

Commentary

PERSPECTIVE ON U.S. POLICY

Americans Feeling the Effects of 'Blowback'



Osama bin Laden's network is only one of many unintended consequences of our actions abroad.

By CHALMERS JOHNSON

Our intelligence agencies—the CIA and its rivals in the Pentagon—have a history of creating neologisms to describe our world that cover up more than they reveal. There have been lofty coinages like “host-nation support,” meaning foreign countries pay to base our troops on their soil, and military jargon like “low-intensity warfare” that repackages the most brutal strife in anti-septic language.

Every now and then, however, a useful new word emerges from the labyrinth of our secret services. The American media recently started to use the term “blowback.” Central Intelligence Agency officials coined it for internal use in the wake of decisions by the Carter and Reagan administrations to plunge the agency deep into the civil war in Afghanistan. It

wasn't long before the CIA was secretly arming every *mojahedeen* volunteer in sight, without considering who they were or what their politics might be—all in the name of ensuring that the Soviet Union had its own Vietnam-like experience.

Not so many years later, these “freedom fighters” began to turn up in unexpected places. They bombed the World Trade Center in New York City, murdered several CIA employees in Virginia and some American businessmen in Pakistan and gave support to Osama bin Laden, a prime CIA “asset” back when our national security advisors had no qualms about giving guns to religious fundamentalists.

In this context, “blowback” came to be shorthand for the unintended consequences of U.S. policies kept secret from the American people. In fact, to CIA officials and an increasing number of American pundits, blowback has become a term of art acknowledging that the unconstrained, often illegal, secret acts of the United States in other countries can result in retaliation against innocent American citizens. The dirty tricks agen-

cies are at pains never to draw the connection between what they do and what sometimes happens to those who pay their salaries.

So we are supposed to believe that the bombings of American embassies in East Africa in 1998, the proliferation of sophisticated weapons, not to mention devices of mass murder, around the world, or the crack cocaine epidemic in American cities are simply examples of terrorism, the work of unscrupulous arms dealers, drug lords, ancient hatreds, rogue states; anything unconnected to America's global policies.

Perhaps the term “blowback” can help us to re-link certain violent acts against Americans to the policies from which they secretly—as far as most Americans are concerned—sprang. From refugee flows across our southern borders from countries where U.S.-supported repression has created hopeless conditions, to U.S.-supported economic policies that have led to unimaginable misery, blowback reintroduces us to a world of cause and effect.

We also might consider widening the word's application to take in the unintended consequences U.S. policies may

have for others. For example, even if the policies that our government fostered and that produced the economic collapse of Indonesia in 1997 never blow back to the U.S., the unintended consequences for Indonesians have been staggering. They include poverty, serious ethnic violence and perhaps political disintegration. Similarly, our “dirty hands” in overthrowing President Salvador Allende in Chile and installing Gen. Augusto Pinochet, who subsequently killed thousands of his own citizens, are just now coming fully into the open. Even when blowback from our policies mainly strikes other peoples, it has a corrosive effect on us, debasing political discourse and making us feel duped when the news finally emerges.

The United States likes to think of itself as the winner of the Cold War. In all probability, to those looking back at blowback a century hence, neither side will appear to have won, particularly if the United States maintains its present imperial course.

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