

April 12, 2008

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Losing Our Will

By **BOB HERBERT**

I wonder what the answers would be if each American asked himself or herself the question: "How is the war in Iraq helping me?"

While the U.S. government continues to pour precious human treasure and vast financial resources into this ugly war without end, it is all but ignoring deeply entrenched problems that are weakening the country here at home.

On the same day that President Bush was announcing an indefinite suspension of troop withdrawals from Iraq, the New York Times columnist David Leonhardt was telling us a sad story about how the middle class has fared during the Bush years.

The economic boom so highly touted by the president and his supporters "was, for most Americans," said Mr. Leonhardt, "nothing of the sort." Despite the sustained expansion of the past few years, the middle class — for the first time on record — failed to grow with the economy.

And now, of course, we're sinking into a nasty recession.

The U.S., once the greatest can-do country on the planet, now can't seem to do anything right. The great middle class has maxed out its credit cards and drained dangerous amounts of equity from family homes. No one can seem to figure out how to generate the growth in good-paying jobs that is the only legitimate way of putting strapped families back on their feet.

The nation's infrastructure is aging and in many places decrepit. Rebuilding it would be an important source of job creation, but nothing on the scale that is needed is in sight. To get a sense of how important an issue this is, consider New Orleans.

The historian Douglas Brinkley, who lives in New Orleans, has written: "What people didn't yet fully comprehend was that the overall disaster, the sinking of New Orleans, was a man-made debacle, resulting from poorly designed levees and floodwalls."

We could have saved the victims of the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe, but we didn't. And now, more than 2 1/2 years after the tragedy, we are still unable to lift the stricken city off its knees.

Other nations can provide health care for everyone. The United States cannot. In an era in which a college degree is becoming a prerequisite for a middle-class quality of life, we are having big trouble getting our kids through high school. And despite being the wealthiest of all nations, nearly 10 percent of Americans are resorting to food stamps to maintain an adequate diet, and 4 in every 10 American children are growing up in families that are poor or near-poor.

The U.S. seems almost paralyzed, mesmerized by Iraq and unable to generate the energy or the will to handle the myriad problems festering at home. The war will eventually cost a staggering \$3 trillion or more, according to the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz. When he was asked on "Democracy Now!" about who is profiting from the war, he said the two big gainers were the oil companies and the defense contractors.

This is the pathetic state of affairs in the U.S. as we approach the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Whatever happened to the dynamic country that flexed its muscles after World War II and gave us the G.I. Bill, the Marshall Plan, the United Nations (in a quest for peace, not war), the interstate highway system, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the finest higher education system the world has known, and a standard of living that was the envy of all?

America's commanding general in Iraq, David Petraeus, and our ambassador to Baghdad, Ryan Crocker, went up to Capitol Hill this week but were unable to give any real answers as to when the U.S. might be able to disengage, or when a corner might be turned, or when a faint, flickering hopeful light might be glimpsed at the end of the long, horrific Iraqi tunnel.

A country that used to act like Babe Ruth now swings like a minor-leaguer. The all-American can-do philosophy has been smothered by the hapless can't-do performances of the people who have been in charge for the past several years. It's both tragic and embarrassing.

The war in Iraq stands like a boulder in the road, blocking progress on so many other important issues that are crucial to our viability as a society. We've seen this before. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, which included the war on poverty, was crippled by the war in Vietnam.

On the evening of April 4, 1967, one year to the day before he was assassinated, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. went into Riverside Church in Manhattan and said of the war in Vietnam: "This madness must cease."

Forty-one years later, we can still hear the echo of Dr. King's call. The only sane response is: "Amen."

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