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## THEY SAID IT

In the second century of the Christian Era, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valor. The gentle but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury. The image of a free constitution was preserved with decent reverence: the Roman senate appeared to possess the sovereign authority, and devolved on the emperors all the executive powers of government. During a happy period of more than fourscore years, the public administration was conducted by the virtue and abilities of Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the two Antonines. It is the design of this, and of the two succeeding chapters, to describe the prosperous condition of their empire; and after wards, from the death of Marcus Antoninus, to deduce the most important circumstances of its decline and fall; a revolution which will ever be remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the earth.

Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire*, Volume I, 1776.

## FOREIGN POLICY 2011: THE EMPIRE STRIKES OUT.

It has become our custom, over time, to finish the second of our two annual forecast pieces – the one focusing on foreign policy – with a brief discussion about Islamic terrorism and its potential to affect everything else in the realm of international affairs. As we have said countless times in these pages, and in these forecasts in particular, all bets are off and all predictions should be considered null and void in the event of a successful, large-scale terrorist attack on American civilians. Obviously, such an attack could change the very course of American history and, along with it, world history. Just as the attacks of 9/11 did. And no one wants to be committed, even only intellectually, to predictions about a world that no longer exists. And no one wants such a commitment to hinge on something as nebulous and unpredictable as terrorism.

Fortunately, most years this has worked out pretty well. We finish the piece predicting no devastating terrorist attacks. And there are no terrorist attacks. Win-win.

Last year, we varied from this format a bit, and *started* with Islamic terrorism. There was a reason for this, namely the fact that we felt very uneasy about global conditions, about American leadership in the world, and about the possibility that the Islamists would, at last, get “lucky” and commit unimaginable and unspeakable evil. And we therefore not only started with terrorism, but forecast that “while we hope we are wrong about this, we believe that [the Islamists] will eventually enjoy successes of various intensities. Or, to put this more bluntly, they will succeed in killing innocent American civilians.”

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Fortunately, this worked out well also, in that we were, in fact, wrong, which is to say there was no successful attack, though again only by dint of stupidity. Whatever the case, we were happy to be wrong, format change notwithstanding.

This year, we think we'll stick with the new format, putting terrorism first, though not for the same reason as last year. This year, our terrorism prediction – which returns to normalcy and again runs toward optimism and the belief that the terrorists will NOT succeed – nonetheless sets the foundational tone for the rest of the piece.

Let us explain...

*Forecast #1: The homeland of the United States will remain safe from major attack by Islamist terrorists, not because the Islamists won't try, but because, perhaps, they won't try as hard.*

If this strikes you as an odd forecast, we'll concede that it is. But bear with us.

We don't think that the Islamists have given up trying to kill Americans in America. And we don't think that they have halted their training or their funding or their efforts to bring the Great Satan low. But at the same time, we get the sense, for the first time in more than a decade – since long before 9/11 – that this nation's enemies believe that the critical battlefield in this twilight struggle *is not the United States itself*.

Now, American leaders have been saying as much for years. George Bush insisted until the day he rode off into the Texas sunset that Iraq was the “central front in the war on terror.” Kerry, Dean, Clinton, Obama, and the rest insisted, by contrast, that Afghanistan was the central front. And despite these and other obvious differences and the manifestly varying grades of dedication to the war as a whole, always it seemed that the American leaders were willing to concede, at least, that the decisive battles were taking place “over there” rather than “over here.”

Today, it seems to us at least that this sentiment is shared by the enemy. There is, we believe, a palpable

sense among the Islamists that the American “war on terror” can be defeated, if the temporary occupation of Afghanistan can be undermined or even just stifled. If progress can be delayed or denied, if the Americans can be kept for another year – *a tenth* – in what amounts to a stalemate, then their will can be broken.

But more to the point, there are more important things to worry about right now, at least from the Islamists' perspective. If they play their cards right, within the next two years, they can be in possession of perhaps as many as two nuclear arsenals. As always, the Iranians trudge along, pushing inevitably toward nuclear status, delayed only by worms and viruses, of the digital variety. At the same time, the Pakistani arsenal appears perpetually within reach, and may, in fact, be so.

Whatever the case, it just strikes us that there has been something of a shift in focus, a realignment of interests, if only temporary. The American homeland is, we suspect, less relevant today, even to the al Qaeda operational planners, than it was yesterday. And less so then than the day before. As bizarre as it may sound to those with long-term strategic objectives – and it is always questionable whether the Islamists can be counted among this group – there are more important things right now than the United States.

For years, opponents of the Bush-era foreign policy, on the right and especially on the left, insisted that the United States needed a smaller global footprint; that it needed to be less omnipresent in global affairs; that it needed to ensure that there are more important things right now than the United States. *Et voila*.

Oh sure, there will be attempted terrorist attacks this year. But perhaps al Qaeda has determined that it can accomplish its goal of disrupting American economic and civil life simply by sending Mohammed the Moron to singe his shorts and curlies on a runway in Detroit, rather than wasting precious time and resources with actual operational planning. Or perhaps this will be the year that the instructors in the training camps finally remember to hold the class on “turning on the propane tank.” Who knows?

The specter of Islamist terrorism will remain omnipresent in this country for years, decades perhaps. But there will be times when that threat will be reduced simply by virtue of its waning importance to the terrorists themselves.

Given the high probability of other, significant and relevant developments elsewhere in the world and the opportunities that exist for execution of other objectives in the absence of American omnipresence, it occurs to us that this might be one of these times.

And as usual, we hope we're right, though for the wrong reason.

*Forecast #2: Elsewhere in the world, in Asia, for example, the lack of American omnipresence will contribute to near-term instability, but, we hope, long-term stability.*

As we have said before, and will undoubtedly say again, Obama coulda, shoulda, woulda been a dream president for the ascendant Chinese. He was perfect for them. He likes to bow, he likes to compare American immigration policy to the *Laogai* (the Chinese gulag), and he wants nothing more than to give China a free hand wherever it wants a free hand. What could be better, right?

Well, no. Not right.

The fact that America's erstwhile allies in the Pacific are now more erstwhile than allies has been discomfiting to some of them. But unlike the hypothetical taxpayers in Congressional tax projections, these folks are not static figures but actually tend to react as conditions change. And as the Chinese have filled the American vacuum in Asia in general, the leaders and peoples of these nations have reacted by looking to each other as sources of support and partnership.

Japan has had discussions with Taiwan. India has had discussion with Japan. South Korea has had discussions with India. And everyone has had discussions with Australia.

According to the national security bloggers and authors at Strategypage, China's economic and political muscle-flexing has "really scared the neighbors, because Communist China preached exporting communism, while the current Old School China believes in exporting Chinese rule. Not to the world, just to the neighborhood, wherever it makes life easier for China, the 'middle (of the universe) kingdom.'" And this, in turn, has made real what was once deemed impossible, an anti-China bloc in East Asia, organized (or organizing) with the intention of denying China the regional hegemony it so clearly and so desperately seeks.

It is obvious, of course, that none of this could take place without the blessing of the Americans. But it is equally obvious that none of it would take place if Japan, India, South Korea, and Australia – just to name a few – believed that the United States would persist in its role of denying China, or any other nation for that matter, any semblance of regional hegemony.

China has what it wished for. But again, to borrow from Strategypage, the Chinese should be a little more careful what it is they wish for. In the short term, they will be upset, and they are liable to lash out by causing disruptions to shipping lanes and the like and by blustering ominously. But in the long term, Asia – and the world – will be better off because of the integration of the region's remaining powers, all of whom share common interests above and beyond their concern about the rising tiger.

*Forecast #3: Continuing the theme of reduced American presence, Obama will shock the world by keeping his oft-mocked promise to begin drawing down troops in Afghanistan this summer and will NOT shock the world by keeping George Bush's promise to continue drawing down troops in Iraq.*

Again, this may appear counterintuitive, given that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates just ordered an additional 1,400 troops to Afghanistan last week, but this mini-surge, sent to reinforce the maxi-surge, will not last. Indeed, Obama has admitted that the surge – maxi or mini – will not last.

The idea, as we understand it, is to whoop the Taliban good in the spring, which is when the Taliban traditionally mounts its offensive, and then begin bugging out, as planned, in July. If we can beat the bad guys back into the hills, then we can leave – or begin “drawdown” – on a high note.

On the one hand, we suppose that we should be grateful that this is *all* that Obama has planned for his “war of necessity.” He could do far worse, we suppose. The Kennedys, after all, dealt with their corrupt ostensible ally/pain-in-backside, Ngo Dinh Diem, by having the CIA stage a coup against him, leading to Diem’s assassination and, according to historians, the radical protraction of the Vietnam War. Likewise Obama and his team spend most of their time attacking their ostensible ally, Hamid Karzai, calling him and members of his family crooks and complaining about how they’ll never win the war with Karzai running the show. Now, the fact of the matter is that Karzai is a crook. But he wasn’t always so, and his corruption and belligerence have both increased exponentially in the two years since the smartest diplomat in world history became president and started talking about bringing the troops home based on timetables rather than conditions. If Obama has decided to leave the Karzai problem to the Afghans rather than try to solve it his own awesome self, then we should be thankful for small blessings.

Of course, how much any of this will matter is debatable. When the Pakistani government falls and is replaced – *mirabile dictu* – by a military junta, the new general-in-charge will find himself under pressure to bring calm by, in part, ending American incursions into Pakistani territory and airspace, which he will do by forcing the Taliban and its Arab friends back into Afghanistan. Just as American troops are beginning to leave.

By the tenth anniversary of the American invasion of Afghanistan, that nation will, we fear, look much like it did before said invasion.

Not that all is lost. Indeed, in Iraq, much is won. We don’t want to paint too rosy a picture of what is going

on in Iraq. It is, in many ways, the bloody remains of a long brutalized nation. But it is not what it was. And it is on its way to being something much better.

When American troops accelerate their exit this summer, they will leave behind a rough version of that which George Bush envisioned, an oasis of Arab democracy in a desert of despotism. This vision will be anything but perfect and will be anything but guaranteed. But the Iraqis will, to paraphrase Franklin, have a republic, if they can keep it.

The wild card, as always, will be the loathsome Moqtada al-Sadr, the Shi’ite cleric and all-around murderous degenerate. Sadr is back in Iraq, preaching the gospel of Iraqi “unity,” but the fact that he has returned from exile *in Iran* and is, well, a thug, suggests that he has ulterior motives. How long he’ll wait to unveil his plans is anyone’s guess. But we suspect it will be only after American troops have fallen below some critical level. Then it will be up the Iraqis to deal with their own vermin. And we can only hope that they will, lest the nation collapse into chaos and civil war. Again.

*Forecast #4: On the other side of the globe from Iraq, Europe will plod along – without America’s interference, thank you very much – on its way to utter and complete economic collapse. By this time next year, someone – and we suspect Germany – will have had enough and will call it quits on the Euro.*

Longtime readers don’t need to be reminded of our feelings about the euro. No one, really, needs to be reminded of our feelings about the euro. But since we enjoy the reminding so much, we’ll do it anyway. Here’s what we wrote about this slow-motion disaster nearly 13 years ago:

Psst! You wanna know a secret. The Euro, and the mess it represents, is going to be a social, economic and political catastrophe. Indeed, I think it is probable that the adoption of the Euro will be to 21st century Europe, what the killing of the Archduke Ferdinand was to 20th century Europe; i.e., that point in time when history will record that the unraveling began in earnest.

Exaggeration? Hyperbole? Well, maybe. But maybe not. You see, the problem isn't, as most critics claim, simply that the "policy makers" from the various "regions," will fight over economic and monetary policy, and that the economic ignoramuses might win. The problem is that economic ignoramuses are likely to be the only ones at the table.

We suppose, given what we are predicting, that we may have been too hard on the Germans. If they cut their losses and determine once and for all that it is not in their best interests to continue to pay for the early retirement of indolent and spoiled Greeks, then perhaps they are not the ignoramuses we feared. Of course, if they don't, if they instead give us more of what they have given us over the last year, then can anyone doubt that we were right? If even the Germans can't divorce themselves from the layers upon layers of corrupt, sclerotic, and unsustainable socialist bureaucracy that characterize Europe, can anyone survive this mess?

We doubt it. And we doubt very much that anyone should consider the economic and monetary union a good long-term bet. As the sovereign debt crisis works its way around the Mediterranean, and then up through the Low Countries (Belgium, anyone?) the German people will grow wearier and wearier. And why shouldn't they? After all, they have their own retirements to think about, don't they? Germany absorbed an entire defunct Communist polity two decades ago. Now the rest of the Europeans want it to absorb their profligacy as well?

Don't bet on it.

*Forecast #5: In perhaps the greatest rebuke to American power and global presence, nearly two-hundred years of precedent will be allowed to crumble, along with the doctrine, on which that precedent was established.*

In 1823, President James Monroe and his Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, preemptively warned

the powers of Europe not to attempt to meddle in (i.e. re-colonize) the erstwhile colonies of the Western hemisphere, thereby establishing the legendary Monroe Doctrine. Through several challenges and more than one expansion and corollary, the Doctrine has remained official U.S. policy for nearly two centuries. But no longer.

As we have noted before, it appears likely – if not inevitable – that the Russian S-300 medium-range missiles that were once bound for Iran will now end up in Venezuela, with Tehran's blessing. Putin and the Kremlin were prevented, at the last minute and by United Nations sanctions, from selling the system to the Mullahs. But with the Mullahs' help the system now appears bound for a less contentious destination, i.e., Hugo Chavez's Caracas.

Any schoolboy could see how this would represent a threat to American interests and a clear violation of the Monroe Doctrine. But that schoolboy would not be able to see what the United States intends to do about it. Indeed, there's been no sign that the Obama administration is even willing to acknowledge the possibility of a Monroe violation, much less that it plans to address the matter in any way.

We suppose that if the administration did try to stop the deployment of the missiles, it could precipitate what Jed Babbin calls a "Venezuelan Missile Crisis," which would be highly unpredictable.

But if it doesn't act, what signal will that send, exactly?

Interestingly, we happen to know the answer to this one: it would send the signal that the United States is tired, humbled, and unwilling to defend its prerogatives.

Sadly, it wouldn't be the only such signal, merely one of many.

Again, as we've said before, this is the way the American left wanted it. Let's see how they do.

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