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US blunders roil the Mideast

By Robert Kuttner | July 22, 2006

THE LATEST VIOLENCE in the Middle East demonstrates the bankruptcy of the Bush administration's grand design for the region. The Iraq war was going to display American power, promote democracy, strengthen moderates, and secure Israel. Instead, the quagmire has demonstrated the humiliating limits of US military power, fomented anarchy, recruited Islamist extremists, and strengthened a more radicalized Iran.

Palestinian moderates have been marginalized, leaving nobody for Israeli moderates to negotiate with. Hamas and Hezbollah have more support among Arabs than ever. Israel finds itself more vulnerable militarily, prone to excess, and dangerously isolated from world opinion. As for democracy, our few allies in the region are dictators and kings. Democratic Lebanon is a shambles. The democratically elected government in Iraq has just denounced Israel, and a democratic Palestinian election empowered Hamas.

Bush said you couldn't negotiate with bad guys. In Iraq, where Saddam turned out to be telling the truth about nuclear weapons and Bush turned out to be lying, diplomacy was forsaken for war. Syria, which gave the US genuine intelligence help after 9/11, was deemed a nation not worth diplomatic engagement. As former National Security Council official Flynt Leverett documented, an overture by the then-moderate Iranian government in 2002 was blown off by the United States.

Bush insisted that we go it alone. Now, having rejected diplomacy, an isolated Bush administration is more dependent than ever on the European Union, the Russians, and the UN. In Bush's four minutes of open-mike fame at the G-8 summit, he plaintively told Britain's Tony Blair, "I felt like telling Kofi to call, to get on the phone to [Syrian President] Assad and make something happen."

But when UN General Secretary Kofi Annan told the Security Council Thursday that we need an immediate cease-fire and expanded multilateral peacekeeping, America's UN ambassador, John Bolton, rejected the idea. Bolton and the other radicals in the administration want Israel to keep pummeling Lebanon a while longer. The Bush policy has produced a codependency of the most extreme elements on all sides -- the party of mutual Armageddon. This is the war party of Hamas, Hezbollah, the Israeli right, the Iranian ultras, Rumsfeld, and Cheney. Right-wing strategists like William Kristol, who often reflect the thinking of Cheney, are now openly calling for war with Iran.

Iran is the source of those Hezbollah missiles, the spawning ground of Islamist militancy, the greatest threat to Israel. So let's just have it out. Not a ground war or an Iraq-style regime change -- we blew that option--

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but a war on the cheap, of missile strikes (with a risk of mass civilian casualties). That would sure make Iran think twice about supporting Hezbollah, promote democracy, and respect America.

Can these people be serious?

Bush did not create radical Islamism, but he certainly gave it a boost. The point is not that the rulers of Iran, the Baghdad suicide bombers, and the fanatics of Hamas and Hezbollah are misunderstood good folks who need only a naïve olive branch from the west. On the contrary, these forces menace everything modern and democratic. They must be stopped, not appeased. The issue is the most practical and effective way of containing them.

And contain is the right word. During the "long twilight struggle" as John Kennedy called the Cold War, the Soviet Union was even more of a threat. The Soviets really did have nuclear weapons, by the thousands. There were some in the United States who wanted to have it out, in World War III. Miraculously, they never attained power. Containment worked, communism fell. When pragmatists governed, we even managed to constructively engage the baddest of the bad, Red China, now our ally in containing North Korea, our prime supplier of Wal-Mart and biggest creditor.

But today, the ideological heirs to that lunatic fringe are running the American government. Every arrogant miscalculation only leads them to more disastrous blunders.

Had Bush used diplomacy to isolate Saddam and to improve relations with Iran and Syria, had he worked as Bill Clinton did for a reduction of violence and a true peace process between Israelis and Palestinians, radical Islam would have far less appeal, the United States would have more influence in the world, and Israel would be more secure. But you can't undo history, and the mess Bush made will haunt his successors for decades.

With a mid-term election looming and the Mideast in flames, will voters finally recognize that this crowd is delusionally incompetent? Or will cynical fear-mongering lead anxious citizens yet again to rally 'round their president?

Robert Kuttner is co-editor of The American Prospect. His column appears regularly in the Globe. ■

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