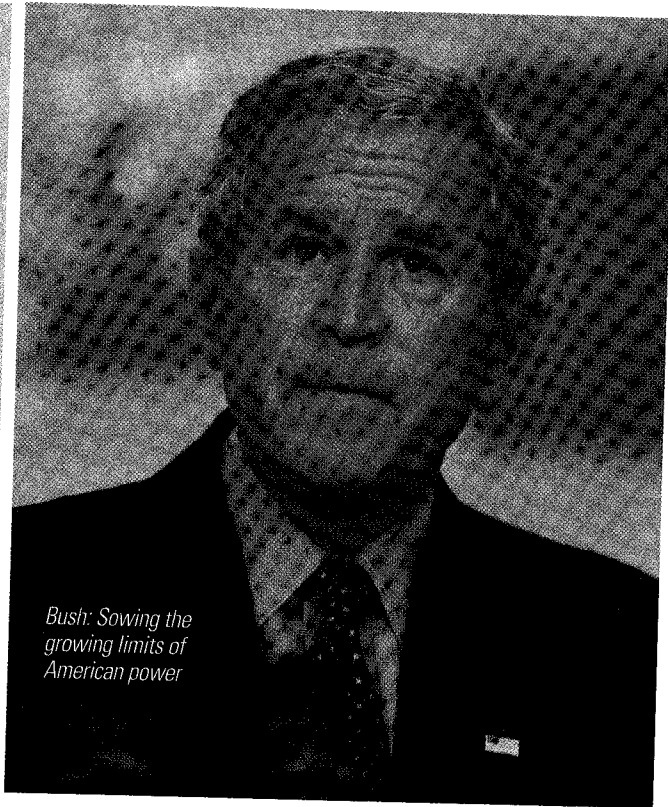


al-Maliki: Iraqi Prime Minister at his wits' end as to how to stop the bloodbath in his country



Bush: Sowing the growing limits of American power

America's Ghost of Vietnam Arises

While Iraq has descended into the 21st Century's Vietnam, the United States continues its denial mode; proof of its declining hegemony.

■ By Bishen Bedi

THIS YEAR has seen so many big stories around the world. Asia-Pacific has had its fair share. There's North Korea. Its despot, Kim Jong Il, is bent on emptying his country's coffers – what's left of it.

He'd rather let his people starve to death while he builds nuclear weapons, intent on destroying Japan, South Korea

and the United States – firm postwar allies, the latter two protectorates of Washington. Worse is the pitiable way in which the West, led by the US, has so far dealt with him, who, by the way, is being cosseted by China and Russia. With friends like these, given also how they deal with their critics at home and abroad, Kim must feel comfortable,

secure and justified in his neurosis.

But one thing this saga tells you, though, is that American power – or hegemony, if you wish – isn't what most people think it is. Some say American hegemony is waning. They've been saying this for a long time. There's neither novelty nor mileage in regurgitating the sole hegemonic power thesis following the collapse of the Soviet

empire. And nevermind the plethora of academic and media analyses. However, did all change when terrorists attacked the US, killing thousands of innocent civilians?

Since 9-11, we've seen, clearly, the US suffer from what Paul Kennedy has called 'imperial overstretch'. And stretched it is. This partly explains why the US could neither convincingly nor unilaterally deal with North Korea – not in the same way Washington thought it could – wait for it – Iraq and Afghanistan. Emboldened terrorists continue to be embedded there and in Pakistan and Indonesia, and to a lesser extent southern Thailand and the southern Philippines.

There's no doubt Iraq has descended into what George W Bush has been furiously denying. Iraq is a hellhole not dissimilar to the carnage wrought by American power – militarily and diplomatically – on Vietnam. Muslims are wantonly murdering fellow Muslims, albeit of different sects, making it more a civil war. But Washington, London and Canberra have taken the three-wise monkeys stance on this. It's a bloodletting about which the White House hasn't a clue how to deal. Day and night the ghost of Vietnam cuts a wild bloody swathe across the US's psyche – and through the midriff of 150,000 American ground forces bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, of whom almost 3,000 have lost their lives. For what?

Still Washington is in a state of denial – the 'malevolent' title, so the White House says, of a book it thinks should be on the fiction list. It's by *The Washington Post's* Bob Woodward who, with his colleague Carl Bernstein, brought down the Nixon administration in the mid 1970s. Woodward tells, from deep inside the bowels of the White House, the idiocy of the Bush presidency.

For all the baloney about American superiority, in the comeback of the American century, led by Bushites – aptly titled, by the way – we are seeing, in a very true sense, the growing limits of American power. The on-off security dialogue with North Korea is apparently

on again. In Iraq, Bush may abandon reconciliation talks with the Sunnis. Instead he'll bring the Shi'ites and Kurds to the table. There's also talk of tripartite talks between Washington, Damascus and Teheran in a bid to exorcise the US's Vietnam ghost in Iraq.

These new plans are about as ingenious as was the plan for regime change in Iraq in the first place. The Americans have lost the plot over a war they cannot and will not win. Hard as it may be to swallow,

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the terrorists will be the victors, and the ghost of the Iraqi Vietnam will haunt the Washington establishment for decades to come. Desperately worried about losing the war in Iraq, the White House has been reduced to making Middle East policy on the run.

And don't worry about Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Kamal al-Maliki: like Bush, he hasn't a clue about how to stop the bloodbath in Iraq, let alone his increasingly fractious and quickly disintegrating government. Bush and al-Maliki make perfect bedfellows. Yet al-Maliki threw a hissy-fit before meeting Bush in Jordan recently: he'd been criticised by US National Security

adviser Stephen Hadley. In a memo leaked to *The New York Times*, Hadley said: 'We returned from Iraq convinced we need to determine if Prime Minister Maliki is both willing and able to rise above the sectarian agendas being promoted by others. Do we and Prime Minister Maliki share the same vision for Iraq? If so, is he able to curb those who seek Shia hegemony or the reassertion of Sunni power? The answers to these questions are key in determining whether we have the right strategy in Iraq.'

Don't worry: Bush won't be asking Donald Rumsfeld for advice either. He quit, or was made Bush's scapegoat for US policy failure, a hopelessly wonky military strategy, and a blind ambition to rid Saddam Hussein and install democracy in Iraq. Led by Vice-President Dick Cheney, the hawkish neo-cons had been planning regime change in Iraq well before the first plane hit the World Trade Centre towers. But for all their John Wayne-like bravado, they'll be left to choke on Saddam's dust – long after his impending execution.

The Kurds may talk, and happily, with the US, without the Sunnis and Shi'ites, if it means they'll finally get their own homeland. But that can only mean one thing: carving up Iraq into three parts. Will the Sunnis and Shi'ites let any one of others draw lines in the desert sands? The best strategic assets can't fall in the hands of the other; viz the world's second biggest oil fields. No way. And not if the Shi'ites, backed by Iran, have anything to say about it, and not the Sunnis, backed by Syria, either. That leaves the Kurds, who are backed by Washington.

If you can't sniff more blood by now, take a good dose of smelling salt. It's going to be the worse bedlam and anarchy in recent memory. And the West will back right away. So will the rest of the Muslim world. The bloodletting will be far worse than the Kosovo massacre. When that happens, expect the US, and the rest of the so-called Coalition of the Willing, to cut-and-run – just like they did out of their Vietnam ignominy. **mb**