

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Yankee Go Home

by Jon B. Alterman

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To hear some people tell the story, anti-Americanism will end on or about January 20, 2009. On that date, a new president will move into the White House, bringing with him a traditional American respect for foreign cultures, international law, and multilateral diplomacy. The Bush legacy will fade from view, and Americans will once again be beloved around the globe, especially in Arab countries.

The world, however, is not so simple. Anti-American riots first filled the streets of foreign nations more than a century ago, as the United States became a global power. They continued through the Cold War and beyond. Anti-American terrorism is not new, either. While some argue that the Arab-Israeli conflict is a major motivator for al-Qaeda, some of al-Qaeda's first actions against the United States—the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam—came at a time when the United States was relatively engaged in Arab-Israeli peacemaking. The facts are clear: Anti-Americanism long predated the Bush administration, and it will long survive it.

There are many reasons for anti-Americanism. Some resent the United States as a power reinforcing an unacceptable status quo. An Arab friend's comment to me a few years ago is typical—he complained that his country's president did not derive his legitimacy from the tens of millions of citizens in his own country, but rather from a handful of officials in Washington, DC. The juggernaut of U.S.-led globalization offends and frightens others, who see their own traditional cultures and their long-held norms of social, religious and sexual behavior being swept away. Many object to longstanding U.S. policies, whether on the Arab-Israeli conflict, toward religious parties in government, or the presence of U.S. troops in the Persian Gulf, and still more complain that the United States uses its power solely to accrue more power for itself rather than to relieve human suffering.

None of these grievances will disappear; indeed, they are unlikely to change much, regardless of who wins the election on November 4. Despite a robust argument

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Quick and Dirty

It sounds like a satire, but the countries sitting on top of the world's largest known deposits of oil and gas are increasingly suffering from energy shortages. Gulf economies rely heavily on natural gas for electricity generation, energy-intensive industrial production such as aluminum smelting, and re-injection into oil fields. In recent years, booming demand has begun to outstrip supply. Iran, with the world's second largest proven reserves of natural gas, has been plagued with shortages. Kuwait has suffered two years of blackouts during the heat of the summer, when electricity use is at its peak. According to Moody's, the GCC needs to invest \$50 billion over the next six years to increase its generating capacity by 60 gigawatts. Right now, though, many favor a quick and dirty alternative.

That alternative is coal. Nuclear technology may offer a long term fix, but it will take years to build the infrastructure. Cement manufacturers in the northern emirates of Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah are already burning coal. Dubai has begun building four coal-fired power plants with a total generation capacity of four gigawatts. Israel and Iran already burn coal for electricity generation and account for the vast majority of regional consumption. Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Bahrain are also exploring the feasibility of using coal to cure their near-term energy woes. Coal is less clean than gas, and it adds a new set of logistical considerations to energy security. It is a quick fix but a long-term problem. ■ DE

Iraq's Reintegration into the Gulf

Two leading experts participated in a Gulf Roundtable discussion on Iraq's changing relationship with its Gulf neighbors. Steve Negus, a former *Financial Times* journalist and now a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, highlighted the ways in which Gulf Arab states fear that a Shi'a Iraq will be an extension of Iranian power into the Arab world. Gregory Gause, a professor at the University of Vermont, detected a potential shift in Saudi views toward regional politics, in part influenced by events in Iraq. To view the summary of this event, click [HERE](#). ■

to the contrary, the fact is that the United States provokes a good deal of hostility because of what it is, rather than what it does.

For the United States to chase global popularity as an end in and of itself would be a fool's errand. There is little global agreement (either within countries or between them) on what the United States should do, and some would see a greater U.S. willingness to conciliate principally as a signal that demands should be raised. In many cases, governments trot out professions of injustice and unfairness as a tactic to improve bargaining positions and cover up for the cold and rational pursuit of national interests. The Arab street is often emotional, but Arab governments are far more calculating. Rather than bend to every wind, the United States needs to be true to itself, its own principles, and its own interests.

Despite frequent professions of patriotism, the Bush administration has not lived up to its claims. The supposed requirements of a Global War on Terror and a reluctance to hold officials accountable for their actions has undermined the U.S. government's credibility at home and abroad; the shockingly poor planning and execution of government activities, from the war in Iraq to Hurricane Katrina, has bred skepticism about the U.S. government's ability to do anything right. Americans have a right to expect that the next president will perform better, and the United States will fare better as a result.

But enhancing the capability and legitimacy to execute is only part of the equation. What has been lost in the last few years is that restraint has been as important an asset to the United States as its overwhelming strength. For more than half a century, the United States has been unquestionably the world's most powerful country. Despite the financial turmoil now roiling U.S. markets, U.S. primacy remains unchallenged. With an economy three times the size of its nearest competitor, the world's third-largest population, and the most powerful military that the world has ever known, the U.S. capacity to affect the calculations of other national actors is unparalleled.

Yet, throughout the twentieth century, U.S. leaders acted to restrain the country's actions and make them more predictable. The United States government is among the most open in the world, with policy debates regularly played out in the national press. The United States nurtured international institutions and international law for much of a century to help guide the behavior of other states and make unilateral intervention less necessary. Part of the secret of U.S. influence in the world has been that U.S. conduct has not been a secret; instead, the United States has acted predictably and effectively to safeguard longstanding national interests and a framework of international conduct that helps preserve those interests. U.S. policy was bland, but it was rarely a surprise.

Over the last decade, the United States has emerged as a variable rather than a constant in world affairs, bent on maximizing its own interests rather than fostering a general climate in which each country can pursue its own. Unconstrained by rules, U.S. power is seen to be more threatening yet less persuasive. One oil executive told me a couple of years ago that, in his estimation, the greatest source of political risk in the world was Washington, DC.

What the United States needs to pursue in the next administration is not to increase its popularity, but rather to restore its persuasiveness. Showing respect for the concerns of others is part of this equation, as is using U.S. power to address issues of longstanding international concern. But equally important is restoring the widespread belief that the United States will act in predictable ways to achieve predictable outcomes. The United States will not always be beloved, but the intensity of anti-Americanism will surely diminish. On occasion, some people may even be inspired, but continually telling people how inspirational we should be to them undermines our cause; it does not advance it. ■ 10/20/08

Links of Interest

Jon Alterman was quoted by the Associated Press in "[Mideast Grapples with Oil Price Slump](#)."

Jon Alterman presented at the American Enterprise Institute: "[Beyond November: Terrorists, Rogue States, and Democracy](#)."

Jon Alterman's blog entry on "[The Bush Administration's Legacy in the Middle East](#)."

The Middle East Program hosted professor Glenn Robinson for an event entitled "[The Strategic Implications of the Israel-Hamas Cease-fire](#)."

Jon Alterman was quoted by Reuters in "[Analysis: U.S. Grappling With Power Dive Amid Financial Crisis](#)."

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