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THEY SAID IT

"The Game is so large that one sees but a little at a time."

"Oho!" said Kim, and held his tongue....

"When everyone is dead the Great Game is finished. Not before."

--Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*, 1901.

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THREATS, REAL AND IMAGINED.

On the one hand, it's hard not to agree with the various and sundry conservative pundits and politicians who declared that last week's opening session of the United Nations General Assembly was enormously important, a clarifying moment if you will. There is no question that the session or, more accurately, the speeches that accompanied its opening, were immensely valuable in helping to illuminate the challenges that face the United States as it attempts to ward off its enemies and make the world a little safer.

On the other hand, it's more than a little troubling that what seemed so clear to us has apparently caused so much confusion among those who should know better and whose thoughts on such things actually matter a whole lot more than ours. Obviously, the already infamous addresses given by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and literary critic Hugo Chavez taught us something important. And we thought that what they taught was unmistakable. But it seems we were wrong, or at least that's what we have to assume, given that our sense of these lessons does not comport perfectly with those of the chattering class.

For starters, we do not believe that the take-away point from the Ahmadinejad and Chavez speeches, or even from the exultant reaction both men received from the world's diplomatic corps, is that the United Nations is a den of vipers largely hostile to American interests that should be viewed with mistrust. Yes, that's true. But as far as we're concerned, that incisive insight was obvious long before last week, and anyone who didn't know it already, is unlikely to have been convinced, even after the Bobbsey twins' theatrics.

Nor was the message that the United Nations is, as the inimitable Mark Steyn put it, "utterly incapable of reform." Steyn is absolutely right that "any reforms would be more likely to upgrade and enhance the cliques of thugs and despots than of the few states willing to stand up to them." But again, as far as we're concerned, that much has been incontestable for years. It's been at least two years now since Steyn, writing about one or another of the United Nations' seemingly endless corruption or child prostitution scandals,

discussed the body's corrupting influence with the "basic axiom that if you take a quart of ice cream and blend it with a quart of dog poop the result will taste more like the latter than the former." And anyone who didn't know that before last week was either not paying attention or was willfully ignorant.

Finally, the message delivered at Turtle Bay wasn't that Ahmadinejad and Chavez represent serious and grave threats to the American people, to American geopolitical dominance, to the "global order," or to anything else for that matter. And it doesn't make any difference what they said about our President and government, or how many threats they issued, or even how fervently they prayed for Armageddon.

Former Reagan speechwriter and current *Wall Street Journal* columnist Peggy Noonan wrote that the speeches reminded her that "the temperature of the world is very high." And about this she was undoubtedly correct. But she also took this point one step further, suggesting that the reason (or one of the reasons) the temperature is so high is because of people like Chavez, a man whom we should "take seriously" and whose speech "achieved a great deal." But we think that this is precisely the wrong conclusion.

Yes, the temperature of the world is very high. But it's not because of Chavez or Ahmadinejad. At worst, these two are minor irritants, annoying but not especially threatening, and certainly not capable of spiking even the mildest heat wave. And that, above all else, is what was demonstrated so clearly last week. The lesson we received from the occasion is, quite simply, that Ahmadinejad and Chavez should not, indeed *cannot* be taken seriously. They are buffoons; cartoonish facsimiles of Third World populist heroes; sad imitations of real totalitarian strongmen.

This is not to say that neither man is dangerous. Each is, in his own way. But neither is a significant enough player in his own right to deserve to be a primary or even secondary focus of American national security policy.

In fact, paying these two common thugs undue attention, taking seriously the anti-American parody they staged last week, actually distracts from the

real threats that face the United States. Chavez and Ahmadinejad provide not merely comic relief, but comic distraction, drawing attention from the real players and the real threats.

Take, for example, Ahmadinejad. Since his emergence on the global stage roughly a year ago, he has become the principal focus of geopolitical angst. *His* proclamations that the Holocaust never happened, *his* declarations that Israel should be wiped off the map, *his* drive for nuclear weapons, *his* fervent millenarian desires have all been sources of much consternation among the world's political leaders. But none of these things are *his* in any meaningful sense of the word.

It's easy to forget sometimes, particularly given the attention that is lavished on him, that Ahmadinejad is largely irrelevant. He is a figurehead with no real power, the official head of state, but one with almost no actual input into the course of public policy. When people like Ohio Senator George Voinovich declare that Ahmadinejad is "a Hitler type of person," they overstate his importance and thereby cloud the picture, making it seem that Ahmadinejad himself presents the threat and that his neutralization would thus eliminate the threat altogether. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Everything which Ahmadinejad represents, all the "eccentricities" that the world quite rightly sees as threatening – the race for nukes, the rabid anti-Semitism, the millenarian yearning to coax the 12th Imam out of the well – have been the guiding principles of the Islamic Republic for over a quarter century now. *And they will be the policies of the Islamic Republic for as long as it stands, long after Ahmadinejad is pushing up daisies.*

The pretense that Ahmadinejad is the problem, that he personally presents a geopolitical threat provides excellent cover to the Mad Mullahs, who still pull the strings, who still control the direction of the ship of state, and who will still be pursuing the "end of days" and the nuclear weapons to bring about that end long after the Ahmadinejad threat has been "neutralized." When the likes of Senator Voinovich bluster about Ahmadinejad's Hitler-esque qualities, they do little more than showcase their own geopolitical and historical ignorance.

Ahmadinejad's anti-Semitism is not unique by any stretch and, indeed, is merely a continuation of the official state position on Israel and Jews as established by the late Ayatollah Rohollah Khomeini some twenty-seven years ago. When Ahmadinejad waxes lyrical about wiping Israel off the map, he is merely echoing the sentiments expressed nearly a decade ago by former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who, you may recall, was the "moderate" candidate in the last election.

In the 1980s, one of Ahmadinejad's predecessors as president was impeached. Another was assassinated. Yet very few Westerners knew this and none who did cared very much. Why? Because those Iranian presidents didn't really matter. And while Ahmadinejad may be more charismatic and entertaining than his predecessors, he doesn't really matter either. Pretending that he does merely distracts from the real problem, which is the nature and composition of the regime itself.

As for Chavez, his role in the grand political scheme is not quite as easily defined as is Ahmadinejad's. He is not the official cover for a more sinister force like his buddy Mahmoud is. He is merely a buffoon who happens to have a great deal of money right now, thanks to oil prices, and who has used his money to make himself appear more important than he really is, to "punch above his weight," as Mark Steyn recently put it.

Now, it's not that Chavez isn't causing all sorts of trouble. He is. And if one wants to worry about the nefarious activities in which Chavez is engaged and to which he directs a great deal of his oil profits, that's all well and good. But it should be known that most of those activities – from colluding with the Mad Mullahs, to arming third world troublemakers, to funding and supporting terrorists – have been done longer, better, and more ominously by others. When it comes to destabilizing the developing world and thus causing headaches for the United States, Chavez is both Johnny-come-lately and a rank amateur when compared with, for example, the Russians.

Former Romanian Lt. General Ion Mihai Pacepa, who was at one time the second-ranking official in the Romanian intelligence services, has, for years, made a strong argument that Islamic terrorism – the tactic, not the ideology that motivates it – is largely a Soviet creation. Last month, after the conclusion of the Israel-Hezbollah mini-war, Pacepa wrote the following:

Today's international terrorism was conceived at the Lubyanka, the headquarters of the KGB, in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War in the Middle East. I witnessed its birth in my other life, as a Communist general. Israel humiliated Egypt and Syria, whose bellicose governments were being run by Soviet *razvedka* (Russian for "foreign intelligence") advisers, whereupon the Kremlin decided to arm Israel's enemy neighbors, the Palestinians, and draw them into a terrorist war against Israel.

General Aleksandr Sakharovsky, who created Communist Romania's intelligence structure and then rose to head up all of Soviet Russia's foreign intelligence, often lectured me: "In today's world, when nuclear arms have made military force obsolete, terrorism should become our main weapon."

Between 1968 and 1978, when I broke with Communism, the security forces of Romania alone sent two cargo planes full of military goodies every week to Palestinian terrorists in Lebanon. Since the fall of Communism the East German Stasi archives have revealed that, in 1983 alone, its foreign intelligence service sent \$1,877,600 worth of AK-47 ammunition to Lebanon. According to Vaclav Havel, Communist Czechoslovakia shipped 1,000 tons of the odorless explosive Semtex-H (which can't be detected by sniffer dogs) to Islamic terrorists — enough for 150 years . . .

By the end of the 1960s, the KGB was deeply involved in mass terrorism against Jews, carried out by various Palestinian client organizations. Here are some terrorist actions for which the KGB took credit while I was still in Romania: November 1969, armed attack on the El Al office in Athens, leaving 1 dead and 14 wounded; May 30, 1972, Ben Gurion Airport attack, leaving 22 dead and 76 wounded; December 1974, Tel Aviv movie theater bomb, leaving 2 dead and 66 wounded; March 1975, attack on a Tel Aviv hotel, leaving 25 dead and 6 wounded; May 1975, Jerusalem bomb, leaving 1 dead and 3 wounded; July 4, 1975, bomb in Zion Square, Jerusalem, leaving 15 dead and 62 wounded; April 1978, Brussels airport attack, leaving 12 wounded; May 1978, attack on an El Al plane in Paris, leaving 12 wounded....

Why does this matter now, a decade-and-a-half after the Soviet Union's demise? Well, for starters, Russia is today run by a small oligarchy of former KGB officials, the most important of whom, of course, is President Vladimir Putin, the former KGB colonel who, by his own admission, was once responsible for "dissident" suppression. More to the point, the KGB remnants appear not to have given up their fondness for destabilizing the world and using Islamic radicals to do so.

As Pacepa noted last month, "Israel has been attacked [by Hezbollah] with Soviet Kalashnikovs and Katyushas, Russian Fajr-1 and Fajr-3 rockets, Russian AT-5 Spandrel antitank missiles and Kornet antitank rockets. Russia's outmoded weapons are now all the rage with terrorists everywhere in the world, and the bad guys know exactly where to get them. The weapons cases abandoned by Hezbollah were marked: 'Customer: Ministry of Defense of Syria. Supplier: KBP, Tula, Russia.'" And this is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

The Russians, of course, have been instrumental both in the development of the Iranian nuclear program and in precluding United Nations action in response

to that program. The Russians are building Iran's Bushehr nuclear plant. Today, Iranian atomic program chief Gholamreza Aghazadeh is in Moscow meeting with Sergei Kiriienko, the director of Russia's federal nuclear power agency. The Russians have supplied the Iranians with their most advanced anti-aircraft system and have helped them increase the accuracy and range of their Shahab-3 and Shahab-4 missile systems, both of which are Russian designed.

Many of the analysts who currently man our alleged "intelligence" agencies insist that the Russians would never want to help the Islamists since they have their own problems with radical Islam (see Chechnya) and would therefore not want to feed the beast. Iranian fingerprints have been found all over the Chechan terrorist insurgency, and one might therefore assume that the Russians would be on our side in the fight against the Mullahs. Unfortunately, such a supposition would contradict both the facts and Russia's historical affinity for geopolitical mischief.

Last week, Comrade Putin announced that he would send troops to war-torn Lebanon, but that they would not be there under United Nations auspices. We can't say with any degree of confidence what Putin might hope to accomplish with those troops, but we can guess that it will not be to the United States' benefit. For roughly two centuries now, Russia (and the Soviet Union) have been playing "The Great Game" in that part of the world; wielding influence, toppling regimes, expanding holdings. And for the most part, Western attempts either to make sense of Russian moves or to anticipate the next one have been unsuccessful. We can't say what Putin and his KGB comrades intend. But we can say that it looks for all the world as though they are still playing the Great Game while the West remains largely in denial.

Two weeks ago, Eugene P. Trani, the president of Virginia Commonwealth University, wrote an article published by the *International Herald Tribune* (essentially *The New York Times* international edition) chastising Americans for criticizing Russia and for not recognizing that the "real" Russia is a bustling place featuring "growing prosperity and innovation, progressive education, and economic strength not

based exclusively on oil and gas.” This, he argues, suggests that the United States should “craft” a “Russian relationship around areas that are mutually advantageous [which] would give the United States a better chance of fostering political liberalism in Russia.”

Now, we don’t know Dr. Trani and thus can’t comment on the body of his work. But this particular piece is just nuts. We are dealing here with a dying nation with a negative birth rate and a rapidly *decreasing* life expectancy. This is a country with no history of political stability, no political institutions of note, that is run by crime syndicates and the remnants of the KGB, and that has thousands of nuclear weapons, hundreds of which, according to some analyses, are unaccounted for. Nothing is more ludicrous than the idea that anyone in the U.S. government could even figure out what the Russians might want, much less be able to cooperate in achieving those wants based on “areas that are mutually advantageous.”

Does all of this mean that President Bush should stop the war on terror and refocus himself on a Cold War showdown with the Russians? Of course not. But it does mean that anyone who tells you that Hugo Chavez is the world’s greatest menace is taking a rather narrow view of the world, to put mildly. Chavez is a thug, but he’s not a thug who can foment global violence and chaos on his own. To do that, he needs help.

Unfortunately, such help is apparently readily available. Over the weekend, Thor Halvorssen, the President of the Human Rights Foundation, noted that Chavez recently “bought 100,000 automatic assault rifles,

53 Mi-35 assault helicopters and several super-sonic fighter bombers . . .” Anyone care to guess who the seller of those items was? (We’ll give you a hint: It’s the same country that, again according to Halvorssen, recently signed an agreement with Chavez to “build Latin America’s first-ever Kalashnikov factory.”)

We don’t mean to sound alarmist about the state of Russia and its current role in geopolitical affairs. But frankly, it’s kind of hard not to be.

Nearly all of the developed world is currently sitting around either fretting about or fawning over the machinations of two melodramatic clowns, clowns who are enamored both with the sounds of their own voices and with the fawning attention paid to them by knee-jerk anti-American elitists. Meanwhile, the real “global bad actors” continue to go about their business in relative anonymity. The Mullahs seem content to let the West delude itself with the absurd notion that a man who has been president for only a year is nonetheless the source of the Islamic Republic’s treachery. And the former KGB agent who runs Russia is similarly content to let the world worry over the threats posed by Iran and Venezuela, while he continues to provide the weapons that fuel both those threats.

As we wrote above, Peggy Noonan is right. The temperature of the world is indeed very high. But Chavez and Ahmadinejad are merely the symptoms of this fever, not its cause. To pretend otherwise is to ensure that the fever will not be broken and that the world will continue in its feverish state for the foreseeable future.

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