

commentary

from other pens...

Possible high casualties mutes Korean war talk

President Bush is less than eager to pick a fight with North Korea over its nuclear weapons program, and not because he wants to deal with Iraq first.

Bush may have been influenced in his thinking on North Korea by a conversation he had with South Korean President Kim Dae-jung last February, three weeks after Bush designated Pyongyang a member of his international "axis of evil."

Sources familiar with their conversation said Bush was taken aback by Kim's account of the horrendous death and destruction that would result from another Korean War.

Kim reportedly cited 1994 estimates by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff as the basis for his assessment. The potential American dead in such a conflict would not be limited to the 37,000 U.S. servicemen in South Korea but also would include the tens of thousands of other Americans, most of whom live in the Seoul area, Bush was told.

Seoul sits within easy range of North Korean artillery deployed just across the Demilitarized Zone. War also would kill or displace hundreds of thousands from both sides, as did the first Korean War in 1950-53.

Based on Kim's assessment, the sources said, Bush decided to include in his public statements on his subsequent visit to Seoul an assurance to North Korea that the United States has no intention of invading.

Bush and top aides have been repeating that statement since then, even since Pyongyang's disclosure it is developing a uranium-based bomb and its announcement it plans to revive a plutonium-producing nuclear reactor that has been idled under a 1994 U.S.-North Korean agreement.

"The United States has no plans to attack North Korea," Secretary of State Colin Powell said Monday, repeating what Bush had said on Nov. 15.

Compared with the "axis of evil" period of almost 11 months ago, the administration has lowered its voice on North Korea. There has been no such rhetorical backsliding on Iraq, another member of Bush's "axis," and preparations for a potential war against Iraq are gathering steam.

As officials see it, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein deserves priority attention because, they say, he has been violating U.N. Security Council resolutions for 11 years, whereas the North Koreans are relative newcomers to the doomsday weapons business.

The administration is content to look to a diplomatic solution.

Don Oberdorfer, a Korea expert at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, said Tuesday the current tensions are reminiscent of the situation in 1994, when the North was first found to have been developing nuclear weapons. Oberdorfer chronicled the tensions that discovery produced in his book, "The Two Koreas."

"We all thought we were going to war," the book quotes Lt. Gen. Howell Estes as saying. Estes was the senior U.S. Air Force officer in Korea.

The U.S. military said then the consequences of a new war would be staggering due to the lethality of modern weaponry. Military estimates cited by Oberdorfer said that as many as 1 million people would be killed in a full-scale resumption of war.

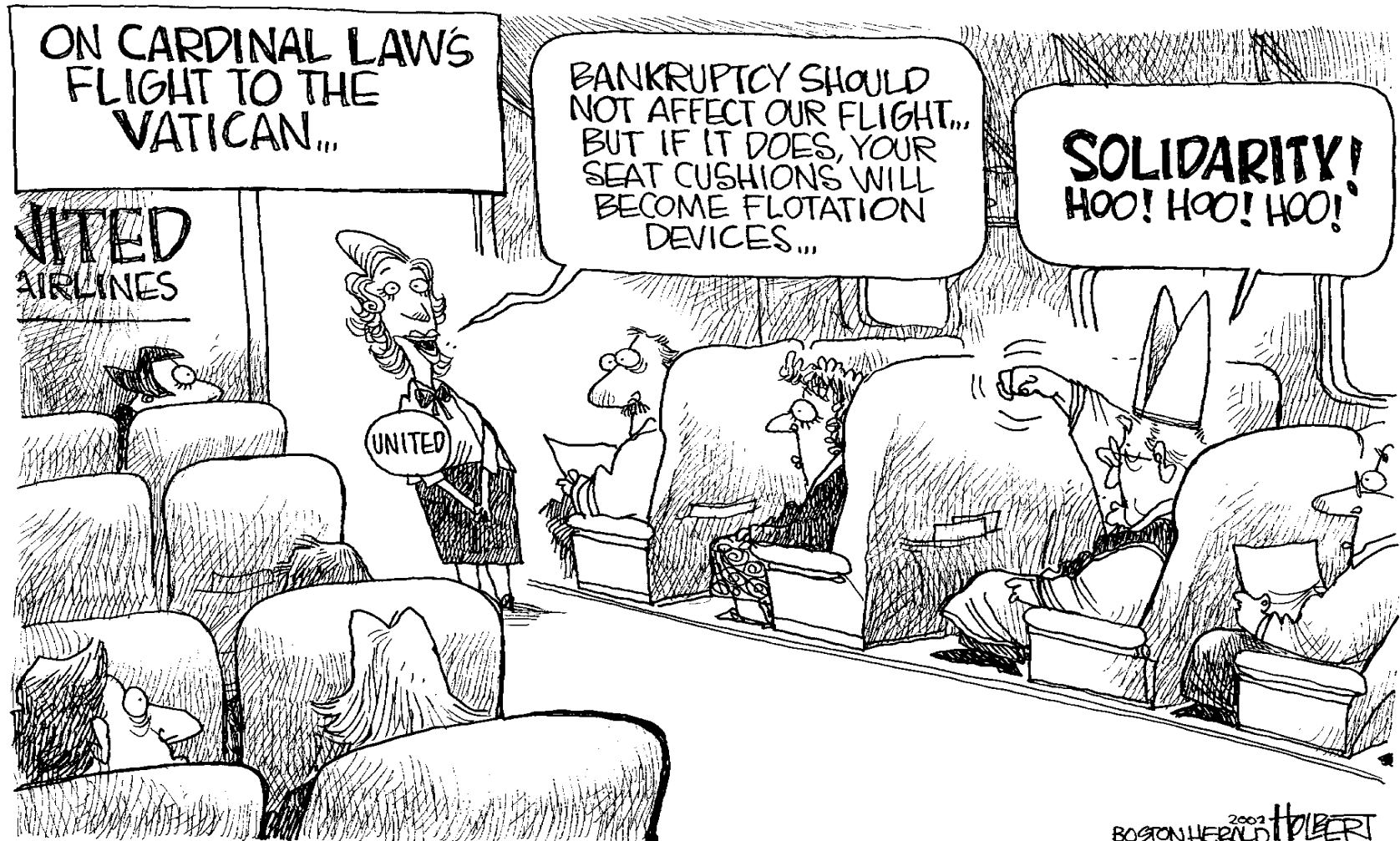
The number of Americans dead would be in the 80,000 to 100,000 range, compared with the 33,000 U.S. soldiers who died during the Korean War. Out-of-pocket costs to the United States would have exceeded \$100 billion, Oberdorfer wrote.

Intervention by Jimmy Carter helped defuse the crisis. But the North has found the nuclear temptation to be irresistible once again, leaving the United States and other countries wondering how to deal with it.

The Bush administration is showing no interest in talking, contending that based on violations of the 1994 agreement, North Korea cannot be trusted.

Russia believes it is qualified to mediate, partly because of President Vladimir Putin's close ties with North Korean chairman Kim Jong Il. "We have instruments no other country has," Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov said Tuesday.

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



A world beyond 'me'



joan ryan

• commentary

I had just stepped off the trolley when I saw him a few yards beyond the door of my office building. He was sprawled on his back in the middle of the sidewalk. He wore a knit cap and thick layers of clothes. I couldn't see his face, so I can't guess at his age. Maybe he was drunk. Maybe he was sick or dead. I didn't venture close enough to see. I was late for a meeting.

I told the security guard in the lobby. She had already called the police. Then I rode the elevator to the third floor, humming "Joy to the World."

I winced later to think about what this said about me: I embrace compassion as a virtue, especially at this time of year, but not, apparently, when it requires personal inconvenience.

War and Christmas are in the air, which means this strange sort of social schizophrenia is bubbling beneath the surface across America. The individualism that has made this country great is also what weakens it, isolating us both as citizens in our local communities and as a nation in the global one.

It's not just that we step past homeless men and women to reach the shoe sale at Macy's. It's tough to know anymore how to respond to the medieval scenario on our city streets. We have few excuses about the rudeness and narcissistic gestures that contribute to it, the ones we so easily rationalize by citing our right to "be ourselves": talking loudly on cell phones in public; interrupting someone to take another call; tak-

ing up two spaces in a crowded parking lot; cutting off other drivers; showing up in jeans and a T-shirt at a formal wedding; subjecting guests to videotapes of a newborn's birth; clipping nails on a subway.

All-about-me individualism chips away not only at a society's standards of decorum, but also at its cohesiveness. The more we cling to our right to do whatever we feel like doing, the less responsibility we feel toward others. It's an attitude that feeds on itself: The more self-centered people are, the stronger the message that we can't rely on anyone but ourselves, so we become even more defensive and self-centered.

During this season, when we drop toys off at the fire station or write checks to the homeless shelter, we like to imagine we are all in this together.

But it's not what we see around us most days. There's a conflict between embracing the idea of connecting with others and refusing to compromise one's self-interest.

Nowhere is this conflict played out on a larger

scale than in the war rooms of the White House. The United States made it clear from the start we didn't need anyone but ourselves in invading Iraq. We're Americans. We can go it alone. And we can do it without giving up our SUVs and our low-interest rates. It is no surprise that we come across to much of the world as Tony Soprano swaggering into the Bada-Bing. And in the end, the virile independence that makes us so confident about going it alone could very well prove our undoing.

As Americans, we are accustomed to having things our way, even in war. Americans who champion the president's invasion of Iraq say we need to get rid of Saddam Hussein, but they say we can't lose too many American lives. They often talk about "surgical strikes" that seem more like video games than actual war.

We want war without blood, generosity without sacrifice. The holiday season has reminded me that, as we head toward war in Iraq, we have to look beyond ourselves. Ousting Hussein will be more effective if the United States joins with its allies. At home, as we support or oppose the president, our voices are more powerful together than alone.

And there's the irony: By giving up some individualism in pursuit of a greater goal, we might in the end save ourselves.

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

Bush repeats Reagan's spending strategy



morton kondracke

• commentary

President Bush evidently plans to win re-election by jolting the economy with huge new tax cuts and defense outlays and damping the deficit consequences.

It's a repeat of the formula that worked for President Ronald Reagan in 1984 and, this time, Congressional Republicans intend to smooth the process by using "dynamic" bookkeeping that transforms tax cuts into revenue gains.

The GOP maneuver might succeed politically, but it could also create a long-term debt load just when the nation needs to make huge expenditures to pay for the retirement of the baby boom generation.

Democrats are only beginning to come up with an alternative to Bush's economic formula, but they are beginning ... by proposing to freeze Bush's tax cuts for the richest taxpayers.

The problem for Democrats is that they also will want to spend large sums on social programs — especially a generous prescription drug benefit for all seniors — and oppose any reforms either in Medicare or Social Security.

Also, to the extent that Democrats favor tax cuts, they want to furnish them to middle-income families at a time when consumer spending is strong and what's needed is a boost in business investment.

The potential long-term fiscal outlook was scarily outlined in a paper prepared early this month by outgoing Congressional Budget Office Director Dan Crippen for Sen. George Voinovich (R-Ohio).

If Bush gets his way and Congress permanently extends his 2001 tax cuts beyond their present cutoff date of 2010, and if spending continues to grow at current rates, the paper stated, the currently anticipated overall 10-year budget surplus of \$1 trillion will collapse into a deficit of \$2.5 trillion.

And this estimate did not include probable adjustments to the alternative-minimum tax, which could cost up to \$200 billion, the \$300 billion 2003 stimulus package that Bush is contemplating, costs of an Iraq war and occupation, and a prescription drug benefit, which is likely to cost at least \$300 billion.

In his letter to Voinovich, Crippen calculated that, of the \$3.5 trillion reversal, more than \$950 billion would result from the tax cuts — demonstrating one reason why Crippen, though a Republican, is about to be replaced as CBO director after one four-year term.

"I said in May that I was not interested in being reappointed," Crippen said in an interview. "It's become a happy coincidence because they don't want me, either."

"They" refers to Congressional GOP leaders, who want to find a CBO director who accepts the

"supply-side" dogma that tax cuts, by generating economic growth, end up producing more government revenue than they lose.

"They" also will be replacing Lindy Paull as director of the Joint Taxation Committee and installing another believer in so-called "dynamic scoring."

Crippen said, "There aren't many economists of any stripe who say that federal policy has no effect on the economy. The problem is, can you quantify it? And my answer up to now has been 'no.'"

He noted that in the past, "There has never been a dynamic scorer at CBO, and no administration has ever done it."

Up to now, the Bush White House's Office of Management and Budget hasn't based its estimates on dynamic scoring, either, and CBO and OMB estimates have tracked each other over the past two years.

Aides to OMB Director Mitch Daniels say that he has no plans to switch to dynamic scoring and that he will continue fighting to keep deficits down — at least by putting brakes on domestic spending.

Historically, according to CBO studies, government fiscal policies — tax cuts, tax increases and spending levels — have had less to do with federal deficits and surpluses than the overall health of the economy.

The "deficits as far as the eye could see" of the 1980s were not primarily the result of Reagan's tax cuts, Crippen said, but of the deep recession that occurred at the outset of his administration and the end of high inflation, which reduced government revenues.

Similarly, he said, "It was not President Clinton's and (economic adviser) Bob Rubin's tax increases or legislation by a Republican Congress that balanced the budget and began to produce surpluses, but growth in the economy."

Supply-siders nowadays insist that Republican economic policies in the 1980s ultimately produced the boom of the 1990s.

Crippen said, "The truth is that no one knows. We saw a rapid increase in productivity, which no one anticipated. We saw a rapid increase in revenues relative to the size of the economy, probably from bonuses, stock options and capital gains, which has now reversed itself."

At the moment, CBO's estimates indicate that

the 2001 recession and the aftermath of terrorism account for about 36 percent of the loss in federal surpluses, while Bush's tax cuts account for 24 percent and new spending on defense and homeland security, 15 percent.

Largely for political reasons — he doesn't want to repeat the fate of his father, defeated amid a weak economy in 1992 — Bush seems determined to stimulate the economy with new business-oriented tax cuts.

Democrats, for their own political reasons, assert that the economy is in even worse shape than Republicans claim and want to rewrite Bush policy completely.

It's probably a good thing that the holidays are coming and Congress is out of session. It provides some time to see what develops in the economy, before politicians sink the deficit even deeper.

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

berry's world

... While visions of ~~sugarplums~~ WAR WITH IRAQ danced in his head.



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