

Message in a Ballot

On his first foreign trip after the “thumpin’,” President Bush headed for Hanoi. Prior to departure, his lame-duck Republican Congress gave him a reminder of the

election—a swift boot, setting aside his trade treaty with Vietnam.

It is a harbinger of things to come, and Bush senses it.

At the National University of Singapore, a chastened president took to resurrecting the familiar bogeymen of all Bush Republicans: “We hear voices calling for us to retreat from the world and close our doors. ... These are the old temptations of isolationism and protectionism, and America must reject them.”

But unlike his father, Bush is not coming off a triumph like Desert Storm. He is a repudiated president, with an army mired in a chaotic mess in Iraq. And the trade deficits, industrial ruin, and job losses his free-trade policy has produced have just helped lose him both houses of Congress.

With the ascendancy of James Baker and Robert Gates, pundits are declaring victory for the “realists” of Bush 41 over the Vulcans and neocons of Bush 43. And surely they are partly right.

Scooter is preparing his defense. Feith, Wolfowitz, and Perle are gone. The rest of the crew will not survive a Pentagon purge by Gates, who will strip the intel portfolio from the cherry-pickers and stove-pipers and hand it back to Langley.

So are we witnessing a revival of Baker-Scowcroft realism? Was that what America voted for? Not hardly. For the “realists” are NAFTA-GATT free traders, while free trade took a “thumpin’” as bad as Bush. Moreover, the world in which George W. leads America today is a far different place from the unipolar world of 41, where

America was sheriff, assembling and leading international posses to ride down the outlaws of the world.

Multipolarism is back. Europe rejects U.S. leadership. Russians, reverting to autocracy, are putting Russia first. China has become a great power rival in Asia and Africa. With the Iraq and Lebanon wars, America has never been more isolated in the Middle East. Bush would not dare visit the region as Nixon did. Iran and North Korea are defying us and the UN openly. Anti-Americanism is rampant in the hemisphere, and neo-Marxist populism has triumphed in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Bolivia and was only narrowly defeated in Mexico and Peru.

The post-Cold War world of 41, where America led the world into an internationalist era of free trade and collective security is gone. Today’s world more resembles the world of 1914 than 1989.

As for all the railing against “isolationism and protectionism,” that is an attack on a straw man. No one ran on such a platform. But America did vote to repudiate the trade and war policies of George W. Bush, as was evident in the rejection of the Hanoi trade deal and the near-universal clamor for a new policy to get us out of Iraq.

No nation can sustain a war that has lost the support of its people, Burke said. Nor can any nation sustain a foreign policy that has lost the support of its people.

Harry Truman had to bring the boys home from Europe in 1946 because that is what the people demanded. Harry sent them back in 1949 and 1950

because that is what the people, awakened to the evil character and hostile intent of Stalin, also wanted.

But if the people are the true “deciders,” what were they saying Nov. 7? They were saying: we want our borders secured, this war ended soon, and a new trade policy that will stop the export of U.S. industrial jobs and begin to create them here in the United States. They want our leaders to start looking out for America, and Americans, first.

They are not demanding that we “retreat from the world and close our doors.” But they are in a nationalistic frame of mind. As for the neocon “idealism,” where U.S. soldiers go abroad in search of monsters to destroy—monsters selected by AEI—they are not interested. Nor are they interested in exercising some “benevolent global hegemony” over all mankind.

If our Lords Temporal are contemplating new military adventures for Wilsonian ideals, they are courting revolution. America wants to bring the troops home, defend the United States, and let other nations fight their own wars and pay their own bills.

Iraq is the Dienbienphu of neoconservatism. But the repudiation of neoconservatism is not a mandate for Bush 41 internationalism. That was yesterday. And if the politicians did not get that message, they will be sent it again in 2008, and in every election thereafter, ‘til they get it right.

On Nov. 7, America said let us be rid of all these ideologies: of liberalism, neoconservatism, globalism, whatever. We want our vital national interests defended and the needs of our own nation addressed.

As for crusades for democracy, goodbye to all that. ■

Operation Rescue

In bringing back Robert Gates, Bush recalls the wisdom of his elders.

By Michael C. Desch

COLLEGE STATION, home to Texas A&M University, is a pleasant place—at least for nine months of the year. Though George H.W. Bush's presidential library is here, after that it's hard to be farther out of the Beltway loop. In most people's eyes, this is the political wilderness, yet an out of the way town in East Central Texas just became Robert M. Gates's stepping stone to George W. Bush's cabinet.

This image of the presumptive defense secretary languishing in the wilderness can be easily overdrawn. Bob and his wife Becky have a beautiful place on Orcas Island at the confluence of the Straits of Georgia and Juan de Fuca to which they escape the summer climes of the Lone Star State. Bob also serves on various corporate boards—he was recently named chair of Fidelity's—that regularly meet in more cosmopolitan environs. And even here in the Brazos Valley he never completely escaped the Beltway's gravitational pull. Along with former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, Bob co-chaired a Council on Foreign Relations study group on Iran in 2004 and was until recently a member of former Secretary of State James Baker and Congressman Lee Hamilton's Iraq Study Group.

Now he returns to Washington for what may be the most difficult assignment of his career: salvaging the wreckage of one war and averting another—while the president who once boasted of his political capital surveys a lost majority. But both experience and temperament outfit Gates well. Unlike the neoconservatives who populated Rumsfeld's Pentagon, he

is a pragmatist, who won't soon indulge their utopian schemes. And unlike his predecessor, Gates's time in government, and more recently here at Texas A&M, reveals a thoughtful consensus-builder prone to take a dim view of unilateralism.

Gates came to College Station in 1999 at the behest of former President Bush to serve as interim dean of the newly established George Bush School of Government and Public Service. At the time, the Bush School was a small program in the College of Liberal Arts. But current Katrina relief czar Don Powell, then the chair of the Board of Regents, felt that it needed to be a stand-alone college, and Gov. George W. Bush and the Texas legislature provided financial wherewithal.

The divorce from the College of Liberal Arts was difficult—some of the estranged parties still do not speak—but Gates successfully guided the Bush School from program to college. "Bob's great contribution," someone close to the process told me, "was taking something that could be very prickly with the faculty and making it into a seamless and smooth transition." Once a permanent dean was selected in the fall of 2001, Bob literally rode off into the sunset toward the Pacific Northwest, seemingly shaking the dust of College Station from his Bass Weejuns.

But scarcely a year later, when Texas A&M President Ray Bowen announced his intention to step down, Powell and other notables encouraged Gates to throw his hat into the ring. At first Bob was reluctant, but after 9/11 and one last call from Powell in December 2001, he

told me that he felt he "needed to do one more public service and couldn't think of anyplace [he] would rather do it than A&M." With the backing of George Bush Foundation chair Brent Scowcroft, he squared off against Phil Gramm for the position. Gramm, a former Texas A&M economics professor and U.S. congressman and senator, had substantial support among the regents. But by a very close vote Gates prevailed and became TAMU's 22nd president. He quickly got past the Gramm fight and won over many skeptics who did not think that a former CIA director could be an effective university president or that a non-Aggie could lead A&M.

Three early moves highlighted Gates's bureaucratic skill and political acumen. He acted quickly to clean up the legal mess resulting from a 1999 campus accident. (A longstanding tradition of building huge homecoming bonfires resulted in the collapse of a 110-foot-high pile of tree trunks that killed 12 students.) Next, he fired R.C. Slocum, the legendary but failing football coach. In a deeply tradition-bound place like A&M, both of these moves were fraught with peril, particularly for an outsider.

Bob's most ambitious effort, however, was his plan to bring in almost 450 new faculty by the fall of 2007. In his first year, the state legislature threatened deep funding cuts. Legislatures often play a game of chicken with public higher education, warning of drastic cuts and then, to the relief of faculty and administrators, implementing much smaller ones. Though something of a