

LEARNING TO OVERCOME THE PUBLIC OPINION INDUSTRY, AT HOME AND ABROAD

There is an *American* pain and a volatility in the face of judgment by *elites* that stem from a deep and enduring sense of humiliation. A vast chasm separates the poor standing of *Americans* in the world today from their *recent* history of greatness. In this context, their injured pride is easy to understand.

In the narrative of history transmitted to schoolchildren *in states purchasing Texas-selected textbooks* and reinforced by the media, [], *Americans* were favored by divine providence.

[snip]

If *America's* rise was spectacular, its fall *is accelerating* and unsparing.

As the Administration continues to insist that the widespread protests against US symbols are merely a response to a crappy video, more and more people are rebutting that by describing the many grievances people in the Middle East have with the US. There's Fouad Ajami's unselfconscious version emphasizing pride, which I've parodied above (the italics and links are the changes I've made). Robert Wright talks about drones, Palestine, US troops in Muslim countries. Flynt Leverett talks about some of the same issues as Wright as well as our support for dictators.

And while I agree with Wright and Leverett, I want to look more closely at something Leverett somewhat acknowledges, but which AJE host Shihab

Rattansi discusses at more length in the segment including Leverett.

As Leverett notes, in countries where there are no dictators policing speech in the Middle East, the US will need to engage in public opinion much more aggressively—and ultimately, the US will need to acknowledge that its policies are not favorable to most residents of the Middle East.

But as Rattansi notes, our allies—Saudis and Qataris and others—are funding the Salafists behind the protests. These Saudi-funded Salafists are using the opportunity created by the Arab Spring and many of the same tools used by Arab Spring protestors to create the image of a PR problem that will polarize the region and with it create a demand—even among some in the US, I suspect—for more authoritarian control. The Saudis are spending money to, among other things, create a desire for less democracy. And they do that by tapping into and magnifying that underlying discontent.

And we don't seem to understand how—or frankly, have the leverage—to respond to that.

That should surprise no one. The elite in the US don't have a response to utterly parallel efforts here in the US. We need look no further than the Islamophobic sources who funded the Innocence of Muslims in the first place.

But I think a more apt parallel is the Tea Party. It arose out of a very real discontent, largely rooted in the decline of the middle class that had already been channeled from class into race. But then oil oligarchs like the Koch brothers funded it and fed it into a carefully channeled protest theater. And it has had an effect very similar to what the Salafists are trying to accomplish in the Middle East: generating electoral support for extremist candidates who in turn embrace policies that bring the country closer to oligarchy. And now both the Democratic and Republican parties are terrified of the protest theater the Tea Party

can muster. Yet rather than engaging and winning on the issues, both parties cower before Tea Party confrontation, usually letting the Tea Party lead the debate further to the right.

As we talk about how to respond to unleashed public opinion in the Middle East—now being aggressively purchased by oligarchic elites—perhaps it's time to consider what we need to be doing better here at home? We have a tough time demanding that President Morsi more aggressively take on the Salafists when both parties shy away from taking on the Tea Party, either by calling out its now completely artificial status or by winning the debate on the issues.

Of course, there's an even better issue, both in the Middle East and here. One of the underlying sources of discontent is the effects of the neoliberal policies American elites (again, of both parties) continue to push. It's not improving the lives of average people, anywhere in the world. And so in the same way our policies on drones and Palestine need to improve if we want to win over public opinion, we also need to address another major underlying source of discontent that makes it so much easier to polarize crowds and make them desire more authoritarian solutions.