

Newsweek

An Unnatural Disaster

America bears much of the blame for its waning global clout.

Michael Hirsh

NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Updated: 1:45 PM ET May 15, 2008

In a month of horrific natural disasters—the China quake, the Burma cyclone—it's instructive to consider what one of the biggest unnatural disasters in memory looks like. That is the decline in America's position in the world from where we were when George W. Bush inherited power on Jan. 20, 2001, to what he will bequeath to the next president eight months from now.

In many articles and in book after book American "declinists" nowadays tend to portray America's reduced stature as a largely natural phenomenon. Never mind that on the eve of the Bush presidency we were still seen as the most powerful nation in the history of the world. Decadent powers always wane in influence, and it seems we've just been doing a lot of waning very quickly. As other countries around the world partook of the ideas we pressed on them in the post-cold war era—free markets, democracy—they started to prosper and catch up to us. Meanwhile we grew fatter (literally) and more spoiled. It was all very organic.

Sure, there's something to this thesis. I argued it myself in a book—["At War With Ourselves"](#)—I published back in 2003. Some relative U.S. decline was always inevitable. But these ruminations still miss the main point. Most of what has happened over the last seven years is the result of strategic misconceptions, awful policy decisions, and botched opportunities for leadership by the major players in Washington. What happened to America wasn't natural, it was almost entirely self-inflicted.

The issue goes way beyond Bush's decision to invade Iraq in the middle of the war in Afghanistan. U.S. government literally broke down during the Bush years. The interagency process was destroyed as Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld set up what was effectively a "black" alternative government (the veep's shadow national security council, and Doug Feith's Office of Special Plans at the Pentagon). The White House treated its coequal branch, Congress, like an interloper (to the annoyance of Republicans as well as Democrats). Junk science infected the policy-making apparatus on key issues of importance to our allies in Europe and Asia, like global warming. Junk legal reasoning by White House and Justice Department lawyers was used to publicly justify torture, decimating our once high moral stature around the world. Junk economics—an excess of free-market fervor—infected the Federal Reserve and other regulators, who slumbered while Wall Street ran amok selling fraudulent mortgage securities to foreign markets. Congress went to sleep while the administration ran up record deficits. (The fallout from the subprime debacle and budget imbalance has cost us as much prestige in the economic sphere as Iraq has cost us in the foreign policy arena.) The Department of Homeland Security, misconceived and oversized even at its birth, grew into an unmanageable monstrosity, leading directly to the disaster of the Hurricane Katrina response.

All this dysfunction might have been bearable had the right strategic decisions emerged from the black box that Bush's Washington became. But not surprisingly, given the absence of most checks and balances, precisely the wrong decisions emerged. Invading Iraq, of course, was the biggie—a decision that has possibly cost as much in innocent life and limb as the Burma and China disasters put together. As most countries saw it, taking on the "root cause" of Al Qaeda by targeting Arab tyranny a thousand miles away from the enemy—while the terrorist network continued to flourish in Afghanistan and Pakistan—was like holding a conference on fire safety while your house is still burning down. In any case, along with their trumped-up case on WMD,

the Bushies never successfully made the argument that Al Qaeda grew out of a lack of democracy in Arabia rather than out of the anti-Soviet jihad in the mountains of Afghanistan, which was the group's real lineage. (Check the record: there was not a single scholarly or intelligence study cited for that argument.) And even if you accept that forcing the defiant Saddam to surrender his "WMD" at that historic juncture was a necessary exercise of U.S. power—we were all pretty riled up, after all—going ahead and invading after Bush had won a 15-0 Security Council vote that gave him complete inspection access to Iraq was seen abroad as an act of recklessness.

But Congress and the punditocracy never really challenged the Bush team on these seemingly simple points. Indeed, scratch a theorist of American decline today, and underneath you'll often find an Iraq war supporter. Because they are vested in justifying themselves—thinking that other presidents would have made mostly the same strategic choices Bush did—it may be easier on their consciences to conclude that our problems are more inevitable than self-made.

But what was most unnatural of all about what we Americans did to ourselves was that we missed the grand opportunity staring us in the face. September 11 was an awful day, but in strategic terms it had a silver lining. The sympathy that the rest of the world sent our way post-9/11 was not just good fellowship, it was a recognition that virtually every country around the globe faced the same kind of threat. This was an extraordinary chance for American leadership to renew itself at a time when the international community was adrift. After the cold war some pundits were questioning whether the "West" would long survive the extinction of its main enemy, Soviet communism. Foreign leaders had the usual doubts about America, but even so polls still showed a remarkable degree of global consensus in favor of a one-superpower (read: American-dominated) world. Most U.S. presidents after 9/11 would have seized the chance to reaffirm America's role in overseeing the international system by achieving a global consensus. Terrorism of the Al Qaeda variety provided a "natural bonding agent" for this system, as the Yale scholar Charles Hill (later Rudy Giuliani's presidential adviser) said.

That is why everyone was with the United States when it invaded Afghanistan and almost no one was when it turned to Iraq. Indeed, there is not a government anywhere in the world—not even the Muslim countries—that wasn't hoping we'd clean out Afghanistan, that last refuge of Al Qaeda. Imagine what the payoff in prestige it might have been had Bush brought into the international community a pariah country that had thwarted two previous imperial powers—Britain and Russia—in the last two centuries. Fixing Afghanistan was always going to be, even under the best circumstances, brutally hard. But contrary to what you might hear, it was possible, had we stayed focused. The Afghans themselves, in stark contrast to the pent-up Iraqis, were so desperately tired of 23 years of civil war that most of them welcomed us with open arms, with virtually every warlord on sale at knockdown prices. (As Ismail Qasimyar, head of the *loya jirga* commission, told me when I was there in 2002, war-weary Afghans saw that "a window of opportunity had been opened for them" and that Afghanistan had become "a baby of the international community.") What an exercise in the judicious use of our great power that would have been, and what a trophy to place on the shelf after Germany and Japan following World War II! America would have been widely admired.

Instead precisely the opposite happened. From the moment Rumsfeld decided to confine ISAF—the international security force—to Kabul in early 2002 after the Taliban fled, the opportunity to save Afghanistan was lost. Year by year, inattention turned Afghanistan into what Jim Dobbins, Bush's former special envoy to Kabul, told me was "the most underresourced nation-building effort in history." And rather than rallying the international system into a consensus against terror, Bush spurned it. Now every statement the president makes is an *ex post facto* justification of the war in Iraq, which he has enfolded into his enlarged concept of the "war on terror." In order to account for his Iraq mistake, in other words, he lumps together almost every Islamist opponent, Al Qaeda or not. Very few people around the world are fooled by this conflation of enemies. I have spoken to many foreign diplomats and officials in recent years, and I have found almost none who embrace Bush's strategic conception of Iraq as an integral part of the war on terror. Just as most reject the blame that Washington is now directing at NATO for Afghanistan. We and the rest of the world are talking past each other.

Yet our pundits are out there sagely arguing that the anti-Americanism in the world and the chaos in Afghanistan are mostly "natural" or "inevitable" phenomena too.

On the economic front there was a similar abdication of responsible governance related to deficits

and the mortgage disaster. Imbued with the simplistic idea that free markets meant unregulated markets, national and state regulators paid almost no attention to the rampant selling and securitization of bad loans since 2000—chief among them the once sainted Fed chairman Alan Greenspan—despite pleas for help from the local and state officials. Now America's economy is in the process of "de-leveraging"—shrinking in borrowing power and thereby reducing its impact around the world as foreign funds pull their investments from dollars or redirect them into euros or "baskets" of several currencies. As European and Asian financiers and economic officials have come to learn the truth about the subprime debacle, they've become leery about ever trusting Wall Street's or Washington's advice again. Yet had anyone in Washington been paying serious attention, the worst of the credit crunch—and loss of prestige—could have been avoided.

This is not pipe-dreaming; it is the history that easily might have been. Had we handled things right, what is now deemed American "decline" could have played out very differently. We will never know, of course. And we won't know for a long time whether the next president can begin the titanic task of raising us up again. All is hardly lost: despite the rise of China and India, and Russia's rumblings, there is still no credible rival to superpower status. But let's not kid ourselves about the cause of our problems.

URL: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/137146>

© 2008