

The U.S. March of Folly in the Middle-East

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Does desperation alone account for reckless escalation of U.S. military aggression in the Middle East for which the “threat” of an aggressive Islamism provides the rationalization? To be sure, the worsening world economic crisis directly conditions the international context, aggravating U.S. capital’s frantic rush to control the world’s remaining oil reserves. America's willingness to use excessive force and to go it alone also serves to intimidate would-be imperialist rivals like China, Russia and France, so as to retain its lion’s share. But it makes little geo-political sense for U.S. imperialism to have become so obsessively focussed on its Middle-Eastern crusade that it apparently lost sight of the main prize in its own back yard, Latin America. Thus Yanqui imperialism’s oldest and most important sphere of influence has been quietly slipping out of Washington’s grasp. North American capital now faces regional rivals like Brazil and heavy-duty competition from China. An expanding coalition of more or less democratic regimes backed by popular movements has shown itself determined to break free from U.S. economic and political hegemony. Indeed, the U.S. has only two reliable allies left in Latin America, Colombia and Mexico, and both are hopelessly corrupt semi-dictatorships bemired in bloody drug wars. This major setback for U.S. global interests is further proof of the irrationality of the ideologically-driven U.S. campaign against “Islamism.”

Another explanation for the U.S. government continuing blindly to pursue failed policies was put forward most recently by the Nobel prize-winning liberal economist Paul Krugman who explains that beginning in the 1970’s, the enormous cost of political campaigns, the growing power of corporate lobbies, the direct and overwhelming domination of big money over every aspect of government has made reform impossible. Today, the demands of individual special interests predominate over the collective national interest, even over those of U.S. capitalism taken as a whole. The government is thus reduced to the role of hired “enforcer” for the coal, petroleum, arms, pharmaceutical, insurance and banking industries in their frantic rush to accumulate short-term profits.

Although Krugman – who is a Keynesian, not a Marxist – doesn't go quite that far, he does conclude that this system of legal, quite open corruption has led to a paralysis of the U.S. political system, which is no longer able to change course or even to make token reforms to satisfy the aspirations of Obama’s multi-class, multi-ethnic, heavily feminine, youthful and anti-war electorate. Within this corrupt system, the petroleum-military-industrial complex is by far the most powerful lobby and the one most deeply invested in continuation of that multi-billion-dollar boondoggle known as the crusade against radical Islamism — at whatever cost to the taxpayer and to U.S. long term political interests. Apparently Obama believes “no man can serve two masters” and he has chosen to serve the money that paid for his campaign over serving the voters that elected him. A year after the popular groundswell that overcame American racism and swept the first African-heritage president in office, Barak Obama remains a vassal of the Pentagon and the lobbies, dependent on their favor. Trapped in the system, he has proven himself unwilling or unable to satisfy the vast popular expectations for peace (as well as for jobs and affordable health insurance) that got him elected. As his disillusioned, disappointed supporter decline into apathy, popular discontent gets channelled into support for the Right, only a year ago discredited by eight years of Bush.

The domination of the Religious Right over American political system is yet another factor limiting U.S. imperialism’s ability to correct its course. During the Bush years, it spoke directly through the drawl of the born-again Texan in charge. Since losing the White House, a headless Republican Party has now apparently been taken over by the hydra-headed Christian Right. Its deafening noise machine barks a crypto-racist message of hate through the halls Congress and the media, harping on Obama’s “foreign birth certificate,” his “forced-euthanasia communist healthcare plan,” his Arab

middle name, his “appeasement” of the Islamists. What should objectively be termed “Political Christianity” (to balance “Political Islamism”) is arguably in an even stronger position under a Democratic President dedicated to “bi-partisanism” who will predictably hold out his hand to the rabid, no-compromise Republicans and get his arm bit off. These economic and political pressures combine with ideological rigidity to make rational reform possible.

Given this delusional and self-defeating outlook, I can only conclude that the U.S. Establishment (dare I say “Corporate Ruling Class”?) and its noble-brow’d factotum Barak Hussein Obama are literally on the Road to Folly – a mental state defined as pursuing an irrational course without regard to the predictable consequences, refusing to listen to critics, and making the same mistakes again and again without drawing the lesson of past failures. The erudite military historian Barbara Tuchman studied five historical examples of such disastrous “Pursuits of Policy Contrary to Self-Interest.” Her brilliant 1984 *March of Folly, From Troy to Vietnam* concludes with mad King George III’s loss of his American colonies and (then) contemporary America caught in the Vietnam quagmire. To crown eight years of failure in Iraq and Afghanistan by destabilizing Pakistan and invading Yemen seems the height of folly, yet it is the (ideo)logical consequence of today’s Clash of Fundamentalisms. “Those whom the gods wish to destroy, the first make mad.”

Am I suggesting that a “saner” U.S. imperialism, while remaining U.S. imperialism, might pursue alternate policies that would not damage its interests? Not really. By adopting Barbara Tuchman’s Vietnam-era notion of “folly” I am approaching the subject from a psychological or rather psychopathological viewpoint. Why not? The actions of both individuals and societies are the dialectical results of their inner conflicts. We consider individuals mentally ill or simply “mad” when their actions and addictions threaten their own survival and endanger others. By drugging them or locking them up we recognize that they can’t help themselves. Today’s capitalist society is definitely sick, indeed moribund. It is like a senile miser who is in denial of his own death and who piles up hordes of riches, marries ever-younger bimbos, and disinherits his children. Capitalism is “knowingly” destroying the planet’s environment in a last orgy of plunder. If the system is not overthrown soon, the children of today’s billionaires will inherit a climate holocaust. Capitalist imperialism is addicted to oil, addicted to gambling (dependence on speculative bubbles to keep up its rate of profit) and addicted to violence (domination by the military-industrial-prison complex). The ruling class has no collective vision. Global capitalism’s leaders – the likes of Bush, Berlusconi, Sarkozy, Blair – are grotesque clowns compared to the statesmen of my youth like Roosevelt, Churchill, De Gaulle. According to my friend Immanuel Wallerstein, who studies the world economy over the historical *longue durée*, global capitalism has apparently reached the end of its 500-year historical cycle of birth (1492), growth and death. Having reached its limits as a productive system, 21st Century capitalism is returning to its 1492 methods of “primitive accumulation:” plunder, slavery, usury and other regressive forms of appropriating wealth. Today, the alternatives are socialism or barbarism: high-tech, market-driven barbarism, a mechanical monster without a heart that kills at a distance via drones and toxic mudslides. It will take a global mass movement of “billions against billionaires” to overthrow it from within and replace it with a saner, more peaceful, cooperative, earth-friendly society.

This completes our deconstruction of the “Threat” of Radical Islam in the Western imagination and of the U.S. political and military follies it both justifies and engenders. Having established the context, we turn in our next blogs to understanding Radical Islamism as it expresses itself on the ground, both in the Middle-East/Arab world and the Moslem *diaspora*.