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9/11 and the Treason of Empire

By Justin Raimondo
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The fifteenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks has brought us mournful memorials, declarations that we will “never forget,” and outraged realizations that nearly a third of Americans don’t recall what year that signal event occurred. All of this is quite natural, but it isn’t what we need at the moment. Yes, anniversaries are a time for looking back, but I want to do something quite different: I want to look forward, and ask “Where are we now – and where are we going?”

But we can’t see where we are going without understanding where we have been, and thanks to that miracle known as the Internet you can do that by reading something I wrote fourteen years ago, in the Autumn of 2002: “Iraq: First Stop on the Road to Empire.” It is actually a speech I gave to the Washington University chapter of Young Americans for Liberty, in which I gave a pretty thorough accounting of the history that brought us to that day, September 11, 2001, as well as a warning of what the future held.

While the fires ignited by the blast in lower Manhattan had been put out, I warned that a fire had been lighted in the hive mind of our political class, one that, to this day, still smolders and burns and fills our eyes with acrid smoke:

“There is something quite different about the prospect of this war that sets it apart from all the conflicts the U.S. has entered in modern times. It’s something new, and I think we all feel it, and know on it some subliminal level: there’s a change in the air, an electricity that some find exhilarating and others find ominous. I count myself among the latter.”

"This new atmosphere was not created by 9/11, but certainly the explosion that sent the World Trade Center hurtling to the earth spread it far and wide. We are not just talking about war fever here, but of a lust for conquest not seen in this country since the Spanish-American war. And plain old-fashioned greed. We had this debate back in the 1890s: in response to the call of the War Party to annex the Spanish dominions a whole movement arose, organized as the Anti-Imperialist League. It was led by what, today, would be called libertarians, and one of its leaders, one Carl Schurz, had this to say:

"If we take these new regions, we shall be well entangled in that contest for territorial aggrandizement which distracts other nations and drives them far beyond their original design. So it will be inevitably with us. We shall want new conquests to protect that which we already possess. The greed of speculators working upon our government will push us from one point to another, and we shall have new conflicts upon our hands, almost without knowing how we got into them."

The shade of Schurz is surely haunting the conscience of our political leaders as his prophecy rings down through the years. Sadly, they don't have anything resembling a conscience, and so they are deaf to his ghostly imprecations.

When we attacked Afghanistan it was a war of vengeance: when we invaded and occupied Iraq it was a war of conquest. This had not happened since the turn of the twentieth century, when we seized the Philippines and Puerto Rico from a sclerotic Spanish empire and our political class dreamed of an American Imperium. That treasonous dream was murdered in its crib by Schurz and his fellow patriots, but it rose from the dead in the wake of 9/11 – and it yet lives, in spite of everything, in the hearts and minds of our elites.

In trying to explain her support for the Iraq war – which everyone but the most unrepentant neocon acknowledges was and is a disaster – Hillary Clinton averred that she has “learned the lessons” of that war and that we must ensure “it never happens again.” Yet in the next breath she likens Vladimir Putin to Hitler, accuses Donald Trump of being a Kremlin pawn, and threatens to take “military action” against Russia for supposedly hacking into the Democratic National Committee’s email system. Debbie Wasserman Schultz *must* be avenged – yes, even at the cost of World War III!

Rather than learning the lessons of our post-9/11 adventurism, the Democrats want to strike out in a new direction: forget the Islamic terrorists, some of whom Mrs. Clinton armed and enabled in Libya and Syria. We have a new enemy – Putin’s Russia.

Donald Trump, on the other hand, is focused – often in confusing and contradictory ways — on cleaning up the mess left by the Bush family and President Obama in the Middle East. On the one hand, he condemns the Iraq war and its consequences, and yet on the other hand threatens war with Iran. He says we were lied into Iraq, and yet is eagerly broadcasting the same lies spread by the same crowd that got us into that war, only this time Tehran rather than Baghdad is being targeted. To his credit, he opposes what he calls “nation-building” and attacks his opponent’s “trigger-happy” inclinations. He even purports to uphold a foreign policy of

“America first,” denounces globalism, and calls out the neocons, whose grip on the GOP he has broken.

Yet his anti-interventionist impulses are just that – impulses. Consistency is not his strong point. As such, he is an unreliable standard-bearer. Alas, we must make do with what we have.

Trump represents, at best, a holding action against a new and even more virulent interventionism raising its head on the “left” side of the political spectrum. The neoconservative infection, having run its course on the right, has now migrated to the other side of the aisle. The anti-interventionist sentiment that arose among conservatives during the administration of Bill Clinton in response to the Kosovo war – you’ll recall that it was a Republican Congress that voted to deny funding to that war – was interrupted and tamped down by the 9/11 attacks. Fifteen years later, it has resumed in the form of Trump’s triumph in the primaries, albeit in a distorted and wildly inconsistent manner.

That distortion is the legacy of 9/11, and the Iraq war, the consequences of which are still playing out.

Fifteen years ago, the neocons told us that the only way to deal with the threat of Islamic terrorism was to invade the Middle East, subjugate it, and install a MacArthur Regency over the entire region. The invasion of Iraq, they assured us, would inspire democratic pro-Western revolutions throughout the world, the “swamp” of the Middle East would be cleansed, and the terrorist creatures who inhabited it would be deprived of a nurturing environment.

Exactly the opposite has occurred. Even more fearsome creatures have emerged from that swamp, which is far from drained, in the form of ISIS, al Nusra, and whatever others are even now germinating like a swarm of Biblical locusts. We are less safe here in the “homeland” – as we’ve come to call the continental United States, to differentiate it from our overseas empire – than we were on September 12, 2001. Terrorist attacks have occurred not only here but also all across Europe – so many that we have become inured to them, we expect them, they are the New Normal.

The road back from 9/11 has been a long one – and our journey is hardly over. We won’t get back to the Old Normal anytime soon, if ever. Yet of one thing we can be sure; we won’t restore our old republic until and unless we divest ourselves of an empire that has become an albatross hung ‘round our collective neck. It is dragging us down, even as I write, into the abyss of bankruptcy and moral corruption. We must free ourselves, or face ruination.