

## **Bush not the only problem**

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**We're going to run these bastards down. We're going to lead, and everyone else is going to follow**

**-CIA director George Tenet, after September 11, 2001**

If the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?  
- 1 Corinthians 14:8, New Testament

At the beginning of the new millennium, a mere seven years ago, it was widely assumed that the character of the coming epoch would be determined by the interplay between two closely related and mutually reinforcing phenomena: US hegemony and globalisation.

The US was the confident possessor of overwhelming all-round power. It was "the benign superpower" that would provide the stability and security necessary for globalisation to proceed and thrive. In its turn globalisation would ensure the worldwide spread of American economic practices, technologies, culture and values. Indeed for many influential writers on the subject - Thomas Friedman in his huge bestseller, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, for example - globalisation seemed to be more or less a synonym for Americanisation. The French foreign minister at the time, Hubert Vedrine, agreed: "American globalism dominates everything. Not in a harsh, repressive, military form, but in people's heads."

It is worth bearing this quite recent picture of the world in mind in order to appreciate fully how different things are now.

The US and the American people are experiencing a crisis of confidence. The country is bitterly divided and uncertain as to how it should proceed. Obsessed by immediate problems, there is little evidence of far-reaching strategic thinking, or of that much prized American commodity, vision.

In the rest of the world, anti-Americanism is at an all-time high. But it is not so much that the US is feared and hated; a superpower can comfortably cope with a lot of that.

What is more serious is the loss of respect and credibility that is evident, the diminished prestige and authority, and consequently a reduced ability to lead, persuade or overawe.

All this has resulted from an astonishingly inept American performance over the past few years. That in turn reflects the cumulative effect of a combination of factors: the profound shock of 9/11; the resulting outrage that had the effect of causing the country to behave in a fashion that in some ways betrayed its own best values; hubris, and the embracing of a doctrine that was so ambitious that it guaranteed failure; and an administration guilty of incredible incompetence in the implementation of policy. (The world witnessed a superpower that claimed to be able to fix the world, even as it failed miserably for months on end to deal with the impact of a hurricane on one of its cities.)

Does this matter for anyone apart from Americans? Well yes, it does. For one thing, to have a superpower that does not command respect is likely to tempt others to frustrate or ignore its will generally, and that is a dangerous state of affairs. For another, the less it is respected the more likely is the superpower to take drastic, and possibly reckless, action to remedy that state of affairs.

But perhaps the most dangerous consequence of a continuing loss of confidence in and by the US is that we would be left with a leaderless world. For there is no alternative leader in sight in the foreseeable future. The other developed Western countries lack the energy, confidence and will for the job. So does Japan.

China has great potential, but has limited recent international experience and for some time it is going to be preoccupied coping with the consequences of its extraordinary economic growth and the urgent problems that presents. The same is true of India. Russia possesses great destructive power and huge energy reserves, but although it has re-emerged as a serious player, it has no global leadership credentials.

The UN? Even if one ignores its many grievous faults, that institution is a forum, not a principal actor. A concert of powers? But the creation and functioning of such a concert requires authority and leadership on someone's part, so the problem remains. There is no other immediate plausible candidate for leadership if the US can no longer fill the role.

But there is going to be an urgent need for leadership in a world that is changing rapidly and is already experiencing serious tensions.

Globalisation requires new economic and political ground rules, and providing them is going to be more complicated than merely extending or tinkering with existing Western ones. There is the specific and urgent issue of global warming. The problems associated with mass, uncontrolled human migration are mounting. Many experts believe that nuclear proliferation is now a more urgent matter than it has ever been, and that the prospect of weapons in the hands of an increasing number of states with weak governments and poor security and control systems is imminent. And, of course, there is the continuing problem of global terrorism, which is real enough even if it is sometimes grossly exaggerated.

If leadership is urgently needed, and if there is really no plausible alternative to the US for the role, the questions arise: How badly damaged is the US? Will it recover reasonably quickly, or does the damage go deep, perhaps too deep for recovery?

Opinions, even serious informed opinions, vary widely. At one extreme there are those who blame everything on the ineptitude of the Bush administration and believe that all will be well once it goes. At the other are those - for example the much-respected analyst Pierre Hassner - who believe that what is happening represents the end of a brief, and partly illusory, period of American dominance, and may indeed mark the beginning of the de-Westernisation of the international system. The former view is superficial, while the second is at best premature.

There is more wrong with the US than the Bush administration. As we witness a presidential election process that now extends over two years and involves the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars, and as we reflect on the mediocre result that such a process can produce, it is evident that there is something seriously dysfunctional about the American political system. (The Democratic Party starts as favourite in the next election; the two leading candidates for its nomination at this stage have no significant experience in international affairs.)

Again, it is not any cheese-eating Frenchman but Irving Kristol, the distinguished father of William and the founder of neo-conservatism, who observed not so long ago that there are "clear signs of

rot and decadence" in American culture, and that the most urgent priority for Americans should be to put their own house in order.

And it is a respectable American enterprise - the Pew Global Attitudes Survey - that has recently reported findings that depict today's US as increasingly hostile to international trade, foreign companies and immigration. That is a strange state of affairs in a country that virtually created today's global economy and that is made up of the children of immigrants.

All that having been said, however, one of the most striking features of American history is the country's ability to recover quickly from adversity and its own errors: witness the rapidity of its recovery from the Civil War, the Depression and, more recently, the Vietnam War.

Whether it can do so again, after the debacle of the Bush administration, has a claim to be the key question of our time, bearing in mind that recovery in this context must mean a return not only of confidence but of judgment, prudence and an understanding of the world.

It is a question of particular importance for Australia, which has invested so heavily in its alliance with the US.

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