

The world according to Kim Campbell

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This year marks the 20th anniversary of Mikhail Gorbachev's startling offer to the United States to begin a three-stage process to rid the world of nuclear weapons. Most everybody, of course, thought it was propaganda. "Tell us another one, Gorby." But the Soviet leader proceeded to demonstrate that he was serious. For a while, he brought Ronald Reagan on board and, for a while, they lit up the galaxy with hope.

Today, you don't want to look. There is no greater terror out there than nuclear arsenals. But they are being stockpiled like beanstalks, and few seem to care. George W. Bush runs roughshod over the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But, yawn, we're so used to this President trashing the treaty system -- he's junked or spurned nine international accords -- that it isn't news any more.

Former prime minister Kim Campbell came to Ottawa this week to try to draw some attention to the issue. She is part of a group, the Middle Powers Initiative, headed by the intrepid former disarmament ambassador Doug Roche, that seeks a nuclear-free world. But nuclear weapons are viewed as a relic of the Cold War. Terrorism is the story. It swamps all headlines.

Ms. Campbell dropped in to see Prime Minister Stephen Harper. With a hundred other issues on his plate, he hasn't had time to look at her one. When he does, she shouldn't expect much. Mr. Harper is not about to go criticizing Mr. Bush -- no matter how many treaties he trashes.

She is 59 now, but Ms. Campbell still has the soft, sparkling eyes of a kid. Our footnote PM is still not afraid to be frank, even with her conservative brethren in power north and south of the border. Sitting in a corner of a dimly lit Ottawa restaurant, she talked of the nuclear threat and of Mr. Bush and Mr. Harper in the context of the harsher conservatism of our times.

Though she credited Mr. Harper with a fine start, she believes his Conservatives, especially in terms of social policy, are to the right of the average Canadian. Being wonderfully experienced in the art of short governance, she issued a warning: They may not last long.

"It was very clear in the last campaign that the Conservative Party tried to put a more centrist or moderate philosophy in the window," said Ms. Campbell. "Now, whether they can continue to do that, I don't know. If they can't and the more socially Conservative

members of the caucus are able to impose an agenda, I don't think they will be able to survive as a government. It will be very, very hard."

Having spent a few years in Los Angeles and Boston, Ms. Campbell now resides in Spain, where she heads up the Club of Madrid, a group of former leaders helping nascent democracies. The distance she keeps from Canada helps soften the scars of the 1993 election, her party's two-seat horror show. She no longer -- or so she claims -- dwells on it.

Being out of the country for so long has made her more appreciative of the values of multilateralism. She's a Conservative, but she kept using a term that is anathema to those on that side of the political spectrum -- "soft power."

"One of the sad things about unilateralism," said Ms. Campbell, a former defence minister, "is that it has in many ways destroyed so much of America's soft power. Soft power is extremely important. It is goodwill that gets you listened to."

She supports the Canadian military effort in Afghanistan, but the chances of Canada and its allies winning there, she said, have been hamstrung by the Bush diversion in Iraq. That war took away the resources necessary to win in Afghanistan. The hard power as displayed in Iraq has made America weaker, she maintained, not stronger.

But it's not all grim out there, said our first and only female prime minister. The Bush Republicans -- and we can only hope she is right on this -- have learned that "being big and powerful is not enough." Even on the issue of nuclear weapons, she sees signs that the President might come to his senses. He and his team seem to be discovering, finally, "that they need the rest of the world."