

Michael Fullilove  
**Bush begins to tread softly**  
The Age  
7 November 2005

In his first term, President George Bush was the Charles Atlas of international politics, pursuing a muscular grand strategy to impose America's will on the world. His Administration eschewed the 20th century tradition of projecting influence not only via hard power but through allied nations and multilateral institutions. Instead US policy was marked by unilateralism, pre-emption and regime change through force.

The President lectured the United Nations while his Defense Secretary dissed "Old Europe". Multilateral agreements were binned. The world was divided into men of steel and evildoers. Iraq was invaded and occupied despite the failure to obtain the Security Council's support. The Administration's boosters glowered that Syria and North Korea were next.

Australian commentators from left and right disagreed violently on the merits of this approach, but most assumed it would define Bush's second term as surely as it did his first.

One year after his impressive victory over Senator John Kerry, however, it is clear that this assumption was wrong. The Bush Doctrine, supposedly America's new strategic posture for the ages, has not survived one election.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced during her confirmation that "the time for diplomacy is now"; since her appointment she has replaced Donald Rumsfeld as the Administration's most prominent international spokesperson. The State Department has regained much of the policy territory previously annexed by the Pentagon.

Many of the leading neoconservatives and unilateralists have been stripped out of Washington's policy-making processes and now find themselves in the private sector or in international organisations, if not in court. Perhaps the most famous of these, ambassador John Bolton, struck a belligerent tone during negotiations leading up to the UN World Summit, but was soon pulled into line by his superiors. One of the most influential, Vice-President Dick Cheney's chief of staff Lewis Libby, now faces up to 30 years in prison if found guilty of obstruction of justice, perjury and making a false statement in the CIA leak scandal. His indictment last week casts a long shadow over the methods employed by the Administration in 2003 to take the US — and its coalition partners, including Australia — to war.

Washington recently worked closely with Paris in order to get the Syrians out of Lebanon, and then to prosecute those Syrian officials allegedly implicated in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. It joined forces with Beijing, Moscow, Tokyo and Seoul in order to reach agreement with North Korea, presumably still a member of the Axis of Evil, over its nuclear program. In the Middle East, the talk is no longer of how to spread the bounty of Iraq's democratic revolution to its neighbours, but of how to contain the chaos within Iraq's borders — and effect a dignified withdrawal.

This shift has been driven in part by the failure of foreign policy adventurism in the first term. America's inability to create a stable democracy quickly in Iraq has discredited the role of ideology in the eyes of many policy-makers. The lack of weapons of mass destruction has undermined faith in the reliability of US intelligence, making pre-emption harder to sell. Much of the US military - and much of Bush's historical legacy - is now tied up in Iraq. The struggle to avoid failure there imposes serious limits on Washington's freedom of movement elsewhere.

Increasingly Bush is also looking like a victim of the "second term curse" which has struck so many recent US presidents. Harry Truman's second term was marred by the Korean War; Lyndon Johnson was emasculated by Vietnam; Richard Nixon resigned over Watergate; Ronald Reagan suffered the Iran-Contra scandal; Bill Clinton was impeached over the Monica Lewinsky matter. Bush is finding his sorrows are coming not as spies but in battalions: the Iraq imbroglio, hurricane Katrina, the embarrassing withdrawal of Harriet Miers' nomination for the Supreme Court. All this is leaching away Bush's support and his political prestige.

Of course, the US has not lost all of its muscle tone: it will not regress from being a body-builder to a 98-pound weakling. America's power projection capacity still greatly exceeds that of any other country, and Washington remains the only capital with a truly global foreign policy. It would still use force to achieve core interests including, quite possibly, the prevention of a nuclear-armed Iran. However, the notion of an "America rampant", lately lauded by the right and feared by the left, is last year's story.

Many Australians will be pleased that Washington's ideologues have been mugged by reality. Certainly, the pursuit of a more moderate international course by the US makes life simpler for us. However, the price of this shift has been the weakening of our great ally - and that should be no cause for celebration.

**Dr Michael Fullilove directs the global issues program at the Lowy Institute for International Policy and is editor of *'Men and Women of Australia!' Our Greatest Modern Speeches* (Vintage).**