

**Patrick Seale: Americans know they have gone well past the point of no return**

| | 19/09/2003

I came back from a visit to Washington this week with one overwhelming impression: US thinking on the Middle East is going through a profound revolution. Public opinion is beginning to rebel against the failed policies of the Bush administration - and against their enormous costs in money, human casualties, and chaos.

The tide is turning against the architects of these policies - in particular against Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his closest Pentagon aides, Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith - who now find themselves on the defensive, having got the US in the mess it is in. Some observers of the American political scene believe these men could lose their jobs before the end of the year, and many think they should.

The leading advocates of America's muscular, unilateralist approach to foreign policy were the so-called 'neo-cons', a powerful right-wing group of senior US officials and their supporters in the media and in Washington's numerous lobbies and think-tanks, many of them close to Israel's hard-line Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his Likud party.

The neo-cons pressed for war against Saddam Hussain, arguing that it would lead to the defeat of Arab and Islamic radicals, the rout of the terrorists, the 'reform' of the entire Middle East on democratic lines, and the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict in Israel's favour. The road to Occupied Jerusalem, they proclaimed, lay through Baghdad.

The swift collapse of Saddam's regime marked the high-point of the neo-cons' political fortunes. Throughout this period, Bush enjoyed the almost unqualified support of the US Congress, while the American press and television echoed the triumphalist tone of the administration.

All this has now changed. The American public is waking up to the fact that the country has got itself into a very deep hole in Iraq, from which it sees no obvious exit. The soaring budget deficit (\$455 billion this year and an astounding \$525 billion in 2004); the daily killing or wounding of American soldiers; the alienation of allies; the apparent lack of planning for post-war Iraq - all these are beginning to cause real alarm.

Members of the Congress, Democratic presidential candidates, retired generals, leading academics, and a media that has remembered its professional duty to the public, are all turning their guns on the Bush administration.

In an unprecedented attack on the Defence Secretary, The Washington Post wrote on September 14 that Donald Rumsfeld might be remembered as 'a principal architect of a foreign policy disaster.' In turn, The New York Times reported this week that two senior Democratic members of the House of Representatives had called on Bush to fire his advisers on Iraq because American plans for post-war Iraq had clearly

failed.

"Iraq never threatened US security," leading columnist Maureen Dowd wrote on September 12. "By pretending Iraq was crawling with Al Qaida, they've created an Iraq crawling with Al Qaida."

Last April, Bush asked Congress for a one-off \$75 billion for the war in Iraq, which he was given with no questions asked. His latest request for another \$87 billion has, however, aroused a storm of protest and will, over the coming weeks, face intense scrutiny in Congress. Many in Washington are stunned at the colossal cost to the American tax payer of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Last week, the International Institute of Strategic Studies, a prominent London-based think-tank, held its annual conference in the Washington area. The keynote address, delivered by a leading Republican Senator, Chuck Hagel, was a devastating critique of the Bush administration's policies.

The US, Hagel said, was heading to a situation of deep debt. Vietnam had consumed the US for eleven years. Now America was embroiled in another war, and people wanted to know where the money was going, where the troops would come from, what was the plan.

The US, he said, was in danger of fracturing the multilateral institutions of collective security forged after the Second World War. The US could not on its own deal with today's immense agenda. The key lay in partnership with its allies.

Bush's chances of re-election in November, 2004, are likely to be determined by the state of the US economy and the situation in Iraq. While the economy is beginning to show signs of recovery, few new jobs have as yet been created to make up for the three million jobs that have been lost during Bush's disastrous economic stewardship.

And the mess in Iraq is already taking its toll on Bush's popularity, as may be seen from the latest polls. Like his father, Bush could end up being a one-term president.

All eyes are now on a possible alliance between Dr. Howard Dean, the former governor of Vermont and the frontrunner in the race for the Democratic nomination, and General Wesley Clark, a retired US Army general and former Nato supreme commander.

Both men want to be president rather than merely vice-president, so it remains to be seen whether theirs will be a Dean-Clark ticket or a Clark-Dean ticket. If Iraq dominates the campaign, General Clark's military experience, and his considerable eloquence, could prove very damaging to Bush.

The revolution in American thinking is not restricted to Iraq. It is also beginning to embrace the Arab-Israeli conflict itself, which has long been dominated by pro-Israeli voices inside and outside the US government.

For example, when Howard Dean recently proposed an even-handed US approach to the conflict and called on Israel to dismantle most of its settlements, he was promptly shouted down by the staunchly pro-Israel Senator Joseph Lieberman, himself a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination.

But then a remarkable thing happened. A powerful editorial in The New York Times, the main shaper of American opinion, declared that "we strongly disagree" with Senator Lieberman.

"Ending colonies in the occupied lands is central to the survival of the Jewish state...Israel must begin to plan its exit from the West Bank and Gaza not only to permit the creation of a viable, contiguous Palestinian state but to preserve its own future."

The battle to change American policy has only just begun. The neo-cons have not disarmed nor have Israel's hard-line supporters been silenced. Bush cannot easily pressure Israel and risk losing the support of the millions of Christian Zionists in the American Midwest, which are the basis of his electoral strength and a well-financed ideological force in American politics.

Nor can he easily withdraw from Iraq and risk inflicting a devastating blow on American credibility. These dilemmas are painful, but at least they are now being debated out in the open.

*The writer is an eminent commentator and the author of several books on Middle East affairs. He can be contacted at: [pseale@gulfnews.com](mailto:pseale@gulfnews.com)*