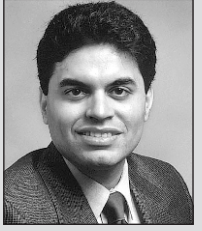


The price of arrogance



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

"AMERICA is ushering in a new responsibility era," says President Bush as part of his standard stump speech, "where each of us understands we're responsible for the decisions we make in life." When speaking about bad CEOs he's even clearer as to what it entails: "You're beginning to see the consequences of people making irresponsible decisions. They need to pay a price for their irresponsibility."

"I take full responsibility," said Donald Rumsfeld in his congressional testimony last week. But what does this mean? Secretary Rumsfeld hastened to add that he did not plan to resign and was not going to ask anyone else who might have been "responsible" to resign. As far as I can tell, taking responsibility these days means nothing more than saying the magic words "I take responsibility."

After the greatest terrorist attack against America, no one was asked to resign, and the White House didn't even want to launch a serious investigation into it. The 9/11 Commission was created after months of refusals because some of the victims' families pursued it aggressively and simply didn't give up. After the fiasco over Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, not one person was even reassigned. The only people who have been fired or cashiered in this administration are men like Gen. Eric Shinseki, Paul O'Neill and Larry Lindsey, who spoke inconvenient truths.

Rumsfeld went on in his testimony to explain that "these terrible acts were perpetrated by a small number." That's correct, except the small number who are truly responsible are not the handful of uniformed personnel currently being charged for the prison abuse

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scandal. The events at Abu Ghraib are part of a larger breakdown in American policy over the past two years. And it has been perpetrated by a small number of people at the highest levels of government. Since 9/11, a handful of officials at the top of the Defense Department and the vice president's office have commandeered American foreign and defense policy. In the name of fighting terror they have systematically weakened the traditional restraints that have made this country respected around the world. Alliances, international institutions, norms and ethical conventions have all been deemed expensive indulgences at a time of crisis.

Within weeks after September 11, senior officials at the Pentagon and the White House began the drive to maximize American freedom of action. They attacked specifically the Geneva Conventions, which govern behavior during wartime. Donald Rumsfeld explained that the conventions did not apply to today's "set of facts." He and his top aides have tried persistently to keep prisoners out of the reach of either American courts or international law, presumably so that they can be handled without those pettifogging rules as barriers. Rumsfeld initially fought both the uniformed military and Colin Powell, who urged that prisoners in Guantanamo be accorded rights under the conventions. Eventually he gave in on the matter but continued to suggest that the protocols were antiquated. Last week he said again that the Geneva Conventions did not "precisely apply" and were simply basic rules.

The conventions are not exactly optional. They are the law of the land, signed by the president and ratified by Congress. Rumsfeld's concern-- that al Qaeda members do not wear uniforms and are thus "unlawful combatants" -- is understandable, but that is a

determination that a military court would have to make. In a war that could go on for decades, you cannot simply arrest and detain people indefinitely on the say-so of the secretary of defense.

The basic attitude taken by Rumsfeld, Cheney and their top aides has been "We're at war; all these niceties will have to wait." As a result, we have waged preemptive war unilaterally, spurned international cooperation, rejected United Nations participation, humiliated allies, discounted the need for local support in Iraq and incurred massive costs in blood and treasure. If the world is not to be trusted in these dangerous times, key agencies of the American government, like the State Department, are to be trusted even less. Congress is barely informed, even on issues on which its "advise and consent" are constitutionally mandated.

Leave process aside; the results are plain. On almost every issue involving postwar Iraq -- troop strength, international support, the credibility of exiles, de-Baathification, handling Ayatollah Ali Sistani -- Washington's assumptions and policies have been wrong. By now most have been reversed, often too late to have much effect. This strange combination of arrogance and incompetence has not only destroyed the hopes for a new Iraq. It has had the much broader effect of turning the United States into an international outlaw in the eyes of much of the world.

Whether he wins or loses in November, George W. Bush's legacy is now clear: the creation of a poisonous atmosphere of anti-Americanism around the globe. I'm sure he takes full responsibility.

Fareed Zakaria is editor of Newsweek International.

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Child of the Raj

YASMEEN MURSHED

I was saddened to learn of the death in 1998 of the British writer Rumer Godden because her works have afforded me many hours of pleasurable reading. She has a particular style of writing which can only be compared to the musical style of a "fugue." I needed to look up a dictionary to get the correct meaning of the term -- apparently a fugue is a contrapuntal, polyphonic piece which may be written for vocal groups or instruments with two or more voices built round a subject.

Well, Ms Godden's style is almost exactly that -- she introduces a topic from the point of view of one person and then the theme is taken up by others or is about others so a complete multi-sided picture forms of a situation or, more commonly with her, of relationships. It is not an easy style of writing and can become repetitive and boring once the novelty wears off; however she uses it successfully in most of her books. In one of them -- China Court -- which is about the successive generations of a family who have lived in the same house for centuries even the house has a voice and a point of view! She also employs the device of the "flashback" extensively and sometimes it becomes difficult to keep track of a character's flashback and present events but concentration pays off and one gets the point in the end.

Kingfishers Catch Fire, The Battle of the Villa Fiorita, The Greengage Summer, An Episode of

adolescents. I enjoy the subtlety of her characterization because there is always a headstrong heroine with great qualities of love and loyalty, faith in the goodness of others, that she sees as a reflection of her own steadfast tenacity to keep the faith, even against odds.

These are stories of a classic cultural clash -- attempts to "civilise" or change the natives with the particular cultural insensitivity that is often displayed by well meaning do-gooders. Of course neither side ever wins and the outcome is but another step in understanding the complexities of human relations.

Perhaps one of her most subtle stories is the tale of a nun in *This House of Brede*, first published in 1969. I found this story of human frailties -- of jealousy, love and despair strangely moving although so far removed in life experience from ourselves. Philippa Talbot leaves her successful career in the Civil Service to join an order of Benedictine Nuns. Of the world and yet away from it, she faces each crisis, internal or external, with compassion and intelligence, surrounded by the beautiful garland

TALKING BOOKS

Obviously their memories are bright with the golden light of their Bengali childhood. But this is more than a memoir. It is a love letter to the times and culture that they grew up in -- a British childhood in Imperial India, remembered with nostalgia tinting the memories with soft sepia colours that cannot quite hide the grim reality of colonialism.

Sparrows, Breakfast with the Nikolides, Black Narcissus are just a few of Rumer Godden's books. A complete range has been published by Pan Books and is quite widely available. I would not advise reading them all in succession because she deals with similar subjects in many of her books -- the growing pains of adolescence and the interaction between young people and their adult relatives -- so it can become boring.

A child of the Raj, Rumer Godden set many of her books in India and they feature some stereotypical "types" -- the obsequious and devious Indian retainers, the British Sahebs and their Mem-Sahibs and so on. However her descriptions of English families discovering new and unfamiliar cultures and the life lessons they learn is sensitive and insightful.

There is also charm in her portrayal of relationships -- the intense strains that families undergo as marriages, love affairs and adultery affect established family patterns that give comfort and security to children and the uncertainties of changing selves and perceptions that face

adolescents. I enjoy the subtlety of her characterization because there is always a headstrong heroine with great qualities of love and loyalty, faith in the goodness of others, that she sees as a reflection of her own steadfast tenacity to keep the faith, even against odds.

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of faith that protects the world of these dedicated women. There is a tender love story at the heart of it and passion, betrayal, deceit and intrigue in plenty. Most of all, there is a seldom found glimpse into the life of these contemplatives who step away from the world and reach deep into their souls to find God.

Another book on this theme was *A Nun's Story* by Kathryn Hulme (Little Brown & Company, 1956). It was a much more dark but equally compelling book and was later made into a memorable film with Audrey Hepburn in the title role.

To return to Rumer Godden, with her lesser known sister Jon, she wrote *Two Under the Indian Sun -- An evocative memoir of the days of the Raj* (Macmillan, 1966). It may have a special appeal for us because the family lived in Narayanganj where the father worked as a steamship agent. In fact the house they lived in was inhabited by the manager of the steamer company until the early eighties and as far as I know stands there still. The book starts in 1914 with the two sisters returning to live with their parents in East Bengal. They had spent a year in England

living with maiden aunts but with the beginning of the World War the Zeppelins were expected and so they were sent back -- sent home, as the sisters tell it, to be safe. This is an account of the next five years told with humor and a winsome delight in life.

Obviously their memories are bright with the golden light of their Bengali childhood. But this is more than a memoir. It is a love letter to the times and culture that they grew up in -- a British childhood in Imperial India, remembered with nostalgia tinting the memories with soft sepia colours that cannot quite hide the grim reality of colonialism. When I first read the book in the sixties I remember enjoying it thoroughly but at a recent re-reading it seemed to grate. I am perhaps being harsh because of my adult perspective that has been shaped by years of nationalistic pride so that I cringe at remembrances of imperialism and the stereotyping of Indians that was inevitable for the time.

Rumer Godden went on to write two more volumes of memoirs -- *A Time to Dance, No Time to Weep* and *A House with Four Rooms* (Macmillan, 1987 and 1989). These are very honest accounts of her later life, hard years eking out a living as a writer, the tragedy of a failed marriage and the comfort she derived from her eventual success as a writer. Good reads all, for those who take an interest in all subjects South Asian.

Yasmeen Murshed is a full-time bookworm and a part-time educationist. She is also the founder of Scholastica school.

Hydro-politics a BJP election stunt

AH JAFFOR ULLAH

HERE is more to India's river interlinking project than meets the eye! The whole of South Asia is now mired in a controversy centering on the interlinking of rivers in the northeast quadrant of India. Our people in South Asia know the maxim -- "water is life." That is why we have a deluge of protest (no pun intended) from Bangladesh, West Bengal, and Assam against the proposal floated by the Vajpayee regime. On the other hand, Indian states in the south and west where water is a precious and life sustaining commodity and which are deemed as water deficient states are not fretting over diverting water from the great river system of the northeastern region.

Many hydrologists of South Asia would concur that the project is at best an ill-conceived one. No feasibility studies have been done on the project and no projections have been made to show the ill effects of river interlinking in states or in neighbouring nations wherefrom water will be withdrawn. The other pertinent issues are: who is going to foot the expense, who is going to decide how much water will be withdrawn from the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and other river system in Bihar, Bengal, and Assam. Sharing the water of a river system is an international issue when more than one country is involved. Bangladesh is located at the downstream part of the river system. Therefore, without consulting the next-door neighbour, India cannot give a green light to the project. To complicate the matter, Indian authorities are giving conflicting answers when asked about the prospect of this mammoth project to link at least 37 rivers. One time they said that the whole project is just in the planning stage. However, at other times, Indian authorities have said that they are very eager to start the project in 2005-2006, and that it will take 10-12 years for completion. The issue of withdrawing massive amounts of waters from Bihar, West Bengal, and Assam by building a canal system is so controversial that not a single day goes by that we do not find news or commentary written about it.

India has just finished conducting parliamentary elections, and what is at stake here is the control of power. The BJP was able to form a coalition government with the help of an

amalgamation of several regional parties last time an election was held there. Will the BJP secure enough parliamentary seats in the current election to cobble together a loose coalition government as they have done so before? Some political analysts have their doubts. Therefore, the BJP politicians are under pressure to go ahead and rouse their supporters. The BJP chief Atal Behari Vajpayee is doing just that. He has gone out of the way to invoke hydro-politics to make sure that his supporters in the water deficient states would rouse up now and show their support for this religion-based nationalist party. On April 27, 2004, Vajpayee, pledged to go ahead with a controversial plan to divert 37 rivers flowing into the Bay of Bengal for irrigation and electricity projects. AFP reported this news. The Prime Minister of India warned of a "great water crisis" in India unless the multi-billion dollar project was put into action. To justify the expense Mr. Vajpayee said, "Joining rivers is a project meant for generating electricity, irrigation. I warn you that water levels are falling. There is going to be a great water crisis in India. Water is wasted. No other country allows that."

Mr. Vajpayee must have been giving an election speech because he said, "Water must be conserved. If we return to power we will take up the project of joining rivers." The Indian PM is known for his poetic abilities, but never have I heard that he knows much about hydrology. In the last several years, Mr. Vajpayee has become a seasoned politician. He is now trying to capitalise on the fact that there is a severe paucity of water in the western states. Therefore, to woo voters from the water deficient states Mr. Vajpayee is playing the game of hydro-politics. But in the process, he failed to understand that river-linking project is fraught with fear because no scientific studies have been done on this project. No one is sure what would happen to downstream Indian states and in Bangladesh when waters are withdrawn year-round or during the monsoon season. The brackish water will surely move inland and seawater may encroach upon coastal areas.

Take the case of Bangladesh. Here, most crops that farmers grow are not saline resistant. How will the farmers cope with the salinity problem? Also, the ecology will be greatly disturbed in the coastal belt. Many fishermen in Bangladesh will have a hard time making ends meet. This project that Mr. Vajpayee is touting to eke out an election victory in the next election may seal the fate of millions of people living in West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, never mind the people of Bangladesh. They are the ones who will bear the brunt of disaster engendered by this ill-conceived plan of interlinking the 37 rivers in northern India.

India is not the first nation on earth to conceive such a plan to withdraw waters from rivers upstream to redistribute the same to the other places where water is deficient. In America, the Army Corps of Engineers has built over 20 massive dams to control the mighty Colorado River in Arizona. The river which once was a massive one in down-river Baja Mexico has become moribund now. Other projects to change the course of rivers in Australia, Russia, and

China also did not materialise and ended up with ecological disaster. The northeast quadrant of South Asia may become very water deficient in wintertime. Doing agriculture in the winter months will be out of question. Naturally, the government of India must perform a thorough study to figure out the damage done to agriculture and livelihood of people in the states that will be impacted by the river interlinking project.

In India, already neighbouring states are fighting over the share of a common river flowing through them. The two states, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, are locked in a bitter fight over the share of Cauvery River. The Karnataka state being situated upstream the river is in full control of how much water could be discharged to Tamil Nadu. In Pakistan, the Kalabagh dam has become a rallying cry for Sindhi people who think that Punjabis will control their life, discharging water at their will. These two are glaring examples of how a state located up-river can control the livelihood of folks living downstream. Can one

possibly imagine what could happen among various states in India when river waters from the northeast will be discharged to other states in the west and south? All kinds of litigations among states would start as soon as water is being withdrawn from the main river system. The waters of any river belong to the population through which the river is flowing. Granted, much water will be flowing into Bay of Bengal. This is the nature of things. Nonetheless, Mr. Vajpayee thinks the other way around. He thinks the discharge of water into Bay of Bengal is simply a waste. He is of the opinion that these waters should be directed to western and southern states which we all know is outside the realm of summer monsoon weather system.

May I urge Mr. Vajpayee not to politicise the rivers interlinking project? Hydrologists and river waters expert from India, Bangladesh, and Nepal should sit in several conferences to figure out the negative impact this Herculean project is bound to engender. If the benefit outweighs the loss, only

then, the rivers interlinking project may get the nod from the government. Also, the cost of the project should be taken into consideration. What will be the economic impact on western and southern states in dollars and cents? We do not have the numbers. But that is not putting a roadblock in Vajpayee's mind. He is playing games with the contentious issue of rivers interlinking project. As a seasoned politician, he is now invoking this dreadful project to sway the minds of voters from central, western, and southern states where water is a rare commodity. Mr. Vajpayee should not play political games with this serious issue because what is at stake here is the life of millions of people. The Indian government should undertake a thorough feasibility studies and get the expert opinion first before uttering one more word on the benefit of digging canals to take away waters from people to whom this great river system belongs.

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