

Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire, Chalmers Johnson, New York: Henry Holt, 2000, 268 pp.

By Wayne Northey

On the eve of the new bombing campaign against Iraq, President Bush said the United States had done nothing to deserve Iraqi hostility. This book begs to differ.

The author is a specialist on Japan and Asia, and a professor emeritus at the University of California. He states that the United States is committed to maintaining a global empire, one eliciting “resentments our policies have built up” eventuating in “economic and political retribution that, particularly in Asia, may be their harvest in the twenty-first century (p. ix).” A little later, he says again, “I believe it is past time for ... Americans to consider why we have created an empire – a word from which we shy away – and what the consequences of our imperial stance may be for the rest of the world and for ourselves (p. 5).”

The book’s title is a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-invented term that “refers to the unintended consequences of policies that were kept secret from the American people.” He continues: “What the daily press reports as the malign acts of ‘terrorists’ or ‘drug lords’ or ‘rogue states’ or ‘illegal arms merchants’ often turn out to be blowback from earlier American operations (p. 8).” The book gives the detail to this contention. It is, Johnson states, another way of saying a nation reaps what it sows. But Americans generally are unaware of the covert operations of the CIA the world over, and thus of policies eliciting blowback. Johnson also declares a profound symmetry between the Soviet and American post-War empires.

Johnson states arrestingly: “Terrorism by definition strikes at the innocent in order to draw attention to the sins of the invulnerable. The innocent of the twenty-first century are going to harvest unexpected blowback disasters from the imperialist escapades of recent decades (p. 33).”

To illustrate his case, Johnson turns first to in-depth analysis of East Asia, beginning with Okinawa, essentially an American military colony “used to project American power throughout Asia in the service of a de facto U.S. grand strategy to perpetuate or increase American hegemonic power... (p. 64).” He continues with a discussion of “stealth imperialism”, including the refusal to endorse establishment of an international court that would indict individuals charged with war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. But American foreign policy denied any possibility of charging any of the 200,000 troops permanently stationed in 40 countries worldwide. Similarly, they refused to sign the 1997 Ottawa Accord that banned the use, production, or shipment of antipersonnel landmines. Between 60 and 100 million landmines are deployed in 60 countries that kill 26,000 persons a year – more deaths than all weapons of mass destruction combined. They also authorized a Joint Combined Exchange Training program (JCET) that has trained “counterinsurgency” forces in 110 countries, including Turkey against the Kurds, of whom 22,000 have been killed, in all Latin American

countries, and Indonesia, where huge loss of civilian life has been incurred by the respective militaries. This amounts to “instruction in state terrorism”.

Monumental military spending is another instance. The United States accounted in 1998 for 32% (\$278 billion) of world military spending (\$864 billion). In 1995 almost 50% of global arms sales was accounted for by the United States, to 140 countries, 90% of which were not democracies or were human rights abusers. It has cost the United States \$5.5 trillion to build and maintain its nuclear arsenal.

South and North Korea, China and Taiwan, are then spotlighted in several chapters. The author also discusses Japan. The presentations become very detailed, but in essence, self-serving U.S. economic interests control all aspects of relating to these countries` Johnson argues. He uses the term “overstretch” to describe inappropriate U.S. military and economic expansionism. He concludes: “The duties of ‘lone superpower’ produced military overstretch; globalization led to economic overstretch; and both are contributing to an endemic crisis of blowback (p. 215).” In 1997, economic “meltdown” occurred, consequence of American economic policies on East Asia.

In the final chapter, the author begins by stating, “American officials and the media talk a great deal about ‘rogue states’ like Iraq and North Korea, but we must ask ourselves whether the United States has itself become a rogue superpower (p. 216).” This is of course the contention of the 2000 publication by William Blum, *Rogue State*. Over against an American self-image of honourable and virtuous foreign policy, Johnson contends: “But the evidence is building up that in the decade following the end of the Cold War, the United States largely abandoned a reliance on diplomacy, economic aid, international law, and multilateral institutions in carrying out its foreign policies and resorted much of the time to bluster, military force, and financial manipulation (p. 217).” The author warns of an inevitable “imperial overextension” that will generate multiple forms of blowback. Johnson recommends a list of first steps that would generally reduce American imperialism in favour of multilateralism. At book’s end, he predicts that “World politics in the twenty-first century will in all likelihood be driven primarily by blowback from the second half of the twentieth century – that is, from the unintended consequences of the Cold War and the crucial American decision to maintain a Cold War posture in a post-Cold War world (p. 229).”

The author is obviously well-informed; non-ideological; and balanced in what he calls for. In light of the second bombing campaign against Iraq, obviously, American foreign policy has a long way to go to embrace Johnson’s sober vision.

When *Blowback* first appeared, it sold better outside the United States, until September 11, 2001. It immediately went through several printings, so prophetic it turned out to be.

Johnson has since (2004) published *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic*, a sequel of sorts to *Blowback*. He described these sorrows thus: “I think four sorrows inevitably accompany our current path. First is endless war... As it stands right now, since 9/11, Articles 4 and 6 of the Bill of Rights are dead letters. They

are over... Second, imperial overstretch... The third thing is a tremendous rise in lying and deceit... The difficulty to believe anything that the government says any longer because they are now systematically lying to us on almost every issue. The fourth is bankruptcy. Attempting to dominate the world militarily is a very expensive proposition... The United States, for the last 15 years, has had trade deficits running at 5 percent every year. We are on the edge... I do not find it easy at all that any successor to George Bush would make any difference... That leads me to the conclusion that we are probably going to reap what we have sown. That is blowback.”

He ends the book with these chilling words: “Nemesis, the goddess of retribution and vengeance, the punisher of pride and hubris, waits impatiently for her meeting with us.”

Christians might rather quote Psalm 2:

“Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One.

‘Let us break their chains,’ they say, ‘and throw off their fetters.’

The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.”