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America's Inevitable Retreat from the Middle East

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THE murder of four Americans in Libya and mob assaults on the United States' embassies across the Muslim world this month have reminded many of 1979, when radical Islamists seized the American mission in Tehran. There, too, extremists running wild after the fall of a pro-American tyrant had found a cheap way of empowering themselves.

But the obsession with radical Islam misses a more meaningful analogy for the current state of siege in the Middle East and Afghanistan: the helicopters hovering above the roof of the American Embassy in Saigon in 1975 as North Vietnamese tanks rolled into the city.

That hasty departure ended America's long and costly involvement in Indochina, which, like the Middle East today, the United States had inherited from defunct European empires. Of course, Southeast Asia had no natural resources to tempt the United States and no ally like Israel to defend. But it appeared to be at the front line of the worldwide battle against Communism, and American policy makers had unsuccessfully tried both proxy despots and military firepower to make the locals advance their strategic interests.

The violent protests provoked by the film "Innocence of Muslims" will soon subside, and American embassies will return to normal business. But the symbolic import of the violence, which included a Taliban assault on one of the most highly secured American bases in Afghanistan, is unmistakable. The drama of waning American power is being re-enacted in the Middle East and South Asia after two futile wars and the collapse or weakening of pro-American regimes.

In Afghanistan, local soldiers and policemen have killed their Western trainers, and demonstrations have erupted there and in Pakistan against American drone strikes and reported desecrations of the Koran. Amazingly, this surge in historically rooted hatred and distrust of powerful Western invaders, meddlers and remote controllers has come yet again as a shock to many American policy makers and commentators, who have promptly retreated into a lazy "they hate our freedoms" narrative.

It is as though the United States, lulled by such ideological foils as Nazism and Communism into an exalted notion of its moral power and mission, missed the central event of the 20th century: the steady, and often violent, political awakening of peoples who had been exposed for decades to the sharp edges of Western power. This strange oversight explains why American policy makers kept missing their chances for peaceful post-imperial settlements in Asia.

As early as 1919, Ho Chi Minh, dressed in a morning suit and armed with quotations from the Declaration of Independence, had tried to petition President Woodrow Wilson for an end to French rule over Indochina. Ho did not get anywhere with Wilson. Indian, Egyptian, Iranian and Turkish nationalists hoping for the liberal internationalist president to promulgate a new "morality" in global affairs were similarly disappointed.

None of these anti-imperialists would have bothered if they had known that Wilson, a Southerner fond of jokes about "darkies," believed in maintaining "white civilization and its domination over the world." Franklin D. Roosevelt was only slightly more conciliatory when, in 1940, he proposed mollifying dispossessed Palestinian Arabs with a "little baksheesh."

Roosevelt changed his mind after meeting the Saudi leader Ibn Saud and learning of oil's importance to the postwar American economy. But the cold war, and America's obsession with the chimera of monolithic Communism, again obscured the unstoppable momentum of decolonization, which was fueled by an intense desire among humiliated peoples for equality and dignity in a world controlled by a small minority of white men.

Ho Chi Minh's post-World War II appeals for assistance to another American president — Harry S. Truman — again went unanswered; and Ho, who had worked with American intelligence agents during the war, was ostracized as a dangerous Communist. But many people in Asia saw that it was only a matter of time before the Vietnamese ended foreign domination of their country.

For the world had entered a new "revolutionary age," as the American critic Irving Howe wrote in 1954, in which the intense longing for change among millions of politicized people in Asia was the dominant force. "Whoever gains control of them," Howe warned, "whether in legitimate or distorted forms, will triumph." This mass longing for political transformation was repressed longer by cold war despotism in the Arab world; it has now exploded, profoundly damaging America's ability to dictate events there.

Given its long history of complicity with dictators in the region, from the shah of Iran to Saddam Hussein and Hosni Mubarak, the United States faces a huge deficit of trust. The belief that this deep-seated suspicion can be overcome by a few soothing presidential speeches betrays only

more condescending ignorance of the so-called Arab mind, which until recently was believed to be receptive only to brute force.

It is not just extremist Salafis who think Americans always have malevolent intentions: the Egyptian anti-Islamist demonstrators who pelted Hillary Rodham Clinton's motorcade in Alexandria with rotten eggs in July were convinced that America was making shady deals with the Muslim Brotherhood. And few people in the Muslim world have missed the Israeli prime minister's blatant manipulation of American politics for the sake of a pre-emptive assault on Iran.

There is little doubt that years of disorder lie ahead in the Middle East as different factions try to gain control. The murder of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens in Libya, the one American success story of the Arab Spring, is an early sign of the chaos to come; it also points to the unpredictable consequences likely to follow any Western intervention in Syria — or Iran.

As in Southeast Asia in 1975, the limits of both American firepower and diplomacy have been exposed. Financial leverage, or baksheesh, can work only up to a point with leaders struggling to control the bewilderingly diverse and ferocious energies unleashed by the Arab Spring.

Although it's politically unpalatable to mention it during an election campaign, the case for a strategic American retreat from the Middle East and Afghanistan has rarely been more compelling. It's especially strong as growing energy independence reduces America's burden for policing the region, and its supposed ally, Israel, shows alarming signs of turning into a loose cannon.

All will not be lost if America scales back its politically volatile presence in the Muslim world. It could one day return, as it has with its former enemy, Vietnam, to a relationship of mutually assured dignity. (Although the recent military buildup in the Pacific — part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" — hints at fresh overestimations of American power in that region.)

Republicans calling for President Obama to "grow" a "big stick" seem to think they live in the world of Teddy Roosevelt. Liberal internationalists arguing for even deeper American engagement with the Middle East inhabit a similar time warp; and both have an exaggerated idea of America's financial clout after the biggest economic crisis since the 1930s.

It is the world's newly ascendant nations and awakened peoples that will increasingly shape events in the post-Western era. America's retrenchment is inevitable. The only question is whether it will be as protracted and violent as Europe's mid-20th century retreat from a newly assertive Asia and Africa.