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The Permanent Paranoia of Empire

The U.S. Empire Fears Any Nation That Thinks for Itself

by JASON HIRTHLER
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“Blind belief in authority is the greatest enemy of truth.”

— Albert Einstein

The unmitigated effrontery of the Senate this month is hard to excel, but President Obama is doing his best to do just that. Over the past week the President has issued a couple of indictments from the Oval Office, both of which involve traditional rivals, Venezuela and Iran. Their sin? Thinking for themselves, a rare condition that must be instantly condemned with the most inflammatory rhetoric available, before steps are taken to eliminate the condition altogether. There’s nothing so inimical to the freedoms of empire as the freedoms of others.

Crackdown on the Chavistas

First, Obama produced a breathtakingly daft Executive Order (E.O.) declaring Venezuela “an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States, and I hereby declare a national emergency to deal with that threat.” The cause? A confused pastiche of unproven items including the “erosion” of “human rights,” “arbitrary arrest and detention,” and “public corruption.” Does anyone believe this farrago of libel actually expresses an actual threat to the United States?

Sadly, many of the brainwashed disciples of the New York Times, Washington Post, CNN and FOX NEWS mostly probably do. But can anyone not so heavily propagandized take the President seriously? One need merely summon the records of our faithful aid to such beacons of human rights as Colombia, a world-class slaughterhouse for unionized citizenry; Nicaragua, still scarred by the legacy of Regan's attempts to destroy populism there; Egypt, where President and former General Sisi has shamelessly conducted his sanguinary violations in the public square; Mexico, where we rely on corruption to keep our candidates in office; and Honduras, where the coup government we have supported since 2009 has turned the country into the bloodiest and most lawless nation in Central America. Still the money flows.

So this isn't at all about the causes Obama mentions. Perhaps the President misspoke. There is really only one way in which Venezuela presents a threat to the U.S. That is the threat that the stunningly successful Bolivarian Revolution poses to the neoliberal fascism practiced in America and Europe. After all, just compare the statistics. Across the board, the Bolivarian model is unquestionably superior to the neoliberal model when it comes to lifting the quality of life for the majority. It has liberated the Venezuelan people in numberless ways. Jobs, incomes, health, political participation, all surged while poverty plummeted under Hugo Chavez and his beleaguered successor Nicolas Maduro. Employment, incomes, political participation, all headed south under George W. Bush and Obama, just to limit one's gaze to this century.

Did the President rather mean to say that no single country has larger crude reserves than Venezuela, and that American access to it has been limited since Hugo Chavez skyrocketed into the presidency on the backs of massive popular support and immediately nationalized the oil industry? A real black eye for the Exxons and BPs of the world.

Interesting that the order targets seven individuals in particular, members of Venezuela's armed forces, its national intelligence services, its department of homeland security (yes, it has one, too), a former member of its national guard, its national police, and its justice department. Looks like another "divide and ruin" strategy, as progressive political author Dan Glazebrook puts it. Sow division, seed turf wars, and splinter the Chavistas with the hammer and chisel of frozen assets. Seems similar to the sanctions imposed on Russia, which targeted members of the military, the security forces, and parliament.

Forget that the United States is openly violating Venezuelan sovereignty, sponsoring coups in 2002 and just last month, and aiding the rabidly anti-democratic opposition behind both failed coups as well as last year's outbreak of violence. Returning the opposition to power would likely return the country to 80 percent poverty, which is where it stood before Chavez. Forget that 33 nations from the Community of Latin American and Caribbean states (CELAC) announced their support for Venezuela and condemned U.S. interference. Forget that a majority of Venezuelans vociferously reject U.S. intervention of any kind. Forget that Maduro's government has produced some pretty damning evidence against the thwarted coup d'état planned by members of the Venezuelan right, including links to U.S. front organizations (all dismissed by U.S. State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki).

Crackdown on the Mullahs

Not satisfied with one transparent fatuity for the week, the President produced another. This time he was confirming and extending the cruel E.O. against Iran. This second “national emergency” in seven days is for the supposedly grave problem posed by Iran’s efforts to produce civilian nuclear energy. This effort represents, in the administration’s paranoiac mind, another “unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States constituted by the actions and policies of the Government of Iran.”

It makes the average observer wonder why anyone has attempted diplomacy at all, given the hysteria produced by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s nose-thumbing speech to Congress, the subversive letter from Republican freshman Senator Tom Cotton, and now the President’s own ruinous theatricality. Why bother? One supposes Obama sees this deal as another piece of his legacy, and this E.O. as an attempt to push it through. Add this nuclear agreement to the rancid TPP (part of the Asian pivot), and the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and you can begin to mouth the words of fake progressives when they insist that Obama had major achievements in foreign policy, healthcare, and free trade. This before they enjoin you to vote (again) for the exceedingly venal Clinton dynasty.

Forget that Iran would be doing nothing illegal by enriching uranium to 20 percent. Under the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it is free to do as it likes in this regard. Forget that, despite this, it is being massively sanctioned on the basis of claims with no evidence to support it (namely, that it wants a bomb). Forget that it has already made generous concessions to the P5+1 on its nuclear capabilities, and made plenty of acceptable offers before that (all rejected by the West). Forget that 16 U.S. intelligence agencies confirmed that it quit its nuclear weapons program in 2003, that the Ayatollah has issued a fatwa against nuclear weapons. Even the leading right-wing think tanks agree. And above all forget that the United States and Israel together have thousands of nuclear bombs at the ready, and that both have attacked Iranian neighbors and allies on fallacious premises, and that both have openly threatened and clandestinely attacked Iran, murdering scientists or launching cyberattacks. Both of which are acts of war by the U.N. standard. Or even, to challenge the received view that Iran is the seminal profligate of the NPT, the United States, though having reduced its nuclear arsenal tremendously since the Sixties, by some 83 percent, a notable achievement, it is still openly modernizing its arsenal. This suggests what we all instinctively know to be true: the U.S. will never fully eradicate its nuclear arsenal, or even permit its nuclear stock to fall behind that of any other nation. None of this matters, because in the U.S.-manipulated IAEA language (“the absence of undeclared activities”), Iran must effectively demonstrate not the absence of evidence, but the “evidence of absence,” the impossible criteria former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once laid upon Baghdad.

Regime Change Best Practices

The standard tactic for “taking out” the various unsavory democratic and socialist governments around the globe pivots on three principals: first, conduct clandestine subversion inside the country’s borders, dutifully carried out by that most admirable of organizations, the CIA. Think here of dead scientists, vicious computer viruses and shadowy coup d’états. Second, sanction the country, a tactic best combined with some form of currency attack. Think here of shortages of medical supplies, secret deals to collapse the price of oil, and massive currency sell offs. If covert sabotage doesn’t destabilize the government, and if sanctions don’t “make the economy

scream,” then take the last step, invade the country. Think here of Colin Powell’s U.N. theatrics and Netanyahu’s adolescent time bomb sketches. What this axis of evil tactics reveals is that a WMD can be a financial tool as much as an MQ-9 Reaper drone. Neither is ever “off the table” wherever Washington’s hegemony-happy neoconservatives need to uproot democratic flashpoints. These exigencies usually occur in the most delicate of places, atop lakes of underground petrol or pipeline crossroads.

Iran and Venezuela are being subjected to this strategy, but they aren’t alone. In the case of Russia, the economy has suffered a triple attack: sanctions applied by the U.S., EU, Japan, Australia and other allies; a U.S.-engineered price collapse in the oil market, driving prices below what nations like Russia, Iran, and Venezuela need to recoup to cover their production costs; and, just as the Russian economy was stung by both sanctions and the price drop in petroleum, the financial markets responded by attacking the currency, turning big profits by dumping rubles, watching their value crash, then picking them back up for a nifty profit.

Of course, all of this must be preceded by a pontifical decree. Before prescribing sanctions or intervention, the President must declare a nominally dire threat to national security. (Clandestine actions, by virtue of their blanket of anonymity, can happily dispense with such legal casuistry.) Hence the two memorandums of the last week.

Lessons from History

Yet Venezuela and Iran shouldn’t be surprised at the ongoing demonization of their nations. Had they studied the history of empire, they would know that if there’s one lesson for leaders of independent-minded nations, it’s this: never utter the word “nationalization” and never prescribe any system of governance other than “free-market capitalism.” There’s nothing imperial power fears more than a country with an independent streak. If you have one, expect a nasty shock. Just ask the Guatemala’s Jacobo Arbenz, Honduras’ Manuel Zelaya, Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi, Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega, Haiti’s Jean Bertrand Aristide, not to mention Venezuela’s own Hugo Chavez and Iran’s Mohammad Mossadegh.

All of these deposed leaders took the brave but fatal step of nationalizing—or attempting to nationalize—their own resources with the aim of developing their domestic economy. This is a bad idea when the hegemon that owns the biggest guns, controls the biggest banks, and intimidates its biggest rivals, isn’t keen on the idea. Much better to open your economy to commodity dumping, foreign takeovers, and imperial military bases. Your people may revile you, but you’ll probably survive, succeed in embezzling state funds, and perhaps arrange an amiable retirement in coastal Florida.

If “don’t think for yourself” is the central lesson for the subjects of empire, then “self-defense” is the dominant description of that empire’s behavior. If there is a single overriding lie that permeates Western propaganda over the last century, it is the fable of self-defense. In this country, it began when we were compelled to demonize the native Americans, declaring them an enemy that we must eradicate to save ourselves. Woodrow Wilson’s Red Scare ratcheted up the fear of the “Hun” such that a largely pacific populace was brought into a frothing fury, ready to

defends its unthreatened freedoms. Hitler succeeded in invading numerous nations in a desperate effort to protect the vulnerable German people from the mad hordes lurking on its every border. Ronald Reagan told America that the little nation of Nicaragua, consisting mostly of forest guerillas armed by the U.S., was a mere 48 hours from Texas. This was perhaps inspiration for Tony Blair's "45 minutes" fabrication from which Saddam Hussein never recovered. And now President Obama is continuing this tradition by telling us that we must be vigilant against the inscrutable deceptions of two rogue nations. Countries that—at least when it comes to eradicating poverty or not starting wars—do pose a threat to the United States: the threat of a good example.