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Bush's Tough-Talkin' Korean Bungle

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Months before 9/11 and the "global war on terror" - and two years before the Iraq War - George W. Bush tested out his tough-talkin' diplomacy on communist North Korea. Bush combined harsh rhetoric and intimidating tactics to demonstrate to Pyongyang that there was a swaggering new sheriff in town.

In his first weeks in office, Bush cast aside the Clinton administration's delicate negotiations that had hemmed in North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The new President then brushed aside worries of Secretary of State Colin Powell and South Korean President Kim Dae Jung about dangerous consequences from a confrontation.

At a March 2001 summit, Bush rejected Kim Dae Jung's détente strategy for dealing with North Korea, a humiliation for both Kim, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and Powell, who wanted to continue pursuing the negotiation track. Instead, Bush cut off nuclear talks with North Korea and stepped up spending on a "Star Wars" missile shield.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, Bush got tougher still, vowing to "rid the world of evil" and listing North Korea as part of the "axis of evil."

More substantively, Bush sent to Congress a "nuclear posture review," which laid out future U.S. strategy for deploying nuclear weapons. Leaked in 2002, the so-called NPR put North Korea on a list of potential targets for U.S. nuclear weapons.

The Bush administration also discussed lowering the threshold for the use of U.S. nuclear weapons by making low-yield tactical nukes available for some battlefield situations.

By putting North Korea on the nuclear target list, Bush reversed President Clinton's commitment against targeting non-nuclear states with nuclear weapons. Clinton's idea was that a U.S. promise not to nuke non-nuclear states would reduce their incentives for joining the nuclear club.

But to Bush and his neoconservative advisers, Clinton's assurance that non-nuclear states wouldn't be nuked was just another example of Clinton's appeasement of U.S. adversaries. By contrast, Bush was determined to bring these "evil" states to their knees.

In March 2002, however, Pyongyang signaled how it would react, warning of "strong countermeasures" against Bush's nuclear policy shifts.

North Korea accused the Bush administration of "an inhuman plan to spark a global nuclear arms race" and warned that it would "not remain a passive onlooker" after being put on the Pentagon's list of nuclear targets.

A commentary by the official Korean Central News Agency cited Bush's threat in the context of the U.S. nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, in 1945.

"If the U.S. intends to mount a nuclear attack on any part of the D.P.R.K. [North Korea] just as it did on Hiroshima, it is grossly mistaken," the communiqué read.

In March 2002, the New York Times reported that "North Korea threatened ... to withdraw from the [1994 nuclear suspension] agreement if the Bush administration persisted with what North Korea called a 'hard-line' policy that differed from the Clinton administration's approach. North Korea also renewed its complaints against delays in construction of two nuclear reactors promised in the 1994 agreement to fulfill its energy needs." [NYT, March 14, 2002]

The North Koreans were telegraphing how they would respond to Bush's nuclear saber-rattling. They would create a nuclear threat of their own.

But Bush was in no mood to seek accommodation with North Korea. During one lectern-pounding tirade before congressional Republicans in May 2002, Bush denounced North Korea's leader Kim Jong Il as a "pygmy" and "a spoiled child at a dinner table," Newsweek magazine reported.

Clearly, North Korea was on Bush's menu for "regime change," but it wasn't the first course. The "Bush Doctrine" of preemptive

wars was to have its first test in Iraq, where Saddam Hussein, along with his two sons and top associates, would face elimination.

Worrying Signs

By early July 2002, U.S. intelligence agencies had picked up evidence that North Korea had acquired key equipment for enriching uranium.

"On Sept. 12, [2002], the same day Mr. Bush addressed the U.N. about the dangers posed by Iraq, the President met quietly in New York with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to brief him on the U.S. intelligence findings about North Korea," the Wall Street Journal reported. [WSJ, Oct. 18, 2002]

In early October 2002, U.S. diplomats confronted Pyongyang with this evidence and were surprised when North Korean leaders admitted that they were working on building nuclear weapons.

Despite North Korea's public warnings seven months earlier, official Washington was stunned. Many analysts puzzled over what might have caused Pyongyang to violate its earlier promises about suspending its nuclear program and then admit to it. Bush formally canceled the 1994 agreement.

For its part, North Korea issued a press release at the United Nations on Oct. 25, 2002, explaining its reasoning. The statement cited both Bush's "axis of evil" rhetoric and the administration's decision to target North Korea for a possible preemptive nuclear strike.

"This was a clear declaration of war against the D.P.R.K. as it totally nullified" the 1994 agreement, the North Korean statement read. "Nobody would be so naïve as to think that the D.P.R.K. would sit idle under such a situation. ... The D.P.R.K., which values sovereignty more than life, was left with no other proper answer to the U.S. behaving so arrogantly and impertinently."

Bush's supporters blamed North Korea's defiance on Clinton, arguing that his 1994 agreement to stop North Korea's nuclear program was too weak. According to aides, Bush said he would never go down the path of compromise that Clinton followed. North Korea "would not be rewarded for bad behavior," Bush aides told reporters. [NYT, Oct. 26, 2002]

Amid Bush's stratospheric poll numbers in fall 2002, few Washington voices dared challenge the Bush administration's finger-pointing at Clinton.

Iraq Lesson

What then happened in Iraq only reinforced North Korea's thinking. Despite Saddam Hussein's assurances that he had no weapons of mass destruction and his granting permission to U.N. inspectors to search any suspicious site, Bush simply ignored the U.N.'s negative findings and invaded anyway on March 19, 2003.

Within three weeks, U.S. forces routed the overmatched Iraqi army and toppled Hussein's government. Later, Hussein's two sons were hunted down and killed by U.S. troops, and the Iraqi dictator was captured.

Humiliating photos of Hussein being examined by doctors and sitting in his underwear were distributed around the world. He was then put on trial in Iraq - rather than before an international tribunal at The Hague - so the proceedings could end with his execution by hanging, an expected outcome that Bush relished.

The war's consequences for Iraqis over the past 3 ½ years also have been horrific. Tens of thousands of Iraqis - men, women and children - have died; the once-prosperous country has sunk into chaos and poverty; ethnic cleansing and a bloody civil war have begun.

While Bush may have intended the Iraq War to be an object lesson about the futility of defying his will, some American adversaries learned something else - that disarmament and cooperation with the U.N. are for suckers.

After all, Hussein had complied with U.N. demands for eliminating his stockpiles of unconventional weapons and had forsaken active development of nuclear weapons. He even agreed to unfettered U.N. inspections.

Hussein's reward was to see his two sons killed, his country ravaged, and the almost certain end of his own life coming as he dangles from the end of a rope, rather than his request that he die before a firing squad.

So, instead of cowering before Bush and his Doctrine, North Korea pressed ahead with its nuclear program, claiming to have detonated a small nuclear device on Oct. 9.

US Reaction

Bush responded to the news with more threats and more tough rhetoric, calling the explosion a "provocative act" and "a threat to international peace and security."

For their part, Democrats argued that Bush's Iraq War had distracted the United States from addressing the worse threat from North Korea.

"What it tells you is that we started at the wrong end of the 'axis of evil'" said former Democratic Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia. "We started with the least dangerous of the countries, Iraq, and we knew it at the time. And now we have to deal with that." [NYT, Oct. 10, 2006]

Another lesson that could be drawn from Bush's cowboy rhetoric is that tough-talkin' diplomacy may play well with loudmouth TV pundits, newspaper columnists and radio hosts. But it doesn't necessarily serve America's national security interests very well.

In a Consortiumnews.com story entitled "Deeper Into the Big Muddy," published nearly four years ago on Oct. 27, 2002, I wrote:

As world leaders have known for centuries, belligerent words and bellicose actions can have real consequences. Sometimes, potential enemies take hostile gestures more seriously than they are meant and events spiral out of control. That's what appears to have happened with North Korea's nuclear-bomb program. ...

Potential enemies may come to think that the best way to protect their nations against Bush's unilateralist policies and threats of invasions is to quickly add a nuclear bomb or two to the arsenal."

In the past four years, Bush's tough-talkin' diplomacy has led the United States ever deeper - now neck deep - into the "big muddy."

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq, can be ordered at secrecyandprivilege.com. It's also available at Amazon.com, as is his 1999 book, Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth.'