

Foreign Policy and the Culture of Complaint

In his 1993 polemic, *Culture of Complaint*, culture critic Robert Hughes cast a sardonic eye over the American social scene. Everyone was now claiming victim status, Hughes noted, leading to an “upward production curve of maudlin narcissism.” Accompanying this was a growing emphasis on the subjective, “how we feel about things, rather than what we think or can know.”

The May 2003 issue of *Policy Options* suggests that this trend has now invaded the traditionally hard-headed sphere of foreign policy. The cover features a dramatic picture of Baghdad in flames. Inside, one might expect a discussion of how the world is to deal with the unprecedented hyperpower that is today’s America, with its disturbing doctrine of pre-emptive invasion, or with the implications of the US’s self-bestowed “right” to promote coerced regime change. What one *doesn’t* expect is an extended discussion of American “disappointment” and “hurt” at Canada’s unwillingness to help pound Iraq into dust. The US today is “somewhat lonely, increasingly frustrated,” according to Derek Burney. In the event of a threat to Canada, declares Ambassador Cellucci, “We would be there for Canada, part of our family. That is why so many in the United States are disappointed and upset that Canada is not fully supporting us now.”

Every pseudo-victim needs a reality check, a bit of perspective. Being called a “moron” or a “failed statesman” may not be pleasant, but it’s not as serious as having cluster bombs dropped in your neighbourhood or having your water supply system destroyed. And if you go around doing those things to other countries, expect to provoke some resentment — at the very least.

But a reality-check requires that we respect reality. For Hughes, such respect

is in short supply in the *Culture of Complaint*, with its exaggerated emphasis on subjective perceptions. May’s *Policy Options* bears this out. Cellucci, Noble, Jones, and Burney all base their arguments upon what the US “believes,” “perceives,” or has “determined” to be a threat from Iraq.

We should at least commend the prudence of these writers. Rather than claiming that Iraq was a threat, they claim that the US *believed* or *perceived* the existence of a threat. And what of these beliefs and perceptions? Were they correct or mistaken? Were they arrived at through an objective study of reality, or not? Were they even sincerely held beliefs, as opposed to rhetorical claims?

It is becoming increasingly clear that the US administration was neither objective nor honest in its portrayal of the Iraqi threat. Certainly, credible evidence that Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction on the eve of the war may yet emerge. But the US administration claimed to have such evidence already in hand. It is now clear that it did not. It claimed to have evidence of links between Iraq and Al-Qa’ida. It has failed to produce this evidence, and repeated leaks from the American intelligence community indicate that no such evidence exists. In his 2003 State of the Union address, President Bush claimed that Hussein was trying to buy uranium in Africa. This claim had been investigated by a CIA envoy a year earlier and found to be unsupported.

This great gap between reality and US administration “beliefs” about Iraq may not hurt Bush domestically. A poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes found that only 59 percent of Americans know that weapons of mass destruction have not been found in Iraq. A remarkable 22

percent of respondents believe that Iraq “actually used chemical or biological weapons in the war.” In conformity with Hughes’s diagnosis, reality seems to have little influence on the political views of a significant proportion of US citizens.

Perhaps, then, the real cause of US anger towards Canada is that, like most of the world, we refused to be conned. Derek Burney laments that “we chose to oppose action by our closest friends and in a way that undermined their positions at a delicate time.” Well yes, snow jobs are always “delicate” operations, vulnerable to an inconvenient irruption of facts or critical questions.

So where do we go now in relations with “our closest friends”? For the Bicentennial, Prime Minister Trudeau presented President Ford with a classy book, *Between Friends*. Perhaps another gift is in order today. I would suggest two books. First, a deluxe edition of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*. This would remind our neighbours that deception of the sort practised around Iraq is not in their long-term interest. The second book is a longer read: Thucydides’s *Peloponnesian War*. Athens was the greatest power of its time. But it lost touch with reality, confusing what it was able to accomplish with what it hoped to accomplish. Thinking “that nothing could go wrong with them,” the Athenians overreached themselves, and paid a terrible price.

These gifts might not be appreciated by the current occupant of the Oval Office. But honest communication when friends go astray, rather than sycophantic support for ill-conceived courses of action, are the marks of true friendship.

Phil Ryan is an Associate Professor in the School of Public Policy and Administration, Carleton University. He can be reached at philip_ryan@carleton.ca