

## It's a new American moment -- if we're lucky

Joan Chittister | Dec. 8, 2006 From Where I Stand

We are living through a very unsettling time in U.S. history. Let no one take pleasure in it -- neither Democrat nor Republican.

Whole alliances are being formed against us around the world and that by countries either historically called friends -- or historically considered too weak to matter.

America, the "leader of the free world," has been hobbled by its overreaching, its political missionizing, its reckless use of military power.

The country has been denounced in the international arena as a "rogue nation," and our president chided, embarrassed, in the public forum -- internally as well as internationally.

That is surely sadness beyond sadness.

How could this have happened? This is, after all, America, "the beautiful." This is an America with a great deal about which to be proud.

This is the country that did not invade Europe, it liberated it. It did not set out to conquer Africa, it emptied it of conquerors. This is a country that did not instigate the destruction of Europe and yet, in the end, it led the rebuilding of an entire continent, even of the countries of the destroyers themselves.

Those things in themselves led the world to have great expectations of us. And rightly so.

But the aura of World War II with its memories of U.S. soldiers stopping German Panzer divisions at the gates of great cities, driving the Wehrmacht out of the forests and the fields of Europe is fast fading. The generation of post-war European leaders who lived in faithful gratitude to the United States for those things has given way now to a new generation of world leaders who were not part of that world and who are committed to their own.

This is a new world where the very notion of putting the United States on trial before an international tribunal is neither unthinkable nor undiscussed. "We will put Vice-President Cheney on trial for war crimes," the Grand Mufti of Syria said. "He owns more shares in weapons industries than anyone else. He has made millions of martyrs."

Indeed, the expectations of the world about us have changed drastically.

No doubt about it: This is a sad moment for a great nation.

At the same time, as we are going through a period in which U.S. violence in Iraq has been repeatedly

condemned, this is still a country that has emerged from either divisive struggles -- like slavery and women's rights and Vietnam -- with a great tradition of justice and equality, of mercy and freedom, of checks and balances.

Which is exactly why this sad moment is an equally refreshing moment.

The fact is that we are also watching two other things emerge again, which -- if we achieve them -- however late, however slow they are in coming -- this time can be the rebuilding of this country itself.

First, we are watching the whole American concept of checks and balances begin to assert itself. For the first time in years, the Congress is beginning to function again, independently of the executive branch rather than its loyal acolyte, to voice its own concerns and expectations.

Just as we saw the country accept two hotly contested elections in peace, we are now seeing the ship of state beginning, like the aircraft carrier Intrepid in New York Harbor, to be tugged quietly out of the mud of intransigence and single-sightedness and monaural argument that had entombed it there. The mid-term elections, the "deteriorating" situation in Iraq -- long present, only now fully admitted -- and the work of the congressionally mandated Baker commission on Iraq have reasserted the voice of reason, of reality and of traditional Americanism in the country.

Secondly, this great turn-around in foreign policy is coming out of a genuine bipartisan effort, the likes of which this country has been lacking for years. Instead of "Democrats" and "Republicans" -- blocs and caucuses, candidates and party leaders -- we may be on the verge of having a genuine U.S. Congress again where multiple ways of achieving the same goals get melded in the centripetal forge of an established and time-honored legislative process.

Then, the needs of the country may finally supersede the political posturing of whichever party.

It's been a long time coming. And, don't be fooled: it's not here yet. But at least we have a chance again.

And how did it happen? It happened because voters went to the polls more concerned about the nature of the country and the integrity of the government than they did about their party affiliation.

That should give us all hope. That should give both parties pause. That should give third parties the energy they need to go on doing what third parties do best: nudging the ship of state out of old berths into new waters so that the deepest values, the finest ideals, of "America, the beautiful" can rise to the top again.

And it's happening not a moment too soon. We have come too close to the edge this time. This has not been a period of distinct differences about how to achieve what we all desire. This has been a period in which the very values of the country have been in flux, in danger, at stake and polarized.

The problem is not simply that time is running out for Iraq. The problem is that, that same time is running out for us, too.

This is surely the time, then, to start at the bottom and ask ourselves all over again what kind of a country we really want to be together. A country of secret prisons and torture chambers? Of imposed "democracy" and invaded nations? Of armed missiles and great spies in the sky?

From where I stand, it might be time to risk assuming once more that justice and equality, mercy and compassion, checks and balances, might be more than enough to make us respected, to make us secure, to make us great again.

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