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Arrogance Is Humility

by Sheldon Richman

Taking a step back from all the particulars, the real lesson of September 11 is that for more than 50 years, the U.S. government has put the American people in harm's way by its heavy-handed intervention in the bitter disputes throughout the Middle East. Then, despite the hundreds of billions of dollars spent each year on "national security" and countless signals of the coming threat, it was unable to protect us from the "blowback."

So the government went to war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, proclaiming success all the way, even if it could not bag the top men. (Governments define "success" differently from the rest of us. Afghanistan is torn by conflict among rival warlords and their gangs, the country's president has to be protected from assassins by American troops, and the terrorists have regrouped in "our ally" Pakistan and elsewhere. But the strife is below the news media's radar, so Afghanistan is a success.)

Despite all this good news, the head of the CIA, George Tenet, went to Congress last October and said,

"The threat environment we find ourselves in today is as bad as it was last summer, the summer before Sept. 11. It is serious, they've reconstituted, they are coming after us, they want to execute attacks."

A year of fighting terrorism and nothing to show for it. And as if to punctuate the point, several police departments and federal law-enforcement agencies were unable to master the "threat environment" around Washington, D.C., where, it turned out, two accused snipers were killing innocent people at will unmolested. (Oh yes, and that anthrax mailer was still out there somewhere.)

To quote, W.S. Gilbert, "Here's a pretty how-de-do."

None of this has stopped our national misleaders from insisting that *they* are our ticket to security. But for that assertion there has been as little evidence offered as there has been for the claims that Saddam Hussein is a threat to Americans and that he has had anything to do with al-Qaeda, which despises secular Arab rulers like him. "We don't need no stinkin' evidence" is the attitude that oozes from President Bush and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

A history of intervention

The objective indications all run the other way. It is indisputable that the U.S. government has picked fights where it did not belong. This is true throughout the Middle East and in nearby Afghanistan at least since the end of World War II.

The CIA helped Saddam Hussein to gain power in Iraq. Then the U.S. government encouraged him to go to war with Iran, because Iran became our enemy after the people there overthrew the brutal shah, whom the CIA restored to power in 1953. During the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, the U.S. government gave Hussein export credits, intelligence data, and the capacity to make biological weapons. His use of chemical weapons was no big deal to our misleaders, though retrospectively, they are appalled.

The troubles for America in Afghanistan started in the late 1970s when the Carter administration got the bright idea of luring the faltering Soviet Union into its “Vietnam.” Afghanistan had a secular, pro-Soviet regime. Carter’s national-security team, led by Zbigniew Brzezinski, encouraged Islamic radicals to cause trouble for the regime in the hope that the Russians would intervene to save it and keep the peace on its border. Part of this effort was a Pakistani and Saudi program to get Arab radicals to fight in Afghanistan to expel the Russian infidels.

The plan worked like a charm. The only problem was that the radicals wanted to expel another foreign invader after they were done with the Soviets: the U.S. government. A particularly charismatic and wealthy Saudi was among the mujahideen, who were embraced as “freedom” fighters” by the Carter, Reagan, and first Bush administrations. His name was Osama bin Laden.

(Incidentally, this policy of encouraging sectarian radicals was not new. The U.S. government had previously supported the rise of religious rivals to the secular Arab leaders it feared, such as Egypt’s Nasser. Likewise, the Israelis nurtured the religious Arabs who became Hamas in order to deprive the secular Arafat of followers. Such is how “blowback” operates.)

When the United States went to war against Saddam Hussein for invading Kuwait (an invasion condoned in advance by the United States), hatred of the U.S. government increased for its stationing of troops near the Islamic holy sites in Saudi Arabia and imposing a monstrous embargo on Iraq, depriving the people of food, medicine, and sanitation facilities. These were the main reasons cited by bin Laden for the September 11 strikes.

Another occasion for extended U.S. meddling in the Middle East has been the five decades of unwavering support for Israel against the Palestinians. While many Palestinians have engaged in murderous violence against innocents, it cannot be denied that the root of the problem is that the land of innocent Arabs has been taken from them and many have been killed and oppressed in the process.

The fruits of intervention

This long train of abuses by the U.S. government has understandably created seething resentment. How should an Arab feel when missiles and bombs with the words “Made in the USA” come crashing into his home, killing his children? Fortunately, most people in the Middle East

distinguish the American government from the American people. Polls done by John Zogby routinely confirm this. They don't hate us. They hate our government's policies. So should we.

Unfortunately, a small number of fanatics don't make that distinction — hence, events like the World Trade Center terrorism. (No, this doesn't mean "we" deserved 9/11. It means the U.S. government failed us by putting us at risk and then was impotent to protect us.)

It must be pointed out that the U.S. government itself is less than thorough about distinguishing between governments and private citizens when it conducts its bombing campaigns in northern and southern Iraq and in Afghanistan. No doubt it will try harder in Baghdad.

Tenet, in describing the continuing threat, apparently paid no heed to a recent tape purportedly featuring the voice of Osama bin Laden. On that tape, bin Laden said, "[Whether] America increases or reduces tensions, we will surely answer back in the same manner." For some reason this was not worthy of discussion on the endless cable programs about the war on terrorism and Iraq. Nor did the congressional committees take it up. I may be wrong, but it sounded as though bin Laden was saying that if the United States reduced tensions, so would al-Qaeda.

This is interesting because if that is what he means, then those of us who said the terrorist attacks were intended as retaliation for U.S. intervention in the Middle East are right. And those who said bin Laden hates us because we are rich, free, and democratic are wrong. I think it shows that the Islamic radicals aren't against American business. They just want America to mind its own and leave the people in the Middle East alone. That's not an unreasonable request. Some of us have been making it for years.

Could that be why bin Laden's remark went by without discussion?

Notice, however, that the United States is not reducing tensions. On the contrary, it is still harming Iraqis with the embargo as it plans to attack Baghdad; it still has troops near the holy sites in Saudi Arabia; and it is still helping the Israelis to oppress the Palestinians. I guess stopping those horrendous policies would show weakness. And we can't have that.

Dangerous days lie ahead, thanks to Bush and his new strategic doctrine of global preventive war, an imperialist doctrine in all but name. Things were supposed to be different. Does anyone remember that day ages ago when then-candidate Bush promised a "humble" foreign policy? I guess to Orwell's "War is Peace" and "Freedom is Slavery" we may now add Bush's "Arrogance is Humility."

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