

# Ancient Rome on the Potomac

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## Abstract

Therein lies the rub. To be sure, the process started before Mr [George Bush] entered the White House; but it has reached its peak during his presidency. Team Bush, as the New York Post calls it, has been driven from the outset by a faith in the efficacy of its political ideology and the policies that arise from it, rather than policies designed to cope with facts unearthed by US intelligence. It is ironic, wrote the former CIA man in the Baltimore Sun that the CIAs inept and corrupt handling of intelligence in the run-up to the Iraqi invasion has led to the agencies demise, because intelligence counted for very little in the decision to go to war. Before the war, British intelligence correctly told Prime Minister Tony Blair that US intelligence and policy were being fixed around the policy. As a result, George Tenet, Mr Goss's predecessor at the CIA, presided over the greatest intelligence scandal in US history. Mr Bush rewarded him with the Medal of Freedom, sending a signal to the US intelligence community that what mattered was not accuracy but loyalty to the President.

This weekend all of Americas eyes are understandably on the plight of the Big Easy and its environs; but the Iraq nightmare continues. If you do the maths (number of attacks per day to calculate the numbers of people involved) it is clear that America needs perhaps three times as many troops in Iraq as it has currently. But look at the recruiting statistics: only the Marines are making their numbers; the army is off by 20%. The situation with both recruitment and retention is much worse than it appears because the books are being cooked and the numbers fiddled to make it look better. But the Joint Chiefs are saying ever more loudly that America cannot sustain the current level of commitment in Iraq for much longer and drawdown has to happen quickly. That is why there are so many mixed signals in the US press, with some influential figures saying the withdrawal of troops will start by the end of the year and others saying America will stay for years until the job is done. The reality is that America cannot sustain its deployment in Iraq for more than a few months more without risking much more than Iraq. One of the reasons why the response to [Katrina] has been so slow and inadequate is that a huge chunk of Louisiana National Guard is currently serving in Iraq. The lack of US troops in Iraq means that, though the military can launch major operations to clear Fallujah or Mosul of insurgents, it does not have enough boots on the ground to control the area afterwards; so the terrorists return. The training of the Iraqi security forces has been largely unsuccessful: America is trying to give Iraq control over its own destiny but so far the Iraqi forces have proved just not up to it. The great untold story which Katrina has ensured will remain untold for some time of the insurgency is the degree to which sectarian killings are becoming such a prominent part of life. Shia hit squads dressed in uniform have been murdering Sunnis and Sunnis have been retaliating; some argue that civil war has already broken out. Nobody really believes the insurgency can be quelled by further elections or the constitution because everyone can see that American will is weak and that the Iraqi government cannot offer

security.

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## Full Text

PRESIDENT Bushs Iraq adventure never really recovered from the looting and anarchy that erupted after the fall of Baghdad, while victorious US troops looked the other way. It has been largely downhill in Iraq ever since. His presidency might not recover from the even worse looting and anarchy in New Orleans that has followed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. A terrible natural disaster has mutated into the Hobbesian social meltdown of a major American city because of an inadequate government response which even Mr Bush has described as unacceptable.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (Fema) has been found wanting, incapable of organising the evacuation of the most vulnerable before the hurricane arrived or of establishing basic command-and-control five days into the devastation, leaving thousands to die or languish in hellholes as a result. But Fema has been neglected by the Bush administration, leaving it a shadow of its former self. As dismay turns to shame then anger across America, with parts of the Deep South degenerating into something approaching war-ravaged Congo rather than the richest country in the world, there are also the first whiffs of a scandal with the revelation that the US Army Corps of Engineers had recently reduced its flood- control work because of budget cuts and the diversion of resources to Iraq and homeland security despite a series of warnings that the flood defences of New Orleans could not withstand a major hurricane.

All this is likely to haunt President Bush for the foreseeable future; and criticism is coming from more than just the usual Bush- haters. When even a Bush cheerleader like the New York Post can write Frankly, Team Bush seemed a little shaky on its responsibility to take command of the situation, then it is clear that Katrina is not just a humanitarian disaster but a political crisis for the president. To add to the shameful fact that the Bush administration had no plan to rebuild Iraq after the invasion comes proof that, on the fourth anniversary of 9/11, America is still unprepared to respond to a major terrorist attack. The evidence is being broadcast non-stop from New Orleans on Americas news channels: no co- ordination between local, state and federal authorities; inadequate and chaotic evacuation plans; the failure to fund the appropriate agencies; delays in deploying the necessary resources in men and materiel; and the absence of leadership that can get a grip of a horrendous situation and give people hope at a time of national tragedy. It is tantamount to an open invitation to al-Qaeda to attack again.

Next time, the attack could dwarf 9/11 or even Katrina. The Business has learned that there is a great debate inside the US intelligence community about whether Osama Bin Laden has a radiological or a nuclear device; the chilling feature of this debate is not if he has a weapon of mass destruction but what kind of WMD he possesses. This newspapers Washington sources believe that the facts support a radiological device but admit there is some empirical evidence to say that he may have a nuclear weapon. The scary thing is that US intelligence does not know. The only way it can find out with a high degree of certainty is through decent human intelligence. But that has not been the CIAs forte for over a generation.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the intelligence failures which led to it, there was much talk in Washington of beefing up the CIAs human intelligence gathering (humint in spy jargon spooks on the ground rather than satellites in the sky, sigint); in reality, the CIA has been unable to shake off its addiction to hi-tech spying, which is a major reason why it has made no headway in locating Mr Bin Laden or discovering his resources. Indeed, US intelligence knows less today about the structure and capabilities of al-Qaeda than it did on 9/11. It knows, for example, that there is an underground railroad taking terrorists from all over the Islamic world to Iraq; but it has no clue how it works. It knows that there are more suicide bombers queuing up in Iraq to die for Allah than there are al-Qaeda lieutenants to process them; but it does not know how to stop them. It knows that terrorist experience gained in Iraq, including knowledge of American and British counter-terrorist tactics, is now being exported to Afghanistan and Europe; but it has no strategy to counter that escalation.

Perhaps none of that should be surprising: under President Bush the CIA is practically a busted flush. Its current boss, Porter Goss, has proved to be as ineffectual and weak as his critics claimed when Mr Bush appointed him. An organisation in which morale was already low following its pre-9/11 failures, which the special commission into that attack exposed in unremitting detail, is now even more demoralised by Mr Gosss predilection for surrounding himself

with know-nothing sycophants from Congress. Last week a former CIA analyst wrote in the Baltimore Sun of the end of the CIA as an authoritative intelligence agency outside the policy community providing objective and balanced intelligence estimates. Intelligence, he wrote, was now being run out of the Pentagon, where Donald Rumsfeld recently appointed his own undersecretary of defence for intelligence, and is driven by the policy goals of the administration rather than objective fact-gathering and assessment.

Therein lies the rub. To be sure, the process started before Mr Bush entered the White House; but it has reached its peak during his presidency. Team Bush, as the New York Post calls it, has been driven from the outset by a faith in the efficacy of its political ideology and the policies that arise from it, rather than policies designed to cope with facts unearthed by US intelligence. It is ironic, wrote the former CIA man in the Baltimore Sun that the CIA's inept and corrupt handling of intelligence in the run-up to the Iraqi invasion has led to the agency's demise, because intelligence counted for very little in the decision to go to war. Before the war, British intelligence correctly told Prime Minister Tony Blair that US intelligence and policy were being fixed around the policy. As a result, George Tenet, Mr Goss's predecessor at the CIA, presided over the greatest intelligence scandal in US history. Mr Bush rewarded him with the Medal of Freedom, sending a signal to the US intelligence community that what mattered was not accuracy but loyalty to the President.

The demise of US intelligence can be seen in the manner in which America is preparing for the next terrorist attack. Its response to a nuclear or radiological threat technology? Put enough sensors at the ports to scan every container coming in and the country will be OK. Yet history teaches that Maginot Lines fail because the enemy sees what is being done and chooses to do something different. In other words, America's response is reactive rather than proactive which would mean taking the fight to the enemy, which again comes back to humint deal with the threat at the source and psyops draw the enemy into the battleground of your choosing rather than waiting for the enemy to dictate the terms of the next battle. Instead, a political decision appears to have been taken not to prepare publicly for a radiological/nuclear attack because to do so properly would scare everyone. As a result, the state of the emergency response system around the country remains dire, as the people of New Orleans are finding out to their terrible cost.

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America's immediate enemies Mr Bin Laden and his cohorts, the insurgency in Iraq are getting stronger. Yet Mr Bush, Mr Rumsfeld and Vice-President Dick Cheney continue to spout optimistic nonsense, far removed from the reality of those involved in the fight. That reinforces the demoralisation of all involved. Last week Inspector General John Helgeson sent a scathing report to Congress which severely criticised former CIA Director Tenet and a score of other agency personnel for their failure to develop a strategy against al-Qaeda before 9/11. More worrying is the fact that the Bush administration still refuses to create a counter-terrorist strategy worthy of the name four years

after 9/11.

We have reached a pivotal moment in American history to which people might well look back and say this was the start of the decline of the American Empire. An inert government unable to take strategic decisions, focused only on the tactical; a Democratic opposition incapable of providing a realistic alternative; a political process that becomes more corrupt by the day, with Congress able to find billions to satisfy powerful energy and agricultural interests but nothing extra for those who want to build better flood barriers; a national security apparatus that is unable to protect its citizens from a rapidly evolving threat; an emergency response system that allows a natural disaster to turn into a human tragedy of biblical proportions. If, God forbid, al-Qaeda were to mount another major terrorist attack in the dark days ahead it is unclear that America, the richest, most powerful country in the world, could cope. The tragedy is that it need not be like this: America has the power, wealth, energy, resilience and brains to deal with whatever is thrown at it. For all who believe in democracy and progress it remains the best hope of the world. But under George Bush, Washington is beginning to look and sound like Ancient Rome on the Potomac.

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