

**The Bush Administration -
Problems and Prospects in 2006**

**by
Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones
Former U.S. Department of State
North Korea Affairs Officer**

January 2006

President Bush's failures at home are undercutting the United States' ability to deal with problems abroad. Domestic politics are closely intertwined with international affairs. The United States, widely recognized as the world's most powerful nation, is particularly susceptible to this fact. The Bush Administration's dismal record in 2005 has greatly diminished the United States' ability to lead the international community. Soon after winning re-election in November 2004, President Bush proudly proclaimed that his victory had "earned political capital" to invest in vigorous reform at home and resolute action abroad. But as 2005 ended, Bush had spent his political capital without earning any dividends at home and abroad.

President Bush must quickly resolve several pressing problems facing the United States if he is to restore his administration's sagging prestige and influence. Other wise, members of his political party will distance themselves from his legislative and budget proposals. At the same time, allies and friends abroad will become increasingly reluctant to accept and support the United States' foreign policy priorities, and adversaries will be less willing to submit to U.S. demands. Given the severity of the problems now facing President Bush, prospects are not good that he will be able to restore his administration's prowess in 2006.

Iraq remains the Bush Administration's foremost problem. In 2005, Bush finally admitted that no weapons of mass destruction (WMD) have been found in Iraq. This was his primary justification for the invasion. His administration subsequently scrambled to find a new rationale for its invasion and continuing military presence in Iraq. President Bush used his January 2005 inaugural address to proclaim that his administration would promote democracy and individual rights around the world, particularly in the Middle East and Iraq. But revelations that the Bush Administration had condoned, even sanctioned abusive treatment of suspected insurgents and terrorists, both foreigners and U.S. citizens, and use of secret jails around the world soon contradicted the president's new rationale.

At home, the cost of Iraq, combined with Bush's previous tax cuts, pushed the U.S. government's deficit to its highest level in history. Then Hurricane Katrina roared into southern United States. Instead of demonstrating compassion for the hurricane's victims by visiting the affected area, President Bush flew in the opposite direction to Arizona to raise money at a political rally. The American people were, and many still remain outraged with their president.

Corruption in Bush's Republican political party has further crumbled his power at home. Thomas Delay, previously the most powerful Republican in the House of Representatives and a close colleague of the president, is under indictment in his home state of Texas for illegally collecting campaign funds. More recently he and several members of Congress have been linked to an influential lobbyist who has confessed to having committed several crimes including the bribing of Congressmen. At the same time, Vice President Cheney's closest adviser Scooter Libby is under indictment for having allegedly committed the crime of leaking the name of a covert Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to journalists.

These and other difficulties add up to very serious political problems at home and greatly eroded prestige abroad.

Iraq will continue to be the Bush Administration's foremost foreign policy challenge in 2006, but the November Congressional election will top the domestic political agenda. All 435 members of the House of Representatives face re-election. The Republican Party since 1994 has dominated the House of Representatives. This has enabled the Republicans to determine the national budget, and thus identify the nation's domestic priorities and influence its goals abroad.

There is some good news for the Republican Party. Most American voters are willing to either ignore or live with problems abroad. But they become increasingly impatient with the ruling political party when the U.S. economy is not doing well. In recent weeks the U.S. economy has demonstrated renewed vigor. Republican members of Congress will benefit if this pattern persists into the fall. Otherwise, chances will greatly increase that the Republican Party could lose its majority in Congress at the end of 2006.

The Bush Administration's fate in 2006 has potentially important consequences for the nations of East Asia. Continuing prosperity under the Bush Administration benefits the export economies of East Asia, particularly Japan, South Korea and China. Reducing the national debt, maintaining low taxes and restraining inflation are necessary to sustain prosperity. Success in this regard requires that the Bush White House maintain Congressional support and a Republican majority in Congress.

The perpetuation of peace is equally important to Northeast Asia's continuing prosperity. Here, the key is achieving a peaceful diplomatic resolution to the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula. Initiated in the summer of 2003, the talks have brought together representatives of China, Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States in the hope of forging a mutually acceptable end to North Korea's nuclear ambitions. But the talks are again stalled. Squabbling between the main antagonists, the United States and North Korea, remains the main impediment to progress.

From Pyongyang's perspective, there is little incentive to achieve an agreement with Washington. Washington and Pyongyang resolved the first Korean Peninsula nuclear crisis by signing the Agreed Framework on October 21, 1994. Two weeks later, President Clinton's Democratic Party lost control of Congress to the Republicans who

promptly refused to fund the expense of implementing the Agreed Framework. The accord subsequently faltered and failed. Pyongyang is certain to avoid making another agreement with the United States until it is known whether the U.S. President's political party will retain control over the Congress and the U.S. national budget.

Progress in the Japan-North Korea talks and South Korea's policy of economic cooperation with North Korea will help maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula. But ultimately, the nuclear issue must be resolved and US-North Korea relations normalized if peace is to prevail in Northeast Asia. Prospects that this might happen in 2006 do not now appear good.