Talking Back: A Critique of Foreign Policy

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A Critique of Foreign Policy

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Professor Bellah’s article on the condition of our universities is characteristically thoughtful and should be helpful to anyone interested in the state of higher education in America. The same cannot be said of the last couple of pages where he goes off the rails writing about the place of the U.S. in the world today. The U.S., he suggests, is a “new kind of empire,” but like previous empires it must go through the same “three stages”—expansion, overextension, and collapse. Indeed the U.S. is already well into the second stage, even though the new American empire can’t be any older than the current Bush administration...surely no one said it was an empire when Bill Clinton was president.

A year ago we were told that American military power was so great that we could intervene anywhere and fight several wars at once...But...now...we find ourselves seriously overextended and badly in need of help from others in the form of troops and money.” Though it’s “too soon to speak of collapse,” the U.S. is enormously powerful, and “since we dominate the world, not absolutely but still enormously, we are responsible for the world we dominate. That, I think, is the greatest challenge for American education today.”

It is hard to know where to begin. Some historical perspective might help. The 20th century began with dire warnings (Claus von Clausewitz, Oswald Spengler’s “The Decline of the West”) about the imminent collapse of Western civilization. The great philosopher Edmund Husserl wrote of “The Crisis of European Sciences,” and Theodor Adorno spoke of “the crisis of modernism.” In one way or another these gloomy contemplations are traceable to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, the towerig late 19th century figure who announced not only the death of God, but the end of philosophy— as practiced in the West—since Socrates. “Nihilism stands at the door. Whence comes this uncanny presence of all gods?” he asked. Nietzsche wrote famously about “what is most contemptible,” the “lost men,” the final inventors of the morally bankrupt and decadent Western tradition. “No shep...
Who were the bad guys now?

In a speech in January 1998, President Clinton told us that the world was at peace and we had no enemies. Professor Bellah seems to think this was generally accurate. After the collapse of communism, he writes, "the world was still a dangerous place, but how were we to understand it? Who were the bad guys now? Through most of the nineties we floundered about trying to find an answer. 9/11 changed all that." He implies that scene of us breathed a sigh of relief after the nation was attacked, because now we could feel superior again. "It was now clear who the bad guys are: they are the terrorists, and we, as usual are the good guys who will win the war on terrorism." That Dubya is such a simpleton! It's so tempting to see the world in terms of "us against them," and those simplistic Republicans always fall into the trap, they don't even know what "nonsense" means.

Some of us view these matters differently. We think the U.S. was on a "holiday from history" in the nineties, willfully ignoring those who were real. Recognizing that had declared their determination to destroy us. In his 1996 "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places" (following the first World Trade Center attack in 1993, the battle in Somalia in 1993), and the massive bombings of the Khobar Towers barracks in Saudi Arabia in 1996), Osama Bin Laden declared his intention of waging jihad against the West in order to restore the Caliphate, or Muslim rule including Sharia (the law of Allah rather than man-made law). Of course not all Muslims share the views of the "Isamofascists." Neither President Bush nor his advisors have ever suggested as much. But then they never pro-

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