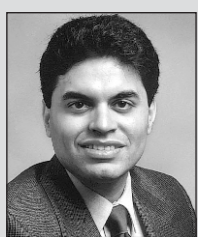


No way to make friends



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

PRESIDENT Bush's Thanksgiving trip to Iraq was a generous and bold-hearted gesture of support to American troops. What made it such a success, however, was that it managed to severely limit an otherwise unavoidable aspect of travel -- contact with foreigners. When President Bush had to go beyond U.S. Army bases in recent weeks, the tours have not gone so well.

Traveling through East Asia last week, I noted how poorly most observers rated President Bush's recent trip there. Even more striking, however, was the comparison repeatedly made between Bush's visit and that of Chinese President Hu Jintao -- with a thumping majority believing Hu had done better.

In Thailand at the meeting for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, "there was no question that Hu was the better appreciated one," a Thai official said to me. "He outshone Bush in most of the attendees' eyes." The trips ended with the two making back-to-back visits to Australia. Bush was greeted with demonstrations, his address to Parliament interrupted by hecklers. Hu, on the other hand, got a 20-minute standing ovation from Parliament. "It is Hu's visit rather than George W. Bush's that will provide a lingering sense of satisfaction and security about Australia's place in the region," wrote The Australian, a newspaper owned by Rupert Murdoch and not given to knee-jerk anti-

There is a lack of empathy emanating from Washington. After the Bali bombings, which were Australia's 9/11, the administration did not bother to send a high-level envoy to a steadfast ally for condolences. Australians had to make do with a videotape of George Bush. Even last week, Bush could surely have arranged to meet in Baghdad with a few troops from allied countries who are also fighting and dying in Iraq.

Americanism.

What is going on here? How does the chief representative of the world's oldest constitutional democracy lose a popularity contest to the leader of a Leninist party?

Let's start with the atmospherics. Everywhere Bush travels, his security is handled with the usual American overkill -- thousands of guards and aides, walled-off compounds, tightly scripted movements from one bubble to another. Hu, by contrast, had a modest security detail, traveled freely and mingled with other leaders and even the general public. (Tony Blair sometimes manages to travel abroad with a total of six people.)

Bush's trip to London two weeks ago is now being heralded as a great success. But here is how one of the president's most ardent supporters, his former speechwriter David Frum, saw it while in London himself. "Bush was sealed away from London for the entire visit. There was no drive down the Mall, no address to Parliament, no public events at all," Frum wrote in his Weblog on National Review Online. "The trip's planners reduced the risk of confrontations -- but only by broadcasting to the British public their tacit acknowledgement that the visit was unpopular and unwelcome. By eliminating from the president's schedule events with any touch of spontaneity or public contact, the trip planners made the president look as if he could not or would not engage with ordinary British people." In Great Britain, Frum concluded, "the United States has a problem, a big one -- and it was made worse, not better,

by this recent visit."

The deeper problem, however, is not one of style but substance. Bush's trips to Southeast Asia and Australia focused single-mindedly on the war on terror. Karim Raslan, a Malaysian writer, explained the local reaction: "Bush came to an economic group (APEC) and talked obsessively about terror. He sees all of us through that one prism. Yes, we worry about terror, but frankly that's not the sum of our lives. We have many other problems. We're retooling our economies,

we're wondering how to deal with the rise of China, we're trying to address health, social and environmental problems. Hu talked about all this; he talked about our agenda, not just his agenda."

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What is most dismaying about this state of affairs is that for the last 50 years the United States has skillfully merged its own agenda with the agendas of others, creating a sense of shared interests and values. When Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy waged the Cold War, they also presented the world with a constructive agenda dealing with trade, poverty and health. They fought communism with one hand and offered hope with the other. We have fallen far from that model if the head of the Chinese Communist Party is seen as presenting the world with a more progressive agenda than the president of the world's leading democracy.

Fareed Zakaria is editor of Newsweek International.

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The thin line between reality and nightmare

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

READERS may recall that in a previous edition of London Letter, published last September, I began with the question: Is Iraq turning out to be America's "New Vietnam?" Memories of many Americans still bear scars left by their Vietnam experience, but in the days immediately following the US President's triumphant declaration that "major combat operations were over," the nightmare of Vietnam was certainly no major part of the scenario. But although the euphoria of victory did not last long and the American and British coalition soon began to feel more than a little nervous at the way the situation was threatening to go out of control, they were nevertheless confident that it could certainly be contained and at least a semblance of order restored until an opportune time when the transfer of power to an elected Iraqi government could be completed. But such optimism -- or shall we say miscalculated confidence -- is now turning out to be a strategic blunder of the gravest proportions and coalition control over key areas in Iraq is in serious danger of collapsing. Saddam loyalists -- claimed by the US authorities to be bands of alien insurgents -- are carrying out devastating raids, big and small, almost every day, and the death toll among coalition troops as well as members of international agencies including media workers and Iraqi civilians is continuing to mount.

The coalition forces are seemingly helpless in the face of these raids by an invisible enemy and their morale must be fast degenerating to breaking point. The other day I was chatting with a young friend of mine who works as a filing assistant for a major news agency and she showed me some figures regarding the casualties of the Iraq war so far. According to these figures, out of a total of 51 UK troops killed 221 died since the end of war, and out of a total of 51 UK troops killed 18 lost their lives over the same period. The toll among Iraqi forces is, of course, much higher -- according to an unofficial thinktank estimates, between 4,895 and 6,370 were killed during the war, and the number of Iraqi civilians killed, again according to the same unofficial source, is between 7,784 and 20,000 which is obviously a very rough and largely unverifiable estimate. The toll among journalists and media workers killed is more accurate -- 19 dead. These figures of course do not take into account the number of international and Iraqi aid workers who were killed when aid agency complexes -- like the UN building in Baghdad -- were bombed, neither the deaths resulting from attacks since the beginning of November, like the 18 Italian troops killed by a car bomb explosion in Baghdad or the 17 US soldiers who died when their Black Hawk helicopters were shot down near Fallujah. As I sit writing the current London Letter, I can hear the BBC newscaster reporting that

the American death toll in Iraq has now crossed 400. So far the British troops seem to have been luckier than their American counterparts, but that is mainly because of their relatively small presence and because, unlike American troops who are spread far and wide, they are mostly concentrated in and around Basra, which has apparently been made more secure than other parts of Iraq.

The cost of maintaining the coalition apparatus in Iraq at working order level has already reached astronomical figures, both for the UK and for the USA and, of course, the major share of this burden on government exchequers in both countries comes out of the pockets of the taxpaying public. In the UK, although the government is having to struggle hard to balance the ledger, so far there has not been too much public outcry, largely because of the fact that there exists, for the time being at least, some

countries. The bulk of these jobless, poor Americans are considered to be "food insecure," which means they don't know where their next meal is coming from. And these estimates are not arbitrary statistics, they are very much official -- the US Department of Agriculture itself has categorised roughly 10 million of them as experiencing "real hunger," defined as an "uneasy or painful sensation caused by lack of food due to lack of resources to obtain food."

So this is the picture in the US -- or at least parts of it -- with presidential elections just about a year away. The poor and the hungry in the US are issued food stamps, which are part of the government aid programme of last resort. The number of Americans now surviving on food stamps, since Mr Bush took office, is estimated at 22 million. But these food stamps are worth only about \$160 (£100) a month on an average, simply not

situation unless there is a rapid and dramatic change of course."

Is the strain beginning to prove too much for Mr Blair?

There is no direct answer to that question yet, but it certainly crossed the minds of many on Wednesday, 26th November, when it became known that a doctor had been urgently summoned to No. 10 Downing Street following complaints of acute stomach pains from Mr Blair. It was probably no more serious than simple acid indigestion or flatulence caused by gastric reflux, but what added to the concern was that only last October Mr Blair had been taken to hospital with a heart problem, albeit minor. There is no denying the fact, however, that at the moment the Prime Minister is not looking at his best. As he arrived in Parliament for the annual Queen's Speech on 26th September, he looked tired, pale and dispirited as though he had

owner of Britain's largest selling tabloid daily The Sun as well as the Sky TV network, gave broad hints that he might consider throwing his weight behind Mr Howard if he seemed to be taking the "right" steps in the right direction." It was not immediately clear what Mr Murdoch meant by the "right" steps and the "right" direction, but it must be borne in mind that The Sun's support was significantly instrumental in ensuring the landslide victory of Tony Blair's New Labour over John Major's Tory party.

One inherent flaw in Tony Blair's nature -- I use the word "flaw" because I don't know what else to call it -- is that while he displays an eagerness to be everyone's flexible friend, he also shows no compunction about cutting down to size a friend who he suspects of becoming a threat to him or an obstacle in his path. As a columnist friend remarked the other day, "Tony Blair is always keen to hunt with the hounds and run with the hare." For example, in the same week he played the gracious host to both President George Bush and Jacques Chirac of France, two leaders representing utterly different and opposite world views and making no secret of their dislike of each other, probably believing that he can get along with both of them equally well and not considering the risk that both these men may come to distrust him equally.

On the other hand, consider Mr Blair's relationship with the Chancellor Gordon Brown, both past and present. Gordon Brown used to be Tony Blair's closest friend in the days when, as newly elected Labour MPs, they shared the same Commons office from where they together hatched the blueprint for New Labour. Today, after six years of being in their respective positions, the two most powerful men in the government are practically not on speaking terms. Gordon Brown is grooming himself to be 10 Downing Street's next incumbent, while Tony Blair is blocking his next door neighbour's every move to become a serious contender. Recently the Prime Minister turned down two direct appeals from the Chancellor to join the Labour party's National Executive Committee, choosing, instead of his one-time ally and current rival, two relatively junior ministers and one party official to fill three vacant NEC seats. This has led to further strained relations between Nos. 10 and 11 Downing Street and provoked a well-placed Labour source to remark, "It is surprising, arbitrary and not in the best interests of the Labour party." Well, politics is a game that two can play at and when the players are more or less evenly matched, the result may not be predictable but the game itself is always worth watching.

But Michael Howard is a different proposition altogether. He is the most skilled, cunning and ruthless leader the Tory party has had since Margaret Thatcher and he could be a lethal performer in the political arena. Just days after the change in Tory leadership, the media baron Rupert Murdoch,

IN MEMORIAM

As I saw Maqsood A. Choudhury

ASIF ALI

I was in Sylhet to attend a review meeting of the audit parties working in that region. I was just having a nap after the Fazr prayer on October 3, 2003, Friday when Bhabi (Mrs. Maqsood Ahmed Choudhury) rang me up at about 6:00 AM in the morning to give me the sad news of her husband's expiry about 2 hours back in a clinic at Dhaka. I was not taken aback since Maqsood Choudhury, as he was popularly known, had been sick soon after he met an accident while travelling by a rickshaw in 1994. He received a head injury apparently not found serious at that moment but that ultimately took his life after 9 years of painful suffering.

My first meeting with him in 1985 was not a very pleasant one. I was then Additional Accountant General when one day Maqsood Choudhury, then Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Information, called me over the phone, asking me to see him at his office immediately. Though initially surprised at such a hasty summons from someone whom I could hardly remember having ever met before, in view of his long seniority over me, I decided to comply. When I entered his office in the Secretariat through the courtesy of his private secretary, he just started roaring at me with a loud voice, "What kind of officer you are that my cheque issued from your office bounces back from Bangladesh Bank for want of advice letter that your office was supposed to send to the Bangladesh Bank? Are you above all accountability?"

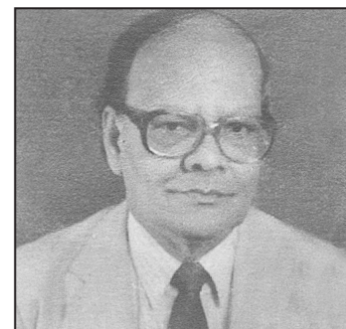
A stranger to me as he was, I could feel the pulse of the man and instantly decided to be on the defensive. "I am very sorry Sir. Such a situation is definitely undesirable. I myself would have reacted like this had it happened to me." It worked like anything. "Sit down. Look at my flight schedule. I am to leave tomorrow for a medical check-up in the US and the cheque is so badly needed but I have not yet got it. It has jeopardised my whole plan. I am so puzzled." Saying this in one breath he gave me a blank look. I asked him, "How quickly do you want the cheque?" "In an hour," he replied. I left his room without even saying goodbye and rushed to my office. I salvaged his advice letter lying unattended in the dispatch section, took my cash officer along to BB, got the cheque issued and went straight to his office well within his targeted time. "This is your cheque and you are flying tomorrow. Have a nice trip." The strong man as he

was, just stood up from his chair, jumped at me and started embracing me like a child. "I am very sorry Mr. Additional Accountant General for being so rude to such a top brass." Tears rolled down his cheeks. This was Maqsood Ahmed Choudhury -- an unassuming person but a man of magnanimous mind.

That was the turning point from where on, my relationship with late Choudhury grew stronger and stronger. Soon after his return home after medical check-up I found him in my office, smiling and contented with a small packet in his hand. "Here is a token of my compliment, Mr. Additional Accountant General." We got closer still when he went on LPR in 1988. He became a regular visitor to my residence in Purana Paltan. Bought by my father in the early 1950s, it was an old house of about 60 years. Maqsood Choudhury started calling it "Nawab Palace" and became very fond of it. "It is this palace that attracts me, not you," was his favourite joke. He was a great lover of Shakespearean literature, having deep insight and proficiency on the subject. His prolific recitation was simply amazing. Helpless as I was on Shakespeare's works, he would say "You should have become a businessman who has nothing to do with Shakespeare." I also became a regular visitor to his house at Lalmatia. The austere but decent living style of his family was simply a treat to watch. Most informal as he was, there was no superficiality in him. "When you feel like having a cup of tea or anything else, please tell your Bhabi. I am a very bad host," was his usual remark.

Maqsood Choudhury was born on May 2, 1932 in Sylhet. He did his MA in English from Dhaka University and received higher training on Accounting and Management from the University of Connecticut. He also did his LLB from Dhaka University after retiring from government service. He joined the erstwhile Pakistan Audit and Accounts Service in 1956 and held the important posts of Deputy Accountant General, Controller of Accounts NBR, General Manager of East Pakistan Investment Trust Ltd, Director of Audit of Defence Services of Pakistan, Financial Adviser, Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh, etc. He also served as Joint Secretary of ERD, Ministry of Shipping & IWT, Ministry of Works, Ministry of Information, and lastly, Science & Technology Division before he proceeded for retirement in 1988.

Maqsood Ahmed Choudhury expired on Friday, October 03, 2003 at 3:30 AM in a clinic in Dhaka, leaving behind his wife, three sons, friends, relatives and many admirers. He was laid to eternal rest at the Mirpur Shahid Buddhijibee graveyard the same day. It was an irony that I was then in Sylhet on official tour, the place where Maqsood Choudhury was born. May his soul rest in eternal peace and his family face the realities of life with fortitude.



accident in 1994 cut short his plans to face the challenges of life, not bowing down to harsh eventualities or cowed down by hostile circumstances.

It was very painful for me to watch a sick Maqsood Choudhury -- bed ridden, fragile and almost speechless. At the initial stage of his illness, he could recognise his close ones in the family. Me and his batchmate Mr. Golam Kibria, ex-Finance Secretary and ex-CAG, were perhaps the few other lucky ones. But in the latter days it was all hazy for him -- staring at us with a blank look.

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Asif Ali is Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh

Is Bangladesh vulnerable to earthquakes?

MIR FAZLUL KARIM

THERE are some valid questions: Is Bangladesh vulnerable to earthquakes? Should we be concerned about an earthquake when occurrences of earthquake damages are not so significant? The country faces so many day-to-day problems related to environment, industrial pollution, traffic, water and power shortage, and annual calamities such as flood, drought, cyclone and tidal bore. Can we afford to ignore earthquake hazards?

Earthquakes are the detectable shaking of the earth's surface resulting from seismic waves generated by a sudden release of energy from inside the earth. Any landmass which has experienced natural ground shaking in the past is vulnerable to earthquake risk and thus liable to earthquake hazard. A severe earthquake can bring devastation to the economy of the country and we cannot ignore potential danger of earthquakes.

Bangladesh: A geological location for earthquakes

The geological structures in and around Bangladesh are capable of accumulating tectonic strain. These structures have released enough energy to produce destructive shakes in the past.

Fortunately, the frequency of large earthquakes in and around the country is less than in other earthquake-prone regions of the world, though sometimes the lone national seismic observatory station at Chittagong measures a relatively high frequency of low magnitude shakes.

Bangladesh, along with its neighboring countries, shared the experience of extraordinary ground shaking due to an earthquake of magnitude 8.7 which is widely known as "The Great Indian Earthquake." The earthquake occurred due to a vertical displacement along the Dauki Fault located near the north-east international boundary between Bangladesh and India. The earthquake caused about 20m of pop-up of the Shillong Massif within a few seconds, and debris were blown even miles away from the epicenter area.

A similar strong and extraordinary earthquake of magnitude 7.5 occurred in Bhuj on January 26, 2001, damaging many urban areas of Gujarat and killing an estimated 25,000 people. Scientists consider these as rare earthquakes, but this type of earthquake could be extremely devastating in the peripheries of the Indian penin-

sula.

Bangladesh occupies a greater part of the Bengal basin. It is located in the eastern extremity of the peninsula and the Kutch basin in the western extremity is a mirror image of the Bengal basin. The regional geological structures from south to north at both the eastern and western extremities postulate a geometrical symmetry that would be receptive to similar tectonic behaviour in terms of stress distribution (except for some local differential characteristics). Considering such a geological setting, Bangladesh could be a receptive place for extraordinary earthquakes.

The rapidly growing urban centers increase the susceptibility of earthquake damage

Generally, unplanned and populous townships are always vulnerable to earthquake hazard or damages. Bangladesh is a densely populated country. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were only 48 urban centers in the country and at present there are 491 including the densely populated cities and growth centers. A rapid change in infrastructure development has resulted in significant changes in housing pattern and transportation, sewerage, water supply, waste disposal system and communication network. All development has taken place in a very short time. The planners and city managers could not keep pace for regulating the government's planned efforts in the face of such rapid development. The lack of planned development puts the cities and growth centers in a vulnerable situation for larger earthquake damages. The experts foresee the most deadly future for Dhaka mega-city in the event of an earthquake here.

Prediction of ground conditions

The geology of Bangladesh is complex due to the presence of about 100m to 1000m (30,000ft) of sedimentary deposits over the basement rock of Indian plate. More than 80% of the country is covered by soft sediments (soil) or holocene deposits with unpredictable changes in the upper 100m of deposits, having considerable variations in the constituent geological materials and geotechnical properties. The geological map of the country indicates that the upper 10m of sediments in about 60% of the land area is susceptible to liquefaction during earthquake, making the ground vulnerable to

immediate shear failure.

More effort is needed for building up earthquake hazard awareness

As the frequency of earthquakes is low in Bangladesh, the people and government are not clearly aware of earthquake devastation and we can not afford any experiment with it. Building up of public awareness could be the first and essential step towards preparedness for reduction of earthquake damages. It is necessary to remember the alarming Dhaka Earthquake 2001, when strong tremors were felt in the city and many people rushed out of their homes and offices in panic. 100 prison inmates were hurt in a stampede at the Dhaka Central Jail.

What shall we do?

The country has had many damaging earthquakes in the past and is placed in a high seismic zone in the Global Seismic Hazard Map. We have not investigated the source structures, but due to its complex geological setting, Bangladesh is not capable of sustaining the strong shaking produced in the Himalaya and Meghalaya source area. Unfortunately, many of the infrastructures and buildings in Bangladesh may not meet BNBC standards and may be considered vulnerable from seismic safety viewpoint. Generally earthquake damages are irreparable. If we consider the potentiality of earthquake disaster, we may not be able to ignore this extraordinary geological hazard.

We are at the early stage of possible earthquake hazard assessment and cannot expect any overnight understanding of earthquake vulnerability of the country. But steps can be taken to reduce the losses and damages by implementation of Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) in the construction practice, identification of appropriate subsurface geology, determining the right type of architectural setting and engineering design of both foundation and superstructures, development of fire safety options, keeping open spaces for rescue operations, and other such measures.

At least we need an plan of action. There is an urgent need for reasonable seismic risk assessment of the country. It is a multidisciplinary task and includes technical training, institutional development, development of technical manuals, legal and enforcement aspects, and public awareness programmes.

Mir Fazlul Karim is Director, Geological Survey of Bangladesh.

LONDON LETTER

More than three million Americans have become unemployed since Mr Bush took office in January 2001 and there is as yet no prospect in sight for them to find new work in an economic recovery process characterised by joblessness of unprecedented dimensions. And this is only the tip of the iceberg, so to say, the overall picture is much more desperate and dismal. According to latest estimates, nearly 35 million Americans -- one in eight of the total population -- have already slipped below the poverty line.

kind of a feel-good element in the employment and industrial sectors. In the USA, on the other hand, the situation is much more critical. George Bush has managed to coax the Senate into granting \$87 billion (£52 billion) for his war chest out of which \$64.7 billion has been allocated to the US military to finance America's occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan compared to just \$18.6 billion towards the reconstruction of Iraq. But while the American exchequer perhaps feels justified to spend such a massive sum on military operations, there is another side of the picture.

George Bush's America, the wealthiest and most powerful nation the world has ever known, is being gnawed away from the inside by persistent and increasing poverty. More than three million Americans have become unemployed since Mr Bush took office in January 2001 and there is as yet no prospect in sight for them to find new work in an economic recovery process characterised by joblessness of unprecedented dimensions. And this is only the tip of the iceberg, so to say, the overall picture is much more desperate and dismal. According to latest estimates, nearly 35 million Americans -- one in eight of the total population -- have already slipped below the poverty line, and over 13 million of them are children, thus making the child poverty rate and life expectancy in the US the worst of all the world's industrialised

enough to buy food for a family with no other income. A number of charitable organisations -- with the help of private donations and food brought from local producers by the government -- are running food banks or food distribution centres in various parts of the country. These are in effect "soup kitchens" which provide the people with the barest minimum to survive, and adult members of families dependent on them frequently have to skip meals or eat less in order to make sure that the children have enough. That's how the citizens of the world's sole superpower -- not all of them, of course -- are struggling to make both ends meet while their leaders are busy making the world free of terrorism and tyranny.

Meanwhile, following a devastating CIA report, described as an "appraisal of situation," that the guerrilla war in Iraq was in danger of escalating out of US control, the White House has drawn up emergency plans to accelerate the transfer of power. The report is an internal CIA document which carries an endorsement by Paul Bremer, the civilian head of the US-led occupation of Iraq, and according to it the insurgency in that country is rapidly gaining ground among the population and the estimated strength of the insurgents is at least 50,000. "The resistance is broad, strong and getting stronger," says the report and warns that the US is almost certainly "going to lose the