

2. FUTILE FOREIGN VENTURES

The basic lesson from the years that followed Amos' warnings is that costly mistakes, absurd blunders and failures in strategic thinking, especially in foreign affairs, are all part of what happens to nations when the hand of Providence moves against them. Under judgement nations slip into growing chaos. So we find Israel attacked Judah her neighbour, a strategy which back-fired and gave Assyria, the real enemy, the opportunity to destroy Israel. Hence the need to look at the foreign ventures of the decade.

a. 9/11 – The Trigger for War

A defining moment for the last decade was undoubtedly the terror attack on the United States in September, 2001. One of the high-jacked planes was directed at the Pentagon, the impregnable bastion of the U.S. military. The plane hit its target causing widespread damage, shock and confusion. For those with eyes to see, however, it was not just a one-off attack but prophetic of the bruising experience that lay in store for the U.S. military in the years immediately ahead.

As well as being prophetic, 9/11 also proved to be the actual trigger that led directly to the wars of attrition in Afghanistan and Iraq, wars that have been costly in U.S. and British lives, caused hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths and still not achieved the objective of defeating terrorism. On the 10th anniversary of 9/11 they are still continue, with little hope of disengagement before 2015. The military has been severely mauled and humiliated, its vulnerabilities exposed and exploited by "amateurs". It is all too reminiscent of the biblical pattern.

b. The Pathway to War

9/11 led to war simply because the enormity and the humiliation of that event fundamentally changed the whole strategy of American foreign and military policy, a change which has proved to be a huge mistake. Britain became intimately connected with this change and was caught up in its disastrous course.

Prior to 9/11, U.S. foreign policy had been for decades one of "containment". This had been evident as late as the Gulf War of 1991. Iraq had been defeated but Iraq was not invaded. Adopting United Nations policy, America "contained" Saddam by economic sanctions and "no fly zones". After 9/11, however, this all changed. President George Bush, elected to power in 2000, already had in his administration a number of people increasingly disillusioned with the "containment" doctrine and ready for more aggressive involvement. After 9/11 their viewpoint rapidly gained the foreground. President Bush, seeking for something personally distinctive and dramatic for his presidency, and nationally pressurised to take some defined and strong retaliatory action, quickly became converted to this much more interventionist stance. By late 2001 he was deliberately describing the Al Qaeda attack as a declaration of war, and announced he would actively seek out not only terrorists but attack any country which in any way helped them, and unilaterally if necessary. Within days of 9/11 not only were plans drawn up to deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan but also plans to remove Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

What was actually happening here was that the U.S. was being lured into the quagmire of full blown war with Muslim Middle Eastern countries, something we now know to have been an essential hope of Osama Bin Laden in attacking the twin towers. 9/11 was only the curtain raiser of a much bigger and prolonged process of judgement whereby the West in general and the U.S. in particular would become embroiled in bitter and bloodthirsty war with a massive haemorrhaging of resources, human, military and economic throughout the decade.

c. The Blind Spot of American Military Thinking after 9/11

From the start, therefore, the U.S. response to 9/11 was to be a hard-hitting military response. Recalcitrant states needed to be taught a sharp, hard lesson. This, however, meant that it was of the utmost importance that the military response was appropriate and above all successful. Precisely the opposite happened. The reason for this was that unfortunately the new interventionist policy was based on fatally flawed military thinking.

This flawed thinking emanated from Donald Rumsfeld, President Bush's Defence Secretary at the Pentagon. He was determined to radically reshape American military strategy by using its huge lead in advanced technology to mount short, devastating military attacks on rogue regimes and using minimum troop numbers. Regimes would be changed, but without occupation troops. They would be unnecessary, Political reconstruction would be quickly achieved by a freed people in a democratic way. Rumsfeld saw both Afghanistan and Iraq as theatres in which this new strategy could be worked out. The senior military commanders immediately saw, however, the potential for disaster in this; quick devastating attack might win the initial battles but winning the peace in such occupied faction ridden countries as Iraq and Afghanistan required above all else large numbers of troops on the ground. They alone could provided the essential security and logistical help for the inevitable nation rebuilding.

Rumsfeld persistently refused to listen to his generals, bullying them into silence and ignoring even the strong strictures of Colin Powell the U.S. Secretary of State and former Chief of Staff of the highly successful Gulf War where overwhelming strength on the ground had been key. Thus the United States went to war both in Afghanistan and Iraq with no strategic plan beyond the first initial attacks. It was all unbelievably naïve and appallingly dangerous. The dangers became quickly obvious in the first few months of the Afghan campaign in 2003, and should have brought about a rethink of strategy. Instead Rumsfeld and Bush blindly went on to attack Iraq some months later and walked into full scale disaster.

The first attacks, both in Afghanistan and Iraq, were highly successful, but thereafter the military were caught up in civil and sectarian strife on an ever increasing and bloodthirsty scale, and for which they had no brief nor training nor sufficient numbers. In Iraq they quickly lost their grip and after two years of escalating fighting and insurgency attacks the U.S. very nearly had to abandon the country. Rumsfeld and Bush simply remained in an attitude of denial, and only the forced dismissal of Rumsfeld at the end of 2006, three years after the war in Iraq had started, brought some change in policy. By then some 3,000 U.S. Troops were dead, 40,000 wounded or sick, tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians had died and some 30,000 insurgents and terrorists were armed and at large. In the same year, 2006, in Afghanistan there was a huge Taliban resurgence and an equally dire military and political situation. The way back from the situation only started as the U.S.

military were allowed, after years of denial and drift, to recognize and grapple with the problems of insurgency, security and nation building.

Thus for all the administration's rhetoric about not getting caught up in a repeat of the Viet Nam defeat and not making the same the same mistakes as the Russians in Afghanistan, that is precisely what the U.S. military did. All this betrayed a gross misunderstanding of the nature of the peoples that the U.S. was invading and their political institutions. Despite all the intelligence and cultural expertise that were at the disposal of the administration, no sensible analysis was ever adopted.

If it had been President Bush's intention in invading Iraq to administer a sharp rebuff to any powers antagonistic to America and to show them they could not play about with America, the outcome was precisely the opposite; the vulnerability of the American war machine and its ineptitude against insurgency and terrorism was exposed, and it was brought to a point where its ability to engage adequately in other areas of the world was greatly reduced. And Britain, excluded completely from any discussion of strategy of course, went limply along with all this and paid a similar price!

d. Further Major Mistakes

In Afghanistan. The inevitable consequence of trying to change regimes with minimal ground forces and a quick military victory was that it was essential to make trustworthy allies on the ground. In the political and social culture of Afghanistan it was obvious from the start that this would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Despite the billions sums of dollars paid out in bribes, American attempts failed disastrously here.

The first setback came when the Afghan warlords whom Rumsfeld employed to bring in Osama Bin Laden after the U.S. bombing of his Tora Bora hideout simply let him escape to Pakistan, something a few hundred more troops on the ground could have prevented. But it was U.S. dependence on Pakistan as an ally that ultimately proved to be the real Achilles Heel of the Afghan Campaign. Its co-operation was essential since Pakistan was on the southern and eastern border of Afghanistan and controlled all the routes in and out of Afghanistan along which Al Qaeda, and other extremists from Middle Eastern countries travelled. That border was extremely long and was very difficult to control. It was crucial to the U.S. that Pakistan sealed it against the Taliban. President Musharraf of Pakistan, under U.S. pressure, gave his assurances of support. The Americans, however, in their naivety, had simply not realised the nature of the game of duplicity that Musharraf would choose to play.

The truth was that fighting the Taliban or the extremists was not Musharraf's priority. Indeed it was quite the opposite. His main concern was to keep India at bay and he was determined to make sure that both the Pakistani North Western tribal regions and Afghanistan kept a strong pro-Islamic and anti-India outlook. For this he needed the Taliban. Accordingly Musharraf would give a semblance of support for the U.S. with a few Taliban arrests, but turn a blind eye to the initial flight of the mass of Taliban in 2002 from Afghanistan into the North Western mountainous strongholds of Pakistan. There he would allow them to regroup, retrain and expand. The result was that the Taliban was eventually able to return to make major attacks both in Northern and Southern Afghanistan in 2005 and bring to grief U.N. efforts at stabilisation. Britain notably came to grief in Helmand in the South as its troops faced this well rehearsed Taliban resurgence.

Staggeringly it was years before the full truth of this duplicity of Pakistan was recognised by Washington, and even when it was the U.S. was so compromised it could do very little about it.

In Iraq. Iraq was a country divided by longstanding and violent faction, both religious and political. It had been kept in control only by the ruthless iron grip of Saddam Hussein. When he was toppled law and order was bound to be a crucial problem. Unless the U.S. gripped this very quickly there would be massive power struggles and violence would follow. There was, as we have seen, no U.S. awareness or plan for this, and the military was specifically geared not to undertake the law and order role of nation building. Rumsfeld had specifically ruled that out. Thus, after their initial victory, the military forces simply looked on as the slide to chaos quickly escalated. A political "supremo", Paul Bremer, chosen by Rumsfeld and directly answerable to the President, was sent out. He immediately did the worst thing possible; overnight he dismissed the Iraqi senior civil service and the Iraqi army leaders, so crippling the very institutions crucial for building up a workable structure of law and order. The streets instead filled up with dismissed, disaffected and armed soldiery. Mayhem, literally, ensued.

It was an ideal moment for the extremists from all over the Middle East. There were not enough U.S. troops to close the borders with Iran and other countries. There was a very rapid descent into violent chaos and civil anarchy with the U.S. military at a complete loss and a sitting target. Casualties rocketed, both civilian and military. Only two years later, with a surge in the troop numbers was anything like order achieved.

At this stage the British were facing the same chaos in Basra and, despite the attempt to use insurgency tactics learned in N. Ireland, British soldiers, even less in numbers than their U.S. counterparts, had a torrid time and eventually withdrew.

e. The Overall Strategic Blunder.

In the big picture of foreign affairs all this military effort was spent on targets that were essentially secondary in importance. The race for nuclear weapons in Iran, Pakistan and N. Korea posed much greater strategic danger than Saddam's regime which many observers saw as on the point of crumbling anyway. American failure in Iraq simply enabled these rogue states to face down the U.S., knowing that it had reached its practical limits of military intervention. By the end of the decade N. Korea secured a resounding success in nuclear weaponry, so did Pakistan. Iran was well on the way.

Meanwhile, China, the huge potential rival as the leading superpower and unmolested by foreign entanglements, continued to build up its reserves and power, simply watching whilst the U.S. became visibly weaker, not only in military and economic terms but also in terms of its political credibility as the democratic example to the world. Much of the world was not too happy at the way the U.S. was throwing its weight around.

On any reckoning, these last ten years have been a very sad episode in U.S. military endeavour. It may not have been as traumatic as Viet Nam, not has it produced a similar outcry as that war, but taken in the context of the 21stC the failure of the past ten years may well turn out to be much more significant for the future of the U.S. and the West.