

Blowback: U.S. Actions Abroad Have Repeatedly Led to Unintended, Indefensible Consequences

BY CHALMERS JOHNSON, *Reprinted by permission of The Nation, October 15, 2001.*

In this post-September 11, 2001 essay, Johnson uses the concept of “blowback” to explain the attacks on the United States. In particular, he argues that the attacks were a response to America’s foreign policy and other actions.

For Americans who can bear to think about it, those tragic pictures from New York of women holding up photos of their husbands, sons and daughters and asking if anyone knows anything about them look familiar. They are similar to scenes we have seen from Buenos Aires and Santiago. There, too, starting in the 1970s, women held up photos of their loved ones, asking for information. Since it was far too dangerous then to say aloud what they thought had happened to them—that they had been tortured and murdered by US-backed military juntas—the women coined a new word for them, *los desaparecidos*—“the disappeareds.” Our government has never been honest about its own role in the 1973 overthrow of the elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile or its backing, through “Operation Condor,” of what the State Department has recently called “extrajudicial killings” in Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America. But we now have several thousand of our own disappeareds, and we are badly mistaken if we think that we in the United States are entirely blameless for what happened to them.

The suicidal assassins of September 11, 2001, did not “attack America,” as our political leaders and the news media like to maintain they attacked American foreign policy. Employing the strategy of the weak, they killed innocent bystanders who then became enemies only because they had already become victims. Terrorism by definition strikes at the innocent in order to draw attention to the sins of the invulnerable. The United States deploys such overwhelming military force globally that for its militarized opponents only an “asymmetric strategy,” in the jargon of the Pentagon, has any chance of success. When it does succeed, as it did spectacularly on September 11, it renders our massive military machine worthless: The terrorists offer it no targets. On the day of the disaster, President George W Bush told the American people that we were attacked because we are “a beacon for freedom” and because the attackers were “evil.” In his address to Congress on September 20, he said, “This is civilization’s fight.” This attempt to define difficult-to-grasp events as only a conflict over abstract values—as a “clash of civilizations,” in current post-cold war American jargon—is not only disingenuous but also a way of evading responsibility for the “blowback” that America’s imperial projects have generated.

“Blowback” is a CIA term first used in March 1954 in a recently declassified report on the 1953 operation to overthrow the government of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran. It is a metaphor for the unintended consequences of the US government’s international activities that have been kept secret from the American people. The CIA’s fears that there might ultimately be some blowback from its egregious interference in the affairs of Iran were well founded. Installing the Shah in power brought twenty-five years of tyranny and repression to the Iranian people and elicited the Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolution. The staff of the American embassy in Teheran was held hostage for more than a year. This misguided “covert operation” of the US government helped convince many capable people throughout the Islamic world that the United States was an implacable enemy.

The pattern has become all too familiar. Osama bin Laden, the leading suspect as mastermind behind the carnage of September 11, is no more (or less) “evil” than his fellow creations of our CIA: Manuel Noriega, former commander of the Panama Defense Forces until George Bush pere in late 1989 invaded his country and kidnapped him, or Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, whom we armed and backed so long as he was at war with Khomeini’s Iran and whose people we have bombed and starved for a decade in an incompetent effort to get rid of him. These men were once listed as “assets” of our clandestine services organization.

Osama bin Laden joined our call for resistance to the Soviet Union’s 1979 invasion of Afghanistan and accepted our military training and equipment along with countless other mujahedeen “freedom fighters.” It was only after the Russians bombed Afghanistan back into the stone age and suffered a Vietnam-like defeat, and we turned our backs on the death and destruction we had helped cause, that he turned against us. The last straw as far as bin Laden was concerned was that, after the Gulf War, we based “infidel” American troops in Saudi Arabia to prop up its decadent, fiercely authoritarian regime. Ever since, bin Laden has been attempting to bring the things the CIA taught him home to the teachers. On September 11, he appears to have returned to his deadly project with a vengeance.

There are today, ten years after the demise of the Soviet Union, some 800 Defense Department installations located in other countries. The people of the United States make up perhaps 4 percent of the world’s population but consume 40 percent of its resources. They exercise hegemony over the world directly through overwhelming military might and indirectly through secretive organizations like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. Though largely dominated by the US government, these are formally international organizations and therefore beyond Congressional oversight.

As the American-inspired process of “globalization” inexorably enlarges the gap between the rich and the poor, a popular movement against it has gained strength, advancing from its first demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 through protests in Washington, DC; Melbourne; Prague; Seoul; Nice; Barcelona; Quebec City; Goteborg; and on to its violent confrontations in Genoa earlier this year. Ironically, though American leaders are deaf to the desires of the protesters, the Defense Department has actually adopted the movement’s main premise—that current global economic arrangements mean more wealth for the “West” and more misery for the “rest”—as a reason why the United States should place weapons in space. The US Space Command’s pamphlet “Vision for 2020” argues that “the globalization of the world economy will also continue, with a widening between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots,’” and that we have a mission to “dominate the space dimension of military operations to protect US interests and investments” in an increasingly dangerous and implicitly anti-American world. Unfortunately, while the eyes of military planners were firmly focused on the “control and domination” of space and “denying other countries access to space,” a very different kind of space was suddenly occupied.

On the day after the September 11 attack, Democratic Senator Zell Miller of Georgia declared, “I say, bomb the hell out of them. If there’s collateral damage, so be it.” “Collateral damage” is another of those hateful euphemisms invented by our military to prettify its killing of the defenseless. It is the term Pentagon spokesmen use to refer to the Serb and Iraqi civilians who were killed or maimed by bombs from high-flying American warplanes in our campaigns against Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein. It is the kind of word our new ambassador to the United Nations, John Negroponte, might have used in the 1980s to explain the slaughter of peasants, Indians and church workers by American-backed right-wing death squads in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua while he was ambassador to Honduras. These activities made the Reagan years the worst decade for Central America since the Spanish conquest.

Massive military retaliation with its inevitable “collateral damage” will, of course, create more desperate and embittered childless parents and parentless children, and so recruit more maddened people to the terrorists’ cause. In fact, mindless bombing is surely one of the responses their grisly strategy hopes to elicit. Moreover, a major crisis in the Middle East will inescapably cause a rise in global oil prices, with, from the assassins’ point of view, desirable destabilizing effects on all the economies of the advanced industrial nations.

What should we do? The following is a start on what, in a better world, we might modestly think about doing. But let me concede at the outset that none of this is going to happen. The people in Washington who run our government believe that they can now get all the things they wanted before the trade towers came down: more money

for the military, ballistic missile defenses, more freedom for the intelligence services and removal of the last modest restrictions (no assassinations, less domestic snooping, fewer lists given to “friendly” foreign police of people we want executed) that the Vietnam era placed on our leaders. An inevitable consequence of big “blowback” events like this one is that, the causes having been largely kept from American eyes (if not Islamic or Latin American ones), people cannot make the necessary connections for an explanation. Popular support for Washington is thus, at least for a while, staggeringly high.

Nonetheless, what we should do is to make a serious analytical effort to determine what overseas military commitments make sense and where we should pull in our horns. Although we intend to continue supporting Israel, our new policy should be to urge the dismantling of West Bank Israeli settlements as fast as possible. In Saudi Arabia, we should withdraw our troops, since they do nothing for our oil security, which we can maintain by other means. Beyond the Middle East, in Okinawa, where we have thirty-eight US military bases in the midst of 1.3 million civilians, we should start by bringing home the Third Marine Division and demobilizing it. It is understrength, has no armor and is not up to the standards of the domestically based First and Second Marine Divisions. It has no deterrent value but is, without question, an unwanted burden we force the people of this unlucky island to bear.

A particular obscenity crying out for elimination is the US Army’s School of the Americas, founded in Panama in 1946 and moved to Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1984 after Panamanian President Jorge Illueca called it “the biggest base for destabilization in Latin America” and evicted it. Its curriculum includes counterinsurgency, military intelligence, interrogation techniques, sniper fire, infantry and commando tactics, psychological warfare and jungle operations.

Although a few members of Congress have long tried to shut it down, the Pentagon and the White House have always found ways to keep it in the budget. In May 2000 the Clinton Administration sought to provide new camouflage for the school by renaming it the “Defense Institute for Hemispheric Security Cooperation” and transferring authority over it from the Army Department to the Defense Department.

The school has trained more than 60,000 military and police officers from Latin American and Caribbean countries. Among SOA’s most illustrious graduates are the dictators Manuel Noriega (now serving a forty-year sentence in an American jail for drug trafficking) and Omar Torrijos of Panama; Guillermo Rodrigues of Ecuador; Juan Velasco Alvarado of Peru; Leopoldo Galtieri, former head of Argentina’s junta; and Hugo Banzer Suarez of Bolivia. More recently Peru’s Vladimiro Montesinos, SOA class of 1965, surfaced as a CIA asset and former President Alberto Fujimori’s closest adviser.

More difficult than these fairly simple reforms would be to bring our rampant militarism under control. From George Washington's "farewell address" to Dwight Eisenhower's invention of the phrase "military-industrial complex," American leaders have warned about the dangers of a bloated, permanent, expensive military establishment that has lost its relationship to the country because service in it is no longer an obligation of citizenship. Our military operates the biggest arms sales operation on earth; it rapes girls, women and schoolchildren in Okinawa; it cuts ski-lift cables in Italy, killing twenty vacationers, and dismisses what its insubordinate pilots have done as a "training accident"; it allows us nuclear attack submarines to be used for joy rides for wealthy civilian supporters and then covers up the negligence that caused the sinking of a Japanese high school training ship; it propagandizes the nation with Hollywood films glorifying military service Pearl Harbor; and it manipulates the political process to get more carrier task forces, antimissile missiles, nuclear weapons, stealth bombers and other expensive gadgets for which we have no conceivable use. Two of the most influential federal institutions are not in Washington but on the south side of the Potomac River—the Defense Department and the Central Intelligence Agency. Given their influence today one must conclude that the government outlined in the Constitution of 1787 no longer bears much relationship to the government that actually rules from Washington. Until that is corrected, we should probably stop talking about "democracy" and "human rights."

Once we have done the analysis, brought home most of our "forward deployed" troops, refurbished our diplomatic capabilities, reassured the world that we are not unilateralists who walk away from treaty commitments and reintroduced into government the kinds of idealistic policies we once pioneered (e.g., the Marshall Plan), then we might assess what we can do against "terrorism." We could reduce our transportation and information vulnerabilities by building into our systems more of what engineers call redundancy: different ways of doing the same things—airlines and railroads, wireless and optical fiber communications, automatic computer backup programs, land routes around bridges. It is absurd that our railroads do not even begin to compare with those in Western Europe or Japan, and their inadequacies have made us overly dependent on aviation in travel between US cities. It may well be that some public utilities should be nationalized, just as safety aboard airliners should become a federal function. Flight decks need to be made genuinely inaccessible from the passenger compartments, as they are on El Al. In what might seem a radical change, we could even hire intelligence analysts at the CIA who can read the languages of the countries they are assigned to and have actually visited the places they write about (neither of these conditions is even slightly usual at the present time).

If we do these things, the crisis will recede. If we play into the hands of the terrorists, we will see more collateral damage among our own citizens. Ten years ago, the other so-called superpower, the former Soviet Union, disappeared almost overnight because of

internal contradictions, imperial overstretch and an inability to reform. We have always been richer, so it might well take longer for similar contradictions to afflict our society. But it is nowhere written that the United States, in its guise as an empire dominating the world, must go on forever.

Questions

1. Explain and give examples of “blowback.” According to the author, how did blowback result in the attacks on September 11, 2001?
2. What steps does the author suggest should be taken to limit anti-American sentiments?

Intimacy at a Distance, Korean American Style: Invited Korean Elderly and Their Married Children

BY KIM, SHIN AND KWANG CHUNG KIM. 2001. "Intimacy at a Distance, Korean American Style: Invited Korean Elderly and Their Married Children," in *Age Through Ethnic Lenses: Caring for the Elderly in a Multicultural Society*, Laura Katz Olson (ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., pp. 45–58.

In this chapter excerpt, Shin Kim and Kwang Chung Kim examine the lives and relationships of invited Korean elderly immigrants in the United States. "Invited" immigrants are those who have come to the United States at the invitation of their adult children who are already settled there. While the family arrangements in Korea remain patrilineal and patrilocal, family arrangements in the United States have shifted to a conjugal family system.

Immigration to the United States from Korea began at the dawn of the twentieth century, in 1903. Nevertheless, the great majority of the current Korean Americans are the post-1965 immigrants and their native or foreign-born children from South Korea. (Korea was divided into North and South Korea at the conclusion of World War II. From that point on, North Korea has had no diplomatic ties with the United States.) There are two categories of Korean elderly currently living in the United States. The first is those who immigrated to the United States at the invitation of their adult children who were already settled here. Most of these immigrants were elderly at the time of their arrival in the United States. Min (1998) refers to them as the "invited elderly." The other group of Korean elderly is those who immigrated as adults with their own family and who recently reached the age of retirement—the "immigrated elderly," according to Min (1998).

These two types of elderly are quite different. The invited elderly generally have lost a considerable part of their preimmigration socioeconomic resources and status because of their migration. No matter how long they have been in the United States, they are not Americanized. Most of them have only a limited record of employment in this country, if any (Kim, Hurh and Kim, 1993). Therefore, these invited elderly are dependent on their children and the U.S. government for their living. In contrast, the immigrated elderly are expected to be financially independent owing to their long history of work in the United States. Their English proficiency and familiarity with the American system further help their retirement situation. Certainly, they tend to be better off financially and psychologically than the invited elderly (Min, 1998).

A great majority of the current Korean elderly in the United States most probably are the invited elderly, particularly those who are seventy years of age or older. According to the 1990 U.S. census, 35,200 of about 800,000 Korean Americans (4.4 percent)

were age sixty-five or over (Yoo and Sung, 1997). Given the relatively short history of Korean immigration to the United States (a little over two decades at the time of the 1990 census), almost all of these older Koreans are presumed to be the invited elderly, although existing data do not provide this level of specificity.

Furthermore, the number of invited elderly is not likely to have increased substantially since the 1990 census. There are two reasons for this. First, there has been a drastic reduction in Korean immigration overall. Second, two 1996 laws—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PL 104–193) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (PL 104–208)—made inviting one’s elderly parents quite difficult for adult immigrants. Nonetheless, the invited elderly still constitute a great majority of the current Korean American older population. This chapter is thus concerned only with the life experiences of the invited elderly and their relationship with their adult immigrant children.

The Immigration Context and Relevant Questions

Even though the number of Korean Americans is estimated to have reached between 1.3 million and 2 million by the year 2000, the heyday of Korean immigration was in the 1970s and 1980s. During the peak periods, over 34,000 Koreans came here every year. Beginning in 1989, immigration from Korea started to decline sharply, and by the second half of the 1990s it had fallen to less than half that of the peak periods (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1970–1999). This trend has not shown any sign of reversal despite the recent Korean economic crisis. Unless North Korea unexpectedly opens its door to emigration, the number of new immigrants from Korea is likely to continue to decrease, albeit at a slower rate than previously. This decline has had an important consequence on the composition of the community: the so-called old-timers—those who have been in the United States for more than ten years—constitute the majority of the current Korean immigrant population, including the elderly.

When the invited elderly arrive in the United States, most of them initially live with the family of the adult children who officially invited them. Some live with other married children if the latter need help with child care or a business operation. A small number live with their unmarried children or other relatives. As their length of residence in the United States extends, though, only a small proportion of elderly parents remain with their married children’s family; a large majority eventually move out to establish their own home (Kauh, 1997). The 1980 census shows that 75 percent of Korean elderly lived with their children; by the 1990 census, this proportion decreased to 57 percent (Yoo and Sung, 1997). Consequently, we expect that fewer than 50 percent of the invited elderly will be residing with their children’s family in the 2000 census. In short, most of the invited Korean elderly now maintain a residence independent of their adult children.

Owing to a huge concentration of Korean immigrants in large metropolitan areas, this phenomenon is likely to be observed more readily in those regions (Yoo and Sung, 1997). Whether they currently live alone or with a spouse, invited Korean elderly parents living independently manage their own daily existence. Surprisingly, when their health no longer permits them to take care of themselves, they are more likely to move into a nursing home than back in with their children. Thus, it appears that most invited Korean elderly not only live independently of their adult children but also prefer such autonomy (Koh and Bell, 1987; Kim, Hurh and Kim, 1991). This leads to the first question, Why do the invited elderly parents prefer an independent residence?

Moreover, elderly parents with an independent residence are generally found to be more satisfied with their current life than those who stay with their children (Koh and Bell, 1987). This observation runs counter to the traditional expectation of filial piety (Kim, Kim and Hurh, 1991). Since the invited elderly are assumed to cling to this traditional expectation, they should be happier when they live with their married children. Considering the fact that these older people are not familiar with the American system, the higher life satisfaction of the independently living elderly is perplexing. In our view, this can be explained by looking at the actual situation in their children's homes. Thus, the second question is, What aspects of the experience of invited elderly parents who live with their married children push them to prefer independent living?

As the invited elderly parents move into their own places, their relationship with their married children is likely to go through some transformations. Thus, the third topic explores the question, What is the relationship between the independently living elderly parents and their married children?

This chapter seeks to address these three questions on the basis of previous studies and our 1998 Chicago survey. In addition, we offer some policy suggestions to assist the Korean invited elderly and perhaps other Asian older people who live on their own.

Let us first place these issues in their proper context. Korean immigrants came from a society where most elderly parents still prefer to maintain traditional living arrangements, that is, to reside with their married sons. This is particularly true when the elderly parents do not possess sufficient resources of their own. Although they are currently residing in America, where multigenerational households are the exception, the invited Korean elderly parents are not Americanized. Also, they have lost a considerable portion of their resources through immigration. Typically, then, they do expect their married sons to practice the cultural norm of filial piety and take them into their homes.

This expectation was obvious during interviews we conducted in 1998. A great majority of the invited elderly parents living alone reported that they received more help

from their daughters than from their sons. Nevertheless, almost all of them boasted of their sons' assistance and not that of their daughters. One implication we drew from these interviews was that no matter what they professed publicly, these Korean older people held onto the traditional expectation of filial piety. Indeed, there is a deep-down longing to live with one of their married sons. Thus, the invited Korean elderly parents' observed preference for an independent life of self-care is not necessarily an outcome of their transformed cultural norms.

Why Do Invited Elderly Parents Prefer Independent Living?

Mrs. K, eighty-one, lives with her husband in one of the senior citizens' apartment complexes on Sheridan Road in Chicago, where a good number of elderly Koreans reside. The couple immigrated to America in 1983 and lived with their eldest son's family for two years before moving into their current apartment. Her husband's health has been deteriorating over the last several years, and he is temporarily in a nursing home. These days she spends most of her time visiting her husband; in order to do so she must take several buses. "I have to make transfer twice [to get to the nursing home]. It takes more than an hour one way," she sighs. She also misses attending the only Korean adult day care center in town because of the long commute.

She is agitated, nonetheless, by the idea of moving in temporarily with her eldest son, who lives nearby. She emphatically expresses her desire to remain in her own place, despite the inconvenience. At the same time, she is clearly worried that she is giving an incorrect impression of her son. "He is a very good son," she says. "It is just darn too uncomfortable to live with children's family. Since we have this place of our own, why do I want to go back to such a life, even temporarily?"

The traditional family arrangement in Korea is a patrilineal and patrilocal extended family system. The root cause of the invited elderly parents' preference for independent living is the disappearance of this structure among Korean immigrants in America. In a patrilocal family system, married sons and their family are expected either to reside with their parents or live under their strong authority. Both sons and their wives are expected to take care of the parents faithfully (Choi, 1970). Worthiness of wives is often measured in terms of their ability and willingness to attend to their parents-in-law (Hsu, 1971b). In return, married sons keep the right to inherit their parents' wealth. Kin is viewed as a corporate body, with all male siblings maintaining the kinship group. Although this traditional patrilineal and patrilocal family system has been weakened considerably in recent years, it provides the basic framework for, and still exerts a powerful influence in, regulating family and kinship relations in Korea (Kim and Rhee, 1997).