

Washington's first collateral damage: its allies

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The adage that truth is war's first casualty needs revision, because the casualties were already widespread even before U.S. President George W. Bush addressed his country last night.

The publics of the whole world, save for Israel, oppose the Bush administration. Anti-Americanism is rampant, a stunning turnabout from 18 months ago when the world mourned with the U.S. after 9/11. Traditional friends and allies such as Canada, France, Germany, and new ones such as Russia, have deserted the U.S. on Iraq.

Even governments supporting the Bush administration have been badly wounded. British Prime Minister Tony Blair yesterday lost a very senior cabinet minister, former foreign secretary and house leader Robin Cook. In today's House of Commons vote authorizing war, reports from London predict that perhaps as many as 150 of Mr. Blair's 410 Labour MPs will vote against him. The governments of Italy, Spain and Australia have also taken a political battering for supporting Bush.

Transatlantic relations, a cornerstone of the foreign policy of the U.S., Canada and Western European countries for more than half a century, have never been more strained. They are strained to the point where Washington wonders if Germany can ever be counted on again, and France becomes a country non grata in the U.S., subject to vicious, even racist, jokes from irate political leaders and conservative "journalists," today's equivalent of the jingoistic Hearst "yellow" press a century ago.

The U.S. and Britain blamed the threat of a French veto for not pursuing their resolution at the United Nations authorizing military action. This was humbug designed to camouflage the diplomatic disaster these countries suffered at the UN, where a clear majority of the Security Council members opposed them. Not pursuing the doomed Anglo-American resolution also let off the hook non-permanent council members -- Mexico, Chile and Pakistan -- since they were not going to support the U.S. but would have felt uncomfortable saying so publicly.

The U.S. had bribed and warned and cajoled these friendly countries -- to no avail.

The U.S. tried the same tactics with another staunch ally, Turkey, and failed again; Turkish-U.S. relations are also wounded. Indeed, everywhere you look, the Bush administration has caused political and diplomatic casualties for traditional allies, and frayed relations with new ones. More ominously, its actions will make it more difficult for governments to align themselves in the future with the U.S.

A subtext of what occurred diplomatically was blowback from other countries to the pushiness and unilateralism of the Bush administration. The entire world view of the ideologues around the President was that the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 terrorist attacks allowed the U.S. to act as it, and it alone, saw fit.

The ideologues, who falsely called themselves "realists," included the Vice-President, the senior people at the Pentagon, and the National Security Council, egged on by a chorus of conservative pressure groups, commentators, think tanks and evangelicals. They took a President untutored in world affairs, read his instincts correctly, and nudged him to their way of viewing the world.

That world was of one superpower (or "hyperpower," as a French observer called the U.S.) that must work to prevent other powers from arising, intervene anywhere to "pre-empt" threats as defined by Washington, and generally to care much less than even previous U.S. governments have cared for the opinions of others.

The result was strutting in Washington, but pushing back in other capitals from Paris to Berlin, Moscow to Beijing, and every Arab capital to Mexico City. The Bush administration essentially reaped what it sowed, which explains the meager harvest of world support for its Iraq policies and the upsurge in anti-Americanism.

What a contrast to the Persian Gulf War. In that war, the U.S. enjoyed almost complete international support, except for the Soviets/Russians, Jordanians, Palestinians and a few hard-line Arab states. Front-line Arab states joined that military coalition. So did all the Western Europeans and Canada. Countries such as Japan picked up chunks of the bill. The biggest political challenge faced by the administration of Bush the elder was domestic public opinion.

In this war, Americans -- whatever their hesitations and doubts -- are still so traumatized by 9/11 and fearful of future terrorist attacks that they support the President. They accept what no other country's public does -- that Saddam Hussein is linked to terrorists who threaten the United States, and that only a military strike can eliminate this potentially mortal threat.

The military campaign will cause casualties aplenty, of course, but even before the fighting begins, the field of U.S. foreign policy is already littered with them.

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