rubbed off on hawks like Vice President Dick Cheney, the primary intellectual force behind Bush's post-9/11 policies. "There's a move, even by Cheney, toward the Kissingerian approach of focusing entirely on vital interests," says a presidential adviser. "It's a more focused foreign policy that is driven by realism and less by ideology."

To much of the world, that's a relief. But having expended so much energy and so many resources on al-Qaeda and the war in Iraq, the Administration is finding that other global challenges--from the turmoil in the Middle East to the genocide in Sudan to the regional ambitions of China--have grown beyond its ability to do anything about them. "It's difficult to think of many other times and many other presidencies when so many dangerous events were happening at once," says Wendy Sherman, a State Department official under President Clinton. "But there's so much going on in every global hot spot because the Bush Administration really opened up Pandora's box with little-to-no plans to support their actions." At the same time, there is a danger that Bush's belated embrace of conventional diplomacy will turn out to be a cover for disengagement, at a time when U.S. leadership is still required to fend off civil war in Iraq and deter the ambitions of Iran and North Korea--to say nothing of al-Qaeda. We are witnessing an overhaul of the old Bush Doctrine, but the question is, Can the U.S. find a new one to take its place?

â€¢THE IRAQ EFFECT

It may be too soon to say whether history will look kindly on the U.S.'s decision to invade Iraq, as Bush and his aides insist will happen. But the very fact that parts of Iraq remain on the edge of chaos after three years of fighting and the deaths of more than 2,500 Americans are incontrovertible evidence of how the Administration's miscalculations have come back to haunt it. Toppling Saddam was to be the singular demonstration of the Bush Doctrine, a quick and decisive strike against tyranny in the heart of the Middle East. It would also send a message to the rest of the world's malefactors, including Iran and North Korea, to think twice about testing the U.S.'s patience with regimes bent on acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

As it turns out, Iraq may prove to be not only the first but also the last laboratory for preventive war. Instead of deterring the rulers in Tehran and Pyongyang, the travails of the U.S. occupation may have emboldened those regimes in their quest to obtain nuclear weapons while constraining the U.S. military's ability to deter them. "We put three countries on notice--Iraq, Iran and North Korea--and we attacked one of them pre-emptively," says retired Marine Corps General Joseph Hoar, who commanded the U.S. Central Command from 1991 to '94. "Now we find that was a put-up job. Meanwhile, North Korea and Iran have chosen different routes than what we wanted them to take."

Fighting the insurgency in Iraq has eroded the appeal of the Bush Doctrine in a more mundane but no less significant way: it's exhausting. Public backing for the war rose slightly after the killing of terrorist leader Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi in Iraq last month, but the unremitting body count has pushed those numbers back down again. More than half the public believes going to war was not worth the cost. The drain on U.S. resources is becoming embarrassing. According to the Associated Press, the diversion of money for Iraq is partly responsible for a shortfall in an Army fund that has left one base, Fort Bragg, unable to buy office supplies. Another base, Fort Sam Houston, has received utility disconnection notices.

There is another cost, and that is the drain of brainpower and psychic energy in the Administration, from the President on down. Governments habitually overestimate what they can achieve and underestimate how much of their working day they have to spend on the really tricky issue at hand. Bush's aides say he and they can multitask--"We can walk and chew gum at the same time," says one--but the ceaseless need to make a bad situation passable is a drag on the entire enterprise. "If Iraq gets better, everything gets better," a White House official says. "If Iraq doesn't get better, there's no hope."

â€¢TWILIGHT OF IDEALISM

If the grind of the war in Iraq has undermined one plank of the Bush Doctrine--pre-emption--the complexity of global politics has caused the U.S. to struggle in its goal to spread democracy as a defense against terrorism. Some democracy activists give Bush credit for giving a jump start to limited reforms in closed Arab regimes such as Saudi Arabia. But the White House was premature, at best, in its hopes for dramatic change. In Egypt, which the Administration has praised in the past for opening its political process, the government of Hosni Mubarak has launched a renewed crackdown against its political opponents. Lebanon, another onetime success story championed by Bush, has witnessed an unraveling of the coalition of parties that led to Syria's withdrawal from the country last spring.

Among ordinary Muslims, outrage at the bloodshed in Iraq and the

excesses of the Administration's campaign against al-Qaeda--in particular, reported abuses at Abu Ghraib and GuantÃ¡namo Bay prisons--has strengthened the appeal of Islamists opposed to the West. As a result, elections are producing governments more hospitable to extremism, not less. Exhibit A was the election of Hamas, a group the U.S. and Europe classify as a terrorist organization, to run the Palestinian Authority. In response to Hamas' victory, the U.S. has led an international ban on aid to the democratically elected Palestinian government.

That reflects a broader dimming of the Administration's commitment to the ideals of its once proactive freedom agenda. Despite occasional jawboning, the U.S. has put only token pressure on Russia and China to improve their records on civil liberties and human rights, which have grown worse on Bush's watch. A senior Administration official tells TIME that the White House wants to set up new systems that will use efforts at democracy building as a condition for foreign aid and as a criterion for judging the work of U.S. ambassadors. But some officials inside the White House admit that the Administration's attention appears sporadic, limited to calling for elections but then failing to follow through on the tougher, more costly and less glamorous work of building institutions that can sustain democracies. Michael O'Hanlon, a senior foreign policy fellow at the Brookings Institution, says, "The Administration's top-down approach of assuming that elections will solve problems has been too simplistic. You also need educational institutions and economic development."

â€¢THE LIMITS OF POWER

To accomplish those goals of democracy building, you need help. The biggest illusion of the Bush Doctrine was the idea that the U.S. could carry out a strategy as ambitious as reshaping the Middle East and changing unfriendly regimes without a degree of international legitimacy and cooperation to back it up. Though the Administration sought broad international assistance in Afghanistan, it largely shunned it in Iraq. As a result, while NATO forces are now relieving U.S. troops of some of the combat burden for fighting the Taliban in southern Afghanistan, Americans continue to fight and die alone (with some backup from Iraqi troops) against the Sunni insurgents in western Iraq.

The practical costs of the last plank of the Bush Doctrine--unilateralism--may have finally persuaded the Administration to jettison that too. This move is being led by Rice, who is emerging as Bush's most visible and intimate adviser. "The President is more willing to listen to arguments in favor of utilizing diplomacy as a tool to fight radical Islam when it comes from her, because he trusts her totally," says a presidential adviser. Rice appears to have won some internal arguments--such as getting Bush to offer conditional direct talks to Iran and calling for the closure of Gitmo--but she has yet to pull off any major diplomatic breakthrough that could burnish the Bush legacy. And neoconservative allies of Bush blast Rice for pursuing

diplomacy for its own sake. "When you are bereft of options, you pursue process and call it progress," says Danielle Pletka, a vice president of the American Enterprise Institute.

Since joining multilateral talks over Iran and North Korea, the U.S. has failed to persuade Russia and China, who wield veto power in the U.N. Security Council, to agree to specific sanctions against either Tehran or Pyongyang. The gap between the U.S.'s priorities and the rest of the world's stretches beyond those two challenges. The war on terrorism has provided a neat ideological framework for U.S foreign policy in the Bush years, but it has distracted the attention of the U.S. from developments in other areas--Asia, Russia and its former satellites, and Latin America--where new international systems are being built without the U.S. as their builder. For most outside the U.S., the threat of suicide bombings is a less pressing concern than issues like health care, education, job security and the environment. The longer the U.S. bases its foreign policy around the single-minded pursuit of Islamic terrorists, the less influence it is likely to have.

Can the Bush Administration recover all it has lost? Much depends on the temper and commitment of the President himself. "He can juggle all the balls and still let his hair down," says Charlie Younger, an orthopedic surgeon from Midland, Texas, and longtime friend, who spent three nights at the White House this month. "He's an eternal optimist."

But global leadership can't be based on optimism alone. And true diplomacy means more than repeating the word itself. Despite the crises facing him, Bush still has options, though they are ones he hasn't yet shown a willingness to use. Until recently, Bush failed to acknowledge how much Iraq has eroded U.S. credibility or show that he takes seriously the criticisms lodged against his policies by the U.S.'s allies. Iraq may turn out to be a peaceful and thriving democracy, but Bush himself concedes he doesn't foresee that happening before he leaves the stage 30 months from now. If Bush hopes to salvage a more popular, less contested legacy, he needs to commit himself to something big and attainable beyond Iraq--a strategic rapprochement with Iran, perhaps, or a Marshall Plan for African development--and bring allies on board for the ride. Of course, the longing for a foreign policy legacy is common to all lame-duck Presidents; more often than not, such quests have ended in disappointment. Bush may still be able to avoid that fate, but he's running out of time.

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