

America's war on itself

Bush's wrecking tactics over climate change follow an established pattern of self-destruction

I have a persistent mental image of US foreign policy, which haunts me even in my sleep. The vanguard of a vast army is marching around the globe, looking for its enemy. It sees a mass of troops in the distance, retreating from it. It opens fire, unaware that it is shooting its own rear.

Is this too fanciful a picture? Both Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were groomed and armed by the United States. Until the invasion of Iraq, there were no links between the Ba'athists and al-Qaida: now Bush's government has created the monster it claimed to be slaying. The US army developed high-grade weaponised anthrax in order, it said, to work out what would happen if someone else did the same. No one else was capable of producing it: the terrorist who launched the anthrax attacks in 2001 took it from one of the army's laboratories. Now US researchers are preparing genetically modified strains of smallpox on the same pretext, and with the same likely consequences. The Pentagon's space-based weapons programme is being developed in response to a threat which doesn't yet exist, but which it is likely to conjure up. The US government is engaged in a global war with itself. It is like a robin attacking its reflection in a window.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in its assaults on the multilateral institutions and their treaties. Listening to some of the bunkum about the United Nations venting from Capitol Hill at the moment, you could be forgiven for believing that the UN was a foreign conspiracy against the United States. It was, of course, proposed by a US president, launched in San Francisco and housed in New York, where its headquarters

remain. Its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, characterised by Republicans as a dangerous restraint upon American freedoms, was drafted by Franklin D Roosevelt's widow. The US is now the only member of the UN security council whose word is law, with the result that the UN is one of the world's most effective instruments for the projection of American power.

The secret deals in Iraq for which the United Nations is currently being attacked by US senators were in fact overseen by the US government. It ensured that Saddam could evade sanctions by continuing to sell oil to its allies in Jordan and Turkey. Republican congressmen are calling on Kofi Annan to resign for letting this happen, apparently unaware that it was approved in Washington to support American strategic objectives. The US finds the monsters it seeks, as it pecks and flutters at its own image.

So we could interpret the activities of Bush's government at the climate talks in Buenos Aires last week as another vigorous attempt to destroy its own interests. US economic growth depends on the rest of the world's prosperity. The greatest long-term threat to global prosperity is climate change, which threatens to wreck many of America's key markets in the developing world. Coastal cities in the US – including New York – are threatened by rising sea levels. Florida could be hit by stronger and more frequent hurricanes. Both farms and cities are likely to be affected by droughts.

In February, a leaked report from the Pentagon revealed that it sees global warming as far more dangerous to US interests than terrorism. As a result of abrupt climate change, it claimed, "warfare may again come to define human life... As the planet's carrying capacity shrinks, an ancient pattern re-emerges: the eruption of desperate, all-out wars over food, water, and energy supplies." The nuclear powers are likely to invade each other's territories as they scramble for diminishing resources.

So how does George Bush respond to this? "Bring it on." The meeting in Buenos Aires was supposed to work out what the world should do about climate change when the Kyoto protocol expires in 2012. Most of the world's governments want the protocol to be replaced by a new, tougher agreement. But the Bush administration has been seeking to ensure both that the original agreement is scrapped, and that nothing is developed to replace it.

"No one can say with any certainty," Bush asserts, "what constitutes a dangerous level of warming, and therefore what level must be avoided." As we don't know how bad it is going to be, he suggests, we shouldn't take costly steps to prevent it. Now read that statement again and substitute "terrorism" for "warming". When anticipating possible terrorist attacks, the US administration, or so it claims, prepares for the worst. When anticipating the impacts of climate change, it prepares for the best. The "precautionary principle" is applied so enthusiastically to matters of national security

that it now threatens American civil liberties. But it is rejected altogether when discussing the environment.

The Kyoto protocol is flawed, the Bush team says, because countries such as China and India are currently exempted from cutting their emissions. But instead of helping to design a treaty that would eventually bring them in, the US teamed up with them in Buenos Aires to try to sink all international cooperation. It even supported Saudi Arabia's demand that oil-producing countries should be compensated for any decline in the market caused by carbon cuts.

The result is that the talks very nearly collapsed. On Saturday, 36 hours after they were due to have ended, and while workmen were dismantling the rooms in which the delegates were sitting, the other countries managed to salvage the barest ghost of an agreement. The US permitted them to hold an informal meeting in May, during which "any negotiation leading to new commitments" is forbidden. According to the head of the US delegation, the time to decide what happens after 2012 is "in 2012". It's like saying that the time to decide what to do about homeland security is when the plane is flying into the tower.

Wrecking these talks is pretty good work for a country which, as it refuses to ratify the protocol, doesn't even have negotiating rights. But this is now familiar practice. The US tried to sink the biosafety protocol in 1999, even though, as it hadn't signed, it wasn't bound by it. It sought to trash the 2002 Earth Summit, though Bush failed to attend. This isn't, as some people suggest, isolationism. It is a thorough and sustained engagement, whose purpose is to prevent the world's most pressing problems from being solved.

And the result, of course, is that the catastrophe described by the Pentagon is now more likely to happen. The US has just spent millions of dollars in Buenos Aires undermining its own peace and prosperity. Of course we know that its delegation was representing the interests of the corporations, not the people, and that what's bad for America is good for Exxon. But this does not detract from the sheer, self-immolating stupidity of its position.

The US has every right to beat itself up. But unfortunately, while chasing itself around the world, it tramples everyone else. I know that appealing to George Bush's intelligence isn't likely to take us very far, but surely there's someone in that administration who can see what a monkey he's making of America.