

Banging Your Head Into Walls

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We've all met them, people who stubbornly hurl themselves in the wrong direction, stopping only when they violently collide with reality. It is a painful way to learn, but those afflicted with the disability seem unable to learn in any other way.

This way of learning characterizes much of America's effort at foreign policy since World War II. I was forcefully reminded of this by a news story with its searing memories of Vietnam.

It now appears that part of the 101st Airborne Division, members of a so-called Tiger Force unit, dropped grenades into bunkers where women and children hid and shot farmers without warning. They killed blind peasants and old men. These events happened in 1967, comparatively early in the war and about a year before the well-documented mass murder by members of the United States Army at the village of My Lai. No one knows how many innocent people the Airborne slaughtered. One surviving member of the unit is quoted saying he killed so many he lost count. Although investigations were conducted, they went nowhere, and it only now that we learn of the horror.

The full story of American savagery in Vietnam will perhaps never be told. We have had other glimpses of it, as for example when former CIA Director William Colby, responding to a titanic power struggle inside the CIA, revealed Project Phoenix, a secret program for the mass murder of civilian leaders regarded as sympathetic to the enemy. There were the revelations about a number of individuals engaging in barbarism, most notably, former Nebraska Senator and Medal of Honor winner Bob Kerrey having been part of a butcher-civilians operation.

The so-called Tail-Wind affair, whose discovery cost some very reputable journalists their jobs, is now consigned to the ever-handly conspiracy bin, but intelligent skeptics can hardly doubt that with all the other savageries of Vietnam, a secret operation to poison-gas American prisoners of war cooperating with the enemy is totally plausible.

To this day, thousands of American veterans attend meetings or counseling for post-traumatic stress disorder, the bureaucratic term for minds deranged by the horrors they saw or inflicted. War is always full of horror, but in the midst of the brutality in Vietnam, it dawned on many that the war served no good purpose and that most of its victims were civilians. The military draft sent a lot of people to Vietnam who weren't suited to the business of serious killing. And while the number of Americans killed was small for a long war, it still proved too many for people enjoying ice cream and beer at ballgames.

For years after Vietnam, Americans talked of the war's lessons, but just what lessons were those? For a while, many believed the lessons might concern the values of the Bill of Rights, words so often abused as hollow marketing slogans. America's armed forces would never again be sent to kill and torture for colonial interests.

But that was a hasty conclusion, as we see in Iraq. America perfected its technology for killing and terrifying so that at least for a small county, it is able to overwhelm fairly quickly. Relatively few American soldiers die, those that do are professionals, and the whole thing is quickly over.

Of course, there is a deep and jagged pit along this smooth-sounding path to military dominance, and it has to do with occupying and rebuilding a country, how you assume responsibility for tens of millions of new dependants. No people on earth today is less inclined or qualified for this task than Americans. You only have to look at the individualistic, selfish, and impatient nature of American society itself to understand why this should be so. The word *dependant* in America often is used as a term of abuse.

Recall Richard Nixon's „madman theory" of the early 1970s. Nixon was trying to pressure the North Vietnamese in Paris for a settlement, and he deliberately spread the idea that he was a madman, quite capable of doing something irrational, and that it would be better for everyone to reach a settlement before he did so. The context that gave his suggestion force included his shattering bombardment of civilians in North Vietnam and Cambodia, as well as nightmarish programs like Project Phoenix, started under him.

I'll set aside the fact that Nixon truly was something of a madman, for, apart from his lifelong career of promoting divisiveness, intense hatreds, and suspicions, who else but a

genuine madman relishes being credited as one? In the end, Nixon was outfoxed by the Vietnamese, and America lost a major war. A decade of shameful destruction, vast resources consumed, rage, and riots were for nothing.

This did not go unnoticed by the American establishment — the Bushes, the Cheneys, the Rumsfelds, and all the other arrogant, insatiably-rapacious people who've given you war in Iraq. Their major lesson from Vietnam — apart from the unreliability of conscripts, the need for tight news control, and the need to improve the efficiency of killing with high-tech weapons — was that threats not acted upon were useless. This lesson comes packaged with a new release of the error-riddled Domino Theory: that a decisive demonstration of power in the Middle East would serve to stabilize the area. The Democrats' regrettable Wesley Clark, among others, has pontificated along these very lines.

Lost in the armchair toying with other people's lives and countries you might think is the fact that Nixon's threat was nuclear, but actually it is not lost. Bush wants to develop and deploy a new generation of compact nuclear weapons, the implication being that these somehow would be useable, as for such wholesome crusade tasks as „bunker busting." Please recall, the main bunker busted in the first Gulf War was the Al Firdos bunker in Baghdad packed with over four hundred civilians who were roasted alive by two „smart bomb" direct hits.

Vietnam truly was a twentieth-century version of burning witches, the witches in that case being communists rather than people who were either demented or senile as in the witch-burnings of a few centuries ago. Powerful people in the 17th century understood that witches were superstitious nonsense, but they used the phenomenon to their own purposes. We've almost run out of communist witches, so now the crusade has been redirected against evil spirits far less well defined, terrorists.

Not that there is no such thing as genuine terrorists. Of course, there are. Terrorism — from the Sons of Liberty and the Klu Klux Klan to black street gangs and camouflage-obsessed militia-nuts — is a rich part of American history. Please note that it has not been dealt with by blowing up whole neighborhoods of innocent people.

The communist-panic after World War II was promoted and manipulated by the America's establishment, that ruthlessly ambitious segment of American society that does not consist solely of Republicans. American liberals today often seem unaware that Democrats like Robert Kennedy gladly played energetic and nasty roles. The establishment sought the immense bounty of new military contracts, forced access to other peoples' resources and markets, and the swaggering sense of exercising vast power throughout the world. Note that the communist-panic began with the precipitous decline in military spending after the world war and with the opportunities for expansion represented by the sudden decline of former colonial powers.

At the end of the Cold War, there was a tendency for military expenditure to slide in real terms. America's current terror-panic, manipulated and exploited relentlessly by Bush, and always echoed by Sharon for his own dark purposes, serves almost identical ends. The average American cannot even grasp the unholy amounts of money now changing hands to almost no good purpose.

I once described a scene in the wake of 9/11 where some Americans in a bar hooted and pumped their arms at the television image of ships equipped with cruise missiles, as though the ships or the missiles had the slightest relevance for individuals bent on killing others through their own suicides. That televised image comes pretty close to symbolizing Bush's entire policy on terror. He has spent tens of billions of dollars, killed many thousands of innocent people, and made many Americans feel intimidated in their own country, but he has done little to end the threat of terrorism. He may even have increased its long-term prospects.

Terrorism predates modern history, and it generally comes as a result of great and oppressive injustice against a definable group of people. Short of ruthlessly repressing the group of people from whose ranks terrorists are drawn — something attempted many times, as, for example, by Cromwell in Ireland or Stalin in the Soviet Union — violence offers no effective solution.

Even Cromwellian repression fails over the long term, Ireland being a potent example. An oppressor eventually tires of repression. It may well have been some such dark thought that helped motivate Hitler in history's greatest bloodbath, the invasion of the Soviet Union and the simultaneous start of the Holocaust (27 million and 6 million victims respectively). He demanded utter ruthlessness in these vast murderous enterprises. The people whose wealth

and resources he was seizing, would not get the chance ever to become terrorists.

Bush's policy is partway along the path of repression, a virtual copy of Sharon's policy in Palestine, but has Sharon ended terror? Does Sharon not almost weekly become more violent and desperate, recognizing the futility of all he has done to date?

Bush's prospects and opportunities are in some ways even more limited than Sharon's, despite the immense and terrible power at his disposal. Although Al Qaeda was a relatively small organization — and nothing has come to light that contradicts an early conclusion that Al Qaeda, though dispersed and having some allies, was no bigger than a Chicago street gang — Bush's tactics have created waves of sympathizers and new enemies, likely even more determined through their confrontation with such a bully. He is not opposed by a group of people confined to a tiny place like Palestine. Rather, he faces opposition in many forms in many countries with mobility across continents. You can't just bomb it all.

The more verbal blunders Bush and his associates make (consider the idiotic statements made recently by Lt. Gen. William Boykin, a man associated directly with secret activities in places like Pakistan, to gatherings of American Christian fundamentalists), the more Bush's efforts come to be viewed as broadly anti-Islamic. The word *blunder* here is only appropriate because such statements are errors in managing public affairs. They are not blunders in a more basic sense: these nasty, narrow people do believe what they are saying, and although that belief is not what launched Bush's crusade, it undoubtedly motivates many along the way.

Terror is one response of those with terrible grievances who lack effective conventional means to fight for them, although if you listened to Bush you would think there were mobs of natural-born terrorists out there, ready to kill for no reason other than jealousy at America's great good fortune and beneficence. As in the case of Northern Ireland, terror can only be ended by redressing the grievances, and even then, great patience and tenacity are required.

A general military action against terror is an insane concept, too destructive and unfocused to have predictable results. You cannot fight beliefs or grievances with armored divisions. You can only have vengeance that way, but vengeance can hardly be called policy and is unworthy of a great power claiming high ideals.

The example of Sharon's brutality just couldn't offer a clearer lesson. The Palestinians have immense grievances that virtually the entire world recognizes as legitimate. Assassinate all the leaders you please, bulldoze all the homes and shops and orchards you can, bomb and shoot civilians time after time as reprisals, the grievances not only remain, they are intensified. The ultimate danger in a situation like this is that Sharon's frustration will drive him to move beyond Cromwell.

And so, too, Bush, but note that I use his name only as shorthand for that much bigger thing, the pitiless greed and arrogance of a large segment of America.

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