

"The Tiger at Bay: Scary Times Ahead"

When many years ago, some of us said that the decline of United States hegemony in the world-system was inevitable, unstoppable, and already occurring, we were told by most people that we ignored the obvious overwhelming military and economic strength of the United States. And there were some critics who said that our analyses were harmful because they served as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Then the neo-cons came to power in the Bush presidency, and they implemented their policy of unilateral macho militarism, designed (they said) to restore unquestioned United States hegemony by frightening U.S. enemies and intimidating U.S. friends into unquestioned obedience to U.S. policies in the world arena. The neo-cons had their chance and their wars and have spectacularly failed either to frighten those regarded as enemies or to intimidate erstwhile allies into unquestioned obedience. The U.S. position in the world-system is far weaker today than it was in 2000, the result precisely of the very misguided neo-con policies adopted during the Bush presidency. Today, quite a few people are ready to talk openly about U.S. decline.

So what happens now? There are two places to look: inside the United States, and in the rest of the world. In the rest of the world, governments of all stripes are paying less and less attention to anything the United States says and wants. Madeleine Albright, when she was Secretary of State, said that the United States was "the indispensable nation." This may have been true once, but it is certainly not true now. Now, it's a tiger at bay.

It's not yet fully the "paper tiger" of which Mao Zedong spoke, but it's certainly on its way to being exposed as a tiger crouching in self-defense.

How do other nations treat a tiger at bay? With a great deal of prudence, it must be said. If the United States is no longer capable of getting its way almost anywhere, it is still capable of doing a great deal of damage if it decides to lash out. Iran may defy the United States with aplomb, but it tries to be careful not to humiliate it. China may be feeling its oats and sure that it will get still stronger in the decades to come, but it handles the United States with kid gloves. Hugo Chavez may openly tweak the tiger's nose, but older and wiser Fidel Castro speaks less provocatively. And Italy's new Prime Minister, Romano Prodi, holds Condoleezza Rice's hands while pursuing a foreign policy clearly aimed at strengthening a world role for Europe independent of the United States.

So why are they all so prudent? To answer that, we must look at what is going on in the United States. The de facto chief executive, Dick Cheney, knows what needs to be done from the point of view of the macho militarists, whose leader he is. The United States must "stay the course" and indeed escalate the violence. The alternative is to admit defeat, and Cheney is not someone to do that.

Cheney does however have an acute political problem at home. He and his policies are clearly losing support, massively, within the United States. The scare speeches about terrorists and the accusations of treason launched at his critics no longer seem to be as effective as they once were. The recent victory of war critic Ned Lamont over war defender Joe Lieberman in the Democratic senatorial primary in Connecticut has rattled the U.S. political establishment of both parties. Within days, a very large number of politicians seemed to move some distance in the direction of closing down the Iraq operation.

If, as seems quite possible now, the Democrats win control of both houses of Congress in the November 2006 elections, there risks being a stampede to withdraw, despite the hesitancy of the Democratic congressional leadership. This will be all the more sure if, in various local elections, prominent antiwar candidates win.

What will the Cheney camp do then? One can't expect that they will gracefully acknowledge the coming of a Democratic president in the 2008 elections. They will know that they have probably only two years left to create situations from which it would be almost impossible for the United States to retreat. And since they would not, with a Democratic congress, be able to get any important legislation passed, they will concentrate (even more than now) on trying to use the executive powers of the presidency, under the docile front man, George W. Bush, to stir up military havoc around the world and to reduce radically the sphere of civil liberties within the United States.

The Cheney cabal will however be resisted, on many fronts. The most important locus of resistance will no doubt be the leadership of the U.S. armed forces (with the exception of the Air Force), who clearly think that the current military adventures have greatly overextended U.S. military capacity and are very worried that they will be the ones held for blame later by U.S. public opinion when Rumsfeld and Cheney have disappeared from the newspaper headlines. The Cheney cabal will be resisted as well by big business who see the current policies as having very negative consequences for the U.S. economy.

And of course they will be resisted by the left and center-left within the United States who are feeling reinvigorated, angry, and anxious about the course of U.S. policy. There is a slow but clear radicalization of the left and even the center-left.

When that happens, the militarist right will retaliate very aggressively. When Lamont won the primary, a reader of the Wall Street Journal wrote a letter saying that "we have reached a tipping point in this country - if we allow the left to govern as the majority our country is finished." He calls Republican leaders "inept." He, and many others, will be looking for fiercer leaders.

Everyone worries about civil war in Iraq. How about in the United States? Scary times ahead!

By Immanuel Wallerstein