

Recipe for a nuclear winter

PICTURE seven terrorists with seven nuclear bombs in seven American cities. That's the buzz floating around right wing talk radio. And unless we acquiesce to an end of our civil liberties, the story goes, America as we've always known it will cease to exist.

Yes, this is a doomsday scenario, and it doesn't take an "evil empire," as Ronald Reagan once called the Soviet Union, to pull it off. We've seen what two planes hitting two towers did to our society and to our economy. It's not uncommon for politicians of all bends to divide modern world history into two segments – pre and post-9/11, sort of like B.C. and A.D.

Seven nuclear bombs would do to us what our government has been threatening to do to other nations since we emerged from the Cold War as the world's only superpower – bomb us back into the proverbial Stone Age. While much of the nation would remain physically intact, the capital necessary to maintain it would have vanished. That's because in large part our banking system and the solvency of our economy is based on mortgages with high value urban real estate as the collateral. Degrade that collateral, and the system crashes.

Socially, however, we'd be facing much tougher problems. Picture all the wacko gun nuts and survivalists, long ignored but heavily armed miscreants and social misfits, suddenly mobilized into Armageddon mode. And visualize martial law, because it's the only reaction to a catastrophe this government could ever fathom. Imagine every American city becoming its own sort of Baghdad, with seven of them under a radioactive cloud.

To respond to this threat, the argument goes, we need to say goodbye to American traditions and values. We need more and stronger Patriot Acts. We need to allow government surveillance into all aspects of our lives. We need to forget about the oldest

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safeguard in our legal system – Habeas Corpus – the right of every prisoner to have a day in court. We need to let the government imprison and torture people at will as well as jail them indefinitely without charges. In short, we need to create what has never existed in the history of humanity – a benevolent police state.

So the big question is, can there be seven terrorists with seven bombs? To answer this, we need to travel back in recent history to the end of the Cold War when the Reagan administration beat the Soviet Union not with the expected nuclear kayo, but simply by outlasting them in a war of economic endurance as both empires bled themselves bankrupt with military spending.

So we won, sort of. But the scene was much like the fall of Baghdad with the former Soviet Union fracturing into chaos, leaving their nuclear arsenal scattered to the winds geographically abandoned in a mélange of emerging nations. So like Mission Accomplished in Iraq, the collapse of the Soviet Union left us not safer, but more vulnerable. Granted, the threat of a thousand missiles raining down upon us in a high tech Mutually Assured Destruction has diminished – but one or two or seven, in the end, could do the job of destroying America pretty well.

McMansions and bombs

Then there was the presidency of Bush senior. Working with the Russians and the former Soviet satellites to collect up their nuclear arsenal was never much of a priority. It would cost money, and Bush I, like Reagan before him, was all about cutting taxes for the richest Americans. Hence, there was no money for “bloated government programs.” So McMansions became more common while cars, shrunk after the energy crisis of the 1970s, once again grew obese. But we needed cheap oil to heat our little castles and run our little trucks. So we gave American ally, Saddam Hussein, the green light to invade Kuwait, hence giving ourselves the moral high ground to go to war and create a permanent military presence in the oil-rich Middle East – pissing off a lot of people.

Many of these folks, including Usama bin Laden, were our former allies in the Cold War against the Soviets. With the Soviets gone, however, and with the US taking over their role as foreign occupiers of Islamic nations, our former allies did the same as they did during the Cold War – take up arms against the superpower that was occupying their holy land. This was George Bush Senior’s present to incoming president Bill Clinton – lots of loose bombs and lots of seasoned fighters with reason to hate us.

The Clinton administration, while selling out American workers by backing a succession of Republican-backed trade bills, did take terrorism and the need for mid-east peace seriously. Hence police agencies caught the terrorists who bombed the World Trade

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Center in 1993 and, thanks to the cooperation of governments around the world, thwarted subsequent attacks. Things certainly weren't rosy under Clinton, however, as the US military regularly bombed Iraq as well as a few other scattered targets such as Belgrade and a medicine factory in the Sudan. And the global disparity in income, a root cause of political violence, was accelerated under Clinton's trade policies. But compared to what came before him, and what came after, Clinton wasn't the worst.

Forget about sanity or Coca Cola

This all brings us up to the current Bush administration. Forget about Arab-Israeli peace. And forget about international cooperation. And forget about effective policing (torture, it turns out, does not work in securing accurate intelligence). Hell, until 9/11, the record shows, the Bush administration even forgot all about terrorism. There's also the Bush league diplomatic blunders, like the "Axis of Evil" speech which led to the electoral toppling of Iran's pro-Western reformist government, or his absolute disdain for the international rule of law, which leaves many pivotal world governments seeing us as a rogue state – one which they are less than enthusiastic about cooperating with.

Then came two Bush wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Both have lasted longer than the US involvement in World War II. And they've transformed us from the beloved land of Nike and Coca Cola, riding high in the saddle, into a reviled global pariah – widely seen as the number one threat to world peace.

Securing loose nukes never has been, and still isn't, a priority of the current Bush administration. Worse yet – under Bush, we've seen the largest wave of nuclear proliferation, including Pakistan's illegal nuclear weapons program, as well its sharing of nuclear technology with Iran, North Korea and Libya. Despite this, Pakistan is still a favored ally of the Bush administration and a partner in its so called War on Terror. The Bush administration's demonizing of North Korea and Iran as being in his aforementioned "Axis of Evil" with Iraq, followed by our invasion of Iraq, pushed the remaining two countries to work to acquire nuclear bombs as a deterrence to a "preemptive strike" by the US.

It all adds up to a recipe for disaster. There are unsecured nukes floating around politically unstable former Soviet states now mired in poverty. And there are former Soviet nuclear scientists now unemployed. Add into the calculation new countries with new nuclear programs producing more nuclear material. Mix in the blood of a hundred thousand freshly dead Iraqis and Lebanese civilians, a few videos of grotesque indignations at the hands of American and US-backed Israeli forces, and the Bush administration's publicly flaunted hubris. Maybe baste it in a repeat performance in Iran.

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Pepper it all with a growing disparity between the wealthy countries and the rest of the world. What you wind up with is a steaming gumbo of nuclear bombs and angry hopeless people – a violent radicalism that US intelligence agencies recently reported as having “metastasized and spread across the globe” as a result of our occupation of Iraq.

Play nice with others

So yes, I think the fear mongers are onto something, even if they like to talk about the threat without addressing its cause. The chances of nuclear bombs detonating in American cities has never been greater. Where we differ is in our strategy to avert the unthinkable. The Bush response to the threat of terrorism is barbaric unilateralism – but this just breeds more terror on all sides of the equation. Alienating the rest of the world cuts us off from the very people we need to be allied with to prevent terror. Bush’s policies leave us without friends. Without people who would otherwise step forward, blow the whistle, and prevent an attack on fellow humans. We are now so reviled that any enemy of America becomes a hero to those living under our collective jackboots. When you fight barbarism with barbarism you become a barbarian – and few people will step forward to save a barbarian from a speeding bullet.

The only effective way to fight terror is to fight against poverty and global injustice. To not appear as barbarians or imperialists. To not be so hated that people will line up to sacrifice their own lives just to take ours. The message Bush missed is the one most of us caught in Kindergarten – play nice with others.

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