

The sobering of

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By Timothy Garton Ash

TO return to America after an absence of six months is to find a nation sobered by reality. The reality of debt and lost jobs. The reality of rising China. Above all, the reality of Iraq.

This new sobriety was exemplified by President Bush's speech at Fort Bragg last Tuesday night. Beforehand, as the camera panned across row upon row of soldiers in red berets, the television commentator warned us that the speech might last a long time, since it was likely to be interrupted by numerous rounds of heartfelt applause from this loyal military audience.

In fact, the audience interrupted him with applause just once. Once! Lines that during last autumn's election rallies drummed up a certain storm ("We will not allow our future to be determined by car bombers and assassins") were now met with a deafening silence. Stolidly they sat, the serried soldiers, clean-shaven, square-jawed, looking slightly bored and, in at least one case that I spotted, rhythmically chewing gum.

Bush ploughed on with his sober, rather wooden speech, wearing that curious, rigid half-smile of his, with the mouth turning down rather than up at each end. A demi-rictus. The eerie silence made him look, at moments, like a stand-up comic whose jokes were falling flat; but of course this was no laughing matter.

Afterwards, the same television commentators who had warned us to expect rounds of applause speculated, with an equally authoritative air, that the White House had suggested restraint to this audience, so it would not look as if the president

to see this. Before Bush spoke at Fort Bragg, 53 per cent of those asked in a CNN/Gallup poll said it was a mistake to go into Iraq. Just 40 per cent approved of how he has handled Iraq, down from 50 per cent at the time of the presidential election last November.

Contrary to what many Europeans believe, you can fool some of the Americans all of the time, and all of the Americans some of the time, but you can't fool most Americans most of the time — even with the help of Fox News. Reality gets through. Hence the new sobriety.

I don't want to overstate this. One is still gobsmacked by things American Republicans say. Take the glorification of the military, for example. In his speech, Bush insisted "there is no higher calling than service in our armed forces". What? No higher calling! How about being a doctor, a nurse, a teacher, an aid worker? Unimaginable that any European leader could say such a thing.

Nonetheless, here are a few indicators of the new sobriety. First of all, neocons are no longer calling the shots. As a well-informed Washingtonian tells me, the nominations of Paul Wolfowitz to head the World Bank and John Bolton to be ambassador to the UN actually show they have been kicked upstairs. There is little talk now of proud unilateralism and America winning the Gwot on its own. Everyone stresses the importance of allies. Bush quoted with approval Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, on our shared interest in a stable Iraq, and proudly averred that "Iraqi army and police are being trained by personnel from Italy, Germany, Ukraine, Turkey, Poland, Romania, Australia and the United Kingdom".

...our requesting blanket coverage from the television networks and exploiting the nation's military for the purposes of a party-political rally.

But then perhaps soldiers who actually risk their lives for Bush's policies in Iraq, and have lost comrades there, would not have been in a great mood to applaud anyway. Afterwards, as he mingled with the troops in the hall, their faces showed little more than mild curiosity at the prospect of meeting their commander-in-chief.

Bush's Fort Bragg speech once again presented Iraq as part of the global war on terror — the Gwot. He mentioned the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks five times; weapons of mass destruction not once. We have to defeat the terrorists abroad, he said, before they attack us at home. As freedom

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spreads in the Middle East, the terrorists will lose their support. Then he made this extraordinary statement: "To complete the mission, we will prevent Al Qaeda and other foreign terrorists from turning Iraq into what Afghanistan was under the Taliban — a safe haven from which they could launch attacks on America and our friends."

Consider. Three years ago, when the Bush administration started ramping up the case for invading Iraq, Afghanistan had recently been liberated from both the Taliban and the Al Qaeda terrorists who had attacked the US. There was still a vast amount to be done to make Afghanistan a safe place. Iraq, meanwhile, was a hideous dictatorship under Saddam Hussein. But, as the United States' own September 11 commission subsequently concluded, Saddam's regime had no connection with the 9/11 attacks. Iraq was not then a recruiting sergeant or training ground for jihadist terrorists. Now it is.

The US-led invasion, and Washington's grievous mishandling of the subsequent occupation, have made it so. General Wesley Clark puts it plainly: "We are creating enemies." And the president observes: our great achievement will be to prevent Iraq becoming another Taliban-style, Al Qaeda-harboured Afghanistan! This is like a man who shoots himself in the foot and then says: "We must prevent it turning gangrenous, then you'll understand why I was right to shoot myself in the foot."

In short, whether or not the invasion of Iraq was a crime, it's now clear that — at least in the form in which the invasion and occupation was executed by the Bush administration — it was a massive blunder. And the American people are beginning

The state department, under Condoleezza Rice, is setting out to repair old American alliances and to forge new ones. One of America's most dynamically developing alliances is with India, a country in which America is also much loved. If anyone in Foggy Bottom (the wonderfully named neighbourhood of the state department) feels a twinge of schadenfreude at the crisis of the EU, they are not showing it. They want a strong European partner too.

On Iran, which even six months ago threatened to become a new Iraq crisis, the US is letting the so-called E3 — Britain, France and Germany — take the diplomatic lead. Even with the election of a hardline Iranian president, military options are not being seriously canvassed. And if the European diplomacy with Iran does not work, what is Washington's plan B? To take the issue to the United Nations! What a difference three years make.

Schroeder is right, of course. It would be suicidally dumb for any European to think, in relation to Iraq, "the worse the better". Jihadists now cutting their teeth in Iraq will make no fine distinctions between Washington and London, Berlin or Madrid. Any reader tempted to luxuriate schadenfreudishly in the prospect of a Vietnam-style US evacuation from Baghdad may be woken from that reverie by the blast from a bomb, planted in Charing Cross tube station by an Iraq-hardened terrorist. But it is a fair and justified historical observation that American policy has got better — more sober, more realistic — at least partly because things in Iraq have gone so badly. This is the cunning of history.—*Dawn-Guardian News Service*