

01/10/2003

Hoist by his own petard

Abdullah Ahmad

IF there were a booby prize for statesmanship and running a military occupation, then President George W. Bush is a clear winner. He is responsible for wrecking his own easy victory in Iraq. There's lots of blame to go around, but Bush gets the gold.

I just love history.

In a commemorative speech over the ruins of Verdun a year after the end of the First World War in 1919, the French statesman Georges Clemenceau intoned sadly that "It is easier to make war than to make peace." Yet people never learn, not even the French, whose punitive reparations demanded of Germany planted the seeds of another global conflagration 20 years later.

It is hard not to compare Clemenceau and many, many others with Bush for their wisdom after the fact of war.

At the United Nations General Assembly last year, Bush took the podium with fingers fiercely wagging at the world for letting Saddam Hussein, his weapons of mass destruction, his tyranny, terror and evil, off the hook.

Last week, he fidgeted as the tables turned before him. He told the 58th session that the war on terror wasn't over, that the struggle for freedom, democracy and hope was being waged with (American) money, heart and soul. But his lip quivered to service a smile for the downcast eyes of his audience. They listened in stony silence to the putative leader of the free world and applauded the end of his speech only in order not to seem impolite.

I didn't think the turnaround would happen so soon, but Bush now needs the UN more than it needs him. My American friends might call it schadenfreude, but I haven't seen this sort of spectacle since the last time the United States fatefully decided to go it alone - in the Vietnam War. And I am far from alone.

American foreign policy and public diplomacy, according to several eminent writers in the Sept/Oct issue of Foreign Affairs, have taken on the contours of a train wreck.

For these specialists, it doesn't even matter anymore whether the US was right or wrong to invade Iraq. The fact was that the most powerful country in history had refused to listen to the rest of the world, had been so sure of itself that it didn't bother to construct a coherent and cogent case for going to war.

This fact of imperial hubris will be difficult to undo. It will take a while before we can tone down the ringing in our ears of Bush's words shortly before the invasion: "At some point, we may be the only ones left. That's ok with me. We are America."

That's okay with us, too. As Bush passes the stetson around for troops and cash, the rest of the world prefers to wait and see if Uncle Sam has started to listen, while taking a pull or two at his unilateralist beard: no taxation without representation; no ducats without dialogue. Besides, more troops (from where other than US reserves?) aren't going to straighten out the mess Bush and company have created in Iraq.

The New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman, an advocate of the war and transformation of Iraq, wrote bluntly last weekend: "I would summarise the collective response of the UN to Bush as follows:

"You talkin' to us? This is your war, pal. We told you before about Iraq: You break it alone, you own it alone. Well, you broke it, now you

own it. We've got you over a barrel, because you and your tax-payers have no choice but to see this through, so why should we pay? If you make Iraq a success, we'll all enjoy the security benefits. We'll all get a free ride.

"And if you make a mess in Iraq, all the wrath will be directed at you and you alone will foot the bill. There is a fine line between being Churchill and being a chump, and we'll let history decide who you are. In the meantime, don't expect us to pay to watch. We were all born at night - but not last night."

History, or a terrible itch not to repeat it, is what the Bush team is anxious about. Although his popularity is slipping, Bush is less concerned about stepping into Churchill's shoes, which is a bit rum, than about not stepping into his father's - the single-term president who squandered a mid-term polls lead after the first Iraq war (the second highest after John F. Kennedy) and lost the election on his handling of the economy.

Bush will get most of the US\$87 billion he is asking from Congress for rebuilding Iraq and Afghanistan and the assorted bells and whistles he wants in the war on terror.

Opposition from the Democrats is growing, but I think he'll be able to squeak it through. They calculate that if the economy doesn't improve, Bush will get caught in the double whammy of a costly occupation of Iraq and a whopping budget deficit that stifles investment and kills jobs.

The President has a well-financed campaign in a fallow field and would have to fall on his face for any of the Democratic contenders to stand a good chance in the next race.

Across the pond, Bush's partner-in-war, Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, is also battling to stave off the sinking feeling evinced by declining poll numbers. Knowing the wiggling he would receive alongside Bush, Blair didn't give a toss about attending the General Assembly, choosing instead to visit hospitals at home, some of which are in a shambles under the cash-starved National Health Service.

He is on better ground than Bush, with a growing economy, a smaller commitment in Iraq and a weaker Opposition than the Democrats, even after a recent surprise by-election defeat.

Of course, all politics is local and precious few elections are won on foreign policy. But Blair has a bigger problem of trust arising out of the rush to war than Bush - he stuck his neck out farther to override his Parliament's and Labour Party's insistence on a UN resolution.

The lack of international legitimacy over the action in Iraq has seeped deeper into domestic credibility in Downing Street than it has in the White House.

The lack of legitimacy means that its cover now has to be doubled before other countries can enlist into the multilateral effort to rebuild Iraq. American unilateralism has stymied the collective will to resurrect that hobbled country and reduced what little there was of UN morale to stick it out in Baghdad after two suicide attacks.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has shrunk the UN presence in Iraq from about 600 staff members to less than 50, which makes things even worse for the US occupation just at a time when the UN is needed by Bush. He deserves it.

I don't quite agree with Friedman's cynicism. The desire to aid Iraq is widespread and heartfelt. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, amid his trenchant criticism of the US-led assault, has said repeatedly that Malaysia would be more than willing to assist Iraq under the full-bodied legitimacy of a UN mandate.

It was in pursuit of that unqualified legitimacy that he called for urgent reform of the Security Council's heavily lop-sided veto system. Not

altogether surprisingly, the applause for his last address to the UN was much louder than Bush's.

Until the US stops behaving like a bully with visions of empire and hands over authority to the UN, its troubles will only escalate in Iraq and elsewhere. Occupation and the non-establishment of a Palestinian state will continue to recruit more people for terrorism and Islamic extremism in a war against what is perceived by a majority of the world as largely an Israeli-American-British hegemony agenda.