

Fourth of July 2007

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Page : 27

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Yesterday, we celebrated the 231st anniversary of the Declaration of Independence under the shadow cast upon the prestige of the United States in the world by the war on Iraq. The declaration, one of the most noble and memorable documents in the history of humankind, enshrined the United States in a promise of freedom, respect for the dignity of humans and the pursuit of happiness. The emerging democracy, a beacon of light in the 18th century, gradually acquired enormous prestige around the world based on its values and ideals. The war of independence was based on these values and ideals, which were later cast into the U.S. Constitution.

There were deviations from these values during the course of the 19th century, such as the war on México pursuing manifest destiny or the war with Spain and the departure into imperialism at the end of the century. But the civil war ending slavery, the independent judiciary and the functioning of democracy maintained a high moral ground. Lead by President Wilson, the country entered the First World War pursuing lofty ideals of democracy and, in the aftermath of that war, maintained its moral course. Perhaps the highest point of respect for the United States throughout the world came through the victory over fascism in World War II. I was a child at the time. I remember my uncles and cousins going out to war in Europe and in the Pacific. Some came back, others did not, but no one questioned the purpose of the war. The U.S. was on a high moral ground. Victory was victory for values and ideals.

As soon as fascism was defeated, the U.S. became engaged in the Cold War against communism, again on a high moral ground for liberty, for human rights, for democracy. I was in Berlin in 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down. I brought back to Puerto Rico pieces of that wall to give my children as a memento of the birth of a new world order. At that time, the U.S. emerged as the sole superpower in the world. At the time, Francis Fukuyama wrote his “End of History,” proclaiming the end of ideological conflicts and the victory of freedom, human rights and democracy as predominant ideals for humankind.

The conflicts after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Desert Storm and the war on Afghanistan to eradicate al Qaeda, maintained the prestige of the United States because they were also fought for values and ideals against the aggression by Saddam Hussein on Kuwait and al Qaeda’s attack on U.S. soil on 9/11/2001.

Not so the war on Iraq. The inescapable conclusion that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the naïve assumption that democracy could be imposed through war on that country stripped the war of all possible legitimacy. The failure in nation building and the daily massacres in Iraq projected in real time have eroded U.S. prestige throughout the world.

As we celebrate the Fourth of July this week, we must insist on the values and ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence in order to shape U.S. policy as to its role in the world. This is probably the most important issue facing the United States today. The U.S. can not retreat into isolation from the world as some would have it. Its leadership is essential to meet the new generation of global challenges. The unending conflict in the Middle East, Iraq, the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the global terrorist networks, such as al Qaeda, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, ethnic cleansing and genocide, massive migrations, climate change and the AIDS pandemic are just a few examples of these challenges, which demand leadership to bring about effective responses. The U.S. must remain engaged with the international community to face these challenges. It must offer leadership but it has to regain the legitimacy it has lost through the war in Iraq and the measures it has taken to combat terrorism, which are alien to the values and respect for humankind professed by the Declaration of Independence.

To lead, the U.S. must be trusted. Its actions must reflect its principles. Its purpose must reflect the values and ideals upon which the country was predicated. It must respect the opinions of other nations when taking actions beyond its shores. Rallying allies to a cause takes time but that is what leadership is about. Unilateral actions usually reflect a failure in leadership or lack of respect for other countries or institutions. They beget mistrust. They should be a genuine last resort born out of imperious necessity.

Leadership must also be for the common good to be trusted. This sometimes requires tough decisions. The U.S. cannot advance free trade for its industrial products or services while at the same time protecting its agricultural products from competition from the underdeveloped countries to which it would sell its products. The common good within a global vision would truly respond to the great promise that the U.S. has represented and to its historic purpose in the world.

Trust also depends on how the world perceives the U.S. treats its own: the minorities in the continental U.S., the treatment of immigrants and the treatment of the offshore areas such as Guam, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa or Puerto Rico.

A few weeks ago, I read President Bush had needled Vladimir Putin by urging him to get Serbia to either arrive at a compact with Kosovo for the government of that province or agree to Kosovo's independence. Kosovo is a province in southern Serbia, which has been under United Nations administration since 1999. While Serbia's nominal sovereignty is recognized by the international community, in practice, Serbian governance in the province is virtually nonexistent. The province is governed by the United Nations Mission in Kosovo and the local Provisional Institutions of Self-Government with security provided by the NATO-led Kosovo Force. The province is the subject of a long-running political and territorial dispute between the Serbian government and Kosovo's Albanian population. International negotiations began in 2006 to determine the final status of Kosovo. Putin has asserted Russia will not support independence for Kosovo in the U.N. Security Council.

When I read Bush's statement in a Spanish newspaper because I was in Spain at the time, I remembered the Spanish-American War and the time that has passed without a determination as to Puerto Rico's final

political status. I then thought Puerto Rico has been requesting the U.S. to enter into a new compact for the political development of the Commonwealth during the past half century and there has been no movement on the part of the U.S. My thoughts then went to Barack Obama's statement that "the U.S. must lead by deed and example."

