

[*American Raj: Liberation or Domination?: Resolving the Conflict Between the West and the Muslim World*, Eric Margolis, Key Porter]

## Averting the Clash

By Leon Hadar

IT WAS BOUND TO HAPPEN. In the same way that the movement against U.S. military intervention in Vietnam split, amoeba-like, during the drawdown of the war in Southeast Asia, the opposition to the war in Iraq seems to be disintegrating now that the presidential candidate who promised to withdraw from Mesopotamia—a position that is currently supported by 70 percent of the American people—has occupied the White House.

In fact, opponents of President George W. Bush's decision to oust Saddam Hussein and the ensuing American occupation of Iraq have never constituted a unified political force. The antiwar coalition instead consisted of several factions on the political Left and Right. They came together at the height of America's unipolar moment in reaction to an effort by neoconservative ideologues to impose U.S. military hegemony in the broader Middle East and most of the Muslim world.

In *American Raj*, Eric Margolis charts the evolution of an American imperial system whose foundations were laid in the Cold War and whose main rationale was the control of energy resources in the Middle East—a process that accelerated after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the only global player that could challenge American supremacy. His book is part political analysis and scholarship—unfortunately the author does not provide endnotes—part lively travelogue and personal memoir.

Margolis, like other critics of U.S. policy in the Middle East, was not surprised by 9/11. “The attacks of Septem-

ber 11, 2001, did not come out of the blue,” he writes. “They were a huge, overdue installment payment in the costs of empire.” Washington's policy of propping up unpopular military regimes and monarchies in the Muslim world and its unyielding support for Israel's repression of the Palestinian people, along with the humanitarian catastrophe resulting from the embargo against Iraq, produced a massive backlash against America in the Muslim world.

President Bush and his neoconservative aides, says Margolis, seized the opportunity provided by 9/11 to pursue an overreaching strategy to secure America's domination of the Middle East's energy resources, a plan that required U.S. military control of Iraq and Afghanistan. This campaign was launched in the name of fighting terrorism, protecting the West from the Muslim menace, and democratizing the Middle East. But that crusade led to a head-on confrontation between the U.S. and the Muslim world, ignited even more anti-American terrorism, and ended up with a strategic debacle in Iraq and costly diplomatic and military setbacks in Afghanistan as well as in Lebanon and Israel/Palestine.

Most of the activists and pundits who helped energize antiwar sentiments in this country would probably support Margolis's assessment. But not all the critics of the Iraq War agree in their opposition to the neoconservative agenda. Many realists faulted the mission in Iraq for not serving core U.S. interests but supported the invasion of Afghanistan. Foreign-policy internationalists insisted that the unilateral decision to attack Iraq violated the dictum that the U.S. should only go to war on behalf and with the full backing of the international community, as happened in Afghanistan. Noninterventionist followers of Ron Paul or Ralph Nader, meanwhile, warned against going abroad in search of monsters to destroy, while traditional conservatives and Jacksonian nationalists cautioned against both invading the world and inviting the world in the name of a self-defeating universalist doctrine.

These differing ideological orientations overlapped on the issue of the Iraq War. Yet while common outrage against the neocons made for congenial political bedfellows, one recalls that there were quite a few realists, internationalists, libertarians, lefties, nationalists, and even paleoconservatives who supported the invasion of Iraq and the campaign against Islamofascism. And now that the U.S.-led crusade to remake the Middle East (aka the Freedom Agenda) has crashed so disastrously into political, economic, and military realities, it is not surprising that the anti-neocons are starting to discover that what united them may not be enough to keep them together.

We can expect, for example, to hear charges of inconsistency directed against political allies from noninterventionists who cannot comprehend why their antiwar internationalist buddies are now advocating humanitarian intervention in Darfur. Or Ron Paul libertarians might be appalled to discover that realists insist the U.S. should remain engaged in the Middle East to maintain access to energy resources.

This is why some readers who wholeheartedly approved of Margolis's many published articles blasting the Bush administration's foreign policy and the neoconservative agenda may not entirely agree with the arguments put forward in *American Raj*.

Realists who rebuked President Bill Clinton's use of military force in Bosnia and Kosovo—even though neither situation threatened the well being of American citizens—would probably see a certain cognitive dissonance between Margolis's denunciation of the military intervention in Mesopotamia and his applause for the one in the Balkans, which he describes as a “rescue of the Balkans' oppressed Muslims” and a “galant humanitarian action.”

And Margolis is very critical of the Bush administration's refusal to denounce and take action against Moscow's brutal suppression of the Muslim insurgency in Chechnya, a view not shared by realists, who place prior-

ity on securing the U.S. relationship with great powers like Russia, and noninterventionists, who oppose military aggression everywhere.

Libertarians and traditional conservatives, moreover, may not feel comfortable with Margolis's notion that the U.S. has an obligation to bring democratic values and practices to the Muslim world or his argument that the Orange and Rose Revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia serve as a model for the role that America and the European Union can play in forcing dictators out of power.

But Margolis is neither a traditional conservative nor a libertarian nor a left-wing interventionist. As the son of an American-Albanian mother and an American-Jewish father, he is one of those foreign correspondents with strong cosmopolitan sensitivities—someone who can reasonably boast that the world is his home. He is essentially an internationalist with realist and idealist tendencies in the tradition of presi-

Qaeda, Bush and the neoconservatives; Milosevic and Serb nationalists, Putin and Russia's imperialists, Israeli Likud leaders and the Jewish settlers—have succeeded in transforming national, strategic, and economic disputes into conflicts between religions and cultures.

Margolis believes that, notwithstanding the history of bloody conflict, the Abrahamic monotheistic faiths have much in common and that a reconciliation between the West and the Muslim world would serve the long-term interests of Americans and Middle Easterners alike.

His case is convincing. The clash of civilizations is not inevitable. The current conflicts in the broader Middle East—Israel/Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, Lebanon, Iraq—are struggles in which political, tribal, national, as well as religious factors all play a role. (In fact, I challenged Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis 15 years ago in an article for *Foreign Affairs*. I argued that

ated in the aftermath of the American empire, working with old and new regional autocrats and local warlords in ways that sabotage political and economic reform.

Yet Margolis, despite his own rejection of Huntington's thesis, keeps referring in *American Raj* to the "Muslim world," as though all its peoples share similar values and aspirations. The Muslim world is in fact a mosaic of nation-states, ethnic groups, religious sects, and tribal groups; a mishmash of political ideologies and economic systems as well as national identities—Arab, Persian, Turk, Kurd, Israeli, Berber—and even large non-Muslim communities—Maronites, Copts, Armenians, Jews, and, if India is added to the picture, Hindus. The Muslim world includes the secular Arab nationalist movements of Ba'athism and Nasserism; Saudi Arabia's dominant and strict Wahhabism; the revolutionary, millennialist dogma of the ruling Shi'ites in Iran and their Middle Eastern satellites; the Kemalist secular, republican, and statist tradition of Turkey; the tolerant and multicultural societies and capitalist economies of Indonesia and Malaysia; the radical Islamists of South and Central Asia; Westernized, multiethnic, multi-religious Lebanon; and Muammar Qaddafi's strict and somewhat bizarre Islamic revolutionary system in Libya.

It is true that Bush's policies may have unified the majority of the world's Muslims against America. Yet changes in American policy under the administration of President Barack Obama, especially in dealing with the Persian Gulf and the Levant, could reverse these attitudes. Washington might then embrace a foreign-policy *realpolitik* that treats the Broader Middle East not as an American Raj or a monolithic civilization, but as a hodgepodge of many identities, interests, and policies. ■

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dents Dwight Eisenhower, whom he praises for pressuring Britain, France, and Israel to withdraw from Egypt after the 1956 Suez campaign, and John F. Kennedy, who fiercely criticized France's colonial war in Algeria. He also shares many of the foreign-policy views of contemporary public figures such as former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and former Republican senator Chuck Hagel. Both have been harsh critics of neoconservative-driven policies in the Middle East, but they also support the exertion of U.S. influence in the region through diplomatic, economic, and political means.

In *American Raj*, Margolis stresses his concern that 9/11 and the Iraq War have helped turn the late Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations paradigm from a theoretical concept into an explosive global reality. Extremists on all sides—Osama bin Laden and al-

members of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment, suffering from "Enemy Deprivation Syndrome" in the aftermath of the Cold War, were settling on radical Islam—or the "Green Peril" as I called it—as a potential new bogeyman.) The hawkish ideologues who hijacked President Bush's foreign-policy apparatus duly embraced Huntington's concept as a way to justify their attempts to expand American military power and establish U.S. hegemony in the Middle East.

But even if, as Margolis advises, America withdraws its troops from Iraq, Afghanistan, and the rest of the broader Middle East and revises its open-ended commitment to Israel, there are no guarantees that the Middle East would take the road towards liberalization, following in the footsteps of the former Communist-controlled states of Eastern Europe. It is quite conceivable that other global powers might fill the vacuum cre-

# Old News

The news racket is dead, mummified, and ready for a mausoleum. The joy has gone. Reporters were once a misbegotten tribe of ashen-souled cynics, honest

drunks chain-smoking their way to the grave, foul-mouthed, profane, boisterously male, believing in nothing but the certainty of corruption and the squalor that is human nature. In short, they were philosophers and splendid company. You couldn't chew the fat with a better crowd. They knew the world as no one else did. I mean the real world—big-city bus stations at 3 a.m. where things crawled forth that would unnerve the underside of a rotting log. They knew Linda's Surprise Bar in Saigon and Lucy's Tiger Den in Bangkok. Many had been in the military and survived the ritualized absurdity of GI life. Delicates and milque-toasts they weren't.

They were the world's true aristocrats. All the Heidelberg philosophers rolled into one and exponentiated knew less of life than a cub on his second year on the police desk. Less that was worth knowing, anyway.

Maybe the news trade didn't build character, but it built characters. Marquis, Mauldin, Royko, Charley Reese, Smith Hempstone, Paul Vogel—names ancient and less so, mostly unknown in the wider world, guys who told wild stories in the press bars of Taipei and Joburg, stories both impossible and sometimes true.

There was Six-Pack Muldoon, a chopper pilot working in Southeast Asia. Always flew with an open six-pack in the cockpit. Asked why, he said, "In 30 years of flying, I've only crashed twice. Both times I was sober. I'm not going to risk it again."

That world is gone. The news biz has been sanitized, made polite and tedious, like a family pool hall with orange felt and no betting. The morgue has become "the library." Newsrooms are "non-smoking environments." As women came in, the boisterousness and dirty stories went out. The gals could do the job perfectly well, but the atmosphere changed. A true news weasel no long felt at home. You could no longer say, "So there we were on Bugis Street, and Murphy picks up this hooker with three thumbs, yeah, really."

And then ... give me strength. The Ivy League took over. The ashtrays went and very nice young people from Princeton showed up. They were smart, sometimes rocket smart, knew about things the old hands had never heard of, learned fast, but they were so ... nice. They ate salads. Until then no reporter had ever eaten a salad, only marbled steak and Jim Beam and other things bad for you. The old-timers watched the new arrivals with horror. It was like being invaded by Moonies.

The D.C. Bob began. Newspapers fell into the gummy clutches of the school-marmish censorship that we call political correctness. Reporters talking in restaurants began the furtive reconnaissance—the duck of the head and the shift glance about—to make sure that no one was within earshot who might be offended. Practically everyone could be offended, indeed seemed to be looking for the chance: blacks, Asians, Hispanics, women, homosexuals, Jews, what have you.

The National Press Club got overrun by lobbyists and flacks. It too fell into the tarpits of the Higher Priss. The big portrait of a bosomy young lady that had once graced the walls had to go. The place began to feel like a hotel lobby. Heartwarming events began, like tree fungus on a log not quite dead. Old-timers hated anything heartwarming. You could shoot at them and they didn't care, station them in Bangladesh and they would hold up. Heartwarming events were too much.

I quit the Press Club over Costa Rica Night, I think it was. Or maybe Mexico. I was at the bar talking to Mike Causey, stand-up guy, a classic newsman, then with the *Washington Post*. A very nice young lady came over tried to sell me tickets to Costa Rica Night, if that is what it was. Oooh, she said, it was going to be fun. We would wear costumes and there would be piñatas and it would be a Latin American Experience, oooh.

I was courteous. In times of trial, I call on deep reserves of character. I didn't tell her I would prefer to spend the evening removing my lungs with a ball-point pen. Nor did I explain my idea of a Latin American Experience: standing at the Gavilan Bar in Guadalajara, hooking down José Cuervo and swapping war stories with my crazy friend Tom the Robot.

But I quit. Character only carries you so far.

And the corporations took over. Everything became tranquil, slant decided at corporate. Don't make waves. The fluorescents hummed narcotically, like paper shredders destroying evidence. Sterility flowered. Libel and character assassination fell into disfavor with publishers.

What a world. ■