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**HEADLINE:** Rebuilding U.S. Image, Influence Abroad Will Take Years

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**BODY:**

The U.S. won't be winning any global popularity contests soon. Many foreigners and their governments were cheered to see the Democrats retake control of Congress, figuring that this would rein in President Bush, who has ruffled lots of feathers abroad. Even so, the U.S. image has been damaged so deeply around the world, particularly since the start of the Iraq war, that it will take many years to repair.

Events in Iraq are a key factor. Until American forces are able to start exiting Iraq in significant numbers, and also able to leave the country in stable condition "highly unlikely in the near term" the perception of the U.S. abroad will remain that of an incompetent, aggressive and self-centered nation. Even assuming the best-case scenario for Iraq, the image-healing process would probably last well after Bush leaves office in January 2009, even if the next administration launches a major charm offensive overseas.

In the meantime, the negative image will continue to impose limits on American political and economic influence worldwide. Other nations, whose support the U.S. needs to accomplish key foreign policy goals, won't be any more inclined than they are now to accept the Bush administration's arguments that Washington's priorities should be theirs as well. Coordinated global efforts in areas such as gathering intelligence, fighting terrorism, countering nuclear proliferation and battling organized crime will remain that much more difficult for the White House to orchestrate.

Keith Reinhard, president of Business for Diplomatic Action, a San Francisco-based private-sector task force, says global mistrust of the U.S. has major implications for national security. "What happens when we have no more friends to whisper in our ears that someone is planning to blow up our jetliners? Well, then someone will blow up our jetliners," he argues.

Iraq-fueled discontent with the U.S. is strongest throughout Europe and the Muslim world. The White House's focus on the Middle East in general and Iraq in particular has also left U.S. supporters in Latin America feeling neglected by Washington. This has worked to the advantage of anti-U.S. populists throughout the region, particularly Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and Bolivian President Evo

Morales.

Iraq is playing a smaller role in the loss of U.S. influence in the Far East, though it has prevented Washington from devoting enough time to another critical national security issue: containment of North Korea's nuclear program. The biggest challenge to the U.S. in the region is China's growing economic and political clout"and to some extent India's as well. Other Asian nations no longer view the U.S. as the only country capable of offering lucrative markets for their exports and major-league development assistance. China, in particular, is clearly trying to use its newfound economic leverage to win friends and diminish Washington's role. This challenge to U.S. hegemony will only grow.

Tight U.S. visa policies, imposed after the 9/11 attacks, are another irritant abroad. High hurdles for obtaining visas not only hurt the domestic travel and tourism industries"and any U.S. company seeking to do business with foreign customers. They also cripple U.S. efforts at public diplomacy. Foreign visitors who return to their home countries with a favorable impression of the U.S. tend to spread those positive feelings with their fellow citizens. Unhappy visitors"or those denied entry"will do the opposite. The visa situation is somewhat better now that the government has loosened restrictions on student visas. But foreign tourists, officials and businesspeople still face humiliating travel hassles.

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