



## Remember Our Blessings - Reclaim Our Founders' Revolutionary Legacy

Doug Bandow

May 16, 2016

ERBIL, IRAQ—It became a cliché as a gaggle of Republican presidential candidates declared that we live in a dangerous world, perhaps the most dangerous ever. The world is dangerous. But, thankfully, most of the horror bypasses the U.S., which remains a global oasis.

Americans can help alleviate the ugliness elsewhere. But rarely can they remake other nations, at least at reasonable cost in lives and resources. Americans' priority should remain safeguarding and uplifting the U.S.

I recently visited the city of Erbil, Iraq. Briefly threatened by the forces of the Islamic State two summers ago, Erbil is the capital of largely autonomous Kurdistan. Today the city operates without evident fear, though security remains heavy.

The Kurdish people are spread throughout Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran, and are the largest ethnic group without their own nation. They have suffered oppression and violence at the hands of all four states.

Kurdistan remains largely separate from the Baghdad government and has become a sanctuary for others, especially religious minorities. I attended a training seminar on religious liberty organized by the group HardWired, headed by Tina Ramirez, who previously worked on Capitol Hill. The meeting brought together people of all faiths to deepen their commitment to protecting the religious liberty of all.

Every group had suffered. Christians fled the Islamic State's takeover of the Nineveh Plain. A Baha'i who lived close to Baghdad went to Turkey with her son.

A Sunni judge got out of Mosul three days before the brutal ISIS takeover. The Islamic State beheaded his youngest brother.

A Yazidi abandoned her home when her city was overrun by ISIS forces. Many people lost contact with friends or relatives left under Islamic State rule.

Even those who escape suffer. A church turned its grounds across the street from my hotel into a mini-refugee camp for 94 families.

More people have been displaced by the Syrian conflict. Last summer I visited Jordan's Zaartari camp, home to some 80,000 people. Many residents have been there for years. Some, in a mix of frustration and desperation, return to Syria aflame.

Only today, decades into a widespread insurgency in eastern Burma, is there hope for the 50,000 residents of Mae La refugee camp, across the border in Thailand. For years when I visited children would tell stories of murdered parents, wrecked homes, and desperate flight across the Moei River.

Today an uneasy peace has descended upon most of the land also known as Myanmar. In fact, it now may be freer politically than Thailand, which suffered a coup two years ago.

In many other nations the threat similarly is repression and persecution rather than conflict and war. I met a Christian minister's wife who lost a leg in a church bombing in Indonesia. Chinese students typically are angry over censorship and curious about the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Pervasive repression is evident in totalitarian systems. North Korea, Eritrea—known as Africa's North Korea—and Saudi Arabia come to mind. Just an accident of birth separates those with a future of freedom and opportunity from those who endure a modern form of serfdom.

Of course, America faces many challenges, especially this political season. Nevertheless, the U.S. remains largely invulnerable to foreign attack.

Only a couple of nations could launch a nuclear assault and they would be annihilated in return. None can challenge America conventionally: Washington spends so much on the military mostly to defend other nations, most of which could protect themselves.

Horrific conflicts elsewhere appropriately tug at Americans' heartstrings, but that is no reason to turn such foreign tragedies into domestic tragedies as well. Less promiscuous intervention abroad is the surest means to limit terrorist attacks at home.

America's economic dream of a constantly improving future has lagged, but the wounds are largely self-inflicted—foolish regulatory, spending, and tax policies which weaken Americans' ability to compete in the world. No one should wish America's political system on anyone else, yet a similar populist uprising is occurring in many European nations. Who can blame people for being angry with their ruling elites?

The ongoing populist response is fraught with danger. Nevertheless, American supporters of liberty remain alert, constitutional protections persist, and checks and balances abound.

There is much in America about which to be concerned, even anguished. Yet traveling the world reminds one just how special America remains.

Rather than give up in despair, we should remember our blessings and redouble our efforts to reclaim the Founders' revolutionary legacy. We don't need to try to remake the world. Rather, we should concentrate on reviving America.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*