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Seven Years of Darkness, Tyranny, and Oppression

by Jacob G. Hornberger

The year 1989 was a year of a great celebration. For that was the year that that hated and reviled symbol of tyranny, empire, and oppression, the Berlin Wall, came crashing down. Not only were the people of East Germany and Eastern Europe celebrating the demise of the Wall, so were people all over the world, including people here in the United States.

That event was of special importance to Americans, who had lived under the cloud of perpetual war, militarism, military expenditures, and the military-industrial complex during the 45 years of the Cold War. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, many Americans began thinking about the possibility that they might be able to live normal lives of liberty, peace, prosperity, and harmony.

Alas, it was not to be.

Today, we live in an era in which there is the threat of perpetual war — a war that we're told is likely to last much longer than the Cold War. The war is against an enemy — terrorists — who they tell us are more dangerous than the communists.

We live in a country in which the president has the omnipotent power to send the entire nation into war, without even the semblance of the constitutionally required congressional declaration of war.

In fact, we live in a country in which the ruler claims the power to ignore any constitutional restraint on his power, so long as he is operating as the “commander in chief” in the “war on terrorism.”

Who would have thought back in 1989 that Americans would soon be living in a country in which U.S. government agents wielded the power to go into any country on Earth, kidnap any citizen whatever, and “rendition” him to a foreign regime for the purpose of torture or transport him to an overseas military prison for the same purpose and even execution?

We live in a country in which the government spies on its own people with warrantless searches of telephone records, email, and who knows what else. Private corporations have

become partners in this endeavor, either with the promise of immunity or the threat of adverse governmental action.

We live in a country in which the president and the military now wield the power to sweep across the land and take any American citizen into custody and transport him to a military prison as an “enemy combatant” — a country which government officials tell us is itself part of the worldwide battlefield in the war on terrorism. As “enemy combatants” in such a war, Americans accused of terrorism by the government can now be denied centuries-old liberties, such as due process of law, trial by jury, and freedom from cruel and unusual punishments.

We live in a country where the president and the military now wield the power to attack any country in the world, including countries that haven’t attacked the United States, and to occupy such countries indefinitely. Resistance to any U.S. war of aggression among the populace of the invaded and occupied country is now automatically considered an act of terrorism, and the perpetrators are treated accordingly.

We live in a country in which the president and the military set up overseas prison camps and an independent judicial system for suspected terrorists that was intended to be beyond the reach of the Constitution and the federal judiciary. The principles of this independent judicial system are completely antithetical to those that underlie the judicial system on which our nation was founded, and they allow such practices as torture and sex abuse of detainees, secret proceedings, use of hearsay, denial of the right to confront witnesses, and trial by military tribunal.

How did it all come to this? How could Americans have been so filled with hope in 1989 that after 45 years of a garrison, big-government, Cold War state, they would be living in an environment free of the threat of perpetual war and foreign crises, only to find themselves in a much worse situation?

Foreign-policy blowback

Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, the president made an important announcement. It was an announcement relating to what had motivated the terrorists to commit the 9/11 attacks. He said that the terrorists had been motivated by hatred for America’s freedom and values. Immediately, that explanation of motive was embraced by the vice president, the secretary of state, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, conservative television and radio commentators, and neocon supporters of the president, not to mention many liberal lawmakers, pundits, and commentators.

Every American was expected to immediately embrace this official position with respect to motive. Those who failed to do so were immediately attacked for lack of patriotism and hatred of their country.

Why was it so important for U.S. officials that the American people blindly adopt the official position with respect to the motive of the 9/11 attackers? The reason was that the last thing U.S. officials wanted was for Americans to focus on U.S. foreign policy — and especially the bad things that U.S. officials had been doing to people ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall, not only in the Middle East but also — as part of the war on drugs — in Latin America.

Consider, for example, the cruel and brutal sanctions against the Iraqi people. While it is impossible to know how many Iraqi children lost their lives as a result of the sanctions, the most reliable estimates are in the hundreds of thousands. When U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright was asked by *Sixty Minutes* in 1996 whether the deaths of half a million children from the sanctions were worth it, she didn't dispute the number and instead simply said, "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price — we think the price is worth it." She was, in fact, expressing the official position of the U.S. government. While many Americans might not have been aware of her statement, it reverberated throughout the Middle East. Iraqi children were expendable in the advancement of U.S. foreign policy.

Why were so many children dying from the sanctions, year after year? The answer to that question lies in a Pentagon policy implemented during the Persian Gulf War. In the midst of that war, the Pentagon conducted a study of what would happen if the U.S. Air Force were to destroy Iraq's water and sewage treatment facilities. The Pentagon reached the same conclusion that U.S. officials would reach many years later when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans — that people who drink untreated, sewage-infested water are in extreme danger of contracting deadly, infectious illnesses. Having reached that conclusion, the Pentagon proceeded to bomb Iraq's water and sewage treatment facilities. The more than 11 years of subsequent sanctions ensured that the facilities could not be repaired, guaranteeing that a certain number of Iraqi newborns and toddlers would die each year.

While most Americans were unaware of the brutal and deadly effects of the sanctions, people in the Middle East were not. Year after year, a cauldron of frustration, helplessness, anger, and hate was simmering, for everyone knew that there was absolutely nothing that the Iraqi people could do, either militarily or otherwise, to escape the deadly effects of the sanctions. In a crisis of conscience, two high UN officials — Hans von Sponek and Denis Halliday — even resigned their positions in protest of what they called "genocide" of the Iraqi children.

To add a bit more humiliation to Arab sensibilities to the mix, U.S. officials, with the consent of the pro-U.S. regime in Saudi Arabia, stationed U.S. troops near what are considered to be the holiest lands in the Muslim religion, Mecca and Medina. There were also the "no-fly zones" that President Clinton established over Iraq without the approval of either Congress or the UN, which resulted in the periodic killings of even more Iraqis. One 13-year-old boy tending his sheep was decapitated when an errant U.S. missile blew up near him.

On top of the sanctions, the troops near Islamic holy lands, and the no-fly zones was, of course, the long-standing unconditional financial and military support of the Israeli government.

In other words, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, when hopes were soaring among the American people for a “peace dividend,” the U.S. government was busy. And its business, by the way, was not only operative in the Middle East, it was also present in Latin America, where the Pentagon was ratcheting up the drug war, an operation that is today manifesting itself in massive terrorist blowback in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America.

Regime change

What was the purpose of the sanctions against Iraq? What was Madeleine Albright referring to when she said that the deaths of the Iraqi children were “worth it”? While the sanctions were often couched in terms of the need for Saddam Hussein to “disarm,” which meant ridding Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, their real purpose was simply regime change. For U.S. officials periodically made it clear that if the Iraqi people would simply oust Saddam from power — through coup, revolution, assassination, or whatever — the sanctions would be lifted. As long as Saddam remained in power, U.S. officials emphasized, there was no chance whatever that the brutal sanctions would ever be lifted.

The concept of regime change is important and, in fact, is a core element in U.S. foreign policy. It involves the installation of rulers in foreign countries, oftentimes brutal dictators, who will do the bidding of U.S. officials when needed, e.g., they will participate in coalitions of the willing, vote a certain way in the UN, or provide funds for the IMF. When foreign aid fails to secure the loyalty of a foreign ruler, U.S. officials oftentimes resort to more extreme measures, such as sanctions, embargoes, assassinations, coups, and invasions to effect regime change.

Consider Iran, 1953. The prime minister of Iran, Mohammed Mossadegh, had been democratically elected to that position by the Iranian parliament. He was a man who was highly respected, even beloved, by the Iranian people. *Time* magazine named him its Man of the Year.

Pursuing a socialist philosophy that was being embraced by countries all over the world, Mossadegh nationalized the Iranian oil industry. That was a cardinal sin in the eyes of the British Empire, given that the Iranian oil industry was almost entirely owned and controlled by British companies.

British officials enlisted the assistance of the U.S. government, whose CIA surreptitiously engineered the ouster of Mossadegh from power and restored the brutal dictatorial regime of the shah of Iran. The shah, with the full support of the U.S. government, proceeded to unleash a 25-year reign of terror — complete with a secret police force and torture — on his own people.

Finally, in 1979 the Iranian people revolted against the tyrannical regime of the shah. In their anger over what the U.S. government had done in 1953, they took U.S. diplomats hostage.

The reaction of U.S. officials was to play innocent, behaving as if they had done nothing to provoke the anger.

The Iranians knew better. For by that time, they had discovered what the U.S. government had been doing to destroy democracy and support tyranny in Iran.

Guatemala, 1954. Still celebrating the regime change in Iran, one year later the CIA effected another regime change, this time in Guatemala. The Guatemalans had elected a socialist, Jacobo Arbenz, president of the country. Arbenz proceeded to take a section of uncultivated land from an American corporation, United Fruit, and transfer it to Guatemalan farmers. The irony was that Arbenz's taking from the rich in order to help the poor was no different from the socialist practices of U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, whose regime founded the modern-day welfare state in America. Nonetheless, the CIA engineered a coup in which Arbenz was removed from power and replaced with a brutal military general. That regime-change operation produced a 30-year-long civil war that killed more than a million Guatemalans.

Regime change was what the various CIA assassination plans in Cuba, along with the Bay of Pigs invasion, were all about — trying to effect regime change in Cuba in the wake of the successful regime-change operations in Iran and Guatemala.

Ever since the 9/11 attacks, U.S. officials have repeated *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseum* that “9/11 changed the world.” But that's just nonsense. 9/11 didn't change anything. Instead, it provided the U.S. government the unhampered ability to continue moving in the same regime-change direction in which it had been headed for many years.

That was what the invasion and occupation of Iraq were all about. All the fear-mongering talk about weapons of mass destruction and mushroom clouds was designed to muster support for what the 11 years of sanctions had been unable to achieve — the ouster of Saddam Hussein from power. Of course, the secondary aim of the invasion — installing a pro-U.S. regime headed by either Ahmed Chalabi or Iyad Allawi — was foiled when Iraqi Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani engineered the installation of a radical Islamic regime in Iraq, one with primary loyalty to Iran.

Equally important, not only did 9/11 provide U.S. officials with the opportunity to achieve what they had been trying to achieve throughout the 1990s, the 9/11 attacks also enabled U.S. officials to expand their power over the American people in ways that could never have been imagined during the Cold War.

After all, don't forget that it was the Soviet communists who kidnapped and tortured people; spied on and kept files on its citizenry; conducted secret trials before kangaroo tribunals; held suspects indefinitely; maintained secret prisons; and plundered and looted the citizenry through taxation, fees, and inflation to finance ever-increasing government expenditures. Who would have ever thought that U.S. officials would be justifying the same sorts of things after the fall of the Berlin Wall under the rubric of a perpetual “war on terrorism,” a war whose roots lay in the actions that U.S. officials took in the Middle East after the fall of the Berlin Wall?

Restoring freedom to America

Is there a way out of this mess? Yes, and it's a rather simple one — dismantling the overseas U.S. empire and ending its foreign policy of interventionism.

That means closing the more than 700 U.S. military bases in foreign countries, bringing all those troops home, and discharging them into the private sector.

It also means ending the decades-old policy of regime change and interventionism, including assassinations, coups, invasions, occupations, and foreign aid.

It means the end of the drug war, which would immediately put drug lords out of business, which would bring to an end all the drug-war violence and the many human-rights abuses committed in the name of the drug war.

Most important, it would mean the restoration of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the rule of law to the nation. No more kidnappings and rendition, no more torture and sex abuse, no more secret judicial proceedings, no more spying on the citizenry, no more suspensions of due process of law and habeas corpus, no more kangaroo tribunals.

Can the American people accomplish such a feat? Why not? If the people of East Germany could bring down the Berlin Wall, why can't the American people restore a limited-government republic and a free society to our land?

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