

# Defeated in Iraq, Bankrupt at Home, Despised Around the Globe ( And That's Just the Good News)

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December 17, 2005

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The Decline of the American Empire

By Gabriel Kolko

<<http://www.counterpunch.org/kolko12172005.html>>

The dilemma the US has had for a half-century is that the priorities it must impose on its budget and its imperial plans have never guided its actual behavior and action. It has always believed, as well it should, that Europe and its control would determine the future of world power. But it has fought in Korea, Vietnam, and now Iraq—the so-called "Third World" in general—where the stakes of power were much smaller.

The American priorities were specific, focused on individual nations, but they also set the United States the task of guiding or controlling the entire world—which is a very big place and has proven time and again to be far beyond American resources and imperial power. In most of those places in the Third World where the US massively employed its power directly it has lost, and its military might has been ineffective. The US's local proxies have been corrupt and venal in most nations where it has relied upon them. The cost, both in financial terms and in the eventual alienation of the American public, has been monumental.

The Pentagon developed strategic airpower and nuclear weapons with the USSR as its primary target, and equipped itself to fight a massive land war in Eastern Europe. Arms makers much preferred this expensive approach, and they remain very powerful voices in shaping US foreign and budgetary policy.

But the Soviet enemy no longer exists. The US dilemma, and it is a fundamental contradiction, is that its expensive military power is largely

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useless as an instrument of foreign policy. It lost the war in Vietnam, and while it managed to overthrow popular regimes in Brazil, Chile, and elsewhere in Latin America, its military power is useless in dealing with the effects of larger social and political problems—and Latin America, the

Middle East, and East Asia are more independent of American—control than ever.

Strategically, also, the US is far worse off in the oil-rich Middle East because it made every mistake possible. It supported Islamic fundamentalism against Communism but also against secular nationalism, Iraq against Iran in the 1980s, and it is not simply losing the war in Iraq militarily but also alienating most of its former friends in the region. And Iran is emerging as the decisive power in the area.

The basic problem the world today confronts is American ambition, an ambition based on the illusion that its great military power allows it to define political and social trends everywhere it chooses to do so. When the USSR existed it was somewhat more inhibited because Soviet military power neutralized American military might and there was a partial equilibrium—a deterring balance of terror—in Europe. Moreover, the USSR always advised its friends and nations in its orbit to move carefully not to provoke the US, an inhibition that no longer exists.

On the other hand, just as the Warsaw Pact has disappeared, NATO is well along in the process of breaking up and going the way of SEATO, CENTO, etc. The 1999 war against Serbia made its demise much more likely but the US-led alliance disagreed profoundly over the Iraq War and now is likely to dissolve in fact, if not formally. The Bush Administration produced a crisis with its alliance and has created profound instability in Iraq, which was always an artificial state since the British created it after World War One resulted in the end of the Ottoman Empire.

Eight nations have nuclear weapons already, but the UN says another 30 or so have the skill and resources to become nuclear powers. The world is escaping the US, but it is also escaping the forms of control which were in place when the USSR existed and states were too poor to build nuclear weapons. The world is more dangerous now, in large part because the US refuses to recognize the limits of its power and retains the ambitions it had 50 years ago. But the spread of all kinds of weapons also has its own momentum—one that US arms exports aids immeasurably.

Iraq was not at the top of the Bush Administration's agenda when it came to power in 2001. Bush was committed, however, to a "forward-leaning" foreign policy, to use Rumsfeld's words, and greater military activism. Had September 11 not occurred, it is more likely that the Bush administration would have confronted China, which has nuclear weapons. This administration deems China a peer competitor in the vast East Asia region. It still may do so, although Iraq has been a total disaster for the administration—militarily and geopolitically—and greatly alienated the US

public (faster than Vietnam did).

The US military is falling apart: its weapons have been ineffective, politically Iraq is likely to break up into regional fiefdoms (as Afghanistan has), and perhaps civil war—no one knows. From the Iraqi viewpoint the war was a disaster, but it also repeated the failures the Americans confronted in Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere.

That the Iraq resistance is divided will not save the US from defeat. Few believe Iraq will be spared great trauma. In fact, many American officials predicted this before the war began and they were ignored—just as they were ignored when they predicted disaster in Vietnam in the 1960s.

We live in a tragic world and war is considered more virtuous than peace—and since arms-makers profit from wars and not peace, conventional wisdom is reinforced by their lobbies and by preaching the cult of weaponry.

The US may explore how to end its predicament in Iraq but only Iran can help it. Ironically, Iran has gained most geopolitically from Saddam Hussein's defeat and has no incentive to save the Bush Administration from the defeat now staring at it—both in Iraq and in future elections in the US.

The world is escaping American control, and Soviet prudence no longer inhibits many movements and nations. World opposition is becoming decentralized to a much greater extent and the US is less than ever able to control it—although it may go financially bankrupt and break up its alliances in the process of seeking to be hegemonic.

This is cause for a certain optimism, based on a realistic assessment of the balance-of-power in the world. I think we must avoid the pessimism-optimism trap but be realistic. Although the Americans are very destructive, they are also losing wars and wrecking themselves economically and politically. But for a century the world has fought wars, and while the US has been the leading power by far—in making wars since 1946, it has no monopoly on folly.

But it is crucial to remember that the US is only a reflection of the militarism and irrationality that has blinded many leaders of mankind for over a century.

The task is not only to prevent the US from inflicting more damage on the hapless world—Iraq at this moment—but to root out the historic, global illusions that led to its aggression.

Gabriel Kolko is the leading historian of modern warfare. He is the author of the classic *Century of War: Politics, Conflicts and Society Since 1914* and *Another Century of War?*. He has also written the best history of the Vietnam War, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the US and the Modern Historical Experience*. His latest book, *The Age of War*, will be published in March 2006. He can be reached at: kolko@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Lord Cerne Abbas

Humpty Dumpty Bush fell off the Iraq wall.  
Humpty Dumpty Bush had a big fall.  
All his spin doctors and all the President's men  
couldn't put Humpty Dumpty Bush together again.

<http://www.velocerator.free-online.co.uk/identity.html>

<http://www.velocerator.free-online.co.uk/mylinks.html>

<http://www.john-lennon.com/>

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