

We've Lost Their Hearts and Minds

by John Feffer | September 9, 2003

The war against terrorism is entering its third year, but the U.S. has already lost the most critical battle.

The Taliban have been booted from power. Saddam Hussein is on the run. The Bush administration is tightening the noose around the remaining two members of the "axis of evil," North Korea and Iran. But the U.S. has lost the battle for hearts and minds. And because of that, our chances of countering terrorism, promoting economic prosperity, and snatching true democracy from the jaws of despotism have become terribly fragile.

Two years ago, after the horrific attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the U.S. received a bouquet of sympathy from the world. Even our longest standing adversaries such as Iran, Libya, and North Korea sent their condolences. The hearts and minds of the world's nations and the world's people were on our side.

Today, according to the Pew Global Attitudes poll released in June 2003, favorable attitudes toward the U.S. are held by less than 50% of the citizens in key allied countries such as South Korea, Germany, and France. In the Muslim world, meanwhile, few think favorably of the United States, and large numbers believe Osama bin Laden will "do the right thing" in world affairs in countries such as Indonesia (58%), Jordan (55%), and Morocco (49%).

Our failure to win hearts and minds has nothing to do with any defects in public relations. The government's PR machine, one of the most powerful in history, has been spinning overtime. Spin has nothing to do with it. The blunders are at the heart of current U.S. foreign policy. Simply put, the administration hasn't gained the world's trust. To build support for the war against Saddam Hussein, the Bush administration fabricated key elements of its case, particularly the Iraqi government's attempts to acquire and build weapons of mass destruction and its links to al Qaeda. As a result, minds that have been deceived

and hearts that have been manipulated will long remain cynical toward the U.S.

Second, the administration conflated terrorists and "rogue states." Because al Qaeda, as a non-state terrorist organization, is a threat to all states, the administration could have built a truly multilateral counterterrorism alliance in the wake of September 11. Instead, in Iraq, we have literally pushed remnants of the Iraqi regime together with foreign terrorists to create the very alliance that we initially fabricated. And North Korea, which has no links to terrorist organizations, may well decide to support the likes of al Qaeda if the United States doesn't negotiate in good faith during the latest round of talks.

Although George W. Bush promised as a presidential candidate to avoid nation-building, he is trying to restore order and construct democratic states in two countries that have virtually no traditions of democracy.

He's learning that there is no such thing as nation-building on the cheap and that there's no substitute for giving indigenous political forces substantive control. Bush's administration has spent the bank on destruction leaving very little for construction. Meanwhile, it's largely deaf to local demands for greater popular sovereignty.

Finally, the Bush administration has undermined multilateral mechanisms such as the United Nations. This isn't a tragic side effect of the war on terrorism. The administration was determined from the outset to weaken any global institutions that might represent a check on U.S. power.

We are slouching toward quagmire in Iraq. The Taliban has been increasingly active in Afghanistan, and al Qaeda continues to plan attacks. Terrorist organizations only flourish under conditions of



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adversity. The recent bombings at the Marriott hotel in Jakarta and the UN headquarters in Baghdad represent only the most visible signs of seething anger and discontent.

In other words, American citizens aren't any safer two years after the terrorist attacks.

We need more intelligent, more sophisticated, and fundamentally more decent methods of addressing global problems such as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and endemic civil conflicts that do not alienate the globe in the process.

(John Feffer, a Foreign Policy In Focus analyst, is editor of the newly published book Power Trip: Unilateralism and Global Strategy After September 11 (Seven Stories Press, 2003).)

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