

After Iraq

America has had a bruising decade. But do not underestimate either the superpower or its president.

WHEN Barack Obama confirms next week that all American combat forces have left Iraq, you can be sure of one thing. He will not repeat the triumphalism of George Bush's suggestion seven years ago that America's mission there has been accomplished. Mr Obama always considered this a "dumb" war, and events have proved him largely right. America and its allies may have rid the Middle East of a bloodstained dictator, but Saddam Hussein's vaunted weapons of mass destruction turned out to be a chimera and the cost in American and especially Iraqi lives has been hideous. Iraq, it is true, is no longer a dictatorship. Thanks in part to Mr Bush's lonely refusal in 2007 to heed the calls to cut and run, the sectarian bloodletting that followed the invasion has abated. But the country's new democracy remains chronically insecure (see article), which is one reason why some 50,000 American "support" troops are to stay behind to shore it up.

The wrong turn

To many Americans, the misadventure in Iraq has come to symbolise a broader wrong turn America made after Osama bin Laden assaulted it on September 11th nine years ago. Nearly six out of ten Americans now say that they oppose even Mr Obama's "good" war—the one against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. An America that is bleeding economically at home, with unemployment stuck at nearly 10% and debts as tall as the eye can see, is losing confidence in its ability, and perhaps in its need, to shape events in far-flung regions such as Central Asia and the Middle East. Even in an age of austerity America still towers above all-comers in military power, as well it should given its annual defence spending of \$700 billion, almost as much as the rest of the world put together (see article). But the past decade has laid bare the limits of high-tech power. Whizz-bang technology enabled America to conquer Afghanistan and Iraq in the twinkling of an eye with negligible losses. Subduing them has been harder. Of the 2m Americans who have served in the two wars over the past decade, some 40,000 have been wounded and more than 5,000 killed.

Given all this, it is a credit to Mr Obama that he has resisted the temptation to follow the popular mood and turn his focus entirely inward. In his gut Mr Obama may well care more about nation-building at home than he does about exercising superpower abroad. But if so it is an instinct he has curbed.

Mr Obama plainly has a keener sense than Mr Bush did of American limits. At West Point last December he cited the cautious example of Eisenhower and told cadets that he refused to set foreign-policy goals that exceeded America's means. He has made a point of changing America's tone and body language, reaching out to the Muslim world in Cairo, offering "engagement" to Iran, bowing to China's Hu Jintao and Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah. The Republicans accuse him of apologising for America and kowtowing to its rivals. They are right to say that his overtures have had mixed results. The Chinese snubbed him at the Copenhagen climate summit, the Iranians spurned his hand and much of the goodwill he earned in the Muslim world after his Cairo speech has evaporated during the subsequent year of stalemate in Palestine.

At times, in short, his conciliatory tone has been read as weakness. But he has notched up successes, too, such as resetting relations with Russia partly to tighten sanctions on Iran. Moreover, his deeds have been tougher than his words. That speech at West Point was the one in which he announced that he was sending reinforcements to Afghanistan in spite of the war's unpopularity at home. Paying attention to China's sensitivities did not stop him selling arms to

Taiwan or eventually meeting the Dalai Lama. America has been working harder than it has for many years on buttressing its alliances in South-East Asia, regardless of Chinese complaints. And although Mr Obama fumbled his initial foray into Arab-Israeli peacemaking—he picked a fight with Israel on settlements and then seemed to back down—he started working on this conflict earlier in his term than some presidents, and appears intent on persevering. Next week he will inaugurate a new bout of direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians, chaperoned by Egypt's president and Jordan's king (see article).

Mr Obama has had his failures, but this record of effort should at least give the lie to the proposition that he is neglecting America's interests in the world or shirking its unique responsibilities. In that sense, Mr Obama is a less "transformational" president than his talk about a newly multipolar world would have you think. He does not subscribe to the neocon dream that America can intimidate every foe and expect the whole world to adopt its values. He has worked hard to enlist the help of international institutions and other countries. But he also plainly believes, and is right to do so, that there are some global jobs that America alone has the mix of military, economic and diplomatic muscle to undertake. At a minimum these include leading the fight against al-Qaeda, holding the ring in Asia, averting war between Israel and its neighbours and preventing Iran from acquiring a bomb and sparking a nuclear-arms race throughout the Middle East.

Still indispensable

Even that abbreviated list is a heavy burden for a war-weary country struck by its worst recession since the second world war. Many Americans would like the withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq to signal the beginning of the end of America's overall embroilment in the benighted regions of the world. They look with understandable envy on rising powers such as China and India that have devoted the past decade to the serious business of becoming rich. The mistake of Iraq has strengthened the instinct against foreign adventures. But it is no less of a mistake to imagine that the dangers of terrorism, proliferation and war will simply vanish if America were now to walk away from all the bad places. If America does not take on the task of containing such threats, who else will, or can? For all the difficulties at home, the fact remains that the biggest gainer from a strong America abroad is America itself. Whatever his gut tells him, Mr Obama seems to understand that.

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