

# Blowback

Chalmers Johnson

**F**OR AMERICANS WHO CAN bear to think about it, those tragic pictures from New York of women holding up photos of their husbands, sons and daughters and asking if anyone knows anything about them look familiar. They are similar to scenes we have seen from Buenos Aires and

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Santiago. There, too, starting in the 1970s, women held up photos of their loved ones, asking for information. Since it was far too dangerous then to say aloud what they thought

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had happened to them—that they had been tortured and murdered by US-backed military juntas—the women coined a new word for them, *los desaparecidos*—"the disappeareds." Our government has never been honest about its own role in the 1973 overthrow of the elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile or its backing, through "Operation Condor," of what the State Department has recently called "extrajudicial killings" in Argentina,

Paraguay, Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America. But we now have several thousand of our own "disappeareds," and we are badly mistaken if we think that we in the United States are entirely blameless for what happened to them.

The suicidal assassins of September 11, 2001, did not "attack America," as our political leaders and the news media like to maintain; they attacked American foreign policy. Employing the strategy of the weak, they killed innocent bystanders who then became enemies only because they had already become victims. Terrorism by definition strikes at the innocent in order to draw attention to the sins of the invulnerable. The United States deploys such overwhelming military force globally that for its militarized opponents only an "asymmetric strategy," in the jargon of the Pentagon, has any chance of success. When it does succeed, as it did spectacularly on September 11, it renders our massive military machine worthless: The terrorists offer it no targets. On the day of the disaster, President George W. Bush told the American people that we were attacked because we are "a bea-

con for freedom" and because the attackers were "evil." In his address to Congress on September 20, 2002, he said, "This is civilization's fight." This attempt to define difficult-to-grasp events as only a conflict over abstract values—as a "clash of civilizations," in current post-cold war American jargon—is not only disingenuous but also a way of evading responsibility for the "blowback" that America's imperial projects have generated.

“Blowback” is a CIA term first used in March 1954 in a recently declassified report on the 1953 operation to overthrow the government of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran. It is a metaphor for the unintended consequences of the US government’s international activities that have been kept secret from the American people. The CIA’s fears that there might ultimately be some blowback from its egregious interference in the affairs of Iran were well founded. Installing the Shah in power brought twenty-five years of tyranny and repression to the Iranian people and elicited the Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolution. The staff of the American embassy in Teheran was held hostage for more than a year. This misguided “covert operation” of the US government helped convince many capable people throughout the Islamic world that the United States was an implacable enemy.

The pattern has become all too familiar. Osama bin Laden, the leading suspect as the mastermind behind the carnage of September 11, is no more (or less) “evil” than his fellow creations of our CIA: Manuel Noriega, former commander of the Panama Defense Forces until George Bush père in late 1989 invaded his country and kidnapped him, or Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, whom we armed and backed so long as he was at war with Khomeini’s Iran and whose people we have bombed and starved for a decade in an incompetent effort to get rid of him. These men were once listed as “assets” of our clandestine services organization.

Osama bin Laden joined our call for resistance to the Soviet Union’s 1979 invasion of Afghanistan and accepted our military training and equipment along with countless other mujahedeen “freedom fighters.” It was only after the Russians bombed Afghanistan back into the Stone Age and suffered a Vietnam-like defeat, and we turned our backs on the death and destruction we had helped cause, that he turned against us. The

last straw as far as bin Laden was concerned was that, after the Gulf War, we based “infidel” American troops in Saudi Arabia to prop up its decadent, fiercely authoritarian regime. Ever since, bin Laden has been attempting to bring the things the CIA taught him home to the teachers. On September 11, he appears to have returned to his deadly project with a vengeance.

There are today, ten years after the demise of the Soviet Union, some 800 Defense Department installations located in other countries. The people of the United States make up perhaps 4 percent of the world’s population but consume 40 percent of its resources. They exercise hegemony over the world directly through overwhelming military might and

desires of the protesters, the Defense Department has actually adopted the movement’s main premise—that current global economic arrangements mean more wealth for the “West” and more misery for the “rest”—as a reason why the United States should place weapons in space. The US Space Command’s pamphlet “Vision for 2020” argues that “the globalization of the world economy will also continue, with a widening between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots,’” and that we have a mission to “dominate the space dimension of military operations to protect US interests and investments” in an increasingly dangerous and implicitly anti-American world. Unfortunately, while the eyes of military planners were firmly focused

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indirectly through secretive organizations like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. Though largely dominated by the US government, these are formally international organizations and therefore beyond Congressional oversight.

As the American-inspired process of “globalization” inexorably enlarges the gap between the rich and the poor, a popular movement against it has gained strength, advancing from its first demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 through protests in Washington, DC; Melbourne; Prague; Seoul; Nice; Barcelona; Quebec City; Göteborg; and on to its violent confrontations in Genoa in 2001. Ironically, though American leaders are deaf to the

on the “control and domination” of space and “denying other countries access to space,” a very different kind of space was suddenly occupied.

On the day after the September 11 attack, Democratic Senator Zell Miller of Georgia declared, “I say, bomb the hell out of them. If there’s collateral damage, so be it.” “Collateral damage” is another of those hateful euphemisms invented by our military to prettify its killing of the defenseless. It is the term Pentagon spokesmen use to refer to the Serb and Iraqi civilians who were killed or maimed by bombs from high-flying American warplanes in our campaigns against Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein. It is the kind of word our new ambassador to the United Nations, John Negroponte, might have used in the

1980s to explain the slaughter of peasants, Indians and church workers by American-backed right-wing death squads in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua while he was ambassador to Honduras. These activities made the Reagan years the worst decade for Central America since the Spanish conquest.

Massive military retaliation with its inevitable “collateral damage” will, of course, create more desperate and embittered childless parents and parentless children, and so recruit more maddened people to the terrorists’ cause. In fact, mindless bombing is surely one of the responses their grisly strategy hopes to elicit. Moreover, a major crisis in the Middle East will inescapably cause a rise in global oil prices, with, from the assassins’ point of view, desirable destabilizing effects on all the economies of the advanced industrial nations.

What should we do? The following is a start on what, in a better world, we might modestly think about doing. But let me concede at the outset that none of this is going to happen. The people in Washington who run our government believe that they can now get all the things they wanted before the trade towers came down: more money for the military, ballistic missile defenses, more freedom for the intelligence services and removal of the last modest restrictions (no assassinations, less domestic snooping, fewer lists given to “friendly” foreign police of people we want executed) that the Vietnam era placed on our leaders. An inevitable consequence of big “blowback” events like this one is that, the causes having been largely kept from American eyes (if not Islamic or Latin American ones), people cannot make the necessary connections for an explanation. Popular support for Washington is thus, at least for a while, staggeringly high.

Nonetheless, what we *should* do is to make a serious analytical effort to

determine what overseas military commitments make sense and where we should pull in our horns. Although we intend to continue supporting Israel, our new policy should be to urge the dismantling of West Bank Israeli settlements as fast as possible. In Saudi Arabia, we should

and the White House have always found ways to keep it in the budget. In May 2000, the Clinton Administration sought to provide new camouflage for the school by renaming it the “Defense Institute for Hemispheric Security Cooperation” and transferring authority over it

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withdraw our troops, since they do nothing for our oil security, which we can maintain by other means. Beyond the Middle East, in Okinawa, where we have thirty-eight US military bases in the midst of 1.3 million civilians, we should start by bringing home the Third Marine Division and demobilizing it. It is understrength, has no armor and is not up to the standards of the domestically based First and Second Marine Divisions. It has no deterrent value but is, without question, an unwanted burden we force the people of this unlucky island to bear.

A particular obscenity crying out for elimination is the US Army’s School of the Americas, founded in Panama in 1946 and moved to Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1984 after Panamanian President Jorge Illueca called it “the biggest base for destabilization in Latin America” and evicted it. Its curriculum includes counterinsurgency, military intelligence, interrogation techniques, sniper fire, infantry and commando tactics, psychological warfare and jungle operations. Although a few members of Congress have long tried to shut it down, the Pentagon

from the Army Department to the Defense Department.

The school has trained more than 60,000 military and police officers from Latin American and Caribbean countries. Among SOA’s most illustrious graduates are the dictators Manuel Noriega (now serving a forty-year sentence in an American jail for drug trafficking) and Omar Torrijos of Panama; Guillermo Rodrigues of Ecuador; Juan Velasco Alvarado of Peru; Leopoldo Galtieri, former head of Argentina’s junta; and Hugo Banzer Suarez of Bolivia. More recently, Peru’s Vladimiro Montesinos, SOA class of 1965, surfaced as a CIA asset and former President Alberto Fujimori’s closest adviser.

More difficult than these fairly simple reforms would be to bring our rampant militarism under control. From George Washington’s “farewell address” to Dwight Eisenhower’s invention of the phrase “military-industrial complex,” American leaders have warned about the dangers of a bloated, permanent, expensive military establishment that has lost its relationship to the country because service in it is no longer an obligation

of citizenship. Our military operates the biggest arms sales operation on earth; it rapes girls, women and schoolchildren in Okinawa; it cuts ski-lift cables in Italy, killing twenty vacationers, and dismisses what its insubordinate pilots have done as a “training accident”; it allows its nuclear attack submarines to be used for joy rides for wealthy civilian supporters and then covers up the negligence that caused the sinking of a Japanese high school training ship; it propagandizes the nation with Hollywood films glorifying military service (*Pearl Harbor*); and it manipulates the political process to get more carrier task forces, antimissile missiles, nuclear weapons, stealth bombers and other expensive gadgets for which we have no conceivable use. Two of the most influential

Intelligence Agency. Given their influence today, one must conclude that the government outlined in the Constitution of 1787 no longer bears much relationship to the government that actually rules from Washington. Until that is corrected, we should probably stop talking about “democracy” and “human rights.”

Once we have done the analysis, brought home most of our “forward deployed” troops, refurbished our diplomatic capabilities, reassured the world that we are not unilateralists who walk away from treaty commitments and reintroduced into government the kinds of idealistic policies we once pioneered (e.g., the Marshall Plan), then we might assess what we can do against “terrorism.” We could reduce our transportation

things—airlines and railroads, wireless and optical fiber communications, automatic computer backup programs, land routes around bridges. It is absurd that our railroads do not even begin to compare with those in Western Europe or Japan, and their inadequacies have made us overly dependent on aviation in travel between US cities. It may well be that some public utilities should be nationalized, just as safety aboard airliners should become a federal function. Flight decks need to be made genuinely inaccessible from the passenger compartments, as they are on El Al. In what might seem a radical change, we could even hire intelligence analysts at the CIA who can read the languages of the countries they are assigned to and have actually visited the places they write about (neither of these conditions is even slightly usual at the present time).

If we do these things, the crisis will recede. If we play into the hands of the terrorists, we will see more collateral damage among our own citizens. Ten years ago, the other so-called superpower, the former Soviet Union, disappeared almost overnight because of internal contradictions, imperial overstretch and an inability to reform. We have always been richer, so it might well take longer for similar contradictions to afflict our society. But it is nowhere written that the United States, in its guise as an empire dominating the world, must go on forever. ■

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federal institutions are not in Washington but on the south side of the Potomac River—the Defense Department and the Central

and information vulnerabilities by building into our systems more of what engineers call redundancy: different ways of doing the same