

Book Review

Chalmers Johnson

Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire

New York: Henry Holt, 2000

Reviewed by Michael Whealen

"Now the onely way to avoyde this shipwracke and to provide for our posterity is to doe Justly, [and] to love mercy."

-John Winthrop, *City upon a Hill* (1630)

Over the last few months I have had the privilege of working as a business analyst with a team of bright young risk managers at the head office of a major Canadian bank. From what I have seen, the lot of risk managers is not an easy one. Their job is to analyze and identify current and future deleterious trends that may threaten proprietary assets, and then identify and put forward mechanisms that will (they hope) protect these assets from harm. I sometimes think that if we were really, really good at this job, our collective efforts to understand risk would have predictive value. In coming to know the dynamics of the risks, we should then be able to anticipate the future shape that they will take and thus be able to do something about them.

This is, I think, the level of skill that Chalmers Johnson has very consummately attained in his latest book *Blowback*, which is at once an erudite, scathing indictment of recent US global monetary and foreign policy in Asia, and an eerily (and tragically) predictive piece of political writing. Johnson's credentials are impeccable. A former US Military Reservist with a wealth of diplomatic experience, he is currently President of the Japan Policy Research Institute and a Professor Emeritus at the University of California, San Diego. In addition to the usual host of articles, he has written more than nine highly-acclaimed books on business and foreign policy in Japan and Asia, including his now classic *MITI and the Japanese Miracle, 1925-1975*.

The title of Johnson's book requires a bit of elucidation for those of us who are not experts in the field of international relations. As the author notes:

The term 'blowback,' which officials of the Central Intelligence Agency first invented for their own internal use refers to the unintended consequences of policies that were kept secret from the American people. 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.

Simply put, Johnson's point is that a nation-state, especially a sole, powerful *hegemon* like the United States reaps what it sows in the course of pursuing its global interests and agendas. There are two chapters on how this has worked out in Japan, two on the impact of US foreign and monetary policy in China, and a chapter on blowback in Thailand and Indonesia. Ancillary chapters explore the relationship between US foreign policy and

what may still prove to be a global financial meltdown that began with the collapse of Asian economies in the late 1990s, the role of US traditional and extracongressional special forces and-most important from a predictive standpoint-the US domestic consequences of blowback scenarios when the chickens, as they must, come home to roost. When one remembers that this study was begun well before the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the following admonitions are chilling and eerily prescient:

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. Although most Americans may be largely ignorant of what was, and still is, being done in their names, all are likely to pay a steep price - individually and collectively - for their nation's continued efforts to dominate the global scene.

In retrospect, it is perhaps not surprising that Johnson devotes considerable attention to the impact of short-sighted US foreign policy in nations and spheres of influence that contain significant Muslim populations, such as Afghanistan and Indonesia. The research is irrefragable, the sources surprisingly orthodox and "conventional," and one seeks in vain for the kind of frequently-unsubstantiated speculations about vast, hidden conspiracies that tend to haunt so many comparable critical studies.

A deeply moral and compassionate man, Johnson suggests sensible remedies that seem to make good sense. Toward the end of his book, he writes that "the United States should seek to lead through diplomacy and example rather than through military force and economic bullying." Even though the events of 11 September may have shown that his was a voice crying in the wilderness, *Blowback* will be worth reading not only for "risk management" types, but for anyone even remotely involved in shaping or steering public or private sector policies in our time.

About the Author:

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