

commentary

from other pens...

Changing realities force adjustments

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Bush's foreign policy has been a series of zigzags lately, as changing political realities have forced him to make complex adjustments.

Vice President Dick Cheney visited the Middle East a month ago intent on drumming up support for a tough stance against Iraq. His Arab hosts kept wanting to talk about the deteriorating situation between Israel and the Palestinians. Iraq got shorter shrift than Cheney wanted.

Since then, the Middle East has continued to stand in the way of Bush's goal of putting the fight against world terrorism at the top of his agenda.

On some days, Bush has been eager to support Israel, seeing repeated suicide bombings against Israeli civilians as an outrage. Not to stand up for Israel in such circumstances would be unseemly for a government committed to do battle with terror.

At other times, he is pulled the other way, heavily influenced by the wave of outrage among Muslims over an Israeli military offensive aimed at liquidating the terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank.

On March 30, Bush defended Israel's storming of Yasser Arafat's compound and demanded the Palestinian leader do more to stem violence.

"I can understand why the Israeli government takes the actions they take," he said.

But Bush took a different tack five days later when he felt Israel had gone too far. He renewed his criticism of Arafat, but he urged Israel pull its troops back from Palestinian areas.

It is an appeal that he has repeated almost daily since then, in increasingly exasperated tones. Bush's stand disappoints Israelis, who note that Bush didn't see any need for restraint in response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Why ask Israel to temper its response, they wonder.

Bush is eager for moderate Arab support for the war on terror but may not get it if Israel turns the West Bank into rubble.

"The administration wants to broaden the war on terrorism and tends to be very sensitive to the Arab viewpoint, especially Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia," says James Phillips, Middle East analyst at the Heritage Foundation.

Meanwhile, the war on terror, while not on hold, is being carried out in undramatic ways. The administration continues efforts to prevent financial transfers to terrorist groups. And it has sent or plans to send military personnel to such countries as Georgia, Yemen and the Philippines to upgrade their anti-terrorism capability.

There also is less talk these days about a move to dislodge Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, by U.S. calculations one of the world's top terrorist exporters. This is a function not only of the continuing crisis between Israel and the Palestinians but also because the U.S. campaign against terrorist forces in Afghanistan remains unfinished.

As a result, Saddam has been able to breathe easier, at least compared with the time 10 weeks ago when Bush designated Iraq as a charter member of the "axis of evil."

It was not long thereafter that Iraqi officials talked for the first time in years about allowing U.N. weapons inspectors back into the country. But things have gone Saddam's way since then, and he must feel safer nowadays than he has in some time. The Arab League has come down unambiguously in support of Iraq in its standoff with Washington. The prospect for a U.S. move to oust Saddam soon seems remote.

Iran, another "axis" country, has drawn harsh criticism lately from Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld. He accused Tehran of harboring al-Qaida terrorists and of joining Syria in "inspiring and financing a culture of political murder and suicide bombing" in the Middle East. There has been no sign of increase in American pressure on that country.

One piece of good news for Bush was the willingness of North Korea, the third "axis" country, to accept Bush's proposal to reopen a dialogue on security issues. After more than 50 years of hostility, no one is predicting an early convergence of views.

EDITOR'S NOTE — George Gedda has covered foreign affairs for The Associated Press since 1968.



VISIONS FOR PEACE

Women hold key to Kabul's future

Rona Popal had not been in Kabul for 24 years. When her plane landed, she recognized nothing of the city that had been her home. "I never thought I would face what I saw," she said the other day, a week after her return.

Worse than the structural damage were the faces and voices of the women she met amid the ash and broken bricks. Most had lost children to the war. Many had lost husbands. They shared with Popal their horrific stories in flat, cold detail.

"To me, I say, oh my God, how can they bear this pain?" Popal said. "For them, it was just survival. But then they cry. Then they want to shout."

Women are and have been the protagonists in the story of Afghanistan. When women walked the streets of Kabul freely, filled the universities and wrote legislation alongside male colleagues, Afghanistan prospered. Then came the Soviets, and afterward the Taliban.

Banished from the workplace and the classroom, imprisoned beneath burkas, women became mute, ghostly figures. The country rotted, becoming a host to all manner of social and moral disease.

With 22 years of war killing so many men, women now make up 68 percent of the population. As women emerge from the shadows, so will Afghanistan itself.

That's why Popal returned, to braid a connection between the women of her homeland and her adopted land. Popal lives in Union City, Calif. — she left Afghanistan with her diplomat husband a



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• commentary

year before the Soviet invasion in 1979. When she left, half the government's workers were women. Half the members of the national governing body, the Loya Jirga, were women. Forty percent of doctors were women, as were seventy percent of teachers.

When the Taliban fell, we pictured women pouring back into schools and offices and marketplaces, pulling off their burkas and letting the sun warm their faces for the first time in six years.

But, it isn't happening, at least not on the scope we had imagined. Popal found Kabul still filled with women in their sky-blue burkas. Some are scared. They don't trust peace. The burka is still protection from men who, though clean-shaven now, are as abusive as they were during Taliban rule.

For some women, widowed and penniless, the burka is their one piece of presentable clothing. "I was talking to a group of women inside a home, and one woman was wearing her burka, even though we were indoors," Popal said. "I asked her why, and she said she didn't own a scarf."

For the women ready to return to work and school, there isn't yet much to return to. Businesses have been bombed and abandoned. The women have no money to start enterprises of their own. Schools have few or no desks and chairs, few books and pencils.

Yet, when the new school year began March 21, women attended class at Kabul University for the first time in six years. There were 200 women in a class of 1,000. Girls crammed empty classrooms, happily sitting on the floor shoulder to shoulder. In the school Popal visited, teachers spent the first few days testing the girls to see in which grade to place them.

"We can give these women a handout, or we can help them get back to work and back to school," Popal said. "We need to help them in a way they don't need to come back and ask for help again."

So, Popal has teamed up with another Afghan-born businesswoman from Atherton, Calif., Catherine Sharif Marcus, to form the US2AfghanB2B Project. It is a Bay Area-based program modeled after the Grameen Bank, which makes small loans to women starting their own businesses. International aid needs to follow a similar path. Rebuilding structures is just one piece of rebuilding the country. Afghanistan will be strong and independent only when its women are.

Joan Ryan is a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle. Send comments to her e-mail at joanryan@sfgate.com.

The hard sell



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If any of you own your own business, manage a store or engage in any commercial activity, I have a suggestion for you. You need to identify any of your customers who are middle-aged men and assign only your best salespeople to them. It is very hard to sell anything to a middle-aged man, unless it floats or rolls. The problem is that by this age they've made so many idiotic purchases that they've run out room for error — especially if they're married. They've already bought the 8-track home entertainment system with the psychedelic color organ, the February time-share in Baffin Island and the amphibious car.

They've already experienced that things don't work as well as expected, particularly when you don't read the manual, and that no matter how softly you hit something with a hammer, the store probably won't give you a refund. If you're interested in selling something to a middle-aged guy, put not only your best, but also your oldest salesman on the case. When a middle-aged guy is confronted with a senior citizen who still has most of his fingers and can form a sentence, he immediately starts feeling better. And, if the old guy can tell him stories about the stupid things he's bought in his life, the middle-aged guy gets absolutely buoyant. He realizes that you can continue to make the kinds of mistakes he's been making and still manage to reach old age. Now he's optimistic and that's how all his troubles started in the first place. He's putty in your hands. That is, until he gets home, where he'll be in his wife's hands — and in something much more serious than putty.

NO INANIMATE OBJECTS

I've worked on enough cars and lawnmowers and sump pumps in my life to tell you for a fact that

there is no such thing as an inanimate object. Every machine and structure is a conscious being with attitudes and feelings, and they're all directed toward you. You may think the lawnmower doesn't mind you taking its engine apart, but wait until you get to the last bolt. You'll skin your knuckles, you'll break your wrench, you'll round the head off. That's because the lawnmower doesn't like you. It's mad that you ignore it all winter and then expect it to be ready to go with one quick pull. That should be an important life lesson for you. Every time a machine breaks down, a barbecue blows up or a concrete block drops on your foot, that's not an accident, it's a wake-up call. However, when a concrete block falls on your head, it's just the opposite.

SAY IT WITH WITNESSES

When you tell your wife your plans, she often shoots you down in a flaming ball of testosterone. That's because nobody else was there. When other people are here, your wife will be much more supportive. Here's a short list of things that should only be said when you're with others:

- I'm looking at getting a new boat.
- I plan to quit my job next week.
- A bunch of the guys are coming over to watch wrestling.
- I'm in pretty good shape for a man my age.

• We don't really enjoy going out to expensive restaurants.

• I went to the casino and lost big time.

GO EASY

My wife always beats me at golf. It's not because she's a better golfer than me. OK, she is a better golfer than me, but it's not because of that. It's because she doesn't swing hard, and she doesn't hit the ball very far. Her mistakes are always shorter than the width of the fairway. Whereas I put everything into it, so when I make a mistake, it's an over-the-fence, out-of-bounds, through-the-parking-lot, out-onto-the-highway kind of mistake. I guess for most of us golf is similar to climbing the corporate ladder or being on a date — it's safer when you don't go too far.

Quote of the Day: "Don't spend more than one quarter of your income on housing or one third of your day on a bar stool." — Red Green
 Red Green is the star of "The Red Green Show," a television series seen in the U.S. on PBS and in Canada on the CBC Network, and the author of "The Red Green Book" and "Red Green Talks Cars: A Love Story." Watch for the feature film Red Green's 'Duct Tape Forever' at a theater near you.

The Goodland Daily News

(USPS No. 222-460. ISSN 0893-0562)

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Published daily except Saturday and Sunday and the day observed for New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day, at 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

Periodicals postage paid at Goodland, Kan. 67735; entered at the Goodland, Kan., Post Office under the Act of Congress of March 8, 1878.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Goodland Daily News, 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

TELEPHONE: (785) 899-2338. Editorial e-mail: daily@nwkansas.com. Advertising questions can be sent to: gdnadv@nwkansas.com

The Goodland Daily News assumes no liability for mistakes or omissions in advertising or failure to publish beyond the actual cost of the ad.

SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$25; six months, \$42; 12 months, \$75. Out of area, weekly mailing of five issues: three months, \$30; six months, \$49; 12 months, \$80. By mail daily in Kansas, Colorado: 12 months, \$115. (All tax included.)

Incorporating:

The Sherman County Herald
 Founded by Thomas McCants
 1935-1989

THE SHERMAN COUNTY STAR
 Founded by Eric and Roxie Yonkey
 1994-2001

Nor'West Newspapers
 Haynes Publishing Company



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