

What the Bush administration has done is not only plagiarize the EU Barcelona initiatives for the Middle East but also stripped the European plan of its two important political elements that could have made it doable and added a military component that would make it unworkable.

First, unlike the GME plan, which attempts to put all the Muslim nations of North Africa, the Near East, North, South, and Central Asia into one basket and create the illusion that it would be possible to link them politically and economically to the liberal institutions of the West, the Barcelona initiative is much more modest in its scope. It proposes an ambitious but not unrealistic goal of associating its 12 signatories—the Arab states of North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, and Israel—to the EU. After all, despite their differences, North Africa, Egypt, Syria/Lebanon, and Israel/Palestine share a common history, geography, and cultural and demographic ties, and they have a closer economic relationship with the EU than with the United States. The SME is for the EU what Mexico and most of Latin America is for the United States, a strategic and economic backyard. Indeed, take a look at the map, and the idea that the 12 Barcelona signatories, all of which border the Mediterranean, would be linked to the EU certainly makes some geo-strategic and geo-economic sense. Why should Egypt, which regards itself primarily as an Arab, African, and Mideast nation, belong to the same club as Pakistan, which is actually part of South Asia? They and the rest of the GME are Muslim, respond the Bushies. So what? Just consider the conflict between Shi'ites and Sunnis in Iraq and the entire Middle East, reflecting deep historical, cultural, and socio-political tensions, and you would conclude that they are not in a mood to cooperate in this fantastic American program.

The Department of Homeland Security's proposal to fingerprint and photograph foreign visitors from 27 of the United States' closest allies is irritating potential visitors without enhancing anyone's security.

Ironically, Mexico, the major source of both legal and illegal entry into the U.S., will be exempt from the new controls due to the hypocrisy of the Bush administration, which is courting Hispanic votes for the November elections. The new policy will begin September 30th at the 50 busiest ports of entry. The 27 countries are referred to as "visa waiver" states, whose citizens do not normally need visas for short visits. Most of the countries are European, but Japan, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand are also included. Homeland Security is arguing that the new biometric controls will be non-intrusive and will take only a second or two to implement, with the traveler placing an index finger on a small screen while a photo is being taken. The government claims it will be able to check the criminal and terrorist watch-lists using the biometric information, but the assertion is absurd as the software, computer capacity, and system interconnectivity do not exist to permit anything of the sort. The information will presumably be stored for later use, whatever that will mean.



Drug use among American soldiers has reached levels not seen since the Vietnam War.

The Pentagon is quietly moving the soldiers from the affected units back to the United States and Germany for medical treatment. Though drug use is a court-martial offense, the soldiers are generally receiving only administrative sanctions in order to avoid making the issue public. Afghan heroin is available cheaply and uncut, sometimes resulting in lethal overdoses. Recently, an entire company of Marines guarding the United States Embassy in Kabul was reassigned short of tour because so many soldiers were failing drug tests. In another instance, an airmobile regiment's helicopters were temporarily grounded because many of the mechanics were found to be using drugs. Drug use is reported to be much more prevalent among support troops than among those in combat. Sources in Kabul indicate that the narcotic abuse is a symptom of the boredom of the assignment to Afghanistan, which offers little in the way of acceptable recreation. Only small groups of special forces are involved in active operations, and the vast majority of the soldiers in Afghanistan see little or no action. Intelligence sources indicate that an investigation is going on to determine whether the drug use is simply a matter of supply meeting demand or something more sinister. One senior Drug Enforcement Administration officer has been relieved of his duties because of suspicion that he has been involved in the trafficking. A highly placed Afghan source believes that the drugs, which are produced in parts of the country where the Taliban is active, are being deliberately diverted to the Kabul market and sold to American soldiers. Normally, Afghan-produced drugs would be exported to Russia and Western Europe, which is where the most profitable mass markets are located. ■

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA Officer, is a partner in Cannistraro Associates, an international security consultancy.

The other building block of the Barcelona plan that has been removed from the American initiative is the emphasis on the need to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. “[I]deas about reform are not a substitute for the Middle East [peace] process,” explained Marc Grossman, U.S. Undersecretary of State, during a visit to Brussels in March. But “you cannot wait until there’s a complete peace,” he argued. “It’s not an excuse for doing nothing.” The problem is that that’s not the way most Arabs see it. In fact, the Bush administration’s attempts to place the Arab-Israeli problem on the back burner point to the internal contradiction in the entire American scheme. Political liberties, open elections, and a free press in Egypt, Syria, Algeria, or for

that matter an independent Palestine, would bring to power leaders who—representing the views of the majority of their elites and publics—would have no choice but to pursue anti-American policies as long as Washington maintains its current policies on Israel/Palestine. To put it differently, there is no way Washington would be able to juggle both the Greater Israel project and the Greater Middle East initiative.

In addition, while the European plan focuses very much on diplomatic, economic, and cultural engagement between the Europeans and the people of the SME, what the U.S. is proposing is a set of military protectorates in this region, starting with Afghanistan and Iraq. Again, the Europeans suspect that the neoconservative authors of the plan want to use the SME initiative as a springboard to “do Iraqs” in Iran and Syria and other provinces in the empire and want it to provide them with international legitimacy for such a strategy.

French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin has already expressed strong reservations about the GME plan, and especially about the idea of having a NATO role in the process. In an interview with the French daily *Le Figaro*, he stressed the need to “avoid a uniform approach, as one cannot treat the Maghreb [North Africa] with the same pattern as the Middle East or the Persian Gulf states, nor can one concentrate everything on the security issue.” His German counterpart, Joschka Fischer welcomed the idea of the Europeans and the Americans working together in the Middle East, but reminded the Americans of the Barcelona initiative.

The Europeans know that the GME is nothing more than a public-relations gimmick. Television images of Bush and the once “Old” European leaders committing themselves to work together to bring peace, stability, and prosperity to Iraq, Afghanistan, and “beyond” would

help demonstrate to the American voters that Bush enjoys the support of America’s allies abroad. But Chirac and Schroeder want to see John Kerry—the son of a former Foreign Service officer stationed in Europe, who was educated in a Swiss boarding school, who is fluent in French and speaks some German—occupying the White House. Kerry, as the *Economist* magazine suggested recently, is nothing less than “Europe’s candidate for president.” So the Europeans are certainly not planning to go out of their way to help Bush to win the election by providing the Republican National Committee with Europe-Loves-Bush soundbites emanating from the G-8 or NATO summits. Let Mexico’s Fox do that.

The Germans, the French, and other Europeans continue to believe that any change in the Middle East will come through diplomatic and economic engagement and not through military occupation and that the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is central to any progress in the region. So don’t expect them to support with major financial and military resources the GME plan, which aims at providing western legitimacy to the U.S. strategy in Iraq and the entire Middle East.

What America seems to be offering Europeans is not a place in the Middle Eastern driver’s seat but an opportunity to check the oil and change the tires: that is, cleaning up the mess. Some Europeans are suggesting that now that Iraq is about to run over the cliff, Americans may be even ready actually to give them the car keys. Thanks, but no thanks. We’ve got our own acronyms. ■

Leon Hadar is a Cato Institute research fellow in foreign-policy studies with the Cato Institute whose book on U.S. policy in the Middle East will be published next year by Palgrave Macmillan.

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Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Kill Bill: Vol. 2*]

Tarantino's Brain

By Steve Sailer

"I've got two words for you when it comes to violence: 'Kill Bill.'"

—Mel Gibson

FEW MOVIES ARE MORE antithetical yet more closely linked in the culture wars than Mel Gibson's epochal hit "The Passion of the Christ" and Quentin Tarantino's "Kill Bill" gore-fest, "Vol. 2," which is now out.

Last fall's "Vol. 1" earned only a fair-to-middling \$70 million from the general public, but movie nerds revere Tarantino for showing them willowy blonde assassinatrix Uma Thurman slicing open Lucy Liu's skull with a samurai sword.

Tarantino represents the apotheosis of all the fanboys who devote their youths and young manhoods to watching hundreds of chop-socky movies. Of course, the reason film geeks have all that time on their hands is because girls aren't dying to go out with them. So, their catfight fetishes grow out of their anger at women, combined with their dreams of someday finding girlfriends cool enough to like slasher flicks too.

The New Republic's Gregg Easterbrook famously denounced this Disney-Miramax production for excessive violence, noting, "Recent European history alone ought to cause Jewish executives to experience second thoughts about glorifying the killing of the helpless as a fun lifestyle choice."

Easterbrook was widely excoriated both for terminal unhipness and for supposedly resurrecting the myth that Jews control the media. Disney supremo Michael Eisner, however, did control Easterbrook's other employer, ESPN, which immediately fired him. Most commentators opined that Easterbrook had it coming.

All I can say is that if Walt Disney were alive today, he'd be spinning in his cryogenic preservation chamber.

In contrast, the elite press condemned "The Passion." Its disgusting violence, we were informed, would set off pogroms. No movie studio would do business with Gibson, ironically making him the sole owner of this vastly and deservedly popular film, a powerful retelling of vital events.

Most critics got the distinction between the violence in the two films exactly backward. The proper question is Lenin's old "Who? Whom?" In "Kill Bill," the heroine is a professional murderer and we're invited to exult in her butchery. In "The Passion," the hero is an innocent victim and we're invited to identify with His suffering. Not surprisingly, 50 million people have seen "The Passion" and, instead of anti-Semitic attacks, the most notable incidents have been repentant sinners confessing to previously unsolved crimes.

In "Kill Bill: Vol. 2," evil Bill (played by David Carradine of the old Seventies' TV show "Kung Fu") praises his ex-girlfriend as a "natural born killer." Tarantino is alluding to the 1994 film directed by Oliver Stone from a scenario by Tarantino. "Natural Born Killers" inspired a number of documented copycat murders in which trailer-trash couples watched the video repeatedly while drugged up and then committed random thrill-kills, just as Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis do in the film.

"The Passion" is also routinely lambasted for assuming that viewers enjoy a

certain familiarity with the most influential episode in the history of Western Civilization. I overheard the following conversation in a screening room on Rodeo Drive:

Man: "'The Passion' really doesn't work as a movie. I mean, if you don't know who the characters are, you can't figure out what's going on. And why is he washing people's feet?"

Woman: "It's like Gibson expects you to know the story already."

Man: "And it's so historically inaccurate. The men didn't have long hair back then."

Woman: "Now, what I really like is *The Da Vinci Code*."

In contrast, Tarantino is constantly applauded for cramming "Kill Bill" with countless esoteric references to obscure Seventies rubbish. He has tapped into a deep vein of nostalgia for the crud that everybody watched as adolescents. Okay, I confess, I loved Carradine in "Kung Fu" when I was 13, too. But then I grew up.

There's nothing wrong with Tarantino's brain, just with the junk he stuffs in it. Moreover, his talents, while broad, don't mesh well. He should instead direct others' scripts, while reserving his own writing—with its vivid but absurd monologues and grandstanding convolutions—for the stage.

The stylish and witty but long and talky "Kill Bill: Vol. 2" offers less gratuitous violence than "Vol. 1," yet the whole movie seems ultimately gratuitous. If you don't adore Tarantino's characters—gangsters with the souls of video-store clerks—as much as he adores them, you probably won't care to hear them soliloquize endlessly about pop culture. ■

Rated R for violence, language, and brief drug use.