

America in Trouble

Monday, 28 January 2008

America is in trouble. The army is tired out but insists that all objectives will be achieved (whatever they are). Congressional support for the war is flagging. Some Republican internationalists are insisting that if the Iraq war vote came up today, knowing what they now know, they would never agree to it. Vice President Dick Cheney's conclusion the insurgency was in its "last throes" and President Bush's "Mission Accomplished" seem false than ever. Public impatience with the war of liberation that turned out to be a guerrilla war of attrition is growing. Diminished public support is palpable.

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Army recruitment and re-enlistment statistics show a sharp decline. The capabilities for fighting two-and-a-half wars simultaneously have long since fallen to the post-Cold War cost-cutters in two Clinton administrations. The two wars at the same time strategy is also a distant memory.

Sir Michael Dearlove's (then head of MI6, the British secret intelligence service, and now dean of Pembroke College at Cambridge University), famous Downing Street memo, has convinced many people that the Bush administration's strategy for a quick war was fundamentally flawed. Even the Rumsfeld Doctrine did not foresee the need for prolonged occupation, as Iraq required.

The might of the U.S., army has been severely challenged. It now seems that any strike by another enemy force can only be repulsed through the use of nuclear weapons.

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It is obvious now that the war had nothing to do with Iraq's so called "weapons of mass destruction", and everything to do with it. Iraq, the war's strategic thinkers posited, was to become the Arab world's first democracy. Democratic Iraq would then become a magnet for surrounding authoritarian states. And Israel, surrounded by Arab democracies, could at last relax and look forward to at least a quarter-century of peace and tranquility.

The illusion that 24 million Iraqis would go back to work after a few joyous days of celebration a la France circa 1944, and that oil would pay Uncle Sam's war bills, was conventional wisdom at the highest echelons of government. Everything was slam-dunk, from WMD to the rallying of the Iraqi army to the coalition. Talk of a possible Sunni-inspired-insurgency was ridiculed.

Even the retired army generals seem pessimistic. According to Richard A. Clarke, former top counterterrorist official, "One victim of this slow bleeding in Iraq," says Mr. Clarke, "is the American military as an institution. Across America, the National Guard, designed to assist civil authorities in domestic crises is in tatters. ... Now the rot is beginning to spread into the regular Army. Recruiters are coming up dry, and some, under pressure to produce new troops, have reportedly been complicit in suspect applications."

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By the end of President Bush's term, Mr. Clarke writes, "the war in Iraq could end up costing \$600 billion, more than 6 times what some key Pentagon officials had projected."

The Bush administration is unlikely to change course because opinion polls show the majority of Americans don't like the heading. He has staked his presidency on seeing it through to a viable Iraqi democracy taking root and then being able to defend itself without the U.S. cavalry standing by to ride to the rescue.

The American people care more about their threatened social securities cloudy future, than about the stakes in Iraq. Mr. Bush has to understand that at this stage, failure is not an option. But at present, failure seems to be a possibility. Damage control is vital.