

# commentary

from other pens...

## Greenhouses became 'a Taj Mahal of glass'

The glass houses rose from the west wall of the White House in a long pile of cubes and rectangles devoted not to government but to lemon trees, potted palms, camellias, roses and exotic orchids.

By 1902, when Theodore Roosevelt decided to remove it, a half century of presidents and first ladies had grown accustomed to the White House conservatory as a secluded all-weather retreat, a private paradise, a highly prized executive privilege.

Floral arrangements from the conservatory smothered White House banquets. Blooms from the greenhouses stood watch at Abraham Lincoln's funeral and astounded the guests at Grover Cleveland's wedding.

But Charles McKim, the prominent New York architect directed by Roosevelt to shape the White House for the demands of a new century, saw the glass houses as vulgar white elephants. They occupied valuable and much-needed space. He planned to wipe the slate clean.

White House gardener Henry Pfister had invested his life in the care of the White House conservatory and fought a rearguard action to preserve the greenhouses and his plants. First lady Edith Kermit Roosevelt, listened, then negotiated a compromise by which the greenhouses would be carefully dismantled and rebuilt elsewhere on the White House grounds.

Tight money and expanding budgets upended that plan. New working greenhouses would eventually grow the plants and flowers needed for White House social events. But they were miles away and no longer a place for after-dinner walks.

Soon the glass houses were gone. But memories lingered.

Andrew Jackson built the first hot house or Orangery at the White House in 1835, possibly to shelter a sago palm from Mount Vernon that had been prized by George Washington. Stepped tables also displayed potted fruit trees, and many varieties of flowering plants.

By the 1850s something more elaborate and efficient was demanded. President Franklin Pierce built the first glass-ceiling green house on top of the flat roof of the West Colonnade, erected a half century previously by Thomas Jefferson.

By the time James Buchanan's administration opened in 1857, the conservatories were attached to the house itself, reachable through doors from the State Dining Room.

From that point, historian William Seale writes in "The White House Garden," the conservatories "grew and grew over 45 years, climaxing at the century's end in a rambling Taj Mahal of glass." There were palm houses, a fern house, and rose and orchid houses.

Harriet Lane, Buchanan's niece and White House hostess, strolled through the indoor foliage with the visiting Prince of Wales as the Marine Band played "Listen to the Mocking Bird."

The floral retreat was available to first lady Mary Lincoln during the Civil War and camellias and roses grown there were displayed as her assassinated husband lay in state in the East Room in April 1865.

An 1867 fire damaged the conservatory and destroyed Washington's sago palm, but the greenhouses were rebuilt more elaborately than ever. Ulysses S. Grant placed a billiard room between the greenhouse and the mansion. Rutherford B. Hayes, the next president, replaced it with a tile-floored palm court.

Hayes rearranged the interiors in broad walks furnished with iron benches and ornamental plant stands. "A jungle of ferns and palms down the middle screened one walk from another, while on the outer walls a variety of flowers was massed on stepped tables," Seale writes.

Flowers from the conservatory banked the Blue Room on June 2, 1886 as Grover Cleveland married the beautiful Frances Folsom.

The glass houses had become a paradise with more space than any one floor of the mansion itself.

But in 1902, with America an emergent world power, orchids and greenhouses would make way for a new presidential workshop.

Future generations would know it as the West Wing.  
 EDITOR'S NOTE — Lawrence L. Knutson has reported on Congress, the White House and Washington's history for 35 years.



## So long urgency, hello indulgence

This must be what a phony war feels like. Having first ventured out of the bunker united as we clutched our flags, fought fear and braced for battle, we now enjoy the fragile complacency of daily routines that can no longer be taken for granted. Except, of course, that they are being taken for granted. Strangely enough, there's little sense of having returned to "life as usual" with any understanding of the essential urgency of the mission before us: to neutralize the terrorist forces of jihadist Islam. Having accepted the basic survival strategies of life as civilian targets — invasive security checks, time-consuming travel routines and the rest — we now face the metaphysical danger that one day a yellow security alert will be considered downright cozy. Adaptability is an asset, but there comes a point at which it has more to do with defeat than survival.

It may sound as if I'm still not over the quilts, ballets and anchor soliloquies of Sept. 11 — the network extravaganza — but that's not it. Nor does this disaffection have anything to do with those ghastly commemoratives in marble and bronze that keep popping up to bring us revels of pain and death when what we really need is a sculpture of an avenging angel or two on a white steed. Somewhat amazingly, it doesn't even stem from this week's Democratic efforts to depict the administration's war policy, long in the making, as a suddenly concocted political ploy that doesn't merit electoral consideration.

What is most perplexing is the U.S. Senate's idea of what it means to take action. After two weeks of public hearings on intelligence failures leading up to Sept. 11, it voted overwhelmingly to create



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a blue-ribbon panel to ... investigate such failures further. Imagine: Senators could hear, for example, the harrowing testimony of a special agent whose repeated requests to launch a manhunt for Khalid Almihdhar, one of the Sept. 11 hijackers, as late as Aug. 29, 2001, were turned down by the FBI's legal arm, and be inspired only to initiate another inquiry. "Someday, someone will die," the agent wrote nearly two weeks before the attacks in a scathingly bitter and prophetic e-mail to headquarters, "and (legal) wall or not, the public will not understand why we were not effective and throwing every resource we had at certain 'problems.' Let's hope the National Security Law Unit will stand behind their decisions then, especially since the biggest threat to us now, UBL [Osama bin Laden], is getting the most protection."

I'm just wondering whether a VIP panel is really necessary to look up who runs the National Security Law Unit, see whether they're standing behind their decisions, and determine how long it will take them to clean out their desks. But maybe I'm missing something. Indeed, as the Washington Post explained, the 90-8 vote authorizing the commission "reflected a mounting consensus in both parties that the current congressional probe into intelligence failures pointed to the need for a more far-

reaching inquiry." Seems that we needed a "probe" to determine that we really needed an "inquiry."

Accordingly, congressional leaders will soon pick a panel of worthies from outside government (if such exist) and give them subpoena powers, a \$3 million budget and a mandate to file an "initial" report in six months. The final report, the one with the actual recommendations, won't appear for another year after that. Assuming the panel is chosen before Congress adjourns, that means no blue-ribbon advice before May 2004. At this rate, even the U.N. arms inspectors should beat them back to town.

Feel more secure? Frankly, it's a bit scary to imagine senators believing a report 18 or 20 months down the road could be anything other than a historical curio. That is, the panel's findings might well serve scholars and archivists (should they still be in business), but it's hard to imagine them being of use to a nation at war. More disturbing still is the thought of our leaders believing we have 20 months to wait — for anything. What this vote reveals is a troubling indulgence in leisure that certainly should have been a casualty of last year's attacks.

President Bush long opposed this independent commission, believing it would open a new sluiceway of security leaks and monopolize the time of those whose job it is to prosecute a war. Too bad he changed his mind. The big, broad bipartisan inquiry is a task for peacetime. In a war, even a phony war, the government is too busy — or should be — working out the future to use precious time and resources sorting out the past.

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## Congress should challenge Bush doctrine

Congress should help President Bush end the dire threat posed by Iraq, but it also needs to give careful scrutiny to his new doctrine of pre-emptive war. It could be dangerous to world order.

Just as Bush's anti-terror doctrine — "whoever harbors a terrorist is one" — has been used by Israel, Russia and India to justify their own operations, other countries also might pick up on the pre-emption idea to attack adversaries they suspect of hostile intent.

In fact, Russian President Vladimir Putin already has claimed the right to invade areas of neighboring Georgia to root out Chechen rebels seeking sanctuary there.

Nuclear-armed India or Pakistan could easily attack the other, claiming that it was convinced its adversary was planning to attack. And while it would be a stretch for China to claim it was threatened by Taiwan, it could happen.

First enunciated in Bush's June 1 commencement address at West Point, the doctrine of pre-emption was reaffirmed in the administration's National Security Strategy report sent to Congress last Friday.

"Given the goals of rogue states and terrorists, the United States can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past," the document declared.

"The inability to deter a potential attacker, the immediacy of today's threats and the magnitude of potential harm that could be caused by our adversaries' choice of weapons do not permit that option. We cannot let our enemies strike first."

As an aide to Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Joseph Biden (D-Del.) said this week, "Normally, we'd have hearings on the strategy report, but we're too busy with Iraq."

But as they consider Bush's request for authority to conduct pre-emptive war against Iraq, Biden's committee and its House counterpart also should question witnesses about the global doctrine Bush has enunciated.

This was done — vituperatively, to be sure, and not systematically — by former Vice President Al Gore in his speech Monday in San Francisco.

Gore accused Bush of practicing a "go-it-alone, cowboy-type approach to international affairs," though he basically endorsed Bush's current policy of challenging the United Nations to enforce its past resolutions against Iraq.

On the Bush doctrine, Gore said, "The president is proclaiming a uniquely American right to pre-emptively attack whomsoever he may deem rep-



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resents a potential future threat." Gore said the doctrine is "open-ended" and might be applied not only to Iraq, but "against a succession of states" including Syria, Iran and North Korea.

"If other nations assert the same right, then the rule of law will quickly be replaced by the reign of fear," Gore charged.

Even more cogently than Gore, the Bush doctrine has been challenged by Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) and one of the Democratic Party's leading intellectuals, former Clinton White House aide Bill Galston, a professor at the University of Maryland.

At a breakfast meeting with reporters on Wednesday, Kerry observed that the United States "always has a right to defend itself in the face of imminent threat," but that "it's better left unasserted" because "if it applies for us, it applies for other nations, too."

Galston can be credited with kicking off the Iraq debate with a June 16 Washington Post op-ed piece. He's expanded upon his case in an article this month in The American Prospect.

In that piece, Galston asserted, "a global strategy based on the new Bush doctrine of pre-emption means the end of the system of international institutions, laws and norms that we have worked to build for more than half a century."

"Rather than continuing to serve as first among equals in the postwar international system," he continued, "the United States would act as a law unto itself, creating new rules of international engagement without the consent of other nations."

In an interview, Galston charged that Bush's Sept. 12 challenge to the United Nations to prove its relevance by confronting Iraq was "a purely tactical and rhetorical tack toward multilateralism which was abandoned at the first whiff of grapeshot."

That's yet to be proved — the United States is still working on a new U.N. resolution — but Biden's staffer pointed out that Bush's U.N. speech is nowhere mentioned in the draft Iraq resolution sent to Congress by the White House.

On pre-emptive war, Galston said, "The administration seems to believe somehow that we can

contain this doctrine to our own case and that our unique virtue, wisdom and power will enable us to use it while restraining other nations from using it at all. I don't believe it."

By the logic of the pre-emptive doctrine, he said, "The only reason for not conducting a first strike against the Soviet Union is that we didn't have the power to do it safely."

"It's to say that (Air Force Gen.) Curtis LeMay was right except for the fact that the Soviets had nukes." In the late 1950s, LeMay advocated pre-emptive nuclear strikes on the Soviet Union.

To give the administration its due, its National Security Strategy report declared that "the United States will not use force in all cases to pre-empt emerging threats, nor should nations use pre-emption as a pretext for aggression."

In a foreword to the document, Bush wrote that "no nation can build a safer, better world alone. Alliances and multilateral institutions can multiply the strength of freedom-loving nations."

Still, there's every reason to fear such sentiments are window-dressing for a policy not of leading the world toward order and the rule of law, but of inspiring international vigilantism.

Pre-emptive war may be justified in the case of Iraq — I think it is — but the United States shouldn't inspire everyone to engage in it.

Morton Kondracke is executive editor of Roll Call, the newspaper of Capitol Hill.

## berry's world



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