
Book Review

Unintended Consequences of U.S. Foreign Policy

by Carl F. Bernard

Blowback, The Costs and Consequences of American Empire

by Chalmers Johnson

New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2000
288 pages, hardbound, \$26

A guest review by Carl F. Bernard, a U.S. Army Colonel (ret.) who won a Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism in the Korean War. Subheads have been added.

The widely observed prevalence of “unintended consequences,” all but accorded the status of “Law” by pessimists, has just received powerful reinforcement. This work by Professor Johnson, one of our nation’s most analytic thinkers, will cause significant discomfort for many decision-makers and their supporters—denial is likely to be their preferred reaction. Johnson’s careful scrutiny of events from World War II to the present, however, unmasks the grim consequences of decrees handed down by our politicians and senior military officers throughout the entire era. Some elements of his work can be challenged; its reality overall, cannot be denied.

“Blowback” is a relatively new term, coined by the CIA to describe adverse consequences that have been or may be triggered by some of our actions or policies. These stimulate other unhappy events, including many never anticipated or previously encountered. Johnson believes that the worst of these repercussions will come from our having maintained the same armed forces structure we developed to confront the Soviets in such areas as the Fulda Gap. Senior officers comfortable with that mission have kept their now irrelevant forces intact, in the same form, and even in place, through these ten years after the Soviets left the scene. We no longer face Fulda Gap-type attacks from any enemy in the world. Still, for over 50 years we have used our World War II tactics and weapons to fight in civil wars. The last one, Vietnam, was against mostly covert forces, a “People’s War” employing guerrilla tactics and supported by their indigenous popula-

tions. Our attrition war effort was doomed to fail, and did, but it was all that the mind-set of our senior officers allowed.

Johnson anticipates disastrous sequels, as our senior officers continue to justify retaining their inappropriate forces by the subterfuge (or even honest incompetence) of transmuting dissimilar threats to current perils. Keeping unsuitable forces authorized and supplied is time-consuming and expensive, but the cost of their inappropriate equipment and training seems much less important to staff officers and politicians than keeping armaments factories in full production. Note the progress of the F-22 and Joint Strike Fighter programs to replace what is already the world’s most advanced fighter today, our own F-15.

The Terrorist Threat

There is no significant armed threat now to our homeland. The enormous difference between our forces and those of any combination of present or potential enemies assures that the conquest of the United States is not a credible concern. However, terrorists, domestic as well as foreign, who feel injured by our actions and policies, are another matter. Some of our enemies can successfully attack our vulnerable economic infrastructure with electronic weapons, assembled in garages, perhaps, with components purchased from their local Radio Shack. This present, very real vulnerability, is an unintentional “blowback” resulting from our adopting every possible useful electronic advance that emerged from Silicon Valley.

Neither our Marines on Okinawa, nor our soldiers in Korea, nor the aircraft we used against the Serbs in Kosovo can protect us from such terrorist attacks domestically. Nor can the Star Wars “products” we paid \$70 billion to acquire. A pickup truck, legally parked on a Los Angeles street with a nuclear warhead under its camper shell; a chemical weapon compounded by an angry undergraduate student at a nearby university, intended for the city water supply; a biological weapon lobbed into Kansas City from a boat moving down river, are examples of attacks we are not prepared to counter. Johnson is convinced that we have inspired such blowbacks, and that they await us in our future. Resentments building since World War II demand relief, at our expense.

Improprieties

Johnson has scrupulously identified enormous dislocations, mountainous costs, and flagrant improprieties in our foreign policy, intelligence operations, and military activities. His insights about these problems are carefully reasoned. Those Americans who believe that destruction of Communist ideology throughout the world is paramount and justifies any behavior and expense, may not be overly concerned. The existence of the “American (industrial/economic/military) Empire” that Johnson reveals, will be unacceptable to less dogmatic anti-Communists. The Empire’s structure evolved during our worldwide campaign to control what some be-

lieved to be a Soviet effort to impose Communism everywhere. The “American Empire” has de facto existence now and endures, although the Soviets are gone. Our Cold War establishment continues to flourish, and there are no serious challengers in sight, Johnson aside.

We allowed what were then our client-states to freely exploit U.S. markets to build up their own industries. Johnson uses our domestic steel industry as an example of one of many we sacrificed to allow the members of our Empire’s markets and industry to flourish. The overall damage this caused us was limited in large part by the profits made by hedge funds in tax havens, which were allowed to rampage through the world we controlled. Allowing free flow of capital to loosen foreign governments’ controls over their economies was a success, and the U.S.-controlled International Monetary Fund virtually assured that the panics of 1997 in the Far East would take place. Is this a credible modern example of a mother country keeping its colonies under tight control?

Johnson extends this argument to “globalization,” our present free-trade policy that “seems to boil down to the spread of poverty to every country except the United States.” The central question is whether removing this source of irritation would prevent its opponents from acting on their frustration.

Forestalling Hostile Actions

Forestalling the activists’ hostile actions would be preferable to leaving the role of assassin as his most attractive alternative. How many relatives of the Koreans and Vietnamese killed inadvertently in American air raids are still seeking revenge? How may Kosovars and Serbs avenge themselves for the 78 days they suffered from American bombing? Are the Iraqis planning to deliver some of the chemicals they may have used in Desert Storm as retaliation for ten years of deprivation and air attacks? How would victims react to any court finding that condemned air raids (or laying of land mines) as indiscriminate slaughter of innocents? My concern, as I surmise Johnson’s may be, is about perception, not reality. How are we being perceived in a world that could believe we are both victims and murderers?

Would No Gun Ri be a less inflammatory cause for revenge if the horrors of both Korean sides’ behavior in their civil war were better known? The North Korean POWs my regiment turned over to the South Korean national police in Chochiwon on July 9, 1950 were all slaughtered in this town. Later, more than 100 men from our third battalion were captured on July 11. Many of them paid for our ally’s unconscionable behavior. A U.S. court-martial would have called both these Korean sides’ behavior murder.

Are the admissions now being made about the untoward effects of Agent Orange on our soldiers going to be extended to the Vietnamese? Is this particular blowback likely to activate more of those people already enraged by this unhappy war? Would an effort to care for those Vietnamese afflicted

by this hastily drummed up solution to our effort to “find” the hidden Viet Cong, blow back again?

Is the just publicized refusal of American drug companies to reduce the price of the license to allow their AIDS drugs to be produced in Africa likely to blow back? Recall that many Africans have accused us of imposing this horror on them to destroy their existence. A student of “blowback” might decide that using our Air Force to destroy the key bridges on the Danube, and paralyzing this vital commercial route for the express purpose of “bringing stability to the Balkans,” is a powerful illustration of a failed intellectual process. It is not difficult to believe the origin of the “I love you” computer virus in the Philippines is also an example of blowback. Another “blowback” may be pending. The Navy is planning to adopt a Surveillance Towed Array Sensor System (SURTASS) Low Frequency Active Sonar (LFAS) to replace its present manpower-intensive, hence, expensive, undersea surveillance system, SOSUS. This incompletely tested LFAS is killing endangered Great Whales, dolphins, and other sea-life at a striking and unexplained rate. The mid-range frequency devices kill Beaked Whales. How will the island nations (Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines) and China react to this effort to locate “enemy” submarines? Will they accept the damage we inflict in their areas as tolerable if it locates Soviet submarines at sea, now however, mostly tied up and rusting away?

For damage limiting, Johnson implies a need to recall most U.S. forces to the United States, and for a significant reduction in their size, structure, and deployment. The money that has empowered our rampant defense industry could serve to reduce our national debt, making us far more capable of surviving in an evolving world, and much less a visible and onsite target for revenge.

Blowback raises questions that should be asked of all Presidential candidates. Little else could so readily raise the intellectual content of their presentations. It is unlikely that either of the major candidates could achieve a personal or party advantage in such a debate. However, our world’s citizenry could benefit from reduced strife and improved social direction. For example: The two chapters Johnson offers on China, properly digested, would show their clearly stated distress over our enduring national missile defense (NMD) folly to be both real, and potentially of considerable danger to us. The military-industrial Congressional complex about which Dwight David Eisenhower warned us, is now so powerful, that we are near certain to continue to finance a revised Star Wars, despite the reproachful howls from “rogue states,” our European allies, Russia, and China. Our defense industrialists’ capture of the Congress with “soft monies” is now a fact of our lives. Our politicians’ willingness to disregard such horrors as the failed NMD missile test on July 7, illustrates and confirms an ability to ignore reality and allow inertia to make vital decisions that is horrifying and raises considerable doubts about our future.