

U.S. sits at crossroads of war, history

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Chicago Tribune (KRT)

WASHINGTON — As an anxious world awaits a report Friday from U.N. weapons inspectors, the United States finds itself at a thorny crossroads, and the path that it chooses could define its role in the world as profoundly as any event since World War II.

America hasn't often been in this place. On the cusp of war, historic alliances are frayed and fragile. Institutions that the United States helped create and nurture, the United Nations and NATO, could lose their relevance and effectiveness.

Domestically, officials are warning of an impending terrorist attack and imploring people not to take up arms but rather to take up rolls of duct tape and plastic sheeting to protect against a chemical or biological attack.

The economy is sputtering, and conflict, at home or aboard, will only make it worse.

A series of complicating and confounding events has created this moment. And the stakes are much greater than the narrow confines of the report that the weapons inspectors will present Friday in New York. President Bush's newly minted doctrine of pre-emptive warfare seems close to its first test case, with or without the assent of the U.N. Security Council.

"How the U.S. acts in the days ahead will have profound consequences for the future," Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien told a dinner gathering of the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations Thursday night.

A near-term military victory in Iraq could still yield long-term diplomatic problems throughout Europe and beyond. If the United States does not find common ground with China, Germany, France and Russia — countries

that have sharply challenged the Bush administration on Iraq — each individual alliance will be strained. The relationship with China, for one, could have dramatic implications for how the United States handles the emerging nuclear threat in North Korea.

If the U.N. report leads to intransigence in NATO regarding military support for Turkey, the U.S. could simply defy the alliance, which has been a cornerstone of international security for more than half a century.

President Bush is on footing fundamentally different from that of his predecessors who have considered war. The U.S. became involved in World War I and World War II haltingly at first. Indeed, Woodrow Wilson ran for re-election in 1916 on the slogan, "He Kept Us Out of War."

In other conflicts, U.S. involvement was guided by the principle of containment to halt the spread of communism and the expansion of the Soviet Union. Still other wars were the product of provocative, hostile acts that directly affected national security and economic well-being.

None of those urgent factors apply to Iraq. And that is in part why Friday's report and how the United States chooses to respond to it will have such long-term repercussions.

"I view this decision as a fateful decision for America's future place in the world," said William Galston, a former senior official in the Clinton administration and policy analyst at the University of Maryland. "It will redefine our relationship with every alliance that we are a member of, every institution that we are a member of, and every region and every country with which we have diplomatic, economic and military relationships."

For Bush, how the U.S. proceeds

will no doubt shape the 2004 presidential campaign, and, should he win, his second term. On Thursday, Bush restated his underlying reason for changing from the durable policy of containment to one of pro-active invasion: "The world changed on September the 11th, 2001."

"If you propel the world into war on somewhat of a unilateral basis with some allies that we have essentially bludgeoned and coerced into it, then what do you have when it is over?"

Chuck Hagel
senator, R-Neb.

In a speech to sailors in Jacksonville, Fla., Bush moved quickly to Iraq and challenged the United Nations with sharp words. "Now the world's most important multilateral body faces a decision. The decision is this for the United Nations: 'When you say something, does it mean anything?'"

He added that he did not think that the U.N. would fade into an "ineffective, irrelevant debating society."

By pointedly challenging the credibility of the U.N., Bush is sure to provoke criticism in some capitals of Europe but almost equally certain to be praised in his Republican Party, where skepticism of the U.N. has deep roots.

Even some in his own party, however, thought he should lower the temperature of his words.

"I'm sorry the president has chosen those words, because I do not think those words enhance America's relationships with the allies. We need to deal not just with North Korea and Iraq but Afghanistan and the Middle East and beyond," said Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., a member of the Foreign Relations Committee. "Sure, if we want to bolt from the U.N. structure and attack Iraq, there is little question that we would win. But at what cost?"

Others worried about the precedent that the United States might set.

"It seems to me that if we can disarm Saddam through collective international action, engineered by the United States, we will have scored a great victory. But more important, we will have set a precedent for constructive leadership to deal with similar problems elsewhere," said Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter.

"If, on the other hand, we rush to war on our own for the sake of removing Saddam from power and not for the sake of disarmament, we will find ourselves much more isolated," Brzezinski said. "The aftermath of the war will be exclusively our burden, and no constructive precedents for dealing" with such situations will have been set.

But Bush also gained adherents to his view that containment is a Cold War relic. In an unusual move, the White House steered reporters to a speech given Thursday by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., often an administration critic, in which McCain fully endorsed the Bush view.

"Proponents of containment claim that Iraq is in a box," McCain said. "But it is a box with no lid, no bottom, and whose sides are falling out. ... Containment failed yesterday in Iraq. Containment fails today. And containment

will fail tomorrow. We would be placing hope before experience to think otherwise."

Yet there are those who do still think otherwise.

"You don't have to know a lot about diplomatic and military history to know that the rise of pre-eminent power tends to lead to the rise of new powers to try to restrain the activities of hegemonic powers," Galston said. "And we are now that power. I think a lot of what is going on in Europe has less to do in particular with Iraq policy and more to do with the much more general sense of what Rumsfeld called 'Old Europe' — that the United States cannot be permitted to have complete freedom of action."

If that comes to pass, it would be a new role for the United States, and it would come at a time of increased globalization and economic interdependence.

That is one reason, Hagel said, that he believes it would be a mistake to not work within the U.N. structure.

"If you propel the world into war on somewhat of a unilateral basis with some allies that we have essentially bludgeoned and coerced into it, then what do you have when it is over?" Hagel said.

Few doubt that the United States would prevail militarily in Iraq. But how the U.S. exercises its power to get to that end, some said, is at least as important as the end itself.

"Right now there is nobody in a position to act against us," Brzezinski said. "Therefore we are the ones who have to exercise the best judgment."

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