

Blowback

2005. Acrylic on canvas, 30x48”

by
Martin Ostrye

“American policy making needs to be taken away from military planners and military-minded civilians, including those in the White House.”¹

Chalmers Johnson
Professor Emeritus, U.C. San Diego
author of *Blowback*

The term “blowback”, invented by the Central Intelligence Agency, is the “unintended consequences of covert operations.”² The first use of the word appears in classified documents after the CIA overthrow of the Iranian government in 1953, whereupon, the United State put in place its puppet dictator, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. That covert operation was to become the blueprint for toppling governments in other parts of the world.³

In July 1979 President Jimmy Carter signed a directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet government in Kabul, Afghanistan. At the time, National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote a note to President Carter saying that aiding the opposition was going to trigger the Soviets to invade. The Soviets rolled into Afghanistan in December 1979. Brzezinski upon hearing the news, wrote a note to Carter again, saying that “[we] now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War.”⁴

The CIA then began to aid the mujahideen (Islamic guerrillas) in 1980. Later, when Brzezinski was asked, by the French weekly magazine, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, whether he regretted these provocative actions, said, “The secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap.” When asked if he regretted arming and supporting Islamic fundamentalism, he arrogantly said, “What is more important in world history? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some agitated Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?”⁵

The United States trained and financed the organizational structure of Al Qaeda. “With generous American aid, Pakistan opened its border to 3 million Afghan refugees and allowed the CIA to conduct its secret war without restraint. Along the border, American operatives ran training camps for the mujaheddin guerrillas and in Pakistan’s capital, Islamabad, the CIA maintained one of its largest foreign stations to direct the covert war.”⁶ As long as Islamic fundamentalists were terrorizing the Soviets in Afghanistan we called them freedom fighters and applauded their operations. When the terrorism was killing foreigners, we didn’t have a problem with it – we encouraged it. However, the CIA and senior government officials should have known (and probably did know) that one day it would blowback on us.

During the Reagan administration, CIA Director William Casey, a bumbling old man who was more troublemaker than intellectual or analyst, and had been a member of the OSS during World War II, was determined to pin international terrorism on the Soviet Union. He had come across a New York Times Magazine story, “Terrorism: Tracing the International Network” by Claire Sterling.⁷

Sterling concluded that that there was “massive proof that the Soviet Union and its surrogates, over the last decade, have provided the weapons, training and sanctuary for a

worldwide terror network aimed at the destabilization of Western democratic society.”⁸ KGB instructors, Cubans, Palestinians and members of the Red Brigades were holding conventions and meetings at terrorist camps.⁹

Director Casey believed that Sterling was out ahead of the CIA and took a copy of the article to his analysts. He wanted to know why.

CIA “covert operators argued that Sterling’s method was preposterous.” Her reasoning was, “a kind of McCarthyist “linkmanship.”¹⁰ When a senior Soviet analyst looked into it, his conclusion “cleared the Soviets of involvement in terrorism.”¹¹ Casey didn’t believe it. Casey told the senior analyst to “[r]ead Claire Sterling’s book and forget this mush,” referring to the actual intelligence.¹²

“It turned out that [parts] of Claire Sterlings information had come from an Italian press story on the Red Brigade.”¹³ The story had been part of a CIA propaganda operation. It was blowback.¹⁴

Another interesting blowback topic is Saudi Arabia. After the oil embargo of the 1970s, the United States set out to induce the corrupt Saudi family and kingdom to become dependent on the U.S. through various construction and engineering projects. The Saudis would get drawn into design and construction schemes, as well as long-term management agreements for engineering companies like Bechtel, Brown & Root, Halliburton, Stone & Webster.¹⁵

However, “[t]he modernization of [the] oil-rich kingdom would trigger adverse reactions. For instance, conservative Muslims would be furious; Israel and other neighboring countries would feel threatened. The economic development of [the] nation was likely to spawn the growth of another industry: protecting the Arabian Peninsula. Private companies specializing in such activities, as well as the U.S. military and defense industry, could expect generous contracts.”¹⁶ That in turn, “would require [more] engineering and construction projects, including airports, missile sites, personnel bases, and all the infrastructure associated with such facilities.”¹⁷

In exchange for a guaranteed supply of oil, the United States would support the Saudi family with a “commitment to provide total and unequivocal U.S. political and – if necessary- military support, [to ensure] their continued existence as the rulers of [the] country.”¹⁸

In return, “Saudi Arabia would use its petrodollars to purchase U.S. government securities” and interest on the oil revenue would pay the American corporations. The United States Treasury Department would hire the companies “at Saudi expense to build [the] infrastructure projects and even entire cities.”¹⁹

Which meant that, “[t]he prospects for immense profits seemed limitless. It was a sweetheart deal with potential to set an amazing precedent. And to make the deal even sweeter, no one had to obtain congressional approval.”²⁰ In other words, the corporations began crafting foreign policy for their own self-interest, which in turn would create the seeds of resentment and hostility toward the United States without Americans ever understanding why. After all, the Saudis would never be able to withstand the military and political pressure from the U.S.. They saw and understood what the United States did in Iran where the CIA toppled the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh (Time magazine’s 1951 Man of the Year)²¹ and put in place the corrupt CIA puppet Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (who was eventually dethroned by popular revolution).²²

The Saudi royal family have always been favored by the Bush family, the multinational corporations and the Republican party because they maintain a corrupt authoritarian

government that allows American corporations and defense contractors free reign to make all the profits they desire. It would be the end of the Saudi family if they ever decided to say no to the United States. When George W. Bush was holding the hand of the current Saudi leader, it was more literal than Americans realize. Perhaps, it was the last grasp on the end of rope.

With the kinds of operations the Bush administration is carrying out today, both militarily and economically, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Haiti, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Eastern Europe, Sudan, Venezuela, Asia, and other areas of the globe, the future possibilities for blowback staggers the imagination. And many of those are the operations that have been exposed to the American public. However, it is the secret operations that today may be sowing the seeds for the reaping of a greater whirlwind tomorrow.

Notes

1. Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), p. 33.
2. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade*, (Lawrence Hill Books, 1991), p. 451.
7. Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 124.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 125
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 129
14. *Ibid.*
15. John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2004), p. 87.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 87-88.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 91.