

RIDING THE WHIRLWIND

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Consider this axiom for the modern age: The longer nothing much new happens, the more likely something big and good is happening.

In this light, look at the state of play with Iraq. Isn't this the same old, same old? Are Americans named Bush, Cheney, Powell and Rice still fighting Saddam Hussein? When will it ever end? How many more fingers in how many more dikes in how many more places? Is there reason to persevere?

It's an important line of questioning, and sometimes disheartening. The role of sole-surviving super power -- No. 1 economically, militarily, geopolitically, linguistically and culturally -- has its drawbacks. It costs money, manpower, time and attention and yields danger. As time goes on, the glory quotient of a day-to-day omni-power erodes. The crows snipe.

Indeed, it is likely that the greatest threat to the well-being of the global community is American fatigue. Yet the stakes are so very high.

Fortunately, the first actions of the new American president tell us that he understands the lay of the land. National Security Council chief Condoleezza Rice said the raids on the enhanced Iraqi radar stations near Baghdad were "routine," designed only to ensure the safety of pilots who patrol the "no-fly" zones over Saddam's bandit nation. Strictly speaking, she is correct. Such strikes had occurred before, the last one two years ago.

But two years is a long time. Was President Clinton growing weary of keeping the

pressure on Iraq? Many of our erstwhile coalition allies were cutting deals with Saddam, making it easier for the terrorist entrepreneur to upgrade Iraq Inc. into a global purveyor of weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, Clinton had refused to spend congressionally authorized and appropriated money to help fund internal resistance to Saddam.

And nothing is routine with a new president. Bush had campaigned on caution in foreign policy. He could have said "no" to the Pentagon request, asked for further study, or delayed so that he wouldn't step on his photo-op summit with the Mexican president. He could have consulted with foreign allies and the Congress. What he did do was say "yes" to the strike.

Previously, with little fanfare, the Bush State Department had also set in motion the process to fund the Iraqi opposition.

By doing what he did in the way that he did it, Bush sent a purposeful signal to all the world -- which is "Bad guys, watch out. We shall continue, and maybe a little more than just that."

I have cited it here before, but we should remember what Bush said in his inaugural address: "Through much of the last century, America's faith in freedom and democracy was a rock in a raging sea. Now it is a seed upon the wind, taking root in many nations. Our democratic faith is ... the inborn hope of our humanity, an ideal we carry but do not own, a trust we bear and pass along. ... The enemies of liberty and our country should make no mistake: America remains engaged in the world by history and by choice, shaping a balance of power that favors freedom. We will defend our allies and our interests. ..."

Bush understands that the proper remedy for geopolitical fatigue is, indeed, the same

as for personal fatigue: an understanding that the goal is in sight. The tired runner knows the tape is just ahead.

But it's not quite so simple in the geopolitical realm. When the Dark Ages ended, it didn't end with the throwing of a switch and a celebration. People didn't know they were in the Dark Ages, and they didn't know that that period had ended. But it had. Better times were ahead.

We may be in such a moment. During most of the paradoxical 20th century, the human condition advanced in almost unbelievable bounds. But the toll of slaughter soared, and the lash of statism affronted human dignity with a magnitude never seen before.

When the Cold War ended a decade ago, we may well have entered a new era. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama's book "The End of History and the Last Man" (Avon Books, 1993) made a compelling case that the long ideological struggle was over and that market democracy, promoted mostly by America, had won out. Through the lens of evolutionary biology, Robert Wright has made a somewhat similar case. Indeed, each year shows gains for democracy emerging and economic progress through free markets. Mexico is a case in point.

I suspect that Dubya sees it somewhat more through the prism of American nationalism, tempered by a deep religious feeling. Toward the end of his inaugural address, Bush cited Virginia statesman John Page's writing to Thomas Jefferson: "Do you not think an angel rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm?" Bush concluded his speech thusly: "This work continues. This story goes on. And an angel still rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm."

It's heading our way.

As long as we don't lose, we win.

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