

Don't Be Spun By The Spin

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President Bush will hail his trip to Europe as a resounding success. He hails everything he does as a resounding success regardless of the evidence to the contrary. All politicians do that.

Lest you be spun by the spin, note that he comes home with only one tangible result — an agreement by NATO to assist in training Iraqi forces, and a tepid assist it will be. Two of the NATO countries have agreed to supply one man each. Nearly all of the training will take place in Europe.

Well, such as it is, it's a good thing, as our own efforts to train Iraqis don't seem to be going so well.

Nevertheless, Bush cannot resist acting as if God appointed him schoolmaster of the world. He lectured everybody in sight. You, Europeans, should not lift the arms embargo against China (they are anyway), and you should stop being so soft on Iran. You should forget all my past insults and get on the Iraqi bandwagon.

They won't forget, and they won't get on a bandwagon that is stuck in the mire.

Hey, you Russians, listen up. You should be more democratic, and you should stop taking up for Iran. You, Iranians, you stop your nuclear-power program. You, Syrians, get out of Lebanon.

Mr. Bush has gotten Teddy Roosevelt's dictum exactly upside down. He shouts loudly and carries a small stick.

Let me put into perspective just how small a stick he carries. The European Union, in all but military power, is itself a superpower. It has more people than we do, and it has a larger gross domestic product. Its currency, the Euro, is very strong, and our currency, the dollar, is very weak.

Russia remains a military superpower, and its economy is growing faster than ours. It has recently undertaken an effort to modernize its nuclear strategic forces and even today has more than enough to blow us away. Furthermore, it recently signed a strategic defense agreement with China.

As to that part of the world, China and India, both with more than a billion people each, have rapidly growing economies (in part thanks to thousands of American jobs exported to their countries). China, in particular, has undertaken a military buildup, and, of course, all three — Russia, India and China — are nuclear powers. If Bush ever looked past his immediate political goals, he might foresee a future tripartite alliance that would mean big trouble for America.

In short, we are not the world's only remaining superpower, as the Washington cliché says, and if Bush could see past his ego, he would recognize that. Our economy is shaky. Federal, corporate and private debt is in the trillions, and Japan and China could wreck our economy just by dumping the debt paper they hold on the market.

One should remember what Osama bin Laden said. He did not say he would conquer us and convert us all to Islam. He said he would bankrupt us. If Bush gets us further mired in the Middle East by attacking Iran and Syria, as he seems likely to do, bin Laden might very well succeed. War is always a drain on the economy. War always produces death, destruction, debt and taxes. It hasn't been a profitable undertaking since the Mexican War, when as war booty we took most of what is today the American Southwest.

In short, real-world circumstances require careful, skillful and quiet diplomacy — not bombast. I fear, however, that we have put in place the wrong administration at the wrong time. Science, economic smarts, diplomatic skills and military experience are woefully in short supply in the Bush administration, which is filled with academics, spinners and ideologues.

The rise or fall of empires in the final days always depends on the right or wrong decisions made by the leadership. As American peons, there is nothing we can do but pray that God will intervene and make Bush give up hubris like he once did whiskey.