

[MILITARY]

PRE-CRIME & PUNISHMENT

On an otherwise unremarkable Thursday, hell visited Fort Hood. By the time the gunman's work was done, 13 lay dead, 30 wounded. Compounding the pain was a cruel double irony: many of the fallen had survived Iraq, and the man who took their lives wore the uniform.

In the immediate aftermath, Nidal Hasan's e-mail was aired, his associations scrutinized. Neighbors offered the bland description that fits most killers: quiet, slightly strange, but pleasant enough. An enterprising NPR reporter even tracked down relatives on the West Bank. A portrait began to emerge: here was a deeply disturbed man in the worst possible line of work.

But then the focus widened, as if the carnage was too much to apportion to a single lunatic. Surely others were culpable—not for firing fatal shots but for failing to stop Hasan. He will survive to stand trial, but those who missed the “red flags” will face swifter judgment.

Joe Lieberman, chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, is opening an investigation into “whether the Army missed warning signs.” The FBI is also being called to account, as it reportedly knew a year ago that Hasan corresponded with a Yemeni cleric suspected of having al-Qaeda ties. The Fort Hood rampage raises “the possibility that serious issues exist with respect to the performance of U.S. intelligence agencies,” says Pete Hoekstra, ranking Republican on the House Intelligence Committee.

At the core of these complaints is a conviction that the massacre might have been prevented if the right people had been paying attention. But dark as that Texas afternoon turned, walk this logic out. Should more citizens' communications be tapped? Their habits analyzed? Their friends questioned? Then what happens if an all-powerful government



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deems someone suspect? Should he be locked away for the crime of potential harm? This is the ugly underside of pre-emption come home.

Rush Limbaugh told his radio audience, “Since the FBI was in on much of this, it may be that things were treated as a criminal inquiry, where you have to deal with reasonable doubt, all kinds of restrictions, rather than terrorism.” That’s the dangerous road total war leads us down. Terrorism—this apparently qualifies since Hasan shouted, “Allahu Akbar”—is so uniquely evil, the argument goes, that it renders quaint the rule of law. Nothing should stand in the way of its global prosecution. Not even the freedoms Fort Hood’s finest swore to defend. That could be the coldest irony of all.

[ECONOMY]

WHAT RECOVERY?

Bush, Obama, and Congress slammed the pedal to the floor—but the U.S. economy isn’t going anywhere. All the bank bailouts and stimulus efforts of more than \$1 trillion have bought is a 2.5 percent blip in GDP for the third quarter of 2009. Pollyannas hail this as a recovery. But for most Americans, it doesn’t feel like one. By mid-November, unemployment stood at 10.8 percent. The

price of stimulus, meanwhile, was not just apparent in its nominal price tag—handing out money Uncle Sam never had sent the dollar plunging, while gold soared to a record \$1,147.72 per ounce on Nov. 18. This “recovery” looks a lot like stagflation.

Liberal economists such as Brad DeLong and Paul Krugman complain that the stimulus has not been big enough. Just what do they think would happen to the dollar if we added another trillion or two to the deficit? And would that be enough? Keynesianism is a bottomless pit. Hope, and government spending, springs eternal, at least for DeLong and Krugman, but Obama needs to show some results. The administration sold stimulus as a path to job creation. With labor statistics putting the lie to that, Obama has now begun to talk of “jobs saved”—in some cases in places that don’t exist. ABC News reported, “In Arizona’s 15th congressional district, 30 jobs have been saved or created with just \$761,420 in federal stimulus spending. ... There’s one problem, though: there is no 15th congressional district in Arizona; the state has only eight districts.”

A stimulus that has hastened the bankruptcy of the nation has given us one quarter of lackluster growth—without any new jobs. With commercial real

estate threatening to tank the way housing did last year, and with mortgages vouchsafed by the Federal Housing Administration looking ever more like the subprimes, the odds of a double-dip recession are mounting. Blame Obama and Congress—but also blame the spendthrift Republicans who prospered under Bush.

[HEALTH]

FEDERAL TROUGH

On Saturday, Oct. 24, President Obama declared swine flu a “national emergency.” If the statement sounded familiar, that’s because it was: six months earlier, the White House had announced a “public emergency” over the fearsome H1N1 virus. Clearly we weren’t scared enough the first time.

“As a nation,” intoned our physician in chief with wartime gravitas, “we have prepared at all levels of government, and as individuals and communities, taking unprecedented steps to counter the emerging pandemic.”

Be afraid, but don’t panic—big bro has it covered. By slapping a “national emergency” tag on the problem, we were told, the Department of Health and Human Services could override federal restrictions and set up special 24-hour clinics in public buildings to immunize all Americans.

Except it can’t. In July, the government promised that 160 million doses of H1N1 vaccine would be ready in time for flu season—all for a measly \$1.3 billion. Come November, however, only 28 million shots had been made available, and the virus had spread widely in 46 states. Across the country, anxious Americans were turned away from those vaccination clinics—no jabs here, ma’am, but take some hand sanitizer.

As *TAC* went to press, H1N1 had not yet mutated into the monster of our government-conjured nightmares. With any luck, it never will. For anybody suffering

from the delusion that Obama’s plans for nationalized medicine will improve our country’s health, his administration’s spectacular bungling of the swine-flu outbreak should serve as a timely shot in the arm.

[WAR]

CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN IRAQ

Fallujah, scene of some of the Iraq War’s fiercest fighting, was always going to be a long time struggling back to its feet. More than half of its 39,000 homes were damaged in Operation Phantom Fury. (Don’t be fooled by the ghostly handle: locals know full well who rained fire on their city.) Only 2,500 families have been compensated, and rubble remains the city’s defining feature.

But the worst news is only now breaking, for rather than taking months or years to move past the war, Fallujah may be suffering for generations. Doctors report an unprecedented spike in birth defects—15 times the usual rate of infant deformity, including a baby born with two heads. Many children have central nervous system problems and multiple tumors. On Nov. 2 alone, *The Guardian* reports, “There were four cases of neurotube defects in the neo-natal ward and several more were in the intensive care ward and an outpatient clinic.”

The U.S. government initially denied dropping white phosphorus, but now admits to using the incendiary chemical. The children’s afflictions are also consistent with radiation poisoning. The head of Fallujah’s pediatric ward has begged international experts to take soil samples, but the tattered Coalition of the Willing is more interested in getting out than digging in.

Eventually even America will leave. But for thousands of Iraqis our presence will long linger—in the shadow of their ruined communities and on the faces of their broken babies. ■

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Going South

Militaristic, corrupt America increasingly resembles a Third World state.

By Ximena Ortiz

DESPITE A CHANGE of presidents, America remains mired in economic, institutional, and cultural purgatory, with Obama's exalted oratory circling the stratosphere like a taunt.

Angry nationalism shouts down prudence. Disproportionate military spending threatens economic wellbeing. Industry has its hand so deep in the government's purse that private enterprise is becoming public property. The currency falters, the infrastructure crumbles. And a supine media, once a watchdog of the powerful, happily licks the strongman's hand.

If the picture looks familiar, that's because we've seen it many times before, from Argentina to Chile to Russia. The U.S. is third worlding.

That statement may smack of hyperbole. It may also understate the phenomenon, for many of the countries that the United States increasingly resembles are not only Third World—they are authoritarian, even rogue.

This is not to say the U.S. will be indistinguishable from a Third World country any time soon. We're clearly nowhere near Sudanese levels of violence or Bangladeshi depths of poverty. But in terms of institutional structure, financial stability, and even national spirit, the U.S. looks little like the country it was a generation ago and more like nations it has long condemned.

The turning point came on 9/11. Terrorism is now a weary concern: other issues dominate the headlines—stimulus, healthcare, climate change. Yet the attacks were a pretext for a host of for-

eign and domestic policies that promised to secure America against its hell-bent enemies but have instead dragged the country down, eroding the qualities that distinguished it from the rest of the world.

Honor Killing

As George W. Bush was fond of doing, Barack Obama looks penetratingly into the camera, addressing all the South Asian terrorists watching CNN from their burrows. He vows to defeat them—using other people's lives. With demagogic mastery, he, too, has tapped America's proud warrior culture, a latent force before the age of terror.

This emphasis on offended honor—particularly male honor—is an integral part of life in the Third World. Where the rule of law is weak, men learn to fend for their own charges, and humiliation must be quickly avenged to uphold street cred. This cultural strain exists even among educated elites, who dress and sound much like their American counterparts, but harbor ingrained machismo.

A repressive leader quickly realizes that the best way to unite his countrymen is to rally them against an outside threat—actual or invented. When Evo Morales became president of Bolivia, he stoked hostility with Chile, blocking the construction of a pipeline to export Bolivian natural gas, at significant cost to his own nation, because it would pass through Chile. In North Korea, a tradition of defiance and nationalistic self-reliance, known as *juche*, is a cultural imperative. If the regime abandoned its bellicose posturing, its power mystique

would shatter. Across the Muslim world, the pursuit of honor is a crucial driver in jihadi recruitment. As Akbar Ahmed puts it in *Islam Under Siege*, a sense of grievance motivates extremism, but even “those societies that economists call ‘developed’ fall back to notions of honor and revenge in times of crisis.” Sept. 11 proved his point.

The fact that 19 misfits with boxcutters scarcely constituted an invading army was of little consequence—that anyone could touch us so shocked the American system that we lashed out with disproportionate fury. When wounded ego drives policy, force becomes the default. Far from being a passing spasm, this honor impulse has become a way of life. It rules our international conduct and makes our wars nearly impossible to quit. Andrew Bacevich, a former U.S. Army colonel and author of *The New American Militarism*, writes, “There was a time in recent memory, most notably while the so-called Vietnam Syndrome infected the American body politic, when Republican and Democratic administrations alike viewed with real trepidation the prospect of sending U.S. stoops into action abroad. Since the advent of the new Wilsonianism, self-restraint regarding the use of force has all but disappeared.”

As the martial spirit rises, soldiers are necessarily heroes, even though they are treated as expendable. Patriotism is defined in militaristic terms. And it's not unusual for an American president to wear a jacket with “Commander in