

Wasting capital based on goodwill

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upcoming visits to Washington by Israeli and Palestinian leaders, the Middle East road map has yet to be unfolded.

In the Far East, the North Koreans may be building nuclear weapons or may not; we don't know. They could have a half-dozen by the end of the year. If the administration has a strategy for responding, it is not telling, but it seems to be relying on China to pressure North Korea effectively. Relying simply on China? As I say, it is a worrisome time. Overall, the outlook for preventing the spread of potentially destabilising weapons systems is bleak. The administration openly allergic to treaties and arms control, has made no effort to promote restraint in developing arms as a normative ethic to which all nations have an interest in adhering. Instead, it has decided to fight proliferation primarily through military means and threats. Is this adequate?

Adm. Lowell Jacoby, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, testified recently that "new alliances" are pooling resources "to deter or offset US military superiority." Globalisation has made the technology and resources necessary to develop sophisticated weapons more widely available. "Some 25 countries," Jacoby warns, "possess or are actively pursuing WMD or missile programmes. The threat to US and allied interests will grow during the next decade."

Now would not be a bad time to start worrying. Tens of thousands of American troops will be in Iraq, perhaps for years, surrounded by Iraqis with guns. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld says this is not a quagmire; I pray he is right. But the practical problems faced by the talented American administrator, L. Paul Bremer, and by US soldiers trying to maintain order without a clear way of separating enemies from friends are daunting.

It would help greatly if we had more assistance from the international community, but in fairness, the war was an Anglo-American production; it's unlikely we will get substantial help without yielding significant authority, something the administration is loath to do. Meanwhile, US credibility has been undermined by the failure to find weapons of mass destruction and by the inclusion of dubious information in the president's State of the Union address.

Among other things, the war in Iraq was supposed to reduce the dangers posed by Al-Qaeda terrorists and prompt resumed progress toward peace in the Middle East. Time will tell whether the former was achieved, but reports of a rush of new Al-Qaeda recruits are not encouraging. As for the latter, Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas has indeed made progress in negotiations — with Chairman Yasser Arafat. Despite a welcome cooling in rhetoric and

While in Africa this month, the president raised expectations that the United States will help stabilise Liberia, a noble mission that would help repair the administration's thoroughly battered image overseas. At the same time, there is a risk that the Pentagon — already stretched thin — will try to get by in Liberia on the cheap, investing American prestige but insufficient clout. We have seen this movie before — in Somalia. If we do go into Liberia, we must be prepared to do the job right. I am an optimist with immense faith in the ability of US leadership to mobilise world opinion on behalf of democracy, justice and peace.

Leadership is not possible, however, without resources. It takes money to secure borders, defeat terrorists, safeguard nuclear materials, build democratic institutions, create educational systems in which tolerance is valued, and help nations recover from conflict. So when I see that the combined federal budget deficit this year and next will approach \$1 trillion, I have to wonder. The president has made a lot of promises about "draining the swamp" in which terrorists thrive, combating AIDS, promoting development and meeting commitments to nations such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Liberia. Will the White House and Congress be able to meet those commitments when police, fire fighters and

schoolteachers must be laid off at home on account of budget cutbacks? If we do renege on the president's promises, what further damage to US credibility will result?

Three years ago, America had vast diplomatic capital based on the good will we enjoyed around the world, and vast financial capital based on our international economic leadership and a record budget surplus. Now our capital of all kinds has been dissipated and we are left with more intractable dilemmas than resources or friends. As someone who has served in positions of responsibility, I know it is much harder to devise practical solutions from the inside than to offer theoretical solutions from the outside.

The nature of today's world, not the Bush administration, is responsible for the majority of problems we face. I would be less concerned, however, if I thought the administration was learning as it went along — learning how to attract broader international support for its policies, make better use of neglected diplomatic tools, share responsibility, be more careful with the truth, finish what it starts and devise economic policies consonant with America's global role. The quickest way to a more effective national security policy is to acknowledge the need for improvement; until that happens, we will continue to slide backward toward ever more dangerous ground.

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