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Leaders to Follow

LIVING IN THE PAST

By Sara Tusek

History is a fascinating subject. History entertains: reading about the people and events of years past takes us away from our current concerns. History also informs: seeing the results of decisions made long ago helps us realize that our actions have both immediate and long-term effects.

The past has much to offer the present., but there's a note of warning that needs to be sounded here. Too much reliance on past accomplishments, past relationships and past ways of doing things is not just counterproductive and stubborn, it's absolutely dangerous in a world where change is rapid and thorough.

PAST LEADERSHIP GLORIES

Since WWII, the U. S. has held an increasingly uncontested place in global leadership. After taking a decisive hand in defeating the two principal enemy states (Germany and Japan), the American government and military were admired, emulated and envied by countries all over the world.

Soon advances in medicine, technology, literature, chemistry, the arts, physics, music, mathematics, and other important fields made the American star shine all the brighter. In the years from 1950—1990, it seemed that the leadership of the world was ours for the taking.

The rapid collapse of communism in East and Central Europe removed the main American rival from the world arena as the Soviet Union imploded and splintered, leaving a line-up of less-powerful countries: Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Chechnya, Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The U. S. was the only large superpower “left standing,” and the American

people talked about how to spend the peace dividend of money that was now freed from military defense.

The '90's, in retrospect, were a time of unwarranted self-congratulation on the part of Americans. Through a gift from history (the self-imposed failure of Soviet communism to provide a decent enough living for its citizens to keep them under its yoke), the U. S. was alone, at the top of the heap. Yet many Americans acted as if we had accomplished our world leadership role by our own merits.



Some Christians began to say that America was especially blessed by God, and that His favor towards us was the cause of our leadership triumph. By contrast, the enemies of the U. S. were not blessed by God and deserved being in our shadow. The religious Right grew by leaps and bounds as the economy boomed ; the “prosperity gospel” sounded better than ever, and these so-called conservative Christians picked up confidence and political power. The election of George W. Bush in 2000 owed much to the religious Right's support of his conservative Republican policies.

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

It seemed that America was going from better to even better in terms of wealth, influence and strength. Then came the unthinkable—terrorists aimed American planes at American buildings in lower Manhattan, financial center of the U. S. A., and as cameras recorded the disaster, nearly 4000 people died with the demolition of the Twin Towers. Even more unthinkable, the Pentagon, seat of military power, was dive-bombed that day. *Top. 2*

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This unimaginable assault on the heart of American economic and military strength was frightening. Not only were lives lost, but the prestige and security of the U.S. was in tatters. From leading the world in military strength and economic supremacy, the U.S. was reduced to sorrow, doubt and despair.

THE WORLD CHANGES

President Bush’s solution to the fears aroused by the 9/11 catastrophe was to invade first Afghanistan, then, more devastatingly, Iraq. With a convoluted, untruthful justification that the terrorists were in some way connected to Iraq, Bush ordered troops into Baghdad in 2003. This

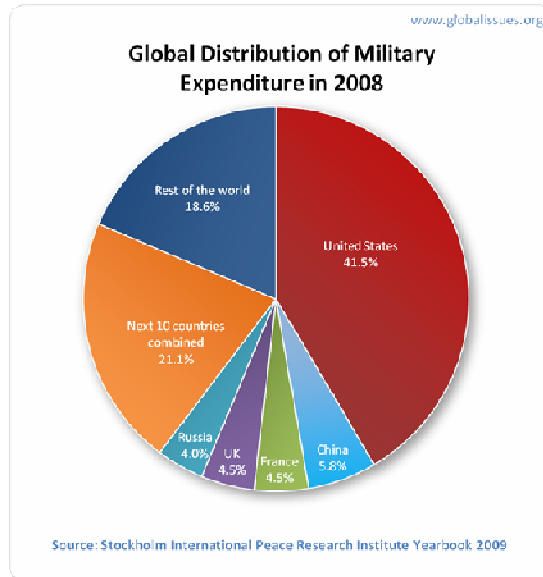
bold military move reflected Bush’s understanding of the world: America was still #1, the country most blessed by God. Bush told the American people that the Iraqis would welcome the U. S. troops, who would liberate them from the godless rule of Saddam Hussein. Now, five years and thousands of deaths later, Bush’s worldview seems a bit askew.

While the U.S. was having a big party in the 90’s, the rest of the world was regrouping and realigning itself. While Americans had a love affair with big SUVs and bigger houses, China and India quietly developed their economic capacities. While the U.S. was congratulating itself on its special place in God’s eyes, the Muslim world was arming itself to overthrow the Christian hegemony of the last 1700 years.

The paradigm of the U.S. as a rich, benevolent world policeman had changed. Far from appreciating the advent of U. S. troops, the Iraqis used the invasion and its disruption of their daily life to settle old scores.

In Afghanistan, where U. S. troops were initially seen as successful in toppling the rule of the hard-line

Muslim Taliban, the reshuffling of political power actually strengthened the Taliban. Its leaders went over the border into Pakistan, where they regrouped and trained for new attacks on the “godless West.” Instead of becoming a safer world for Americans, it has become a more dangerous and more complicated world.



LIVING IN THE PAST?

The old military model has produced two concurrent wars (in Iraq and Afghanistan), draining the U. S. Treasury of hundreds of billions of dollars while putting thousands of people in peril of being shot, blown up, maimed or kidnapped. The goals of these two wars are still not clear to either

Americans or the rest of the world.

So the question is, what kind of leadership is being exercised by the U. S. in the first decade of the 21st century? Are we alert to changes in the world around us, or are we living in the past, when the U. S. was on top and no one seriously questioned our role as the leading global power?

The current presidential campaign is laid out on very clear lines, with the Republican candidates (led by a former P. O. W. from the war in Vietnam) calling for more military strength, more funding for more wars, more internal and external security, and for the continuation of the destructive economic policies of the Bush administration. Many conservative Christians back the Republicans, with the reasoning that God wants the U. S. to continue in its “privileged” position.

The Democrats, on the other hand, are all about hope and change. But not change for its own sake—rather, the changes that are called for in global leadership in the new century. Compromise, cooperation and consensus are buzzwords of the changes submitted by the Democratic candidates. A new kind of leadership, based on listening rather than lecturing, is needed in a world where everyone now has a voice. The U. S. may indeed maintain its prominent leadership role, but only if it gives up old, divisive methods and ideologies. It’s not good to live in the past.

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