

Jul-1991

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Michael J. Kryzanek

Bridgewater State College, mkryzanek@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

Kryzanek, Michael J. (1991). Editor's Note: The Enemy Within. *Bridgewater Review*, 8(2), A1.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol8/iss2/2

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Bridgewater Review

The Enemy Within

by Michael J. Kryzaneck

Department of Political Science

Section Editor

As in the case with most wars, the end of the Persian Gulf war marks a new beginning with new approaches to old political problems, new diplomatic alliances, new economic challenges, and in this particular instance, the pursuit of what President Bush calls the New World Order. The end of war also brings with it a turn inward as the major combatants put down their weapons and rebuild or direct their energies toward pressing domestic concerns. In the case of the United States, the president has already articulated a wide-ranging domestic agenda from crime control to the environment to transportation to education.

The shift in emphasis from foreign policy and defense to domestic issues has taken on a special character as the speedy and complete victory over Iraq has emboldened political leaders and enhanced the confidence of the American people. The country is filled with the sentiment that by winning the war in the Gulf, we now have the chance to achieve similar victories here at home. The current logic is that if we can outfit our soldiers with \$23,000 night vision goggles, we surely can provide our grade schoolers with \$2,500 computers; if we can rebuild Kuwait City, we can rebuild our inner cities; and if we can spend \$500 million a day on liberating a distant country, then we can spend an equal amount liberating this country from infant mortality, homelessness, and AIDS.

Unfortunately, war-related euphoria almost always collapses into the realities of the domestic scene as the energy, sense of mission, and bravado of military conflict dissipates amid the tangled web of partisan politics, endless debates over priorities, and the intricate patchwork of problems that have many solutions. We quickly come to realize that it is far easier to defeat Hussein than it is to defeat illiteracy or clean up the environment or bring an end to the scourge of drugs.

The question thus becomes, how do we transfer the enormous national will that surfaced during and after the Persian Gulf war to the sea of domestic problems that in many respects are more a threat to our national security than the territorial designs of a Middle Eastern bully? One answer may be that this country has to begin to think in terms of domestic wars and domestic enemies. One need only remember that in the 1950s the Russian Sputnik pushed Americans into a frenzy of science and engineering education in order to meet the Soviet threat. We clearly defined the education of our youth as something akin to the training of soldiers ready to do battle with their counterparts in the Soviet Union. We set goals, marshalled resources, brought competing constituencies together, and, most importantly, got excited about solving a pressing social problem.

But in 1991 who is the enemy, where is the war, who are the domestic Norman Schwarzkopfs? The most troublesome facet of post-Persian Gulf America is that we will have all this excitement and confidence and goodwill and do nothing because we are unwilling to recognize what the comic strip character Pogo did - the enemy is us.

While this may seem a dismal evaluation of America during the heyday of good feeling, there are many opportunities to transfer a military victory into domestic victories. One critical element is good leadership. What America needs now more than anything is leaders at all levels who are able to equate domestic problems on the same level with war and point out the national security threats from ignorance, social decay, violence, and inequality. It would be a shame for those brave men and women returning from the Gulf to a grateful nation only to find months later that we saved a far-away country, but were unable or unwilling to save our own.♦