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A Hollow, Failed Presidency

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"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:

Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"

Nothing beside remains: round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,

The lone and level sands stretch far away.

- Percy Bysshe Shelley

Like a modern day Ozymandias, President Bush doesn't know that his legacy has already crumbled, leaving nothing but ruin behind.

Despite the weight of the evidence, Bush hasn't figured out that Iraq is a lost cause. He nods when the vice president confabulates about the insurgency in its "last throes." He nudges people like Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, onto Sunday talk shows to assure us all how "very, very well" things are going. He should be listening to William F. Buckley Jr., who wrote a Feb. 24 column in the National Review titled "It Didn't Work," in which the fierce conservative argues that Bush's next step is "the acknowledgment of defeat."

The bombing of the gold-domed Askariya shrine, one of the holiest places for Shiite Muslims, will one day be remembered as the first major salvo in Iraq's civil war. American soldiers in the thick of it know this well enough, which is why 72 percent of troops serving in Iraq as surveyed by Zogby International say we should cut our losses and leave within a year.

When a tribal nation seething in sectarian rivalries has more guns than classroom seats, the only democracy that will emerge is a zero-sum form where the majority takes the whole prize. The Iraqi elections illustrated how far this nation is from anything resembling a liberal democracy. Almost all Iraqis who voted put their ethnic and religious allegiance over common, nation building ideals.

Iraq is now coming apart at its natural pressure points, a consequence eminently predictable had the neocons bothered to read about the British misadventure in Mesopotamia and of Gertrude Bell, the intrepid British Arabist, who drew the modern map of Iraq into a powder keg.

The big winner from our investment of \$250-billion and 2,300 American lives will be Iran, whose Shiite-led theocracy will make common cause with Iraq's Shiite majority and secure for their team an even larger share of the world's oil wealth. We traded the reasonably contained tyranny of Saddam for the anti-Semitic Looney Tunes Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a leader much closer to joining the nuclear club than Saddam was. No need to sex up the intelligence here.

Bush declared in his 2002 State of the Union address that "America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere," a

statement that no longer passes the straight-face test. Bush will be remembered on the "liberty and justice" front for unraveling both and sinking America's international reputation to boot.

The administration denounces the soft racism evident in the opposition to the Dubai ports deal, but thought nothing of subjecting 5,000 largely Muslim and Arab men to preventive detention in the United States after 9/11, embracing an overt "Arabs are terrorists" racism. To this day, not one of them stands convicted of a terror-related crime.

The legal black holes Bush has created at Guantanamo and at CIA black site prisons - and his stepped-up use of extraordinary rendition, prisoner abuse and warrantless domestic spying - demonstrate that this president has no meaningful conception of the words "liberty and justice."

Bush equates the phrase with the planting of the American flag. To him it is a shibboleth, handy to use when his useless tongue can think of no other words to twist around it.

The real war against terrorism - the one in Afghanistan - has foundered from Bush's neglect. Warlords control daily life in many regions, and the Taliban is resurgent. When Bush parachuted in earlier this month and praised the nation's "education of young girls," he failed to note that in January alone at least 200 schools in Kandahar and 165 schools in Helmund provinces were closed after 20 schools were torched and one headmaster was killed.

Even Bush's most determined legacy, his desire to make his tax cuts permanent, will bring this nation only future suffering and hardship. Next week we will have hit the \$8.18-trillion ceiling on our national debt. Bush is spending against an empty treasury that he fought to deplete. America's path to financial ruin was paved by his borrow-and-spend and enrich-the-rich approach to governance.

Our own Ozymandias has visions of grandeur, but in reality Bush has planted the seeds for a more destabilized world, a more vulnerable America and a nation stripped of its fiscal footing and principled creed.

As we look on his works, we will despair indeed.