

LEGACY OF A 'WAR PRESIDENT' IS NOTHING TO BE PROUD OF

The American Presidential campaign still has a few weeks to run, and a few million dollars still to be thrown around. Whoever from Kerry or Bush wins the election (a narrow win it seems), America, as a most powerful country, remains a compulsory reference to the rest of the world. Which is why President Bush's staff will be interested in the latest multinational poll published by the US-based German Marshall Fund, three years after the September 11 attacks. Beyond the information itself which, as is often the case, offers contrasted elements, one should look at the trend. Twenty-two per cent of the European countries polled thought a strong US role in world affairs was 'very undesirable' in 2002. They are now 47 per cent. A majority of Europeans polled now oppose the US global leadership (55 per cent against 31 per cent in 2002). More focused information refers to countries such as Poland or Turkey which for years, were considered bedrocks American allies. "The Turks are now more negative than even the French towards the US", writes the Wall Street Journal. As to Poland, where polls reflect frustration at sacrifices in Iraq or at the enforcement of the US visa program, situation is not better.

A consequence will likely be a new definition of the Atlantic Charter. Yet, urgent issues such as terrorism need to be continuously addressed and the Bush legacy does not help in this respect. "Because of this administration", writes Joseph Biden, a senior Democrat on the American Senate Foreign Relation Committee, "America is less secure than it could be... It is more alone in the world than at any time in recent history... This President has thumbed his nose at the world and asked Americans to accept it as diplomacy". Surely, some of the past events in the US would illustrate a situation which the electors will be asked to sanction November next: the \$400 million Hollinger's scandal (where Richard Perle's name reappears), the Larry Franklin Israeli spy issue (which in other circumstances would have sent US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to the floor), the rather disgusting activities of the 'Swift Boats Veterans for Peace' association that Bush campaigners manipulated, and even more blatantly, uneven economic performances and a \$422 billion budget deficit. But a real issue in European eyes copes with the Middle East, "the growing belief in Europe that the biggest threat to them is entanglement with the US in a misbegotten policy in the Middle East", as concludes the already cited Marshall Fund report.

When one comes to the Bush legacy in the Middle East, Iraq and Israel immediately emerge as the two emblematic locations for lost opportunities. Bush unconditional support to Israeli PM's Ariel Sharon will have lasting effects, but it is not sure that American electors will consider it that much in November. This is not the case for the Iraqi adventure, especially after the official 1000 headcount of US soldiers killed in Iraq was reached last week (not to mention the 7,000 wounded). "Mission accomplished" in Iraq: 1,000 dead, \$200 billions spent and "no money for a social security program", Kerry has just said. This may be how the Iraqi debate comes back to the US. Whether Bush lied or not over the existence of MDW's will only have a mitigated effect as the American elector seems to believe that the President 'honestly' thought that the threat was real. The non-existing link between September 11th, terrorism and Saddam Hussein will on the contrary be more difficult for electors to swallow, for it is a lasting lie. US soldiers fighting in Iraq indeed were not yet told that they are not there, as they still believe, to make an act of revenge and defeat the terrorists. Dying for more oil is not either a good argument to provide soldiers with. But as a result of the war, Iraq has now concentrated the hard core of terrorism within its borders. Cities supposedly freed by the US troops have fallen under the control of Ultra-Islamists, Ba'athists and others. Instability is said to go on for another ten years whereas whatever any new development, it turns sour. As

an example, the June 'handover of sovereignty' was supposed to be a rupture for the Americans and a way for the Iraqis to take their future in hand. But Iraqis in command are not part of the Iraqi society. During the Najaf events, an eight-members delegation headed by Sheikh Hussein Al-Sadr went to convince Moqtada Al-Sadr to leave the city, depose arms and create a political party to join the 'democratic process'. They arrived on a US military base, using helicopters and armoured vehicles of the US army, in the name of the Iraqi government. Who would have listened to them? Finally, Moqtada Al-Sadr left the place with his people and their arms. The emergence of an Iraqi solution brokered by Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, with no winners or losers, was another blow to the local American policy.

The US has created a disaster in Iraq and they do not know how to deal with it. And when they decide to attack the city of Latiffya the very day French hostages were to be freed, it is not likely to reinforce the co-operation between Western allies. Iraqi Prime Minister and CIA enrollee Iyad Allawi launched a fierce attack against President Chirac last week. He took into derision these French 'having illusion if they hoped they could stay out of terrorism', as if France did not already pay a heavy tribute to terrorism. A few days ago, he nevertheless turned back to France and asked for its support against 'terrorists' (actually, everybody but Allawi and colleagues). The point, however, is that the apparent Iraqi although US-sponsored administration who arrived in Baghdad in American suitcases will never convince the Iraqi people that they talk on their behalf. The dilemma to day for the Iraqi officials is to gain legitimacy with their people –and they will have to oppose the Americans- or to forget about it –and they will become of no use to the Americans. When looking at the daily growing unrest in Iraq and the climbing toll of civilian casualties, it is more than time for the Americans to reverse their policy and reconsider their presence there; and for the Iraqis, to initiate a true political process before it is too late.

Luc Debievre, September 13th, 2004