

# CounterPunch

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ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

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***“Freeing ourselves from nuclear power would mean starting a new life with hope”***

## **How Japan Can Prosper without Nuclear Power**

**Interview with Takashi Hirose**

**In the past you have warned about the dangers of nuclear power and, in particular, of the Hamaoka Plant. What are your thoughts now that it has been shut down?**

**Hirose:** The Hamaoka Nuclear Plant is located at Shizuoka City, on Suruga Bay. There is a point at which the Philippine Sea Plate, the huge Pacific Plate, the North American Plate, and the Eurasian Plate all meet; directly over that point is the Japanese Archipelago. And the very center of the area where these four plates press together is Shizuoka. Despite predictions of a magnitude 8 earthquake on Suruga Bay, the plant has continued in operation. And so, first I want to say I welcome Prime Minister Kan’s decision to close the Hamakoa Plant down.

In the first place, it was the government’s Headquarters for Earthquake Research Promotion that, in 2006, publicly announced that there was an 87 per cent chance of the Tokai earthquake coming within 30 years. The government itself stated clearly that this earthquake is sure to come.

The decision by Chubu Electric Power to accept the shutdown on May 9 was – I will say with reservations – the first step toward the abolition of nuclear power generally. To accelerate this movement, we now need to carry on a series of reasoned public discussions.

The prime minister’s order was that the plant should “stop operations” until

***“Judge Whether Good Enough [to hit] SH @ Same Time – Not Only UBL.”***

## **Donald Rumsfeld’s Really Huge Mistake**

**By Andrew Cockburn**

**D**onald Rumsfeld, you could say, has had a remarkable career, stretching from a middle-class upbringing amid wealthier neighbors on the edge of Chicago, through Congress and high office in the Nixon and Ford administrations, including a spell as secretary of defense, a profitable excursion into business, and, finally, six tumultuous years heading the Pentagon under George W. Bush.

Oddly, Rumsfeld begins his memoir with an out-of-sequence account of his 1983 meeting with Saddam Hussein as Reagan’s Middle East envoy, memorable for the evident warmth with which the two greeted each other. Perhaps it is there because he always cherished meetings with celebrities (later in the book there’s an encounter with Elvis.) He has said in interviews that he didn’t actually write much of this book, preferring to dictate his reminiscences and then edit the transcripts – a process that took four years. Given the care with which he navigates some of the more contentious stretches of his history, there is little reason to doubt that it did, indeed, take a lot of time.

In describing his own experiences on September 11, 2001, Rumsfeld notes that, in a breakfast meeting with congressmen that very morning, he had warned of an impending event somewhere in the world that would be “sufficiently shocking that it will remind the American people and

their representatives in Washington how important it is for us to have a strong national defense.” Further emphasizing his prescience, he mentions in the next paragraph that he had earlier sent Bush an essay on Pearl Harbor, to alert him to the possibility of “surprise.”

Absent from this account is any mention of the warnings issued over the course of that summer by the CIA, or the White House anti-terrorism coordinator, Richard Clarke, to the effect that Osama bin Laden was planning an attack inside the United States. Clarke’s name

**Donald Rumsfeld: *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*. Sentinel, 815 pp. February 2011**

doesn’t appear in the index, or in any of the supplementary documents posted by Rumsfeld on his web-

site, [www.rumsfeld.com](http://www.rumsfeld.com). Other sources attest that the last time Rumsfeld discussed – and dismissed – these warnings was on September 6, 2001, five days before the attacks. His memory of the period is hazy; the account here of his movements immediately after American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon differs in detail from that of Aubrey Davis, the security guard who accompanied him to the site.

It may be unfair to demand detailed and accurate recall of those moments when he and Davis marched along the smoke-filled Pentagon corridors on their way to the crash site, but there are also more interesting lapses. According to the note his aide Stephen Cambone made of the conversation, at 2.40 p.m., still in the command center, Rumsfeld told General

the danger of an earthquake has passed, not that it should be shut down entirely. A lot of people don't understand that difference.

That's the problem I want to talk about. Everyone must understand that as long as there is nuclear fuel in the reactor and in the storage pools, the danger is no different whether the reactor is turned on or off. So, the ultimate goal is to remove the nuclear fuel from Hamaoka Plant site.

Unfortunately, in the prime minister's announcement, he did not say that the reactors should be shut down entirely. He talked about spending 2 or 3 years building a breakwater and a tide barrier while making safety tests. If Chubu Electric Power really does begin that construction in earnest, money will come flowing down to them, leading to the worst possible scenario, in which the danger from the Hamaoka Plant doesn't go away – the very opposite of what Prime Minister Kan intended.

**As a protection from tsunamis, how much can we expect from the construction of breakwaters? Looking at the recent tsunami catastrophe, it doesn't seem they can be stopped so easily.**

**Hirose:** That's absolutely right. The plan is to build a wall to protect against a 15-meter tsunami, but that's no pro-

tection. After the Great Eastern Japan earthquake, the tsunami's highest point, which came in at Miyako City in Iwate Prefecture, was 38.9 meters. That was the highest in measurement history, but about 100 years ago, in 1896, in the Meiji Sanriku earthquake, in Ryoury village in Iwate Prefecture, it was recorded that the tsunami came in at almost the same height, 38.2 meters. And in 1771, after the Yaeyama earthquake, Ishigaki Island was hit with a tsunami about 80 meters high. If you look at Japan's history, you see that earthquakes on that scale happen often.

And then, a lot of people haven't understood this, but what Chubu Electric Power is planning is not a breakwater but just a seawall. A breakwater is built like a dam, a hard construction, but a seawall is just a high wall. If it's hit by a big tsunami, it's going to collapse right away. In a tsunami, the waves come in one after another. This is a mass of water with gigantic volume and stored up energy, so the height of a wall, the height of a breakwater, has nothing to do with it. Even if they do build a strong breakwater, a tsunami will go over anything.

Then the electric company people are saying that they will put their equipment in a high place, and one wonders if they are all right in the head. Does anyone think that's safe? With everything washed away by the tsunami, the cars, the ships, the houses destroyed, and the electric cables torn apart? The Tokai earthquake is set to shift the surface of the earth two meters – do you think the cables won't be severed? With the cables severed, can you get electricity?

It is the same with earthquake [as distinct from tsunami] damage protection. This last earthquake occurred some 130 km – that is, rather far – off shore. However, the predicted Tokai earthquake is expected to be of the same magnitude, but directly under the Hamaoka Nuclear Plant. I don't want to think about it, but, if this happens, we could expect the Hamaoka Plant to be destroyed in one blow, and as much radioactivity as has been released by Fukushima Daiichi to be released all at once. And then the tsunami comes and the electricity is cut off. What it comes down to is that there is no such thing as an effective defense strategy against earthquakes.

Of course the other reactors are dangerous, but when we look at the historic cycles of earthquakes, Hamaoka is the

place where an earthquake seems to be critically approaching, so, for the sake of the safety of the Japanese people, that needs to be shut down right away. If the Hamaoka Plant is shut down, and the economy of the central district comes out all right, then there will be a growing consciousness in favor of shutting down all the others.

**Chubu Electric Power District Electric, after shutting down the Hamaoka Plant, has said that there will be no planned blackouts, that electricity prices will not rise, but that they will ask people to conserve electricity. But the mass media have been warning us that there will be an electricity shortage. What do you make of this?**

**Hirose:** What it means is that the people doing the reporting aren't looking at the data. You can't just listen to what Chubu Electric Power is saying and then claim you have investigated the electric power situation. If you look at Japan as a whole, even if the nuclear plants weren't running at all, water and fossil fuel power would be enough to supply the country. Take the production capacity of the different sources of electricity, and the summer peak electrical demand, from 1965 to the present, the summer peak demand has never gone higher than the amount produced by water and fossil fuel. And since 2008 consumption has gone down sharply, so the nuclear plants are becoming more and more redundant.

Or, let's look just at Chubu Electric. Last summer, 2010, had an extraordinary heat wave. At its peak, consumption was 26.98 GW (gigawatts = billion watts), and the production capacity, leaving out nuclear reactors, was 31.01 GW. In other words, in the midst of the hottest summer, even without the Hamaoka reactor, there was a surplus of 4.03 GW, about 15 per cent.

It's hardly likely that this summer will be as hot as the last one, so we should get by with a surplus once again. So, the question is, what are they fretting about? The TV and newspapers are trying to stir up a panic.

Chubu Electric predicts this summer's peak demand to be at 25.6 GW, which is 1.38 GW lower than the unusual levels last summer. That seems like a reasonable judgment. The reason they say there might be shortages is that existing supplies of fossil fuels have been frozen. All that's needed to get the plants moving is

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fuel supply, which is why Mr. Mita, the company chairman, was right to make a quick trip to Qatar. It was after the fuel supply was assured that the Hamaoka shutdown was decided. And July next year the new natural gas power plant at Niigata is scheduled to start operation. It is the latest design, and has a capacity of 2.38 GW, which means there will be a large surplus of electricity. The 3.60 GW Hamaoka plant operated at 50 per cent of capacity, that is, 1.80 GW was the best it could do, so with the Niigata plant they can come up with change.

It's remarkable that the mass media and the politicians don't seem to be aware of this, but in Japan electricity is not only generated by the electric power companies. When there is a power shortage, the power companies should make their power lines available to all the country's factories. The reason is that these Independent Power Producers (IPP) have the capacity to generate a large amount of electricity. Steel mills, machine and chemical manufacturers all generate electricity, and if they were used to full capacity, even if all the nuclear plants were shut down right away, there would be no shortage.

In Japan, the system of bidding for wholesale electricity began in 1997. At that time an investigating committee of the Ministry of Economics, Trade and Industry (MITI) reported that the IPPs have the latent capacity to generate at least 21.35 GW, and at most 52.00 GW of electricity. But take a look at the figures now. Today, in 2011, there are, in name, 54 nuclear plants capable of generating 49.112 GW, but with Fukushima Daiichi (4.696 GW) down, and Kawazaki's #2, 3 and 4 reactors (3.30 GW) down, nuclear power plants are actually able to generate only 41.116 GW. But, according to government data, the IPPs can produce at least that much. So, it would be possible to shut down all the nuclear plants without difficulty, but the public does not know this. That's why we accuse the newspapers and TV with stirring up a needless electrical-shortage panic.

The problem is that the big power companies monopolize the overhead transmission lines, charge high prices, and keep these other power producers out of the market. The government should act to make a complete separation between the generation and the transmission of electricity, and promote

the liberalization of the electric industry, freeing the power lines for the benefit of the public. Surely, the politicians and the media people are not the lapdogs of the power companies, are they? Now more than ever, for the sake of the people and of industry as well, everyone should raise their voices on this.

#### **In the future, what kind of power generators should be built in place of nuclear?**

**Hirose:** From the standpoint of the electrical companies, Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) is the best. According to the head of the Energy and Environment Research Center, Akira Ishii, an LNG facility can be set up in as little as a few months (Gas Energy Shimibun, April 2, 2011). Before the power companies start talking about blackouts, they should turn to this cleanest of energy sources, the ace of the world's electrical power producers.

Today LNG power plants use a combined cycle involving both gas and steam turbines. Among the fossil fuel generators, this is the most energy efficient. Actually, the energy efficiency of nuclear generators is surprisingly low, only 30 per cent. The remaining 70 per cent of the energy that doesn't become electricity is carried away as hot water, which goes into the sea, heating it up and damaging the environment. Compared to that, ordinary fossil fuel generators have an energy efficiency of up to 45 per cent, while the combined cycle LNG generators can achieve a figure of as high as 60 per cent.

With this system, after the LNG is burned in the turbine, the escaping heat can be recaptured and returned to the generator, so while the energy efficiency is twice that of a nuclear reactor, the escaping heat is half. In addition to being clean, the LNG generator also takes up very little space. And it can start generating electricity within an hour of turning on the switch, so it is good for dealing with fluctuations in consumption.

The idea that without nuclear power economic development is impossible is entirely wrong, though the tendency in the world today is to believe it.

In fact, Japan's electric companies are promoting the installation of this equipment. On November 14 last year, Chubu Electric announced that it was replacing its oil-burning plant at Nagoya with this combined cycle system. With that they can boost output from 1.19 GW to 2.20 GW. So, you can see that rather than

try to prolong the life of the Hamaoka Nuclear Plant, it is far more efficient to replace it with this LNG system.

On May 9 this year, four companies – Tokyo Gas, Osaka Gas, Chubu Electric and Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation – announced that they were joining with Mitsubishi Industries to promote the production of Canadian shale gas; this is the most recent development. America is planning to depend on shale gas for its future natural gas supply.

Beyond that, when thinking about future energy policy, I think we can expect the Household Fuel Cell Cogeneration System [a system that generates electricity from an electrochemical reaction between hydrogen and oxygen] to take the center stage. Its energy efficiency, at 80 per cent, is higher than that of LNG, and rather than being concentrated in one place where it is vulnerable to natural disasters, it is ideally located in each home. It is expected that, by 2020, some 2,500,000 of these will be distributed around Japan. That would be one for every twenty households, and if this proves successful, we can expect the cost to go down, as it did with the personal

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computer, so that it will come to be used by industry as well. In short, the largest energy consumer will become the largest energy supplier.

People say that we should replace nuclear power with natural energy, but the one made most happy by this argument is the nuclear power industry. Natural energy can't replace nuclear energy 100 per cent in the next 20 years, so, what the argument amounts to is an excuse for the continuation of nuclear energy.

Of Japan's electrical consumption, 30 per cent goes to households and 70 per cent to industry and business. Moreover, in the middle of the day not many people are at home, so the problem of the mid-day peak is mainly a problem of business and industry.

Solar energy is marvelous, but to produce the same amount of electricity as a 1 GW nuclear power plant, you would have to lay out solar panels in a space equal to the whole interior of Tokyo's Yamanote loop line [i.e., all of downtown Tokyo]. To equal 50 such plants, you would need 50 times that much space devoted to solar panels. So, to prevent more environmental destruction, people put them on the roofs of their homes. That's a project that can be carried out over the long term.

Continuing to live in dependency on nuclear power is good neither for the people who live near the plant sites nor for the public generally. Freeing ourselves from nuclear power would mean starting a new life with hope. When the old disappears, giving birth to something new – that's the essence of humanity, human being. We shouldn't think negatively. What makes me say that is watching Okinawa. Though Okinawa was once economically dependent on U.S. military bases, it is precisely where those bases have been removed that the economy is thriving. It's because of that economic success that Okinawa is now raising the anti-base movement to the national level. I hope the people of Omaezaki will understand that they can produce a similar future. But until they get to that point, the government has the responsibility to give them generous support. CP

*Translated by Doug Lummis.*

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Richard Myers, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to find the "best info fast ... judge whether good enough [to] hit SH @ same time – not only UBL." UBL stood for Usama/Osama Bin Laden; SH was Saddam Hussein. Although several passages in Rumsfeld's account of that day are sourced to Cambone's handwritten notes, this conversation goes unmentioned. Instead, we have the bland assertion, "Early on, I had no idea if Iraq was or was not involved, but it would have been irresponsible for any administration not to have asked the question."

Cambone's note was leaked in 2002, so Rumsfeld should know that we know what was on his mind that afternoon. His refusal to discuss it suggests that he still believes he can stay in charge of the debate by deploying information selectively. In office it was a practice he took to extreme lengths. White House officials, as one of them once told me, were reduced to hacking into the Pentagon's classified Internet system to find out about upcoming military deployments, because Rumsfeld had forbidden normal information sharing. This was not mere caprice: he was determined that all communication between the Department of Defense and the president's office pass through him, and was especially anxious to ensure that there would be no independent communication between any of his underlings and Bush himself.

Although he enjoyed the rare privilege of private weekly meetings with the president (unknown to the secretary of state), he begrudged others the same access, Condoleezza Rice especially. Among senior security officials, he notes (through gritted teeth), "only the national security adviser works in the White House and has routine daily access to the president ... Her personal access to and affinity for President Bush gave Rice substantial influence." Nevertheless, Rumsfeld makes clear that he soon cut this incompetent ("meetings were not well organized") but formidable rival down to size: "She and her staff did not seem to understand that they were not in the chain of command and therefore could not issue orders, provide guidance, or give tasks to combatant commanders." When Rice tried to intrude into his domain on such matters as high-level military promotions and oversight of his travel schedule, he simply refused to cooperate.

The one official who didn't feel the de-

fense secretary's sharp elbows was Dick Cheney, his former assistant from the Nixon-Ford days. Though there are intimations that they had drifted apart in the intervening years – Rumsfeld says that he never visited Cheney when the latter ran the Pentagon in the elder Bush's administration – there is no suggestion here that in more recent times the partnership didn't operate smoothly. In fact, Rumsfeld says that his old friend was no more responsible for the errors and delinquencies of the administration than he was himself: "The caricature of Cheney as the man wielding the reins of power, playing his colleagues and even the president as marionettes, is utter nonsense."

Rumsfeld's own ascendancy in Bush palace politics really dated from the day of the attacks, when his well-publicized visit to the crash site transformed his image from that of gray official slated for early dismissal to telegenic warlord. In January 2002, a *New York Times* fashion writer claimed that "the post-Sept 11 world has caused a certain kind of woman to re-evaluate what she is looking for in a man ... She has seen the valiant efforts of rescue workers and remarked to herself that men like Donald Rumsfeld make big, impactful decisions in the time it would take any of her exes to order lunch."

As master of the world's mightiest military machine, Rumsfeld was happy to perform in the role of impactful decision maker – his 5'8" boosted by the built-up footwear his staff called "the duck shoes." Roaming the globe in his huge C-17 transport, he particularly relished addressing massed ranks of troops in far-flung outposts of empire. There is no doubt that the military high command were mortally afraid of him, not least because he took personal control of senior officers' promotions, effectively holding their careers in the palm of his hand. Unsurprisingly, he was soon surrounded by generals and admirals, (notably the Joint Chiefs chairman Richard Myers) not known for their eagerness to speak out of turn. His behavior toward powerless subordinates intensified the aura of fear around him.

Underlings were regularly subjected to blizzards of whimsical "snowflakes," as Rumsfeld liked to call his memos. On April 7, 2003, he sent the following message to Douglas Feith, the under-secretary of defense for policy:

“We need more coercive diplomacy with respect to Syria and Libya, and we need it fast. If they mess up Iraq, it will delay bringing our troops home. We also need to solve the Pakistan problem. And Korea doesn’t seem to be going well. Are you coming up with proposals for me to send around?”

Thanks.”

Such domineering displays fit well with the reputation garnered during his earlier political career. Nixon, one of the few people discussed with genuine respect in the book – “thoughtful, brilliant” – returned the compliment by describing Rumsfeld, as recorded on the White House tapes, as “a ruthless little bastard.” Others close to him formed the same opinion – among them Al Lowenstein, a fellow congressman and close friend despite their diametrically opposite political views. The friendship ended when Rumsfeld strongly endorsed Lowenstein’s opponent in the 1970 election. Gerald Ford, who made Rumsfeld White House chief of staff and later secretary of defense, may have felt equally betrayed when Rumsfeld fought successfully to undermine his efforts to reach an arms control agreement with the U.S.S.R.

Despite his well-cultivated image of toughness, he strives throughout to convince us that many of the big decisions taken while he was secretary of defense were made by someone else. Who most authoritatively affirmed Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction, thus justifying war? According to Rumsfeld, that was Colin Powell, who “had spent decades in uniform ... and at every level ... had spent long hours dealing with intelligence.” We are led to assume that, despite authorizing the Office of Special Plans – a special unit headed by Feith – to sift intelligence on Iraq independently of the CIA, he left it to his rival to sift the knowns. The crucial decision to invade Iraq? Rumsfeld insists this was all the work of George W. Bush, who apparently never asked his secretary of defense what he thought of the idea: “While the president and I had many discussions about the war preparations, I do not recall his ever asking me if I thought going to war with Iraq was the right decision.” (He doesn’t say what he would have told Bush had the question been asked.)

Such evasions and maneuvers are easy

to identify and ridicule, but they reflect an essential truth about Rumsfeld: he avoided the big decisions, always keeping an eye out for bureaucratic cover. “He won’t make the big mistake,” he answered when asked why he was promoting Stephen Cambone, an obscure think-tank defense intellectual, to progressively more powerful Pentagon positions. It was an admonition he repeated to subordinates, “Don’t make the big mistake.”

The irony is obvious: Rumsfeld will forever be associated with the really huge mistake of attacking Iraq, however much he argues that the catastrophic decision and all the mistakes that flowed from it were the work of others. As the occupation descended into a quagmire (Rumsfeld forbade his staff from using that word, along with “resistance” and “insurgents”), critics searching for the reason why everything had gone wrong attributed the fiasco to the secretary’s

## **Rumsfeld will forever be associated with the really huge mistake of attacking Iraq.**

insistence on a “light” invasion force, far smaller than initially deemed necessary by the military planners.

Rumsfeld considers this monstrously unfair, and for once he is probably right. He points out that none of the military high command spoke up when he and the president asked if they had everything they needed for the war – but then he had selected most of them. Joining in the chorus of endorsement (the only dissenter was a Marine General Gregory Newbold, who resigned in protest in November 2002) was the Army chief of staff, Eric Shinseki. Shinseki has been portrayed in the media and Army hagiography as a martyr who spoke truth to power and sacrificed his career in consequence. The record – Rumsfeld is happy to lay it out in detail – shows that Shinseki cautiously observed in a Senate hearing, just a month before the war, that “several hundred thousand” troops might be required as an occupation force. Quizzed by journalists, Rumsfeld issued a furious rebuttal, but Shinseki served out the rest of his term and retired peacefully. In fact, it is by no means clear that a larger initial occupation force would have made much difference, because

the troops who were dispatched had little idea what to do and their very presence appears to have spurred resistance among the population.

Rumsfeld has far less to say about another area in which he met spirited resistance from Shinseki, along with the rest of the Army hierarchy. On entering office, he announced that his mandate was to implement the defense program outlined by Bush during the campaign and based on the agenda of the neoconservative Project for the New American Century, with which Rumsfeld had been closely associated in the 1990s. The idea was to jettison unwieldy Cold War-era formations in favor of light, mobile forces equipped with highly accurate (and very expensive) precision weapons.

The Pentagon was certainly in need of transformation. Left largely to their own devices by Clinton, the generals and admirals had helped themselves to an ever-increasing budget, much of it spent on developing “gold-plated” weapons systems of dubious utility. So chaotic were the Department of Defense’s accounts that they could not be audited, meaning that no one really knew where the money was going.

Rumsfeld set up a financial management transformation panel soon after taking office. Though it duly reported in dire terms and urged immediate action, Rumsfeld, so far as we know, paid no attention to these pleas, and the panel was never heard from again – it certainly isn’t in the memoir. Instead, as an example of the decisive and efficient manner in which he approached transformation, Rumsfeld cites his cancellation in May 2002 of the Army’s \$11 billion Crusader Artillery System. This, as he says, was a Cold War “anachronism.” But what he doesn’t say is that he had come into office more than a year earlier with a mandate to kill the program, and that the endless delay was due to the spirited and resourceful tactics deployed by Shinseki and the rest of the Army’s lobby.

In reality, the money not spent on Crusader was invested in a \$128 billion project called Future Combat Systems (FCS), developed by the same contractors who had been working on Crusader. But if Rumsfeld did involve himself deeply in this decision, or was aware of what it really entailed, he gives no sign of it here. FCS ended up failing tests so spectacularly that it was canceled by Rumsfeld’s

successor in 2009. Questioned in an investigation into an infamous scandal involving a \$26 billion Air Force tanker contract that led to criminal trials and jail sentences, Rumsfeld professed not to know anything about it, claiming that he had been too busy with the wars and that he never met defense contractors unless he “ran into them at a party some place.”

By late 2006, with casualty lists growing longer by the day and the Republican Party sliding to defeat in the midterm elections, Rumsfeld had become the touchstone for Bush’s disastrous war. Sensing his weakness, a group of retired generals went public with a critique of his performance. The results of the election ensured his departure. Bush and Cheney regretted having to let him go, throwing an elaborate departure ceremony in front of the Pentagon with the honoree inspecting rank on rank of troops.

Robert Gates, his successor, has done a fine job of not being Donald Rumsfeld. The press cherishes the access he grants them. The military bask in the freedom he grants them to fight the various wars bequeathed by his predecessor. The White House staff applaud the readiness with which, though a Republican, he works with a Democratic president. Pentagon critics applaud his readiness to eliminate costly weapons programs. Nevertheless, Guantánamo is still open; canceled weapons have been replaced by no less costly programs; casualty lists from Afghanistan continue to rise remorselessly; the Department of Defense still reports that its account books cannot be audited.

In February 2011, Cheney presented Rumsfeld with a Defender of the Constitution Award, conferred by the American Conservative Union, right wing even by the standards of the American right. Youthful libertarians heckled, shouting “war criminal,” as the aged twosome grinned and waved. In remarks praising his old friend, Cheney slyly noted how little had changed and wondered aloud whether Rumsfeld had more influence on Obama than his current advisers. Who knew? **CP**

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# Syria and the Specter of Civil War

By Margot Patterson

**O**n a layover at the Newark airport on my way home from Syria, I watched CNN on the TV screen overhead. It was the final weekend in March, and guests on “State of the Union” were discussing the protests in Syria. Former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley said regime change in Syria would be good for Syrians, good for the United States, and would send a message to Iran. Former CIA director Michael Hayden chimed in that it was important that the U.S.A. succeed in Libya to send a message to both Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iran. Listening, I thought the conversation said more about the United States and the unreal nature of its realpolitik than it did about Syria and the troubles facing Syria’s protesters, public and presidential.

I had been in Jordan and Syria for not quite three weeks. In Jordan, people spoke freely about their views of the turmoil occurring in other Arab countries and in their own. Syria was a bigger and harder country to figure, partly because fewer people spoke English, partly because I’d been warned not to present myself as a journalist (reporting was not, in fact, my initial purpose in going there), partly because the nature of the regime was such that it was difficult to gauge how free people felt to speak honestly. A friendly “Welcome” or “Welcome to our country” from a Syrian often began a conversation that shortly after petered because of mutual language difficulties. I’d been told in the U.S. that President Bashar al-Assad was popular with the Syrian people. “He is not a man who is out of touch with the times, as the former president of Egypt, Mubarak, was. He is viewed as youthful, energetic, and a man who has put in place several very significant reforms,” said Murhaf Jouejati, a professor of Middle East Studies at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C. Although not everyone was positive. In a Greek Orthodox Church in Aleppo, a Syrian Christian hissed to me, “Everyone opposes Bashar al-Assad.” One contact said she preferred not to comment when I asked her if people genuinely liked the president. But many people did seem genuinely enthu-

siastic.

“Most Syrians love their government. It’s different from other governments like Libya and Egypt because of better services and policies. The president is really loved,” said Sarah, 23, an Iraqi refugee in Damascus who’d lived in Syria since 2006. “There’s a lot of freedom. Maybe it’s restricted freedom,” she qualified.

Indeed, Syria seemed a more open society than one might expect from listening to U.S. politicians and commentators, who frequently paint the country in one color only: pitch black. “The Syrians are not nearly as repressive as we make them out to be. We object to their policy on Lebanon, so we look at the worse aspects of their society and explode it until it really doesn’t match reality,” said Martha Neff Kessler, a CIA officer for 27 years, now retired and the author of *Syria: Fragile Mosaic of Power*.

For 30 years, Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria with a mixture of astuteness and ruthlessness, putting down an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 that left thousands dead in Hama and leveled the old part of the city to what is today just a few streets. The secular government he led was supported by religious minorities, primarily Alawis but Christians too, and a prosperous Sunni merchant class. Sometimes described as a gnostic offshoot of Shi’ism, the Alawis drink wine, seldom worship in a mosque, and revere a holy trinity composed of Muhammad, his cousin and son-in-law Ali, and a companion of Muhammad called Salman the Persian. For much of their history, they’d been a poor, disenfranchised minority, until promoted by the French as a counterbalance to Sunni domination. Since the Alawi Assad family came to power, the Alawis have prospered and hold key posts in the military – one reason why it’s unlikely the military will desert Assad as the Egyptian military did Mubarak.

Trained as an ophthalmologist, Bashar al-Assad became the heir apparent to his father after the death of his brother Basil. Since becoming president in 2000, he has sought to liberalize the stagnant socialist economy. Private banks have been opened and a stock market established in the shift from a command economy to a free-market system. The move is

creating more prosperity for some, but at a cost. Poverty has increased during the last 10 years and the income gap between Syrians has widened. Still, many of the Syrians I spoke to saw progress and seemed optimistic that the future would bring further reforms.

“Honestly speaking, the period of the son is much better than the period of the father,” a businessman in Aleppo told me. He said 95 per cent of Syrians would be apprehensive if the regime fell and would wonder who and what would follow.

That comment was made in the first week of the protests, before they morphed into the viral phenomenon they’ve become. The question of who or what succeeds the regime is even more pertinent today. Syria is a multi-ethnic, multireligious state, composed of Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Turkmen, Circassians, and now, since the war in Iraq, host to over a million Iraqi refugees. The population is about 74 per cent Sunni Muslims, with Shi’as, Druze, and Alawis constituting another 16 per cent and Christians 10 per cent. Religious tolerance is the order of the day – one French Catholic there told me that Syria is the best country in the Middle East for Christians to live – but Syria’s diverse population also makes it vulnerable to sectarian strife.

“The people of Syria know that if they were to engage in the kind of uprisings that took place in Egypt and Tunisia, they might face civil war,” Jouejati said. “They’ve seen civil war next door to them in Lebanon and Iraq.”

It was a friend in the United States who first alerted me by email to the protests in Daraa. I turned on the BBC that night in my hotel room and learned of the prodemocracy demonstrations. Nobody in Syria was speaking much about them, or at least not to hotel guests.

Muhammad, a student at the University of Aleppo whom I asked about the protests taking place in Daraa, shrugged them off. “The media like to create something,” he said. To improve his English, Muhammad watched CNN and BBC and sometimes *Dr. Phil* and *Oprah* on satellite TV. He told me, most Syrians don’t care about politics and don’t have a bad attitude toward Americans. I asked him if Syrians had a negative view of the U.S. government. “Maybe,” he conceded. “The big issue is Israel. Do you know what’s going on in

Gaza? Electricity no. Food no. If you see a man being kicked and someone doing nothing to help him but is, in fact, supporting the people hitting that man, you stop and think again.”

In his office in Damascus, Nabil Sukkar, managing director of the Syrian Consulting Bureau for Development and Investment and a former senior economist with the World Bank, spoke about both the economy and some of the tensions in the U.S.-Syrian relationship. Syria was slow to liberalize its economy, he said, but now has an annual growth rate of 5 per cent, a rate that would have been even higher if not for the effects of a four-year drought in Syria, the worldwide recession, and the drag on the Syrian economy of the 1 million Iraqi refugees now living there. “We are paying the price for the U.S. occupation of Iraq,” he emphasized. “We are paying for their accommodation. The U.N. pays very little.

## “Honestly speaking, the period of the son is much better than the period of the father.”

Of course, it is the U.S. that created the problem which should be paying.”

When I left Syria, the protests seemed a bigger story outside the country than in it. That period is over. Bashar al-Assad is now embroiled in an enormous challenge to his 11-year rule. Some say, sooner or later the writing is on the wall for him and his regime.

“Bashar Assad is a decent, intelligent man but without particular charisma or strategic brilliance,” Brian J. Davis, Canada’s ambassador to Syria from 2003 to 2006, wrote in an article posted this April on the daily news blog *Syria Comment* Assad would like to see Syria’s economy improve, create jobs for the large number of unemployed youth, and attract foreign investment – not only because he genuinely cares for his country, but because success in those areas would strengthen the regime,” Davis noted.

What percentage of the population the protesters represent is uncertain. The reports are of thousands protesting, not the millions seen in Egypt and Tunisia. But the brutality of the crackdown cannot but further alienate Syrians from their government. The immediate demands of the protesters are clear, but who they

are or what kind of Syria they want at the other end of the process is not, said Joshua Landis, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma and the administrator of *Syria Comment*. He noted that many of Syria’s Kurds would probably like to see the establishment of a separate or autonomous Kurdish region, similar to what’s been created in Iraq.

“Syria is a very diverse country and it’s got a lot of different people living in it. All of the regions have their own reasons for being upset – for economic reasons, for religious reasons, for reasons arising from the lack of freedom,” Landis said. “What we’re hearing is a message that’s largely been shaped by the Facebook crowd, which are external to Syria to a certain degree. There’s an expatriate community that has connected with Syria through Facebook in particular, through the use of YouTube and Twitter, and they’ve been able to set up centers for producing a message and organizing the message, and they’ve been able to keep this opposition movement on message and keep it about freedom, liberty and not about religion and local problems.” The focused message papers over other factors behind the protests or other possible agendas, Landis said.

“The Arab uprising had a very concrete economic beginning with an unemployed worker in Tunisia, but as the movement has caught steam, it’s articulated itself in political terms,” Landis said. “And that’s the situation in Daraa, but Daraa we know has been devastated by four years of terrible drought. It’s a poor rural area that is relatively underprivileged. Joblessness is high. If you look at where the revolution is hitting hardest, it’s in areas undergoing a lot of economic hardship.”

Economic grievances arising in part from economic reforms advocated by the West are a key factor in the revolutions shaking the Arab world, analysts say. Writing on the economics of the Arab Spring in *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Richard Javad Heydariyan noted that Ben Ali’s Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt were the face of economic globalization in the Middle East. Both leaders slashed economic subsidies, embraced privatization and deregulation, and steered their countries away from the paternalistic welfare-oriented policies of their predecessors. Both the World Bank and the IMF touted

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Egypt and Tunisia's success at economic reform, which, ironically, increased economic insecurity for many citizens.

Declining incomes for the poor, high unemployment, especially among young people, crony capitalism and corruption, and the recent food, financial and energy crises have aggravated the failure of economic liberalization to equitably spread the wealth in the Arab world, Heydarian contends. This, coupled with political repression and a lack of democratic institutions that would allow people to register their discontent, has sparked the upheaval in the Middle East.

Now Syria teeters on the brink of revolution too. Unlike the homogenous societies of Egypt and Tunisia, sectarian and ethnic divisions could explode in the wake of revolution or during it. Still on the sidelines are the urban middle class in Damascus and Aleppo, whose ongoing connections and interests are intertwined with those of the regime.

For 40 years, the Assad regime has presented itself as a bulwark against sectarian strife, Muslim fundamentalism and general chaos. Challenged by protesters, the implicit bargain between

the Assad regime and the Syrian people, one in which security and stability are traded for restricted freedom and human rights, is now on the table. The protesters demanding change say concerns about sectarian conflict are exaggerated. They are enthusiastic, determined, and increasingly resolute in calling for revolution, not reform. Many Syrians, including Christians and other minorities, fear a battle over the future of Syria, one in which they may become targets. If the protestors look to the future, it's safe to say others remember the past. For some, this is the political instability in Syria before the Assad regime came to power. For those who came to Syria as refugees, it's the violence that forced them to flee their country of origin.

In Aleppo, Muhammad and I talked a about Iraq's civil war. Muhammad spoke of the Sunni-Shi'a conflict there, which he said must not happen again. When I asked him about his own religion, Muhammad told me he was a Shi'a. He made it clear, in a polite way, that it was not a question much asked in Syria, or one he approved of. "Muslim, Christian, Armenian – we all get along here. We are

all Syrians," Muhammad said.

Can amity between Syria's different communities prevail over the centrifugal forces in motion? Iraq stands as a warning to those who assume that the overthrow of an autocrat will necessarily bring peace or progress. Despite the blithe talk from commentators on CNN, no one can foretell Syria's future if the Assad regime falls or turmoil continues. But better lives for Syrians look doubtful. A disorganized, leaderless opposition doesn't bode well for a post-Assad Syria; a civil war, with a resulting refugee crisis, seems more likely than not. Should the now much-damaged current regime stay in power, it will be at the cost of simmering political discontent threatening long-term stability and economic development. Sadly, this is one Arab spring that looks very unpromising. **CP**

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