



A Question of Loyalty: A "Saddamite" Responds to Perigo

The truth is, of course, that I am not a Saddamite. But it is very hard to discern exactly who is a Saddamite from Lindsay Perigo's essay "Saddam's Succours #3" (TFR 57) or from essays #1 or #2 for that matter. I wish he'd name names. So, at the risk of buying into that old Carly Simon lyric, "You're so vain, You probably think this song is about you," I think a response to Perigo is necessary.

For the purposes of this brief essay, I will not reiterate all the points that I have already made in my May-June 2003 *Free Radical* article, "Understanding the Global Crisis: Reclaiming Rand's Radical Legacy" including those points of *agreement* with Perigo.

But I do have my disagreements with him, especially when he suggests, perhaps inadvertently, that those who invoke Rand's critique of the history of US foreign policy are engaging in an "argument from authority." Those of us who rely on Rand's insights do so because they are *correct* and *relevant* to the current context—not because we are idol Rand worshipers seeking to rationalize our "appeasement" of evil.

And make no mistake about it: Saddam Hussein is/was evil. But I know of no "Saddamite" who praised his early development of WMDs—though some have pointed out that his initial ability to produce such weapons was the product of US encouragement. I know of no "Saddamite" who celebrated his torturing and slaughtering of dissidents, his "torture chambers & underground prisons" and mass graves.

Whatever the mixed ideological colors of those in the antiwar movement, one need not hurl the charges of disloyalty and appeasement against *everyone* who opposed the war in Iraq; on these grounds, Rand herself would have been called a "Hitlerite" by Perigo. As Barbara Branden reminds us in *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, "Ayn was passionately opposed to any American involvement in the war in Europe" (p. 161)—despite the fact that Hitler's torture chambers, concentration camps, and mass graves were beginning to consume the continent. She opposed the Wilsonian campaign "to make the world safe for democracy" in World War I,

because it made Hitler and Stalin possible, and she was adamantly opposed to allying with Soviet butchers in a battle against the Nazis, in which billions of dollars in Lend-Lease aid were sent to Stalin. (She suggested that the US should have let the Nazis and Communists kill each other before even thinking about committing troops to the battle.)

Like Rand, my opposition to US involvement is not based on the sin of neutrality, the sin of being noncommittal, the sin of refusing "to take sides . . . in a time of crisis," as Perigo puts it. I am not vying for a place in Dante's Vestibule of Hell. The very suggestion that, in a time of crisis, opposition to the actions of your "friend"—in this case, the United States of America—translates into taking "the side of your opponent," is a false alternative. My opposition to the Iraq war was based on the principle that the only *legitimate* reason for war is self-defense in retaliation against those who have initiated force or as a pre-emptive action against those who are an *imminent* threat to life and liberty.

It took a few months but President Bush *finally* admitted that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11, despite the fact that 70% of Americans polled thought that such a link existed, given that the administration made statements, on the path to war, that had this obvious, and false, implication. More importantly, however: Saddam was not an imminent threat. If we do not use "imminent threat" as a standard for judging a US military response, then there is nothing to stop the US government from sacrificing thousands of troops on a global scale in a world-wide battle against "evil"—because there's so much of it.

Perigo is not persuaded. He has suggested that when a friend (such as the relatively free US) is in trouble, one needs to "get in

behind" or risk aiding and abetting the enemies of freedom. But, absent *imminent* threat, why on earth should I, or anyone, practice self-immolation as an ethical credo in fighting tyrannies the world over? Other techniques have been effective in combating tyranny—including the containment, through deterrence, of the lethal nuclear arsenal of the Soviets for over fifty years, surely a bigger threat than Saddam. And for all this talk about the imminence of the Saddam threat, the US shocked and awed its way right into Baghdad. There were no chemically, biologically, or radiologically laced SCUDs on the launch-pad ready for lift-off.

The long-term consequences of the Iraq war are slowly coming into focus. The most recent Bush request for *another* \$87 billion—on top of the \$45 billion already spent for military preparation and invasion—is more than *double* what the US is spending on "homeland security." The war has contributed to a ballooning deficit that will be in excess of \$500 billion next year, "but could reach a cumulative total of \$5.8 trillion by 2013" (*NY Times*, 27 August 2003). The federal debt increases exponentially, even as the US aims to pay off Iraq's \$350 billion foreign debt, not to mention resettlement and reconstruction costs, estimated at another \$200 billion over the next decade. And for those who thought Iraqi oil reserves would pay for this: Nice try. Oil revenues from a devastated Iraqi oil industry *might* rise to \$20 billion annually by 2006 ("Nice War. Here's the Bill," *NY Times*, 3 September 2003).

Meanwhile, the threat to domestic liberties from a variety of euphemistically named "Patriot Acts" is growing too, as the Bush administration uses the provisions of these acts in criminal investigations that have nothing to do with terrorism—prosecuting everyone from drug traffickers to suspect Internet users ("U.S. Uses Terror Law to Pursue Crimes from Drugs to Swindling," *NY Times*, 28 September 2003). And while the thousands of wounded are nowhere near the number of casualties from previous wars, the US has now lost more troops in the occupation—an occupation with no end in sight, costing an additional billion dollars per week—than in all of its combat operations. Worse yet, if Iraq actually had WMDs—they were not used in the war and they have not yet been found—then the

invasion has most likely brought about the very condition the US feared: their dispersal in chaotic social conditions among hostile terrorist groups. Fanatics are picking off US troops daily, as Iraq becomes a magnet for terrorists from all over the Muslim world.

Moreover, the US is facing massive ethnic conflict within Iraq, as each group vies for a different part of the “democratic” pie, with no history of knowing how to “share” the pie, let alone eat of it. This is not unusual in the period after the fall of a despotic regime. When the Soviet Union fell, many were astonished at how ethnic warfare re-emerged as if unaltered from 70+ years of Communism. Democratic nation-building presupposes that there is a *nation* upon which to build democracy. But as columnist George Will has observed, Iraq—like the Soviet Union—is not a nation. Iraq was a makeshift by-product of British colonialism. So if the US is trying to bring “democracy” to Iraq, the question remains: Which Iraq? Sunni Iraq? Kurdish Iraq? Shiite Iraq? (Which Shiites?)

This is not to say that the world was better off with the Soviet Union or Saddam Hussein in place. Good riddance! Those regimes exercised monopoly control over the instruments of oppression in brutalizing their populations. In the absence of a monopoly terrorist regime, however, and in the absence of any culture of individualism, the only “democracy” that is emerging in Iraq is an anarchic “democratization” of the means of terror: a war of all against all, instead of one against all. Not quite the Wilsonian democracy envisioned by US policy-makers.

Now, Perigo and other Objectivists may oppose such democratic “nation-building.” Even Presidential candidate George W. Bush once opposed the goal of democratic nation-building in Kosovo and Bosnia. But his neo-Wilsonian advisors seem to have convinced him that the US government can engage in such folly in Iraq. And it has become increasingly clear that these neoconservatives have a disproportionate influence on the foreign policy agenda. Not Perigo. Not any other Objectivists. So much for being a “useful idiot” for established power elites.

It is true, other things being equal, that when a friend is in trouble, we should put aside our differences with him, and lend our support. And on that count, let no man accuse me of disloyalty. When my friend (the US) was in trouble, and was attacked—indeed, when *I* was attacked on that fateful September day, along with my family, my friends, and my neighbors here in New York City—I knew, deep down, that contradictory US policies had contributed to the conditions that led to the attack. But an explanation of context is not a justification for murder, and US hypocrisy notwithstanding, I continue to urge a devastating and ruthless response against Al Qaeda and its allies.

This Iraq situation is different, however. Let me explain by way of analogy. If a dear friend has a history of drug abuse, one does not “support” one’s friend by standing there while he injects the drugs into his veins, or by supplying him with even more drugs. As a radical libertarian, I would certainly defend my friend’s *right* to inject

drugs into his veins—just as I defend the moral *right* to destroy Saddam or even the moral *rightness* of seeking a free Middle East. But having a *right* to take drugs or having a *right* to “take out” Saddam doesn’t make it *right* for my friend’s long-term survival or happiness.

And *that* is what Iraq has represented to me—a context that nourishes the most addictive and abusive statist impulses of US policy: from Wilsonian “nation-building” among warring Muslim tribes to pull-peddling among corporate tribes receiving reconstruction contracts. And like a drug, such interventionism creates unintended consequences that call out for more and more interventionism—until the whole society overdoses in a catastrophic collapse. This is not the way to get my friend off drugs and on the path to a healthy lifestyle. It will not even serve the short-run goal of supporting my friend in the *genuine* fight against Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Whereas the fundamentalists of Al Qaeda did *not* have a foothold in “secular” Iraq (given their lethal opposition to the Ba’ath Party), this war has now made possible their growing presence in that country, as they swarm over its porous borders to fight the American “infidels.”

And throughout this whole “War on Terror,” the poisonous soil from which Bin Laden emerged—Saudi Arabia—remains untouched. While the US is busy fighting in Iraq, it sleeps with the Saudis, continuing a 60+ year-affair that most likely led the Bush administration to blot out 28 pages from a report on the failure of 9/11 intelligence, which might have embarrassed its Saudi



At odds, but still friends - Sciabarra and Perigo, Brooklyn, New York, October 7, 2003

"allies." US corporations engage in joint business ventures with the Saudi government—from petroleum to arms deals—utilizing a whole panoply of statist mechanisms, including the Export-Import Bank. The US is Saudi Arabia's largest investor and trading partner. Historically, the House of Sa'ud's alliance with—and exportation of—intolerant, fanatical Wahhabism has been strengthened by the US-Saudi government partnership with Western oil companies, especially the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO), a merger of Esso, Texaco, and Mobil. This is precisely the kind of "pull-peddling" that Rand condemned as "the New Fascism"—a US-Saudi-Big Oil Unholy Trinity that sustains the *undemocratic* Saudi regime.

And so, it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia will ever be touched *significantly* in the "War on Terror," even if 15 of the 19 people who rammed those planes into US targets were Saudi. So close is the US-Saudi relationship that the US government worked with the Saudi embassy to facilitate, by private jet, the evacuation from the US of 140 prominent Saudis, among them members of the Bin Laden family, in the days after 9/11.

Within the Saudi cultural climate, however, anti-US sentiment is on the rise. Some terrorists gain the sanction of Saudi government officials, who talk out of both sides of their duplicitous mouths. Other terrorists flourish in reaction to the despotism of the Saudi regime and to its US alliance. It is a regime that depends upon a barbaric network of secret police and sub-human prisons, using the kinds of torture tactics that would have made Saddam proud: routine floggings, rotisserie hangings, amputations, penis blocking, and anal molestations. Such is the "pragmatic" nature of official US government policy, which goes to war for "human rights" in

Iraq, while tacitly sanctioning their eradication in Saudi Arabia.

It's this kind of pragmatism that has been the midwife to anti-American terrorism—from US support of the Shah of Iran that led to the establishment of an anti-American Islamic theocracy to US support of the Afghani mujahideen that led to the establishment of an anti-American Taliban. It is not a question of loyalty to one's "friend," therefore, when that "friend"—the US government—appears to be more loyal to its autocratic allies than to its own citizens.

Dante may have reserved the Ninth Circle of Hell for those who, like Satan, Judas, Brutus and Cassius, are treacherous to kindred, country, party, lords, superiors, and benefactors. But loyalty is of no ethical

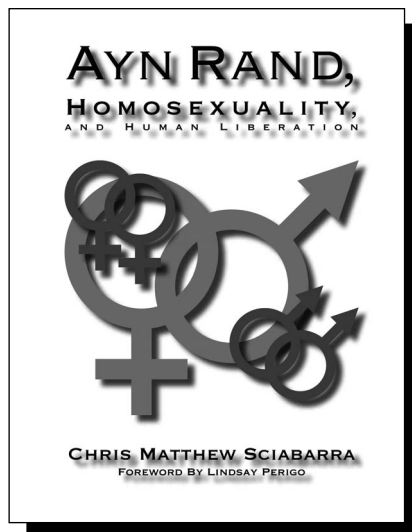
import unless it is loyalty to an *idea*. And, in this instance, it is the *idea* of America to which I owe my loyalty. It is to the *rational individualist and libertarian ideas of Western civilization* to which I owe my loyalty—ideas that the United States of America embraced in its infancy, and that have faced extinction over the past two centuries.

As Ayn Rand once wrote: "Loyalty can be maintained in only one of two ways: by terrorism—or by dedication to ideas" ("The Missing Link"), by fear or by conviction. I owe no loyalty to any group, party, class, or Commander-in-Chief, when such adherence undermines loyalty to *moral principles*. And it is only those *principles* that will save *my* country—and the rest of the world—from utter destruction.

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