While You Were at War . . .

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In every administration, there are usually only about a dozen barons who can really initiate and manage meaningful changes in national security policy. For most of 2006, some of these critical slots in the Bush administration have been vacant, such as the deputy secretary of state (empty since Robert B. Zoellick left for investment bank Goldman Sachs) and the deputy director of national intelligence (with Gen. Michael V. Hayden now CIA director). And with the nation involved in a messy war spiraling toward a bad conclusion, the key deputies and Cabinet members and advisers are all focusing on one issue, at the expense of all others: Iraq.

National Security Council veteran Rand Beers has called this the "7-year-old's soccer syndrome" -- just like little kids playing soccer, everyone forgets their particular positions and responsibilities and runs like a herd after the ball.

In the end, there are only 12 seats at the conference table in the White House Situation Room, and the key players' schedules mean that they can seldom meet there together in person or on secure video conference for more than about 10 hours each week. When issues don't receive first-tier consideration, they can slip by for months. I learned this firsthand: In the early days of the Bush administration, I called for an urgent meeting to discuss the threat al-Qaeda posed to the United States. The Cabinet-level meeting eventually took place -- but not until Sept. 4, 2001.

Without the distraction of the Iraq war, the administration would have spent this past year -- indeed, every year since Sept. 11, 2001 -- focused on al-Qaeda. But beyond al-Qaeda and the broader struggle for peaceful coexistence with (and within) Islam, seven key "fires in the in-box" national security issues remain unattended, deteriorating and threatening, all while Washington's grown-up 7- year-olds play herd ball with Iraq.

Global warming: When the possibility of invading Iraq surfaced in 2001, senior Bush administration officials hadn't thought much about global warming, except to wonder whether it was caused by human activity or by sunspots. Today, the world's scientists and many national leaders worry that the world has passed the point of no return on global warming. If it has, then human damage to the ecosphere will cause more major cities to flood and make the planet significantly less conducive to human habitation -- all over the lifetime of a child now in kindergarten. British Prime Minister Tony Blair keeps trying to convince President Bush of the magnitude of the problem, but in every session

between the two leaders Iraq squeezes out the time to discuss the pending planetary disaster.

Russian revanchism: When Russian President Vladimir Putin and Bush leave office in rapid succession in 2008 and 2009, it seems likely that Russia will be less of a democracy and less inclined to cooperate with Washington than it was six years ago, when Bush stared into the eyes and looked into the heart of the Russian leader. Given her extensive background in Soviet studies, Condoleezza Rice would have been a natural to work on key U.S.- Russian issues, first as national security adviser and now as secretary of state. But the focus on Iraq has precluded such efforts, even as the troubling issues multiply: Russian governors are no longer elected, but appointed; dissidents die mysteriously and probably at the hands of the new KGB; opposition media are suppressed; and corporate leaders are jailed or hounded out of the country.

Meanwhile, Moscow plays petro-politics by dramatically raising the cost of energy to former Soviet republics that do not toe the Kremlin's line, and by threatening to turn off the pipeline to European nations that don't cooperate. If Bush hoped that turning a blind eye to all this would help win Russian cooperation in Iraq and Iran, the strategy failed.

Latin America's leftist lurch: In the years before the Iraq war, U.S. presidents were welcomed at summits throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Indeed, the attacks of Sept. 11 found then- Secretary of State Colin L. Powell in South America, visiting one area of the world where U.S. policies had worked. Friendly, democratic governments were in power in every nation in the hemisphere except Cuba. Formerly debt-ridden economies were implementing pro-market reforms, and the United States was welcomed as a partner. Washington seemed confident that if and when Fidel Castro died (there was always some doubt), even Cuba might join the democracy/free market club.

Today, Castro has been replaced, but not just by another Cuban dictator. The leader of the hemisphere's new anti-Yankee alliance is Hugo Chavez, the democratically elected president of Venezuela. Chavez's anti-U.S. campaign is supported by Cuban intelligence and Venezuelan oil money. By 2006, Venezuela and Cuba were not alone in their opposition to Washington; kindred spirits have been elected in Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua. Having begun his administration pledging new cooperation with Mexico, Bush backtracked after Sept. 11, focusing instead on tightening immigration and border controls.

Africa at war: The genocide spilling from the Darfur region of Sudan into neighboring Chad has captured attention in the United States mainly because of (belated) media coverage and an aggressive advocacy campaign by concerned groups, but the prospects of Washington dealing with the problem seem slim. Darfur, however, is only one of a pox of conflicts that, together with HIV/AIDS, are depopulating parts of Africa and robbing it of potential wealth from mineral, oil and gas deposits. Wars have also raged in Chad, Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Somalia. Were it not for the Iraq war, Washington may have acted to stop what the Bush administration admits is genocide in Darfur, or taken steps to prevent the chaos sweeping Somalia after a group affiliated with al-Qaeda took over the country and left Ethiopia no choice but to invade in hopes of pre-

venting a more disastrous war. Unfortunately, even designating a small presence of U.S. Special Forces to lead a U.N.-approved peacekeeping force in Darfur appears beyond the capability of the badly stretched American military.

Arms control freeze: Once atop several administrations' national security agendas, international arms control has received little White House attention since the Bush administration decided early on to walk away from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. National security adviser Stephen J. Hadley has extensive government experience working on arms control and he began to focus on this turf in early 2001, when he was number two at the National Security Council. But after 9/11, Hadley has had little opportunity to advance international efforts to control biological weapons, nuclear testing and proliferation, or the threat of nuclear or radioactive terrorist weapons. For a long time, the White House outsourced dealing with Iran's nuclear weapons to the Europeans, just as the onus of stopping North Korea's nuclear development was placed on Asian nations. The sustained senior-level attention that is needed to stop two nuclear weapons programs at the same time has simply not been available -- because of Iraq.

Transnational crime: In a nationally televised address in 1989, President George H.W. Bush held aloft a bag of cocaine that had been sold near the White House and declared a "War on Drugs." That initiative was later enlarged to target the international criminal cartels engaged in human trafficking, gun and contraband smuggling, money laundering and cyber fraud. The momentum from these efforts produced international treaties to combat hidden global crime conglomerates, but the White House leadership necessary to coordinate dozens of U.S. agencies and mobilize other nations has dissipated. Moreover, the world's international crime cartels received a major shot in the arm with the occupation of Afghanistan by NATO forces. From relatively low levels of heroin production in 2001, Afghanistan's economy is now dependent upon the widespread cultivation of heroin that is flooding black markets in Europe and Asia. With most of the U.S. Army either in Iraq, heading to Iraq or returning from Iraq, insufficient U.S. forces were available to prevent the once-liberated Afghanistan from morphing into a narco- state.

The Pakistani-Afghan border: Afghanistan increasingly receives the attention of senior U.S. policymakers, not because of the narcotics problem, but mainly because the once-defeated Taliban again threaten Afghan and coalition forces. However, if there is a solution, it lies on the other side of the Khyber Pass where a sanctuary has emerged, a Taliban-like state within a state in western Pakistan. Dealing with that problem is more than Washington has been willing or able to handle, for it involves the complex issue of who governs nuclear-armed Pakistan and how.

Thus far, Washington has accepted Gen. Pervez Musharraf's half- hearted measures for dealing with the nuclear proliferation network of A.Q. Khan, addressing the terrorist involvement of Pakistani intelligence and controlling the Taliban/al-Qaeda bases in Waziristan. Getting Pakistan to do more would require a major sustained effort by senior U.S. officials, including addressing the longstanding tensions with India. Because of Iraq, Washington's national security gurus do not have the hours in their days to manage that -- nor the troops needed to secure Afghanistan.

As the president contemplates sending even more U.S. forces into the Iraqi sinkhole, he should consider not only the thousands of fatalities, the tens of thousands of casualties and the hundreds of billions of dollars already lost. He must also weigh the opportunity cost of taking his national security barons off all the other critical problems they should be addressing -- problems whose windows of opportunity are slamming shut, unheard over the wail of Baghdad sirens.

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