

"Bush and the World: The Second Term"

George W. Bush has been reelected for a second term of four years. It is rather certain what policy he will pursue on the U.S. domestic scene, since he has announced it clearly. He will push for further tax cuts. He will seek to privatize as much of the social security system as he can. He will appoint only judges who will reflect his conservative values, both on economic and social matters. He will seek to dismantle as much environmental legislation as possible. He will seek to strengthen the authority of the government in all police investigations and prosecutions. In short, he will pursue a classic rightwing agenda.

What remains much more obscure is what he intends to do in foreign policy, and this for one very simple reason. On the one hand, during his first term his administration committed itself strongly to a particular foreign policy - that of unilateral pre-emptive action whenever and wherever it felt like. On the other hand, this foreign policy has not been very successful, not only in the eyes of its critics at home and elsewhere in the world, but even in the eyes of many of its faithful supporters. There is turmoil in the ranks of the Bush partisans, which can be observed in the recent flurry of demands by certain major conservative figures for the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld combined with the immediate support Rumsfeld received from others, including the president himself. Rumsfeld simply exemplifies these policies.

What can we expect now? There are actually two questions here. Will the second Bush administration pursue the identical foreign policy as the first? And, to the extent that it changes, how will the rest of the world react?

The most immediate question is Iraq. The number one political priority of the U.S., as we enter 2005, is holding Iraqi elections in the end of January. But why is this so important? In the first place, it is important to the U.S. in order to show that these elections can be held at all, despite the attacks of the insurgents. Secondly, it is important because the U.S. fears that, if they weren't held, they would be blamed by the Ayatollah al-Sistani, who might then shift his position from one of prudent distance from the U.S. to one of active hostility. Thirdly, it is important because the U.S. hopes to be able to shift the political/military battle in Iraq from one in which it is Iraqi insurgents versus the U.S. to one in which it is Iraqi insurgents versus a legitimate elected Iraqi government. But fourthly, it is important because it is seen as the essential prerequisite to a reduction of the number of the U.S. troops in Iraq. Of course, there are others who also anxiously want these elections - the interim Iraqi government and the mainstream Shia parties in particular.

So, elections will almost certainly be held - amidst continuing and probably escalating violence and amidst a high rate of abstentionism, especially in Sunni areas. But what will happen then? We shall probably see a new government with Ayatollah Sayed al-Hakim, the leader of the main Shia party (SCIRI), as Prime Minister. Depending on how the elections actually go and the behavior of al-Hakim, this government may or may not start with some minimal acceptance as a national government. The insurgency will almost surely continue, however, charging that the new government is a U.S. puppet. And the new Iraqi government will sooner or later have to choose between continuing to pursue the overtly pro-American policy of Iyad Allawi and adopting a nationalist line more consonant with the demands of the Iraqi people. One does not have to be a Middle East expert to suspect that sooner or later the

new Iraqi government will opt to be more nationalist, in order first of all to be more legitimate.

The pressure on the U.S. to withdraw its troops will then be coming from three sides: from the insurgents, from the new Iraqi government, and from public opinion at home. Within the U.S., all the polls indicate that more and more people feel that the price the U.S. is paying in soldiers killed and wounded and in the costs of war are simply too high. The U.S. is at the beginning of an isolationist reaction. And since isolationism has always had a strong hold within the Republican party, we shall begin to see the president's own supporters pushing for troop withdrawal.

There is no doubt that there are others within the Bush administration such as the militarists and the neo-cons - the two are not identical, by any means - who will fight this tendency bitterly. But this camp is much weaker than it was in 2003. So we may get a big swing in U.S. foreign policy. What we will not get is the modulated middle position of "multilateralism" dear to the heart of Colin Powell and to the first President Bush's advisors like Brent Scowcroft, and dear as well to the leaders of the more conservative wing of the Democratic Party (such as Senators Biden and Lieberman).

What happens vis-a-vis Iraq will presage all the rest of the Bush foreign policy. It is already the case that Bush has pulled back on North Korea and Iran to a position of tacit recognition of impotence. The Bush team is huffing and puffing, but they know there is very little they can do. They would be happy to see renewed negotiations between Israel and Palestine, which Blair is trying his best to push, but the U.S. will merely go along with such developments rather than be their prime promoter. These renewed negotiations are in any case not likely to go very far. And, in that case, the laid-back position of the Bush administration will protect it from too much internal U.S. damage.

Looking around the world, where can Bush act now? In Cuba? He'd like to, no doubt. But today we have state officials in Alabama (the heart of Bush country) saying that if they don't sell chickens to Cuba, Brazil will, and adding that the government's restrictions on trade with Cuba are an unjustified sop to the Cuban exiles in Florida. There is no sign of any serious support within the U.S. for a Cuban adventure. In Russia? We have just seen how, even though the Ukrainian elections have caused a very bad press for Putin in the United States, nonetheless Bush went out of his way to indicate that the U.S. will continue to work with Putin. In China? The economic interests of the United States preclude anything hostile, despite the uneasiness the Bush administration has with China's increased political role in Asia. In Europe? Even Rumsfeld's "new Europe" is beginning slowly to desert the U.S. In short, Bush does not have many options available to him. And since Bush is a canny and very unprincipled politician, he will not want to play in a game in which the odds are so heavily against him.

And how will the world react to a de facto pulling inward -both militarily and economically - of the U.S.? One can expect that, after an initial period of caution, everyone will try to take advantage of this new display of U.S. geopolitical weakness. The problem is that, once the U.S. presence in the world is reduced, it is like removing an elephant from the living room. No one is quite sure how to fill the space. And it is probably the case that no one has a fully prepared set of policies for such a situation. So there will be much unsure jostling among all the other geopolitical players. The U.S. was already a declining hegemonic power when Bush came to power in 2001. In seeking to restore the U.S. world position in his first four years of

power, Bush actually made the situation much worse for the U.S. The U.S. (and Bush) will reap the harvest of his folly in the second term.

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