

The Washington Post

Outlook

FROM GERMANY Flex Your Muscles, Softly

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523 Wörter

6 Januar 2002

The Washington Post

WP

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Englisch

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On Christmas Day 1991, a seemingly prosaic exchange of flags over the Kremlin marked the end of an empire and an era. The United States was the one and only Mr. Big. It has taken 10 years, though, for this awesome transformation to sink in. The war in Afghanistan has made the point in all its baldness.

Yes, Washington cobbled together a coalition, but more for window dressing than for war fighting. While the British offered valuable help right away, the French and the Germans took their time. But it did not matter; Washington could do very well without Paris or Bonn, thank you very much.

As we looked on (more or less), friends and foes of the United States realized that none of us, whether singly or in combination, could have mustered the sheer mass and firepower that obliterated the Taliban regime and routed al Qaeda in the space of a few weeks.

What are the implications for American policy? The good news first. Unlike the Clintonistas, who never felt comfortable with America's clout, the Bushies have delivered a threefold lesson.

First, when sufficiently riled, Americans will shrug off the "body bag syndrome." Second, when Washington is sufficiently determined, others will follow -- not simply reliable European allies like Germany, but even Russia and China, even those Middle East potentates who are allegedly quaking hostages of the "Arab street." Third, as Al Capone said in one "Untouchables" episode: "You can get further with a kind word and a gun than with just a kind word."

Vast military power, in other words, can achieve vast political objectives, like harnessing much of the world to the global fight against terrorism -- and winning.

What is the downside? George W. and Donald Rumsfeld might overlearn the lessons of Afghanistan, as their predecessors overlearned those of Vietnam. Now they might believe that the rest of the world is indeed no more than window dressing -- useful, but dispensable. But History (with a capital H) offers yet another lesson: The international system abhors excessive power; too much of it provokes "ganging up" on whoever is No. 1.

Of course, there was ganging up before Afghanistan, when the Europeans went after the Bush administration for its refusal to ratify the Kyoto climate convention, the land mine ban and the complete nuclear test ban.

America has always done best when it pursued its interests by heeding and serving those of others -- when it built international institutions like the Marshall Plan and NATO, when it upheld the integrity of the global free trade system through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and its successor, the World Trade Organization.

The Bush administration has paid little attention to the rest of the world in the past 12 months, and Afghanistan seems to prove it right. But the free ride won't last, History whispers. "Ganging up" will replace "going along" unless the United States recalls what true leadership (and greatness) are all about: power softened by responsiveness and responsibility.

</body>Josef Joffe is editor of the German weekly Die Zeit.

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