

Blowback from Iraq War Is Global, and Growing

By Ronald Bruce St John | December 9, 2004

Blowback is a term invented by the Central Intelligence Agency to describe the unintended consequences of policies kept secret from the American people. Chalmers Johnson's excellent book, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, helped popularize the term. Originally intended for internal use only, blowback increasingly characterizes global reaction to Bush administration policies in and out of the Middle East.

Reaping What You Sow

In the aftermath of 9/11, the president told the world you are either "with us or against us." He then offered a far-reaching moral vision for the Middle East with democracy as the core ingredient. He saw a free Iraq serving as a catalyst for peace in the region, setting in motion progress toward a truly democratic Palestinian state. In pursuit of these objectives, the United States turned to force, rushing to war in Iraq and condoning, if not supporting, draconian Israeli policies in Gaza and the West Bank. In ruling out the peaceful settlement of disputes in Iraq, Palestine, and elsewhere, American policies legitimized and provoked terror.

Three years later, the number of people "against us" around the world has grown exponentially. The popular view of the United States throughout the Middle East and the broader Islamic world is dark and hateful. In short, the administration's faith-based, fact-free foreign policy has spawned the antithesis of the Bush vision.

Instead of democracy, U.S. policies have generated mistrust, hostility, and opposition, compounding the sense of degradation, indignity, and humiliation often found in the Islamic world. Both standing governments and legitimate opposition movements in these countries have come to see U.S. policies as a major obstacle to home-grown efforts to promote political reform. In the Islamic world, close association with the United States has become a kiss of death—figuratively and literally.

Trans-Atlantic Blowback

While the CIA originally conceived of blowback as limited to the unintended consequences of U.S. policy on Americans, it has long enjoyed a wider application. Chile, Guatemala, Iran, and Vietnam are only a few Cold War examples where direct CIA involvement in the domestic politics of another country had unintended, disastrous consequences for its citizenry. What was true during the Cold War is doubly true in the case of the Iraqi occupation and the war on terrorism.

The March 2004 Madrid train bombings, which killed 191 people, are one example of blowback from U.S. policies affecting non-Americans in Europe. The November 2004 murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a young

Muslim of Moroccan descent is another. Pinned to the corpse of Van Gogh, who had produced a short film critical of the treatment of women in Muslim societies, was an "open letter" to Ayaan Hirshi Ali, his liberal Muslim film collaborator. The central argument of the letter, which provides considerable insight into the major theological conflict of our time, amounts to an admonition from a radical Islamist to an atheist apostate. In a country known for its toleration and openness, Van Gogh's murder set off a surprising wave of retaliatory attacks on more than 20 Islamic sites, including mosques and Islamic schools.

Turmoil in Southeast Asia

The full extent to which the policies of the Bush administration are producing blowback outside the Western world is less well known. The bombing in October 2002 of two Indonesian nightclubs on the isle of Bali is one example. The blasts and subsequent fires left more than 202 dead and hundreds injured, many of them young Australians and other Western vacationers. Those attacks were followed by the suicide bombing of the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta in 2003. And almost three years to the day after 9/11, a massive explosion in front of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta killed at least nine, wounding more than 180 others. While the embassy attack occurred less than two weeks before the second round of Indonesia's presidential elections, most observers agree it was really meant to influence elections in Australia against an incumbent prime minister who made his country a strong American ally. Terrorism thrives on symbolism, and terrorists find Indonesia offers easier access to Australian targets than security-conscious Australia. But too often, innocent Indonesians are the ones doing the dying.

In Thailand, the invasion and occupation of Iraq fuelled Muslim separatist movements in the southern part of the country, a traditionally Muslim area in a dominantly Buddhist state. The Thai government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra overreacted, savagely slaughtering 105 students. No wounded were taken in a police ambush of the separatists. Six weeks later, the government mishandled largely peaceful demonstrations by arresting more than 1,000 and killing 87 protestors, 78 of whom suffocated after being forced to lie face-down in army trucks while being transferred to a detention center. So far this year, more than 550 people have been killed in southern Thailand alone, half

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the number of Americans killed since the Iraq war began. And government and Islamic insurgent forces remain trapped in a cycle of violence. The two million Muslims in southern Thailand are mainly ethnic Malays, and harsh Thai tactics have also strained diplomatic relations with Thailand's neighbor Malaysia.

As the Thai case demonstrates, blowback is seldom limited to a single event or action. Too often, blowback leads to more blowback, resulting in a prolonged, downward spiral of destructive behavior. The policies of the Sharon government in the West Bank and Gaza offer an excellent example of the downside of blowback.

Elsewhere in Asia, recent attacks on high-ranking government officials suggest Pakistan could be losing its grip on extremists. And China continues to use anti-terrorism as a pretext for suppressing political and religious dissent in the largely Muslim region of Xinjiang. In the Philippines, officials finally conceded mid-year that the February 2004 explosion on Superferry 14 was a terrorist attack, the worst since the 2002 Bali bombings. Finally, United Nations officials visiting Cambodia in late October 2004 described it as a "breeding ground" for terrorists, a comment quickly rejected by Royal Government and Muslim officials alike.

Ferment in the Middle East

In North Africa, long-time U.S. ally Morocco is increasingly seen as the principal sleeper threat in the war on terror. In the wake of suicide bombings in Casablanca in May 2003 and the March 2004 train bombings in Madrid, Moroccan-based groups are seen as central to the terrorist threat in Europe. To the east, a previously unknown pro-al-Qaida Islamist group, Islamic Tawhid Brigades, claimed responsibility for the October 2004 Sinai hotel bombing which killed 33 people.

In Saudi Arabia, where a shadowy terror campaign has killed well over 100 people in the last 18 months, many Saudis express increasing anger at the United States, arguing that the U.S. occupation of Iraq is the signal event behind escalating attacks in the kingdom. The early

December 2004 attack on the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah, as Syed Saleem Shahzad emphasized in a recent *Asia Times* article, should thus be seen as a manifestation of extreme discontent within the Saudi sociopolitical system. White House pressure on the Saudi government to clamp down on Islamists has compounded the problem, badly splitting a society previously united on the issue of handling terror.

A Polarized World

In the wake of the recent presidential campaign, the media has focused on the causes and consequences of a polarized America. Little attention has been placed on the increasingly polarized world in which we live. The real danger to America today comes from its ideological rigidity, and the blowback it is producing around the globe. The problems facing the United States—and the world—today are radically different from those faced in 2001, in large part due to the foreign policy of the Bush administration. What is desperately needed is a global strategy to reduce, not increase, terror.

*Ronald Bruce St John, an analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus, has published widely on Middle Eastern issues. His latest book on the region is *Libya and the United States: Two Centuries of Strife* (Penn Press, 2002).*

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