

# Time's Up for Some Foreign Policy Straight Talk from White House

By Col. Dan Smith (Ret.) | August 2003

"What are you going to believe, what we tell you  
or what you see with your own two eyes?"

Groucho Marx

In the foreign policy arena, the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush is having about as much trouble making it to first base as Bud Abbott and Lou Costello in their old-time comedy skit "Who's on First."

In the skit, a baseball manager introduces a new player to the other team members by telling him, "Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know's on third." This prompts the answer, "That's what I wanna find out." The dialogue goes downhill from there until the new player ends up having a conniption fit.

While this example of communication paralysis has been cause for hilarity on the vaudeville circuit, the kind of comedic plain talk it exaggerates is cause for concern when it comes from the White House.

Not to be confused with straight talk, which Bush's fellow Texans full well understand as telling the honest truth, comedic plain talk seduces listeners into falling for tall tales. Chief among them in this case are the rationales the administration puts forth for its handling of relations with Afghanistan, Iraq, North Korea, Israel, Palestine, Liberia, and Syria.

Some analysts suspect the reason for this is that the administration may have too many hot items on the plate. Others see an administration that simply reacts to events without having a coherent game plan. Still others suggest that the president's sense of personal destiny and divine assistance unduly slant policy. Consider the following:

Washington insists that its dedication to intervention in Afghanistan is helping advance the democratic process there. However, the central government's control remains confined to the capitol and its environs. Motivated by what Bush says is a "hatred of our [U.S.] freedoms," Taliban and Al Qaeda remnants continue a low-intensity campaign against an estimated 11,000 foreign troops, including 9,600 from the United States.

In mid-July, Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah warned that his country quickly needed more long-term development aid for infrastructure and institution building. Without such aid, he worried, Afghanistan could slip back into anarchy. "The Afghan people ... are giving us time. How long? This is my point. The international community should build the capacity in the central government in order to deal with the core issues of security and reconstruction."

In a recent report, the World Bank said Afghanistan will require \$15 to \$20 billion over the next five years in reconstruction assistance. This year, the U.S. contribution has been \$1 billion, with another billion pledged for 2004. Despite occasional significant casualties, the Pentagon's direct costs for continued military operations have dropped to \$700 million per month.

## An Occupation Under Siege

In post-invasion Iraq, the Bush administration, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the Pentagon all insist that the situation is under control and progress is being made in neutralizing opponents. However, some 148,000 U.S. and 12,000 U.K. troops occupy a defeated, chaotic country that still lacks basic security and dependable supplies of electricity and other utilities. As in Afghanistan, low-intensity war continues, causing on average more than one U.S. fatality per day. Despite quiet pleas from Washington for assistance, most countries have refused to send peacekeeping troops without a UN mandate. As a result, the CPA has had to conduct a month-long crash course to train and arm 7,000 Iraqi militia to work alongside U.S. forces and reduce their physical exposure to attack. Meanwhile, protests against occupation forces by Shi'ites in Najaf, Basra, and Baghdad continue.

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Just how much reconstructing Iraq will cost has yet to be estimated; the continuing military operation runs \$3.9 billion per month. While deposed President Saddam Hussein's two sons were killed July 22, he remains unaccounted for, and the Bush administration says that with "more time," it will find his missing weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The real question, however, may be not how much time it will take to find the weapons, but how long Iraqis will tolerate the presence of: 1) foreigners, 2) infidels, 3) occupiers, and 4) exploiters. Choose one or more to justify attacks on coalition forces, aid workers, and others.

## Contradictions in Policy Toward North Korea

The administration's professed strategies for North Korea are nothing if not contradictory. With questions remaining about the status of nuclear fuel rod reprocessing as well as the extent and location of Pyongyang's nuclear facilities, July 18 reports that sensors had detected a possible second reprocessing plant were contradicted three days later. In talks with Chinese officials at about the same time, the U.S. government reportedly repeated its April offer of a trilateral formula for consultations involving the United States, North Korea, and China, if a multilateral meeting with these three plus South Korea, Japan, and possibly Russia followed. Although no formal non-aggression treaty was suggested, hints were dropped of renewed U.S. food and fuel shipments and an oral promise not to attack North Korea. This, along with pressure from Beijing, seems to have tipped the balance, for a six-party meeting is now scheduled for August 27th.

The agreement to meet will probably delay any use of so-called "soft" steps to coerce North Korea, such as denial of trade, cutting financial flows, and halting humanitarian aid. North Korea, of course, would not see these as soft, but as attempts at economic strangulation. Still, the Bush administration can be expected to quietly pursue these measures in case the negotiations fail—or are never held.

At the same time, the United States has organized a group of 11 countries in a new coalition of the willing to enforce what it terms a "proliferation security initiative." Under this plan, North Korean ships entering the territorial waters of any of the 11 can be stopped, boarded, and inspected for illegal goods—such as drugs or coalition-banned cargo related to missiles or nuclear programs. But even before the initiative, ships had been stopped and inspected. And now, some in the administration want to interdict any North Korean vessel anywhere on the high seas, an act that would be tantamount to a war declaration.

Pyongyang, with its guard heightened by Bush's 2002 "Axis of Evil" speech and the Afghan and Iraqi precedents of forced regime change, remains as defiant as it is unpredictable. Kim Yong-Chun, chief of the General Staff of North Korea's army, told Pyongyang's official Central Broadcasting Station, "If the United States goes ahead with sanctions against us, we will consider the move as a declaration of war." A similar response might be triggered by stepped-up, overt military provocations such as intrusive intelligence collection and unannounced exercises, both of which reportedly are possibilities on the table. Even Pentagon plans to send \$11 billion in sophisticated equipment to modernize forces stationed in South Korea could be interpreted by the North as war preparations.

The president illustrated his administration's great ambivalence in remarks on May 23: "We will not tolerate nuclear weapons in North Korea. We will not give in to blackmail. We will not settle for anything less than the complete, verifiable, and irreversible elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons program . . . . I believe that we can solve this peacefully. I believe that diplomacy can work."

Former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry, who was a key player in resolving the 1994 U.S.-North Korean confrontation, believes that the interdiction stratagem "would be provocative but . . . not effective." And in considering the current stand-off, Perry voiced the view that "it was manageable six months ago if we did the right things. But we haven't done the right things." His conclusion: War is closer than at anytime since 1994.

## Road Map or No Map?

In the Middle East, the administration says that with Bush's road map for peace between Palestine and Israel, the goal is closer than it has been since September 2000 when the latest intifada began. But the president's ambivalent stance here again was revealed in talks about Israel's ongoing construction of a barrier fence on Palestinian land—when Palestine's Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas visited the White House July 25 for the first time and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visited July 29 for the eighth time. If completed as recommended by the Israeli Defense Forces, the barrier will completely enclose the West Bank and Gaza as well as key Israeli settlements that will not be dismantled.

Standing in the Rose Garden with Abbas, Bush said: "I think the wall is a problem and I've discussed this with Ariel Sharon. It is very difficult to develop confidence between the Palestinians and the Israelis—Israel with a

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wall snaking through the West Bank—and I will continue to discuss this issue very clearly with the prime minister. As I said in my statement today, he [Sharon] has issued a statement saying he is willing to come and discuss that with us and I appreciate the willingness to discuss it.”

Then, standing in the Rose Garden with Sharon four days later, Bush turned around and said: “I fully understand that the most effective campaign to enhance the security of Israel, as well as the security of peace-loving people in the Palestinian territories, is to get after organizations such as Hamas, the terrorist organizations that create the conditions where peace won’t exist. And therefore, I would hope in the long-term a fence would be irrelevant.

“But, look, the fence is a sensitive issue, I understand. And the [Israeli] prime minister made it very clear to me that it was a sensitive issue. And my promise to him is we’ll continue to discuss and to dialogue how best to make sure that the fence sends the right signal that not only is security important, but the ability for the Palestinians to live a normal life is important, as well.”

What is clear is that Sharon came not to discuss but to tell Bush, “The security fence will continue to be built,” adding almost as an afterthought, “with every effort to minimize the infringement on the daily life of the Palestinian population.”

## The Liberian Emergency

In Liberia, the United States is in real danger also, to paraphrase Perry, of “not doing the right things.” The people of Liberia’s capital, which is home to at least one quarter of the country’s population, have been pleading for a U.S. military peacekeeping intervention similar to the British one in Sierra Leone and the French one in Cote d’Ivoire. The administration chose to equivocate, promising help on the condition that Liberia’s dictator Charles Taylor would leave the country first. Taylor said he would leave but laid down his own precondition: He would not go until a peacekeeping force was in place to preclude a power vacuum.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) said it would send 3,000 to 5,000 troops to complement expected U.S. forces (probably 2,200 Marines of an Amphibious Ready Group). Washington sent a so-

called “assessment team,” which was greeted joyously by Liberians. Apparently unimpressed by the warm welcome, the White House hedged further by adding another precondition for U.S. involvement: The ECOWAS force has to set a date for moving into Liberia, at which time the United States will support the deployment.

On July 20, an additional 41 Marines flew to Monrovia to strengthen embassy security. At the same time, government opponents renewed their military offensive, killing at least 90 civilians and wounding 300 with small arms and mortar fire. In what can only be interpreted as a reproach to the United States for not intervening, Monrovia

piled 18 of the dead in front of the embassy. As casualties continued to grow, U.S. State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher seemed to modify the U.S. stance, saying that Taylor “should go coincident with a deployment of peacekeepers.” But in the same July 22 media briefing, Boucher also reinforced the ambiguity about just what support the United States will provide ECOWAS, and when. He clearly left the ball in the West Africans’ court, but in so doing, the White House may be hoping the situation will resolve itself. As July ended, one insurgent group captured Liberia’s second port city, the main anti-government group penetrated further into Monrovia, and civilian casualties continued to mount.

Like Perry on North Korea, Susan Rice, another official of the Clinton administration, believes that in Liberia the Bush White House “squandered the month-long opportunity it had” while a shaky ceasefire was in place. Specifically, Rice points to this administration’s failure to lay out a plan to preclude further institutional breakdown in Liberia: “Neither the rebels nor the government could be expected to pause indefinitely,” she notes.

## Syria in John Bolton’s Crosshairs

With Syria, the administration’s inconsistencies and manipulations are quite blatant. On June 4, Under Secretary of State John Bolton told the House International Relations Committee that: 1) the United States was concerned about Syria’s nuclear ambitions and was looking for “signs of nuclear weapons intent,” 2) “Syria has maintained a chemical weapons program for many years,” and 3) the United States “know[s] that Syria is pursuing ... biological weapons.”

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On July 15, Bolton was scheduled to testify again, but his appearance was scrapped when intelligence agencies strongly objected to his overall conclusion that Syria now posed a threat to the Middle East because of progress made on its WMD programs. According to Knight-Ridder reporters, the objections and comments from the CIA alone ran to 40 pages. Bolton's conclusions go beyond even the CIA's latest, publicly released semi-annual evaluation of threats to the United States. That report, covering the first half of 2002, said that Russian-Syrian nuclear energy cooperation offered "opportunities" should Syria "decide to pursue nuclear weapons." The agency also concluded that it was "highly probable" that Syria is still trying to develop biological weapons.

What is most puzzling may not be the disagreements within the U.S. government about Syria as a regional threat, but how quickly certain agencies cast Syria out into the cold after the war with Iraq started. In the July 28 issue of *The New Yorker*, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh details the extensive Syrian cooperation with the CIA throughout 2002 and early 2003 in going after Al Qaeda, including allowing U.S. operations within Syria. But Syria received nothing in return. It remains on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism, largely because it supports Hezbollah and allows Islamic Jihad and Hamas to maintain offices in Damascus.

The breaking point seems to have been Syria's refusal to support the March 2003 U.S.-U.K. draft second UN resolution authorizing military action against Iraq. Shortly thereafter, the Pentagon accused Syria of supplying equip-

ment, including night vision goggles, to Iraq and accepting for "safekeeping" Iraq's WMD. Forced regime change in Damascus was publicly discussed, justified on Bush's premise that those who support terrorists are equally subject to destruction.

Then on June 18, 2003, acting on fragmentary and ambiguous intelligence, U.S. military forces from Iraq entered Syria to interdict two ground convoys speeding toward the border. In the confrontation, the reported toll was 80 dead gasoline smugglers and innocent civilians and five wounded Syrian border guards. Nonetheless, U.S. officials and many analysts credit Syria with helping to subdue Hezbollah's activities during the Iraq war. As one person told Hersh, Syria sent "a signal to us, and we're throwing it away. The Syrians are trying to communicate, and we're not listening."

When all is said and done, the high-profile, continuing controversy over the mishandling or political manipulation of intelligence may have induced greater caution in claims about what is known, as opposed to what is possible or probable. If so, it's a lesson well learned.

Straight talk doesn't overreach in its conclusions. Those who make policy need to remember that and keep in mind that their credibility rests on leveling with the U.S. public, allies, and even adversaries.

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*(Dan Smith <dan@fcl.org> is a military affairs analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus (online at [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)) and a retired U.S. army colonel and senior fellow on Military Affairs at the Friends Committee on National Legislation.)*

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