

appearing as it did only four days after Saddam's regime collapsed.

Saddam has indeed been ousted. Syrian President Bashar Assad may be next in line for the same treatment. And the amazing barrage of Saudi-bashing on the mainstream op-ed pages of the U.S. media has already risen to its old post-9/11 stridency. But will this really make us safer, as Cowell rightly asked? Will it disperse, or only further intensify, the humiliation and rage sweeping the Arab world that MacFarquhar documented? And if the Iraqi people are indeed given the freedom to choose their own rulers, as President Bush so movingly promised them, how can one doubt that they will immediately raise up leaders who hate him—and us?

Yet the ideologically driven neoconservative push to “drain the swamp” of the Middle East by pursuing regime change throughout shows no sign of diminishing. Who, then is in position to profit from this destruction or mortal weakening of secular or moderate governments throughout the region? Not the American people or the national interests of the U.S. That is for sure. Not Israel either. It is notable that Israeli officials have been signaling recently that they do not favor “regime change” in Syria, since they recognize that the only credible alternative government there would come from the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood—a natural ally for bin Laden if ever there were one.

Who then does stand to benefit from current U.S. policy? Who else but the man who most wants to see the current governments of the Middle East destroyed so that he can proclaim the New Caliphate and True *Jihad* against the West? None other than bin Laden himself.

We already see that the dethroning of Saddam—for so long relentlessly urged by Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and their acolytes—has served to unleash Islamic fundamentalism throughout

Iraq. And there is no reason to doubt that the discrediting or toppling of the governments of Syria and Saudi Arabia will do the same.

Are Perle and Wolfowitz, therefore, deliberately acting as bin Laden's Agents of Influence? Presumably not, yet it is hard to argue otherwise, as they are so obviously doing what he wants. At the very least, they are repeating the catastrophic error of Jimmy Carter a quarter century ago when he undercut the Shah of Iran by urging democratization on him, only to get instead—Ayatollah Khomeini.

It would be a disaster for America, the

West, and Israel too, for that matter, if the current weak and corrupt governments that run most of the Middle East were to be overthrown. For it is bin Laden and his ilk that would sweep in to reap the rewards, just as they have begun to do in Iraq.

This cannot happen unless the power of the United States is deliberately mobilized to undermine the region's major governments. Yet that is exactly what is now happening. The Middle East is being made safe all right. But not for us. ■

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Missile Defense Bait and Switch

Protecting the homeland or building the empire?

By Charles V. Peña

PRESIDENT BUSH ANNOUNCED last December that the United States would deploy a missile defense by 2004. The plan calls for deploying ten ground-based interceptors at Fort Greely, Alaska in 2004 and another ten in 2005 or 2006. But this initial deployment is a phantom missile defense rather than a functional military system providing any meaningful protection for the American public.

The ground-based midcourse system is still in a test and evaluation phase. Eight tests have been conducted, five of which have been considered successful by the military. So even under artificial test conditions, the system is only about 60 percent effective. More realistic tests

(including against decoys and other countermeasures) need to be done before being able to make any hard conclusions about whether such a system is operationally effective and reliable against real missiles. Indeed, the Pentagon Office of Operational Test and Evaluation states that the system “has yet to demonstrate significant operational capability.”

The latest scare fueling the rush to deploy missile defense is CIA Director George Tenet's affirmative response when asked on Capitol Hill whether North Korea currently has a missile capable of hitting the West Coast of the United States. The doomsayers were quick to proclaim that Americans are

defenseless against the dire threat posed by North Korea's two nuclear warheads.

Never mind that the United States has an arsenal of 6,000 nuclear warheads that serve as a credible and effective deterrent against any nuclear power. And what Tenet did not say is the missile he referred to, the Taepodong-II, was flight-tested in 1998, an event that was widely reported and is therefore not news. Although that flight-test demonstrated that the North Koreans have the technical know-how to build a three-stage rocket that could fly intercontinental distances, they did not actually fly the third stage, have not conducted any subsequent flight tests, and—most importantly—have not deployed a functional and operational military system.

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So the threat to the United States is postulated rather than real.

The truth is that missile defense is not really about defending America *per se*. Indeed, the administration's missile defense program is ultimately to develop

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a global system to defend U.S. forces, friends, and allies (many of whom are wealthy enough to pay for their own missile defense) against ballistic missiles of all ranges. In fact, short-range missiles like Scuds that do not threaten the United States are probably seen as the more real threat. Why? Because if they are equipped with nuclear, biological, or chemical warheads, such missiles could serve as a deterrent to profligate U.S. military intervention with conventional forces around the world.

To be sure, a truly national limited land-based missile defense, which is thoroughly and realistically tested, designed to protect the U.S. homeland, is an appropriate insurance policy against the potential rogue state threat, as well as against accidental and unauthorized launches. But pursuing an expansive global missile defense would not only be expensive (probably well in excess of \$100 billion on top of more than \$100 billion already spent) and technically difficult and complex—building any missile defense system will be the most technically complex and challenging weapon system ever—but downright dangerous.

No weapon system is 100 percent perfect, and missile defense will not be any different. Therefore, no missile defense system can guarantee that all attacking warheads will be destroyed. As a result, a global missile defense may provide a false sense of security by creating per-

ceived protection for the United States to operate with relative impunity throughout the world. If policymakers are willing to take pre-emptive military action overseas, adversaries armed with long-range missiles and WMD may feel they

have nothing to lose by launching an attack against the United States. Given a less than perfect missile defense, the possibility of a warhead getting through would be real. Thus a potentially catastrophic attack on U.S. soil (a failure of the first magnitude in U.S. national security policy) could result directly from unneeded U.S. military action against a country that would not have attacked the United States if it had been left alone.

It would seem that the Bush administration has successfully duped the American public about missile defense with classic "bait and switch" tactics. In contrast to a more affordable limited land-based system, the global missile defense sought by the administration is not about defending America. It is a naked shield for a quixotic crusade using military force to build a safer and better world based on American values. But this strategy will have the perverse effect of making the United States less secure because it will sow the seeds of hate and anti-American sentiment under the guise of expanding liberty. Such actions could result in recruiting more terrorists and terrorist violence. And missile defense, no matter how effective, will not protect Americans from enemies using easier and cheaper means to inflict mass casualties—witness 9/11. ■

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Arts & Letters

FILM

[A Mighty Wind]

The Times They A' Changed

By Steve Sailer

"A MIGHTY WIND" is another fake show-biz documentary in the lineage sired by the immortal "This Is Spinal Tap." Christopher Guest, who starred in that 1984 comedy as Nigel Tufnel, a thick-as-a-brick heavy metal guitarist, revived its semi-improvised format for his 1996 community theater spoof "Waiting for Guffman" and 2000's shaggy dog show satire "Best in Show."

"A Mighty Wind" gently parodies some washed-up remnants of the 1960s folk music boom as they regroup to put on a show for public television to honor the late impresario Irving Steinbloom (modeled on real life folk mogul Albert Grossman).

Guest, an English nobleman more formally known as the fifth Baron Haden-Guest of Saling, consistently wins critical accolades for his deadpan lampoons. The intrinsic box office limitation of Guest's mockumentaries, however, is that they are funniest to lovers of documentaries. And those folks don't tend to get out to the megaplex on Saturday night much because that's when their favorite PBS station airs pledge-week concerts starring Art Garfunkel.

Fortunately, Guest's films don't cost much to make, and they generate good word of mouth. Despite the expert comic timing of Guest's troupe of fifty-something actors, his films' lines sound

best when your friends repeat them to you.

"A Mighty Wind" reunites Guest with his Spinal Tap band-mates Michael McKean (Lenny from "Laverne and Shirley") and Harry Shearer (17 characters on "The Simpsons"). This time they're The Folksmen, a cheery singing trio hoping for a comeback after 30 years.

A debate over whether to wear their old flannel shirts on stage gets them entangled in inane Spinal-Tap-style epistemological meanderings: "The costumes are retro now, but they weren't retro then. They were 'nowtro.'" Catherine O'Hara, the queen of Toronto's famed 1970s "SCTV" show, plays one half of a long-defunct romantic duo. Eugene Levy, another SCTV alum and Guest's writing partner, portrays her quasi-catatonic ex-partner. Levy's popularity is peaking at age 57 with his scene-stealing turn in "Bringing Down the House" as the lawyer with the darker-the-berry-the-sweeter-the-juice philosophy.

"A Mighty Wind" frequently touches on the curious demographics of folk music. Although early 1960s folkies prided themselves on their authenticity as they strummed Scots-Irish hillbilly tunes, the genre, like PBS and NPR today, appealed most to East Coast Jews and Great Lakes Gentiles. Bob Dylan, a Jew born in Duluth, was the perfect hybrid.

As Steinbloom's son, tiny Bob Balaban, once again portraying a Jewish entertainment executive, has a memorable scene setting up the broadcast with big, blonde Ed Begley Jr. He plays the folk-loving manager of an NYC public television station who speaks in a strangely appropriate Swedish-Yiddish patois: "Yah, yah, that's meshuggah!"

Oddly, top comedians have tended to come from similar locales at least since the debut of "Saturday Night Live" and

"SCTV" in the mid-1970s. With the Second City improv troupes in Toronto and Chicago functioning as farm teams, this Great Lakes influence has become pervasive in comedy.

Guest and Levy let veterans like Fred Willard (doing another of his jolly jerks) improvise. To keep the story (and budget) on track, though, they carefully structure what can happen within each scene.

"A Mighty Wind's" restraint is admirable. For example, the uncomfortable ex-lovers are primarily based on the obscure Canadian duo Ian & Sylvia, when they could have gone for the easy yuks by modeling them on a reunion of Cher and Sonny Bono or of Dylan and Joan Baez.

Still, they pay the price for their tastefulness by harvesting more chuckles than laughs. The fundamental problem with "A Mighty Wind" as satire is that it's too humane toward its victims. While the dim vulgarity of Spinal Tap's rockers—"These go to eleven"—made them ready targets, the fatal flaw of the folkies was their dweebiness. The filmmakers, though, are now too mature to find low testosterone levels adequate inspiration for Swiftian outrage.

As a story, "A Mighty Wind" suffers from lack of conflict. Levy should have played a Dylan character, a superstar who condescends to appear, having forgotten how much he is bitterly resented by the other musicians for outmoding folk music when he switched to electric guitar rock in 1965. Dylan is a man so ambitious for adulation that he's wasted a good part of his life trying to become a movie star despite possessing no screen charisma whatsoever, as proven again by "Masked & Anonymous," Dylan's new and strangely similar ensemble film about a benefit concert. When The Beatles arrived, Dylan realized that acoustic