

A Threadbare Emperor

By Jim Lobe | June 2, 2003

President George W. Bush recently completed his first tour of major world capitals since the war in Iraq, en route to the Group of 8 (G-8) meeting of the world's wealthy countries and Russia in Evian, France. His handlers are predictably depicting his stature as something akin to Shakespeare's Julius Caesar "bestrid[ing] the world like a Colossus." After all, the notion that the new world order most closely resembles Caesar's Pax Romana has become a commonplace. History, so its advocates argue, is now witnessing a Pax Americana.

Like Caesar, Bush expects others to show due respect for the global hegemon, suggesting, for example, that he was ready to forgive if not quite forget those, like French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who doubted his wisdom and determination. Provided they recognized who was in charge.

French leaders, he told *Le Figaro* this week, "must work to convince their own citizens and show that France is ready to cooperate with the United States," a euphemistic phraseology that Caesar himself may have uttered about restive Gauls 2,000 years ago.

But as Bush makes his triumphal procession from the favorite of his "new Europe," Poland, to Russia's imperial capital, St. Petersburg, to the G-8 meeting in Evian, and thence to the Middle East to impart some momentum to a "road map" for peace between Arab and Israelis, his entourage may yet hear mutterings of the Ides of March.

Bush, of course, is not in any physical danger despite the smiles and sycophancy that are likely to greet the president at every stop, just as they did for Caesar on that fateful day before the knives were drawn.

Rather, it may be his empire that is in trouble, and on virtually every front.

An Empire Imperiled?

While Bush's popularity ratings remain very high indeed (albeit not as high as his father's at a comparable moment after the last Gulf War) and U.S. military power has proven once again how completely globally dominant it is, serious doubts are being raised about how well-clothed the emperor really is.

It begins with the dollar, which has plummeted some 30% against the euro since Bush launched his imperial agenda after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon. While the decline may aid

U.S. exporters, normally cautious analysts are becoming increasingly agitated over whether foreign investors who kept the dollar up and the Treasury solvent during the 1990s, are now moving their money elsewhere.

"A big foreign withdrawal ... could even trigger a panic," warned *Newsweek's* Robert Samuelson last week, a panic now made more likely as a result of the \$330 billion tax cut Bush just bullied through Congress. The result: Bush Thursday raised the limit on how much money the government could borrow by a record \$980 billion, to a total of \$7.4 trillion. State and local governments, already hit hard by tax cuts, are also experiencing deep, even unprecedented, deficits.

According to the *Financial Times*, Bush's fiscal policy shows that "the lunatics are now in charge of the asylum," while *New York Times* columnist and Princeton economics professor Paul Krugman this week asserted that Washington's fiscal health is now dependent on "investors remain[ing] in denial, unable to believe that the world's only superpower is turning into a banana republic."

His conclusion, similar to the *FT's*: "The people now running Americans ... (are) radicals who want to do away with the social and economic system we have, and the fiscal crisis they are concocting may give them the excuse they need."

But even if investors continue to deny the possibility of fiscal collapse, serious questions also abound about Washington's growing military entanglements and what was called in the late 1980s "imperial overstretch."

While the country's military performance in the Iraq war was exemplary (although growing interest in the payoffs made to Iraqi generals for disbanding their forces before combat has taken some of the gleam off the shine), its postwar performance in securing the peace is beginning to worry even the most optimistic of the Pentagon's Pollyannas.



An Occupation in Turmoil

The headlines in Friday's newspapers tell the story: "G.I.'s in Desert Town Face Rising Iraqi Hostility" (*New York Times*); "Firing of Council in Basra Upsets Middle Class" (*Washington Post*); "War Isn't Over in Iraq, General Says" (*Wall Street Journal*); "More U.S. Troops To Stay in Iraq After Rise in Violence" (*USA Today*).

It now appears that the occupation is not going well at all and that the administration's efforts to depict its victory in Iraq as a "liberation" rather than an "occupation" are becoming increasingly untenable. Claims that discontent or active resistance is being orchestrated by die-hard Ba'athists and Iranian mullahs and their agents—the administration's latest excuse for why things are not going well—are also meeting skepticism, even from some of Bush's Republican supporters in Congress.

It is even beginning to dawn on administration hawks that the 75,000 to 100,000 troops they insisted would be needed to keep the peace in Iraq over a two-year period will not be nearly enough.

With 150,000 U.S. and 15,000 British troops already in Iraq, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced earlier this week that another 15,000 to 20,000 were on the way. But, if the divide between the U.S. forces and the Iraqi population in key parts of the country continues to grow, then much-mocked predictions by the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Eric Shinseki, that several hundred thousand troops may be required could be vindicated.

Hopes that other members of the much-vaunted "coalition of the willing" would also help free up U.S. troops

for deployment elsewhere in the empire have also been significantly deflated in recent weeks. Britain continues to reduce its forces there, which had reached a high of 45,000. Denmark, which backed Bush in the war, was asked to send 5,000 troops, but will send only 380.

"His new friends (in Europe) may be more compliant but aren't nearly as rich and powerful as the old ones, nor as able to help shoulder burdens," noted the *Journal* Friday, which reported that the administration had hoped for total contributions of 30,000 foreign troops, a goal that now appears unlikely.

Meanwhile, the news out of nearby Afghanistan is even worse. "Out of Limelight, Afghanistan Slides Back Toward Chaos" was the latest in a series in U.S. newspapers about increasing insecurity throughout much of the country.

"It is a crucial moment," warned Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid and one of the foremost U.S. experts on Afghanistan, Barnett Rubin, in a joint column in the *Wall Street Journal* on May 29th. "A failure to provide Afghans with security will push that country back to the state of anarchy that gave rise to the Taliban and allowed al Qaeda to base itself there."

Bombs in Riyadh; suicide attacks in Morocco; disorder and hit-and-run attacks in Iraq; unraveling in Afghanistan; rising tensions with Iran and North Korea; strong but resentful allies in "old Europe"; willing but weak allies in "new Europe"; a rapidly depleting treasury at home—the hegemon looks hollow.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2003. All rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Jim Lobe, "A Threadbare Emperor," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, June 2, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.presentdanger.org/commentary/2003/0306noclothes.html>

Production Information:

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