

Crunch Time

American Idealism, the Economy, and Afghanistan

My hunch is that all the contention over healthcare reform this summer is the symptom of a deeper distress—growing doubts about American idealism combined with declining trust in government.

Consider the distress at the Pentagon over deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan (*Washington Post*, 8/24/09). The United States did not go into Afghanistan to build a nation-state. The aim was to defend us from terrorists. Which was also President Bush's stated reason for invading Iraq. Yet the long slog in both countries has continued for so long that other aims have been added along the way to justify the military losses and expenditures. Chief among the added aims is to promote freedom and democracy in the world, and that now involves us in trying to build a state in Afghanistan.

The American venture in Afghanistan (and in Iraq) continues to be called "war"—to defend America—because Americans would not be willing to spend tens of billions of dollars each year for state-building exercises abroad. We are reluctant to see taxes raised even to restore our own public infrastructure, or to reform healthcare policy, or to raise teachers' salaries, or to strengthen the court system. We certainly don't want the government to use our taxes to pay for such things in other countries.

However, America's leading generals are saying that military efforts alone will not be enough to win "the war" (*Washington Post*, 8/6/09; 8/9/09; *Financial Times*, 8/11/09; 8/14/09). The enemy, apparently, is not only the Taliban or al-Qaeda. The enemy is drug trafficking, extensive corruption, lack of government, and near economic disaster. Thus, the US and a few of its NATO allies are trying to fill in for an almost powerless national government. The US military is spending tens of billions of American dollars to provide domestic policing, military training, counter-insurgency efforts, and economic opportunities for Afghanistan.

As a consequence, recent opinion polls here at home (no doubt influenced by the economic and debt crises) show that opinion is shifting against the "war" in Afghanistan (*Washington Post-ABC News Poll*, see the *Washington Post*, 8/20/09). After all, terrorists are doing damage in many parts of the world—India, Pakistan, Somalia,

Indonesia, Chechnya—and those terrorist acts do not appear to threaten America’s homeland to the degree that they would require the dispatch of our military to those countries. Why then does the US need to spend billions more in Afghanistan to act as a police force, to build schools, and to develop economic alternatives to opium production when tens of thousands of Americans can’t find jobs here at home?

American idealism entails faith not only in a strong defense and in the spread of democracy throughout the world. It also entails faith in freedom and economic prosperity at home. This faith—this American way of life—now appears to be in crisis because its different elements no longer cohere as they once did. Many are wondering: Will we no longer be able to enjoy prosperity at home and win wars abroad? Is our freedom threatened and the spread of democracy in danger?

Listening to radio and TV talks shows and to people in shopping malls, one also gets the distinct impression that the perceived enemies of freedom now include New York investment bankers, members of Congress, and even the president of the United States. Few people feel immediately threatened by the Taliban, but many are suspicious of the United Nations and foreign countries, which they fear may have more control over our economy and long-term security than do Washington officials. How then can Washington be trusted to reform health care?

If American idealism—faith in freedom, democracy, and prosperity—is no longer strong enough to guarantee prosperity at home and military victory in Afghanistan, how can citizens trust government to resolve the economic crisis or reform healthcare? Is American idealism withering? Is the future of America in doubt?

These, it seems to me, are the deeper questions of this summer, but they are not new. They emerged from the turmoil of the 1960s, intensified with the failure of the Vietnam war, expanded during the Culture Wars of the 1970s and 1980s, and are now driving political debate in the face of questionable conditions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the very serious economic crisis now upon us.

Meaningful answers to these questions will have to be rooted in a better, stronger, shared vision of what a just republic should be in this shrinking world. Confidence at home will require trust in government, for which we need a new system of electoral representation that will tie government more closely to citizens than to dominating interest groups. And sustainable prosperity will require hard work, durable savings, and stewardly investments in place of debt-induced consumption, unending warfare, and limitless grasping for the fulfillment of life’s meaning in this age.

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