***AMERICA AT BAY – EVADING DESTINY***

*Americans are struggling to draw into focus their exalted image of themselves and reality. They are not doing a very good job of it. The gap is wide and growing. That is due in good measure to what has been happening beyond the country’s shores, and over which it lacks the means to exercise decisive influence. Our response has been one of avoidance and evasion.*

*We seem to fear that if we stare at reality squarely, we will find reality staring back at us in a discomforting way.*

*The forms that this behavior takes and its implications are the subject of this essay. It extends themes that were treated in two other commentaries some time ago, “America’s Exceptional Insecurity & Its Global Future” and “Treating The Terror Psychosis,” which are attached.*

Fading prowess is one of the most difficult things for humans to cope with – whether it be an individual or a nation. By nature, we prize our strength and competence; we dread decline and its intimations of extinction. This is especially so in the United States where for many the individual and the collective are inseparable. Today, events are occurring that contradict the national narrative of a nation with a unique destiny. That creates cognitive dissonance.

Our thoughts and actions in response to that deeply unsettling reality conform to the classic behavioral pattern of those suffering from acute cognitive dissonance. ***Denial*** is its cardinal feature. That is to say, denial of those things that cause stress and anxiety. Sublimation methods of various kinds are deployed to keep them below the threshold of conscious awareness. We all do that, to some degree, on a personal level. Collectivities can do it as well. In the latter case, the mechanisms are more numerous and diverse. Even truths that touch on the essence of the collectivity personality can be sublimated because normally they are not experienced immediately and directly by the individual. We are speaking of military actions, abusive state behavior like the conduct of torture, diplomatic deals that are permissive of unsavory actions by others, or studied misrepresentations by government and media which hide unpleasant truths from the populace. At a more abstract level, we repress or minimize perceptions of us by other peoples, relative well-being compared to other societies (medical care, maternity leave, pensions), or national competence as demonstrated by accomplishment in comparison with other societies (constructing mass transportation systems).

The crudest denial mechanism is literal *avoidance*. If you don’t travel abroad, you don’t see; or you don’t observe when you do travel abroad. You don’t inform yourself about any of the above mentioned matters by abstaining from following the news; by reading only reassuring reports and talking only to equally ignorant/sublimating people; by excluding all contradictory sources as ‘alien” or “subversive;” by declaring the world as too complex to decipher; by appraising serious issues of national policy as “above my pay grade” while ignoring the core democratic precept that as the citizen of a republic, nothing is above your pay grade.

Avoidance is greatly facilitated by the strategies of those who aim to keep your attention off of troubling matters. Suppression of disturbing or negative news (imposed or voluntary); dissimulating public officials; the sowing of fear that critical debate will be harmful; and the fostering of narratives that either render everything in anodyne terms or cast reality in an unnaturally rosy light. Thus, most Americans’ conception of their government’s actions in the Global War On Terror is composed of what they take from films such as *American Sniper* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, TV programs such as *Homeland*, and similarly confected “news” stories.

Another avoidance mechanism is to stress systematically those features of other nations, or situations, that conform to the requirements of the American national narrative while neglecting or downplaying opposite features. Currently, we are witnessing the unfolding of an almost clinical example in the treatment of China. The emergence of the PRC as a great power with the potential to surpass or eclipse the United States poses a direct threat to the foundation myth of American superiority and exceptionalism. The very existence of that threat is emotionally difficult to come to terms with. Psychologically, the most simple way to cope is to define it out of existence – to deny it. One would think that doing so is anything but easy. After all, China’s economy has been growing at double digit rates for almost 30 years. The concrete evidence of its stunning achievements is visible to the naked eye.

Necessity, though, is the mother of invention. Our compelling emotional need at the moment is to have China’s strength and implicit threat subjectively diminished. So what we see is a rather extraordinary campaign to highlight everything that is wrong with China, to exaggerate those weaknesses, to project them into the future, and – thereby – to reassure ourselves. Coverage of Chinese affairs by the United States’ newspaper of record, *The New York Times*, has taken a leading role in this project. For the past year or two, we have been treated to an endless series of stories focusing on what’s wrong with China. Seemingly nothing is too inconsequential to escape front page, lengthy coverage.

We read of new satellite cities that remain largely uninhabited due to faulty demographic assessments, of jaded consumers who are turning away from luxury products, or a widespread epidemic of stress among children exposed to the rigors of a Confucian style testing regime, of rural communities losing their sense of solidarity and common identity as people move to the cities and the stay-at-homes spend hours watching newly acquired televisions, of the uprooting of Beijing’s traditional narrow lanes and houses squeezed out by real estate development. Of course, there is voluminous coverage of the much publicized corruption scandals – indeed, coverage that exceeds what the papers devote to recurrent financial scandals in the U.S. These latter are treated as a sign that the regime itself may be endangered. So, too, the recent turn toward a crackdown on political dissidents is presented as an omen of underlying contradictions in the Chinese system that jeopardizes the viability of national institutions. “Can China’s hybrid autocratic Communism survive?” is a theme that crops up repeatedly and frequently – either boldly stated or *sotto voce*.

The current signs of economic weakness and financial fragility have generated a spate of dire commentary that China’s great era of growth may be grinding to a halt – not to be restarted until its leaders have seen the error of their ways and taken the path marked out by America and other Western capitalist countries. Editorials go so far as to lambast Beijing for failing to meet in its responsibilities to the global economy as a whole by being so obtuse in its economic management. These judgments are passed without reference to an eight year world slowdown produced by the recklessness of American authorities in creating conditions that led to the financial collapse of 2008; without reference to the lethargic performance of the American economy whose growth rate barely exceeds population increase (and which in Europe and Japan rates that have left GDP still below the 2008 level); without reference to the Chinese leaders’ skillful following of Keynesian logic that maintained robust growth rates; and the exceptional benefits that the United States enjoys from having the dollar accepted as an international reserve and transaction currency – something that allows it to run massive trade deficits without resorting to harsh austerity medicine as does every other country. As Richard Fischer, who recently stepped down as President of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, pointedly has noted: turbulence in the world’s financial markets should be traced to Washington; “it is not China” – yet, everyone else relishes blaming China,

This latest upwelling of China-bashing could well serve as a clinical exhibit of avoidance behavior. For it goes beyond sublimation and simple denial. It also reveals the extreme vulnerability of the American psyche to the perceived China “threat,” and the compelling psychological need to neutralize it – if only by verbal denigration. There is not the smallest sign of inhibition about ignoring the weaknesses and failings of the American experience according to the criteria so rigorously applied to China. Implicitly, the point of comparative reference is some idealized standard derived from no historical record – much less present realities in the United States. Indeed, if we are to speak of feckless economic policies with deleterious effects on the world economy, it is those of the United States and its partners that stand out in bold relief. Here, we may be seeing a classical example of “*projection*” behavior.

The “demean China” project is becoming cartoonish. The *NYT* capped a week of daily stories on the theme of “it’s all over for the Chinese economy” with a splashy story, *“China’s Factories Fading”* illustrated by a Detroit-like photo of abandoned steel mills. Doubtless, we’ll soon be treated to graphic images of emaciated coolies pulling rickshaws. What’s happening is simple: the creators of propaganda begin to assimilate their own fabrications and editors come to believe that the audience is so fully indoctrinated that subtlety can be dispensed with.

*There is a similar pattern of denial in the systematic disparagement of Russia’s intervention In Syria* - by official Washington, by the media and by the commentariat. The remarkably effective air campaign, coupled with the Russian coordinated ground campaign, has transformed the situation both militarily and politically. Yet, one would hardly notice that salient truth by limiting oneself to American sources. There has been a virtual blackout about those accomplishments. Instead, we are submitted to a steady drumbeat of criticism that Russia has not concentrated on ISIL (as if al Qaeda were now a “good guy” and as if Moscow has not taken the initiative in striking at ISIL’s critical oil commerce, in collaboration with Turkey, which for a year American forces studiously have avoided attacking). Dubious claims are made daily about civilian casualties from Russian air strikes (without reference to the tens of thousands killed by the US in its military interventions in the region – included its full backing of Saudi Arabia’s homicidal assault on Yemen). Putin’s diplomatic efforts are derided although they are more realistic and promising than anything the Obama people have undertaken. And Washington spokesmen trip over themselves to make insulting remarks about Putin personally.

This type of avoidance behavior smacks of *wishing thinking*. That is most evident in the repeated forecasts by American officials and pundits that Putin will be unable to sustain his intervention in Saudi because of the negative political fall-out domestically. They affirm with confidence that Russia’s wobbly economy, weakened by sanctions and the drop in oil prices, will suffer from the outlays for military engagement in Syria with intolerable consequences for Russians’ standards of living. The expected outcry of protest would be aggravated by the spectacle of coffins arriving from the battlefront a la Afghanistan. So we are told by Samantha Powers at the U.N., Deputy National Security Adviser (and failed novelist) Ben Rhodes, and numerous others. Scenarios of this sort, of course, have no grounding in reality. Facilitated by the ignorance of even senior policy-makers about Russia and Putin, they do serve the purpose of postponing the moment of reckoning with uncongenial realities. “The sky is falling” motif applied to Moscow as with Beijing is immature, irresponsible – and ultimately costly. But those in high office who habitually resort to avoidance devices are indeed immature.

Taken together, these reactions to Putin’s move into Syria form a pattern of behavior reflecting insecurity and anxiety about the appearance of an unexpected rival. That party’s display of military capabilities thought to be an exclusive American asset, in particular, undercuts the air of superiority so central to the nation’s self-image and prowess.

An ancillary trait exhibited in avoidance behavior is *to define problems in ways that are intellectually and emotionally convenient.* The Russia-in-Syria situation provides one example. A level-headed interpretation would focus on these elements: the failure of Washington to prevent violent jihadist groups from exploiting the rebellion against Assad to advance their own program hostile to the United States; the absence of a countervailing force ideologically acceptable to us; the threat posed to Russia by the expansion of terrorist groups that have Russian affiliates and that have recruited large numbers of fighters from Chechnya and elsewhere; and the opportunity that Putin has opened to find a resolution that squares the circle of our opposing both Assad and the Salafists. That attitude, though, would entail an agonizing reappraisal of the foundation stones of American policy set in place over the past five years. It also would require modifying the prevailing view of Russia as an intrinsically aggressive state challenging the West from Ukraine to the Middle East, and Putin as a thug. Finally, it would mean facing down Republican leaders and the neo-conservative/R2P alliance that agitates fiercely for escalating a confrontation with Moscow. The Obama White House recoils at the very thought of this last but promotes the narrative.

So instead of a sensible, realistic assessment we get hostile rhetoric, denigration of the Russian effort, and the indulgence of dreamy scenarios dissociated from anything actually happening in the real world. This is married to a problem definition that emphasizes: Russia’s alleged nefarious intentions; its interest in seeking military bases in the Eastern Mediterranean; and its dedication to foiling the American design for its global hegemony, The last point is correct; however, adherence to so unrealistic a goal in the presence of overwhelming evidence that it is unrealizable – and that its pursuit is counter-productive - avoids the need to come to terms with the question of how to engage with Russia.

*To return to China*, the same tendency to respond to the rise of a new power by instinctively reducing the challenge to a conveniently one-dimensional one is manifest in the Obama administration stress on the military aspect. It increasingly concentrates on the expansion of China’s military forces – especially its navy, the steps that Beijing has taken in the dispute over tiny islands in the South China Sea, and the tensions generated by a similar dispute with Japan. These issues are genuine, but they are being played up out of all proportion to their intrinsic significance in shaping the long term Sino-American relationship. China undoubtedly aims to become the dominant power in East Asia while exerting more and more influence world-wide. It is not in the business of military conquest, though. Historically, it almost never has been. The goal has been to extract deference from rather than to rule other peoples. That is exactly what it now is doing, in Asia as well as in other regions, through the use of its economic strength and vast financial reserves.

The American response has been to replace a calibrated, well-balanced strategy with one that increasingly gives precedence to containment. Thus, we see Washington forging an array of alliances with other countries in Asia, and establishing new bases, in tacit emulation of SEATO in the 1950s when the enemy to be contained was the Sino-Soviet bloc. We have gone so far as to ‘send a message” by deploying a Marine brigade on the North Coast of Australia whose practical value is nil. These steps might make some sense in the light of anxieties felt in regional capitals were they simply secondary elements in a sophisticated long-term strategy designed to fashion a viable relationship with China. They increasingly, though, look like stand-alone measures that accord with a security focused view of the challenge.

Probably the most extreme example of this propensity is Obama’s decision to budget $1 trillion to develop and deploy a new generation of nuclear weapons. Mainly of small caliber designed to be delivered as precision guided munitions, their only potential value is as first-strike weapons against non-nuclear countries. They would add nothing to the deterrent effect of the American nuclear arsenal – assuming that there is anyone to deter; they could encourage commanders to press for their use in circumstances of convention war; they could tempt use to destroy the nuclear facilities of states suspected of harboring nuclear ambitions; and they contradict the President’s early proclamation of his dedication to reducing nuclear arsenals. Above all, their very existence contravenes the principle of no-first use that has been a stabilizing factor in great power nuclear relations for the past 40 + years – thereby, increasing the chances that the world will witness the employment of nuclear weapons for the first time since Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

What this represents is not cool strategic judgment. It is the national equivalent of ostentatious iron-pumping by body-builders worried about declining prowess. Those worries never disappear, though, even as the muscle-bound strive ever more energetically to reassure themselves. More important, they fool themselves into the false belief that other, more relevant adjustments to reality are unnecessary.

At the psychological level, this approach is understandable since it plays to the United States’ strength – thereby perpetuating the national myths of being destined to remain the world’s No. 1 forever, and of being in a position to shape the world system according to American principles and interests. President Obama declaimed: “Let me tell you something.  The United States of America is the most powerful nation on Earth.  Period. It’s not even close. Period.  It’s not even close.  It’s not even close!” So? Is this meant as a revelation? What is the message? To whom? Is it any different than someone shouting ; “ALLAH AKBAR!” Words that are neither a prelude to action nor inspire others to act – nor even impart information - are just puffs of wind. As such, they are yet another avoidance device.

Avoidance is easier than resolution. Its mechanisms are devices for pushing away discomforting, complex realities.

*Reiteration* plays an important role in this strategy for coping with cognitive dissonance. Constant reaffirmation of presumed verities serves as the recitation of a liturgy. We thereby reassure ourselves that nothing basic has changed. Cherished notions of who we are, of what we are capable, of our primordial virtue, of our exceptionalism are preserved. In the United States nowadays the examples of a compulsive reiteration of the American creed are profuse.

There is the obligatory *Stars & Stripes* lapel pin. There are the outsized flags that proclaim *Old Glory* wherever we look. There are the uber-patriotic pageants at sporting events. There are the endless declarations that America’s greatness still has its best days ahead of it. President Obama, in his State of the Union Address, confided that while composing it he felt the powerful conviction that there was more reason to be “optimistic” about America than ever before. That statement may express the spirit of these speeches which have become ritualized ceremonies for administering a dose of uplifting tonic. He might actually believe it.

That would be stunning against the backdrop of sharpened racial tensions, the takeover of the Republican Party by the angry and haters who detest him personally, of a world reaction to our degenerate presidential politics that alternates between dread and mockery, of rampant economic inequality undercutting standards of living, of unabated and unpunished financial criminality, of declining life expectancy, of floundering in the Middle East punctuated by the emergence of grave new terrorist threats – among other worries. Such stark incongruity suggests that what we are witnessing is not considered appraisal of the nation’s health or a calculated message intended to lift American spirits. For there is something compulsive about the exaggeration and overblown rhetoric. Rather, it is the emotional reaction to circumstances of a profound dissonance between the fundamental elements of the collective national self-image and reality.

We are close to a condition that approximates what the psychologists call “*dissociation*.” It is marked by an inability to see and to accept reality as it is for deep seated emotional reasons. Those you are dissociating are not aware that they are sublimating on a systematic basis. “Dissociation is commonly displayed on a [continuum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continuum_(measurement)).[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissociation_(psychology)#cite_note-Dell2009-5) In mild cases, dissociation can be regarded as a [coping mechanism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coping_(psychology)) or [defense mechanisms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defense_mechanism) in seeking to master, minimize or tolerate [stress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stress_(biology)) – including [conflict](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotional_conflict).[[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissociation_(psychology)#cite_note-Weiten-6)[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissociation_(psychology)#cite_note-7)[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissociation_(psychology)#cite_note-8) Conflicts of purpose, conflict of aims, conflict of ideas, conflict between idealized reality and actual truth. Dissociation can involve [dissociative disorders](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissociative_disorder). Dissociative disorders are sometimes triggered by trauma (9/11?).

These alterations can include: a sense that self or the world is unreal (torture as official policy approved in the Oval Office; other countries surpass us; we are widely disliked; Russia has risen Phoenix-like from the ashes of the Cold War; Chinese claims of being superior and exceptional show signs of being grounded in reality. D[erealization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derealization) is one variant: a loss of memory (that we pledged to stay in Afghanistan until the Taliban were eliminated, and then that Obama declared it over); that the Iraqis would garland us; that we are responsible for killing tens of thousands; that there were no terrorists in Iraq when we overthrew Saddam). Or, a loss of logic: al-Qaeda is the Evil One/al-Qaeda in Syria is not the bad guy, only ISIL; ISIL is evil incarnate/we should not criticize those allies who provision and finance them because Turkey/Saudi Arabia are good guys; Russia is killing al-Qaeda and ISIL jihadis, but they are bad guys.

*Depersonalization* is another variant: I am completely disconnected from all of these actions and their consequences. Therefore, it makes no difference whether I remember any of this; whether I swallow the illogic that 5 – 2 = 8; that I’m all confused between virtual reality and what actually is. Anyway, it’s all above my pay grade. Where’s my flag – I’m going to watch the Olympics.

` **USA! USA! USA!**