

American Foreign Policy: A Tragic “Success”



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*M*any people today believe that American foreign policy is stupid or timid or confused or overextended or bankrupt. The truth is that the current policy is rational. By “rational,” I mean it pursues certain goals and maximizes certain interests rather consistently. And, unfortunately, it is strikingly successful in what it does.

THE GOALS OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

American foreign policy consistently supports those who throw their countries open to Western investment on terms that are completely favorable to the investors, those who open land, labor, markets, and natural resources to be used in service to the market interests of American capital and other big corporate Western investors. The countries that cooperate with this global investment agenda are approvingly labeled by American policymakers and the American corporate media as “pro-West,” “friendly to the West,” and “pro-American.”

At the same time, American policy has consistently opposed those countries, political movements, and leaders who have sought an alternative approach, outside the global corporate free-market system that is now being imposed on the entire world, those who have wanted to be something more than comprador collaborators with American power and Western investors.

These “rogue states” have included a democratic-reformist coalition government, as in Chile under Allende; a Christian Socialist Revolutionary government, as in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas; leftist military governments, as in Panama and under Torrijó and even Noriega, or in Libya under Khaddafi; and Marxist-Leninist governments as in Vietnam or Cuba. Even a conservative, militarist right-wing regime that proves to be an economic nationalist government, as in Iraq under Saddam Hussein,

was targeted. These are the kinds of countries that have had their leaders demonized and their populations subjected to massive military assaults by United States forces. During the Cold War, American leaders tolerated and even encouraged some independent and potentially competitive economic development by Third World nations. The poorer countries were supposed to develop their own industrial bases. Aided by western investment, they would come to enjoy prosperity, or specifically a stable, sizable middle class that would keep them from going communist. The fear that they would turn to collective forms of economic development was the motor force behind American policy in the Cold War era (and remains a concern to this day).

Most such Third World development was highly uneven in regard to who benefited and who paid the costs, just as it is highly uneven today in China and a few other places. For instance, the “Brazilian miracle” of the 1960s brought a dramatic increase in Brazil’s gross domestic product but also a dramatic increase in poverty. Some industries expanded, especially in the export sector; some people got rich, but millions were left dispossessed, underemployed, and hungrier than ever as land that once grew beans was now used for coffee and beef exports. Western investment in poor countries usually has had a distorting rather than a developing effect because banks and corporations do not invest to help poor people but to help themselves. This explains why the number of poor in the world is growing at a faster rate than the world’s population, even while investments increase. Poverty is spreading as wealth is accumulated.

Today, without a competitor like the Soviet Union, American policy has become as nakedly exploitative as its wealth and power allow it to be. Aid programs have been cut. Local industries in the Third World are denied protections and denied markets under “free trade accords” such as the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the General Agreement on Trade in Services, and the Free Trade Area of the Americas. These agreements really have little to do with trade and certainly are not free. They should be called: “Monopoly Capital Investment Accords.”

The goal of American policy today is total domination of a global free-market economy, unchallenged by any competing superpower or even regional power and intolerant of any deviation from the free-market norm. Consider how that policy recently has been applied to Yugoslavia and Iraq.

THE DISMEMBERMENT OF YUGOSLAVIA

During the Cold War, Yugoslavia was tolerated and even encouraged in its independent course, as a breakaway from the Eastern Bloc. But after 1990, when there was no Eastern Bloc, there was no reason to have to tolerate Yugoslavia anymore. Here was this rather large-sized country right in the middle of Central Europe, with plenty of problems and imperfections to be sure, yet fairly prosperous, with a decent

and roughly equitable standard of living, ruled by a democratically elected coalition government of four parties under the much demonized Slobodan Milosevic, with 80 percent of its economy still publicly owned and showing no interest in opening itself to all-out neoliberal privatization and deregulation, as was being done throughout Eastern Europe. Yugoslavia was resisting free market reforms, it showed no interest in joining the European Union, and it had absolutely no desire to become a part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. So something had to be done about Yugoslavia.

It was not long before German and American agencies were supporting every divisive, retrograde, secessionist, nationalist element in Yugoslavia. In Croatia, they backed Franjo Tudjman, a fascist sympathizer and Holocaust denier, who had former Nazi collaborators, that is, former Ustashe, in his party. During World War II, the Ustashe sent hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, and Roma ("gypsies") to their death in the Jasenovac extermination camp. In Bosnia, the Western destabilizers supported Alija Izetbegovic, who himself during World War II had been a member of a fundamentalist Muslim youth unit of the Nazi SS that perpetrated atrocities upon Jews and helped guard the rail lines to Auschwitz. In Kosovo, American interventionists supported the Kosovo Liberation Army, which the American State Department had called a terrorist organization that was deeply involved in the drug trade. Both of those descriptions would still hold for the Kosovo Liberation Army and its newest reincarnation, the Albanian National Army. More recently we heard that the Kosovo Liberation Army has been linked to al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist organizations. While the Serbs were being demonized by American policymakers and charged with committing all the atrocities, in fact all three of the reactionary secessionist groups (Croatian, Bosnian, and Kosovar Albanian) perpetrated at least as many atrocities against the Serbs and other groups.

So Yugoslavia was broken up into a cluster of little right-wing republics in which everything is privatized and deregulated. Most recently, with the overthrow of Milosevic, this is happening in Serbia, where public services have been shredded to pieces; pension funds have been plundered and disappeared; and unemployment is skyrocketing, as are inflation, poverty, homelessness, crime, prostitution, and all those other good things provided by the free-market paradise.

BATTERING IRAQ

Iraq is another case of a country that no longer has to be tolerated by the American globalists. The Iraqi Revolution of 1958 was only partially undone by the Central Intelligence Agency countercoup of 1968. It is one of the American media's best-kept secrets that Saddam Hussein and his military cohorts were backed and financed by the Central Intelligence Agency. His assignment was to slaughter the Iraqi revolutionaries,

the progressives, democrats, communists—all of them, which indeed he did. He even exterminated the left wing of his own Ba'ath party.

But Saddam Hussein then produced a few surprises of his own that made Washington most uncomfortable. He did not turn out to be a perfect comprador leader, totally collaborationist with the West. His government was politically conservative but also economically nationalist. In 1972 the Iraqi rulers nationalized the oil industry and nationalized much of the basic production system. They also pursued economic self-development, setting education programs and health clinics, and were supportive of Palestinian independence.

Some countries in the Middle East have oil but no water. Some have water but no oil. Iraq has quite a bit of both. It has one of the largest oil reserves in the world. Iraq also had the highest standard of living in the Middle East until the Gulf War of 1991, when so much of its infrastructure was shattered. It had a very good agricultural base too, much of which has been destroyed by depleted uranium from the first Gulf War. And a dozen years of cruel sanctions and intermittent air strikes took a further toll. So in 2003 the American administration picked a fight with an already seriously battered country that, despite the sanctions, was trying to rebuild itself.

That policymakers gave us justifications for the war that proved to be misleading and confusing did not necessarily mean they themselves were misled and confused. It may have been that the goal was to mislead and confuse us. Consider the first Gulf War. Many reasons were given to justify the American military onslaught against Iraq. For example, we had to go in there, we were told, because Saddam had invaded Kuwait. Many of us questioned this rationale, noting that Turkey invaded Cyprus, Morocco invaded the Western Sahara, and Israel and Syria invaded Lebanon and were still occupying it in 1990, but the United States doesn't seem bothered by those aggressors. In fact, we continued to give them aid. So why were we supposed to get so upset about Kuwait?

The American government argued that we had to wage the first Gulf War because Saddam was a tyrant. But so are many other leaders. Why the urgency about this one?

Then Secretary of State James Baker said that a war against Iraq would create more jobs and be good for the economy. I thought that was interesting. It was the first time that the administration in power from 1989 to 1992 had shown any interest in creating a jobs program for people. But even auto accidents are good for the economy. They create jobs in towing and wreckage, in health care and rehabilitation, for lawyers, funeral directors, plastic surgeons, state troopers, and for the entire auto industry. The point is, some things may be good for the economy but not good for the human beings who live in that economy.

Despite the monopoly-media bombardment and demonization of Saddam Hussein, American public opinion was not all that enthusiastic for war as late as the autumn of 1990. People were asking, What is this war all about? Why do we have to go fight Iraq? Then in November 1990 a poll was taken that asked, "If Saddam

Hussein develops nuclear weapons, would that be sufficient cause for military intervention?" (The term "weapons of mass destruction" had not yet come into vogue.) In response to that question, the percentage supporting military intervention went up to something like 70 percent. Immediately that became the theme that the administration picked up in 1990. And twelve years later, that was the very same "fright theme" that the administration seized upon in the second war against Iraq.

In regard to weapons of mass destruction, the American government has charged that Iraq has failed to comply for twelve years. In fact, that is not true. In 1998 the United Nations inspection team checked 457 sites. Of these, 452 were in perfect compliance. The 5 other sites consisted of minor, marginal things, like forty-minute delays because the Iraqis raised questions about particulars. Even though inspectors were then allowed to inspect the sites, Iraq was cited for noncompliance because of the relatively minor delays and arguments they raised.

THE REAL REASONS FOR WAR AGAINST IRAQ

Having discovered that the reasons given to justify war are shallow and false, we would be wrong then to conclude that the policy is ill-founded because there may be other reasons that the policymakers are not willing to discuss. I would suggest at least three compelling reasons why America invaded Iraq.

The first reason was the need to maintain a superpower global predominance that imposes the free-market model on the entire world (including within the United States itself), reducing the populations of the world to Third World client-state status and making sure there will arise no competing superpower or even a strong self-directed regional power, such as Iraq could have been.

The second reason for war was the old-fashioned colonialist grab for precious resources. Iraq has 112 billion barrels of crude—some of the best quality in the world; it is the second largest reserve in the Middle East, maybe in the world, except for Saudi Arabia. A lot of this oil has remained untapped. Exploration concessions were made by the Iraqi government to Russia, China, France, Brazil, Italy, and Malaysia. The United States has made it known that, having done away with the Saddam government, it feels no obligation to honor these previous agreements. Some 112 billion barrels of oil at \$35.00 a barrel is over \$3 trillion. This would be the biggest oil grab in the history of the world. And it is not the first time that American leaders have squeezed out other Western interests and grabbed the oil for American companies. Recall the history of Iran, for instance.

And it was not always oil. British sugar and fruit companies were pushed out of Central America and replaced by American ones. When these globalists no longer have the communists to worry about, they start whacking each other, just as they did through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The third reason for war against Iraq was the domestic political advantage it initially brought to its perpetrators. War with Iraq was played the same way that September 11 was played—to further a reactionary, rollback agenda. In 1787 Alexander Hamilton, in *Federalist Paper #6*, made the point that history is replete with leaders who have pursued foreign adventures in order to distract the people from their domestic grievances. Indeed, the Iraq venture was a perfect example of what Hamilton had in mind. Perpetual war, perpetual crises, and perpetual threat from abroad justify perpetually greater military spending and cutbacks in human services—just as did September 11, 2001. You might recall one of the first things that the government did after September 11 was increase military spending and cut out \$15.7 million that was to be allocated to help abused and abandoned children.

In 2002, the administration was reeling because of Enron, WorldCom, and other such scandals. The president and vice president were implicated with Harken (Energy) and Halliburton, insider trading and buying up stock that was being artificially inflated in its price, then dumping the nearly worthless stock at a very high price, with smaller investors holding the bag. Both the president and vice president refused to produce documents and did not cooperate in the investigation. But with the coming of the second Iraq war, that story of corporate scandal and massive thievery has been blown off the front page and out of the evening network telecasts.

That is exactly what the American government did in 1990 with the savings-and-loan conspiracy, the largest theft of the public treasury ever—over \$1 trillion of the people's money. We taxpayers will be paying off the bill for generations. In 1990, the federal government just wiped that issue out of the media with a war against the very same Saddam Hussein.

More than a decade later, the American government tried to wipe economic recession from the media and replace it with a focus on patriotism, military leadership, a strong defense, and war. September 11 helped. By late 2002, with war in the air, pleas for patriotism, military leadership, and strong defense again were reinforced, and Republicans (with help from inept Democrats) won a Congressional election they should never have won, given the state of the economy.

War and crises also allowed the reactionaries in the White House to try to suppress domestic dissent. The nation was at war, so everyone had to fall into line. Democracy is a bothersome thing for plutocrats, for those who want to rule primarily in the interests of the top 1 percent of the income bracket.

THE “PROBLEM” OF POPULAR STRUGGLE

To say that policymakers consciously pursue self-serving goals with much success is not to imply that they are infallible. Sometimes unexpected consequences and reac-

tions put them into troublesome situations. In the wake of September 11, the American government was able to invade Afghanistan with relatively little opposition at home and abroad. With the United States much fortified by that now-dubious accomplishment, it expected to enjoy another free victory ride into Baghdad the following year. Instead, the American government was caught by surprise when various members of the U.N. Security Council refused to go along with the American military assault against Iraq. Washington was further discomfited when peoples around the world demonstrated against the anticipated war. Here was an unprecedented development.

First, the antiwar protest movement arose within a matter of weeks and went into action *before* the war began.

Second, the protests were massive in size; for instance, the February 2003 march in London numbered 2 million, the largest public protest in British history. The ones in Madrid numbered close to a million, with demonstrations continuing in almost every Spanish city and town for days on end.

Third, the protests were global in reach, extending into countries as varied as Japan, Lithuania, Indonesia, Russia, Argentina, Finland, Italy, India, Pakistan, Germany, Egypt, Mexico, and numerous others throughout the world; tens of millions of people of different languages, cultures, ethnicity, and political affiliation, all joining in a furious campaign against the American war of aggression that was soon to be. In all, there were protests in 665 cities worldwide.

The protestors were concerned not only about Iraq but also about their own security and sovereignty. They were confronting a renegade superpower whose leaders openly appropriated for themselves a monarchical global control over all others and whose leaders made it clear they would no longer bother with the normal restraints of international law. They would not be held to any past treaties. They openly disregarded the U.N. Charter, the Geneva conventions, and the right of any international court to judge war crimes committed by U.S. military and political personnel. At the same time, they themselves could hold the leaders and combatants of other nations accountable for war crimes.

American leaders even declared that they had a right to pursue "preventive war," attacking anyone, anywhere, anytime as they might choose. And they would not hesitate to be the first to use nuclear weapons if they deemed it necessary, even against countries that had no nuclear arsenal. In all, they made it clear that they were answerable to no one. They had the might, and that made it all right.

But even an overweening superpower possessed with unanswerable military force can sometimes bite off more than it can chew. Along with the global opposition around the world against the invasion of Iraq came an armed people's resistance within Iraq itself. Several thousand American military personnel have suffered disabling injuries and wounds in Iraq; hundreds have died in combat or in war-related operations; and an estimated 10,000 Iraqis have been killed. In both Iraq and

Afghanistan resistance was widespread, violent, resourceful, and unrelenting, while democracy and nation-rebuilding were nowhere in sight.

The federal government warned the American public that it faced “a massive and long-term undertaking in Iraq.” Appeals were made in various forms to the United Nations, for example, to assist in policing Iraq. This was the same United Nations that the American government had dismissed back in March 2003 as “another League of Nations” when the United States announced its determination to invade Iraq with or without a U.N. Security Council mandate. Now with a long postwar prospect, the United States wants the United Nations and its member nations to come pick up some of the blood tab. We want other countries to share in the casualties and expenses. A U.N. bailout would lessen the political damage to the administration, which now finds itself trapped in an increasingly fruitless and costly people’s resistance.

Despite every threat and subterfuge, despite false proclamations about “weapons of mass destruction” and the like, it seems many millions throughout the world still have minds of their own and refuse to fall into lockstep. This should be an encouragement for further democratic action on our part.

TERRORISM AS A REACTION TO AMERICAN REACTIONISM

Terrorism is a bloody, vicious form of political action often directed against innocent and defenseless people (though usually on a smaller scale than the American state-sponsored terrorism that has resorted to death squads and massive armed operations to claim tens of thousands of victims in scores of countries). While depicted in the corporate media as fueled by a mindless hatred of Western democracy, secularism, and prosperity, the “Islamic terrorists” actually have enunciated a rather explicit opposition to American politico-economic global oppression. Not long ago, William Blum reminded us that terrorists have actually stated their objectives and motives. Here are several of the key instances Blum cites:

The terrorists who bombed the World Trade Center the first time, in 1993, sent a letter to the *New York Times* declaring that the attack “was done in response for the American political, economic, and military support to Israel . . . and the rest of the dictator countries in the region.”

A leading suspect behind the October 2002 bombings of nightclubs in Bali, which took more than 200 lives, told police that the attacks were “revenge” for “what Americans have done to Muslims” and because “America oppresses the Muslims.”

In November 2001, in his first interview after September 11, Osama bin Laden had this to say: “This is a defensive jihad. We want to defend our people and the territory we control. This is why I said that if we do not get security, the Americans

will not be secure either." A year later, a taped message from Osama bin Laden began: "The road to safety begins by ending [American] aggression. Reciprocal treatment is part of justice. The [terrorist] incidents that have taken place . . . are only reactions and reciprocal actions." (I, for one, find it somewhat unsettling when Osama bin Laden sounds more rational than our leaders in Washington.)

That same month, Mir Amal Kansi, on death row for gunning down several people outside Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in 1993, stated: "What I did was a retaliation against the American government" for its policy in the Middle East, including its support of Israel.

Even the Pentagon has lent support to the idea that what American leaders do abroad might have something to do with inciting terrorism. A 1997 Defense Department study concluded: "Historical data show a strong correlation between American involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States."

Blum points out that, in a 1989 interview, former president Jimmy Carter told the *New York Times*: "You only have to go to Lebanon, to Syria or to Jordan to witness first-hand the intense hatred among many people for the United States because we bombed and shelled and unmercifully killed totally innocent villagers—women and children and farmers and housewives—in those villages around Beirut. . . . As a result of that . . . we became kind of a Satan in the minds of those who are deeply resentful. That is what precipitated the taking of our hostages and that is what has precipitated some of the terrorists' attacks."

A number of the right-wing pundits who overpopulate the corporate media maintain that the "Islamic terrorists" attack us because of who we *are*: prosperous, white, free, secular nonbelievers. In fact, if we bother to listen to what the terrorists themselves say, they hate us because of what we *do* to them in the name of peace, stability, and democracy. In Iraq, they also attack us for *where* we are—in their homeland, pumping out their oil, while bringing death, poverty, and destruction to the Iraqi people.

DEMOCRACY AND DISTRUST

Many of our fellow Americans are capable of having a very cynical view of politicians, seeing them as frequent deceivers and manipulators. But unfortunately, when these same politicians claim to be doing battle with some foreign menace, when they claim to be defending the ramparts, then many of our compatriots, with an uncritical trust, rally around the flag.

I once had a student say to me, "This is where you and I differ because I have faith in our leaders." I said, "Excuse me; you have *faith* in our leaders? What are we doing here, religion or politics? I mean, do you light a candle to a picture of our leaders,

the way my old Italian grandma did with St. Anthony?” And what does it mean to have “trust” in leaders? Trust is something you extend to loved ones or very close friends and family (and even then, check them out once in a while).

Democracy is not about trust; it is about *distrust*. It is about accountability, exposure, open debate, direct challenge. It is about responsible government, all of which is fortified by a healthy dose of distrust. We have to get our fellow Americans to trust their leaders less and trust themselves a lot more, trust their own questions and suspicions. This is not paranoia; it is responsible oversight. These events do not happen by chance. If they are happening by random chance, why are they always going in the same direction, serving the same interests? No empire and no social structure ever survived without conscious human agency to propagate and defend it. Political and economic leaders act to preserve their interests just as any other people do.

CONCLUSION

American policy has been rational and we should not be deploring its failures but deploring its successes, because these “successes” do not represent the interests of the American people or the people of the world. We should spend less time talking about how stupid and short-sighted the American government has been and more time talking about how relentlessly vicious and resourceful it has been. Then we must attempt to deter it from its current destructive course.

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