

The Eagle's Shadow – a Look into our Nation's Ignorance

As United States citizens, we enjoy some of the highest standards of living in history. We are rich beyond historical precedent. While one fifth of the world lives on one dollar a day, we don't bat an eye at driving our SUV's two blocks for groceries. Our comfort has led to political complacency; we rank 114th in the world in voter turnout.¹ Our apathy towards the rest of the world and our consumerist culture allows our government to adopt foreign policies that are detrimental to many foreign countries. Additionally, technology plays a key role in America's adversarial relationship to the rest of the world.

America is the biggest drain on the environment overall. Even though we are home to merely 5% of the world's population, we are responsible for a quarter of worldwide consumption and pollution.² If all countries on the Earth were to become first world nations, and consume as we do, the amount of resources needed would require 3 more planets.

As the world's leading consumers, we are addicted to shopping. We buy the latest toys and throw them out when there's a better model. Our media tries to secure brand loyalty starting with children as young as one year old.³ We are reminded by the press that if we even slow down on consumption our economy will dive. But as purveyors of technology, we need to set the standard for the rest of the developing world, and try to be a country that is rich and environmentally friendly by decreasing consumption and proving the viability of using alternative resources. While we take steps to protect the environment, we also need to protect our rights as citizens.

¹ Hertsgaard, Mark. The Eagle's Shadow: Why America Fascinates and Infuriates the World, page 163

² Hertsgaard, page 34

³ Hertsgaard, page 38

The USA PATRIOT Act, introduced and passed through legislation and executive review in only one month's time, seemed to revoke half of the 10 amendments of the Bill of Rights. Its policies infringed upon freedom of speech, prohibition against unreasonable search and seizure, right to due process, right to a prompt public trial, and protection against cruel and unusual punishment. There were no public debates, no coverage by the media, and no explanation of the changes until *after* its ratification. “‘We’re an open society,’ the president declared, ‘but we’re at war.’”¹ Sadly, polls showed that most of America was willing to give up some rights to improve national security, and a third of those polled even wanted the detainment of Arab-Americans.² We might wonder what the ratio of blue-collar to white-collar workers was in that poll. As stated by Schmidt in “Timid Professionals,” white-collar workers tend to think in favor of their company’s best interests, which are normally aligned with conservative actions – giving the government power. This may help explain the overwhelming support the government has shown towards business since Reagan’s years.

In the eighties Ronald Regan deregulated business because he believed the free market would do better without restrictions. He based his supply-side economic policy on the idea that major tax cuts to companies and the wealthy would provoke investment by companies.³ Unfortunately, major side effect of this policy was a massive federal budget deficit, as well as the reduction or elimination of social services, which, as of now, are almost impossible to bring back. Reagan also deregulated the various communication technology channels, allowing those who could afford it to buy up as many as 36 radio and television stations per company.⁴ That number soon increased so that a given company could reach one in three households nationwide.

¹ Hertzgaard, page 53

² Hertzgaard, page 52

³ Hertzgaard, page 142

⁴ Hertzgaard, page 101

This centralization of media sources has had broad implications regarding what information we receive.

Now we have merely seven huge media conglomerates controlling nearly all of television, radio, newspaper, and books. These companies are: General Electric, Sony, AT&T, AOL Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, and News Corp. Decades ago journalists were radical if they challenged the actions of political and economic elites, but recently it seems they are radical for just being honest. Journalists are accused of being un-American for merely criticizing any of the nation's (or their parent company's) policies, and many times are even fired. Their news stations are generally prevented from reporting negative issues that involve them or their affiliates, and they aren't interested in criticizing or investigating government actions either. After all, why would one of the 'Big 7' want to criticize the government whose supply-side economics has been a veritable windfall for them for the past thirty years?

Even in cases where gathering information should be top priority, politicians, the military, and even the media corporations themselves prevent our journalists from accessing it. June 23, 2001, Reuters reported of a plan of attack by Saudi dissidents on the U.S., which reached almost every major newsroom in America.¹ Surprisingly it was considered not worthy of publication by media heads, but at the same time those stations were giving considerable airtime to the Gary Condit sex scandal. After it was realized that Bush may have ignored such critical terrorist information the media decided to return to reporting on more serious news, but it had trouble. "After all, overseas [news] bureaus had been closed and experienced reporters fired long ago."² Shortly after the Daniel Pearl incident the Pentagon quickly decided that reporters must stay under the protection of the American Army, and not to wander without an

¹ Hertzgaard, page 104

² Hertzgaard, page 105

accompaniment. It was roughly this time that journalist Doug Struck was held at gunpoint by American troops, preventing him from checking into a rumor that a civilian Afghan village had been bombed. It's no wonder we don't know much about the outside world. We should demand better reporting from our sources of world news and openly criticize those who try to prevent their publication. Being ignorant about our foreign policies doesn't prevent foreigners from hating us.

Even without the U.S. media diligently reporting only the official government line, it would be easy for Americans to be oblivious to our government's actions abroad. Nightly television news, the primary news source for the majority of Americans, devoted a measly two minutes per night to foreign news.¹ This is an abuse of a publicly owned communication technology media channel – television airwaves. A democracy depends on a well-informed populace to make decisions. This information should reach us through the airwaves that we own.

U.S. media's choice not to put any emphasis on foreign news helps to allow the U.S. government to enact foreign policies that are widely unpopular worldwide. While the scope of these policies is very broad, ranging over political, economic, and military policies, we will focus here on the military. At the same time that Reagan initiated the deregulation of the media, he also diverted federal funds away from social programs and into the Pentagon's budget. This has bloated the Pentagon into a \$400 billion a year federal agency.² One may argue that we need this money for defense. However, the question has become: defense from whom? Our largest potential foes, Russia and China, spend \$70 billion and \$50 billion on military technology and resources, respectively. How do we justify spending so much on military technology, especially when the federal government cries broke when schools and other social programs are starving for

¹ Hertsgaard, page 99

² <http://www.truemajority.org/oreotrans.cfm>

funding? As an example of our military technology glut, note that we have 22 Trident nuclear submarines in our nuclear arsenal. *Each* of these submarines has the capability to turn 400 cities into toxic rubble.¹ As citizens, we have been, in our complacency, condoning this bloated and misdirected military. As engineers, we should strive to not become an enabling cog in this system of military-industrial complex gone awry.

We have argued in these pages that U.S. citizens' levels of consumption and complacency when it comes to our government have allowed abuses in media and military technology. These abuses are allowing for financial plundering within our country and nurturing a worldwide population of angry, disenfranchised people who blame their woes, in many cases justifiably, on us. We introduce the term "blowback", coined by the CIA for how foreign policies can, in unforeseeable manifestations, come back to plague a country many years after the fact. There are numerable examples of this in our military history. In fact, it seems empirically that most of our military excursions in other countries have had the net effect, paradoxically, of lowering our national security. The most recent examples are the September 11th attacks, which were largely the result of growing global resentment in response to foreign military policy, notably our military aid for Israel, and our troops stationed in Saudi Arabia. While our policies cannot excuse such attacks, it is arrogant and ignorant of us not to assume responsibility for our own actions overseas.

While we have focused this paper on negative aspects resulting from our complacent, consumerist culture, it is important to also know that much of the world greatly admires us. Much of the technology that is invented here has great positive social consequences around the world. Communication technology is inherently anti-repression,² and medical technology has

¹ Hertsgaard, page 83

² Giddens, Anthony. Runaway World

tremendous positive potential. The trappings of our culture are adopted widely, even in some of the most rural and unexpected places. We are seen as a country where individual prosperity is not precluded, and where political change is possible. These qualities are much admired by citizens of countries for which neither of these virtues exist. We should be careful not to squander this reservoir of good will by allowing our technological might to arrogantly trample upon other nations. If we do, we will see the results of our actions “blowback” in our faces time after time.