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BOOK REVIEW: 'The Shock and Awing of America'

By Ted Galen Carpenter

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In "The Shock and Awing of America," author Ximena Ortiz argues that the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks "made a direct hit on the country's collective psyche" and that they still "carry a strong, damaging resonance."

Miss Ortiz contends that a severely traumatized society has reacted with counterproductive, and at times disastrous, policies. Indeed, measures that officials and members of the opinion-shaping elite adopted have led to major missteps in both the international and domestic arenas. The consequences of those blunders may plague the American republic for decades to come.

Miss Ortiz makes the provocative assertion that the aftermath of Sept. 11 has even caused the United States to resemble some of the chronically dysfunctional political, economic and social systems in the Third World. Manifestations include acute fiscal irresponsibility, an unhealthy drift toward unrestrained executive power, growing violations of civil liberties and foreign-policy jingoism — all in the name of preserving national security.

By debasing American values in that fashion, she argues, U.S. leaders have responded in precisely the way that radical Islamic terrorists intended.

It is a troubling indictment, made all the more credible because the author is not a leftist basher of all things American. Miss Ortiz comes from the conservative side of the political spectrum, having served as an editorial writer for The Washington Times and executive editor of the respected foreign-policy journal The National Interest. Her arguments, therefore, deserve to be taken seriously.

Much of her evidence is very hard to dispute. Only the most perpetually optimistic types can regard the military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan as even remotely successful. In the former case, Washington sacrificed more than \$850 billion and 4,400 American lives to replace a staunchly anti-Iranian Sunni dictator with a generally pro-Iranian Shiite autocrat. Post-Saddam Iraq is a maelstrom of fighting between sectarian factions that has caused the country to be on the brink of civil war and fragmentation.

The outcome in Afghanistan is scarcely better. The corrupt, often ineffectual, rule of President Hamid Karzai has made a mockery of U.S. nation-building objectives. As in Iraq, the United States spent a great amount of blood and treasure, only to experience never-ending frustration.

Miss Ortiz also makes a powerful case that what President Dwight Eisenhower termed "the military-industrial complex" exploited the Sept. 11 attacks to advance its political and budgetary agendas. She notes that "America dramatically outspends other rich countries on defense even when measured as a percentage of their wealth."

Moreover, that spending has not been driven solely or even primarily by the costs associated with wars conducted in the name of combating the terrorist threat. Instead, "expenditures unrelated to the wars have also surged." That is not a minor concern, Miss Ortiz contends. "This kind of fiscal hemorrhaging is debilitating even for the world's largest economy and only superpower."

The portion of her analysis that should disturb advocates of limited, constitutional government the most is the material on civil liberties in the post-Sept. 11 era. Officials and much of the American public have certainly taken a more casual, accepting view of torture and other unsavory measures.

Miss Ortiz points out that the government has now "given itself to order the killing of American citizens without any due process whatsoever, even the procedural scrutiny of a military court. It can relegate detainees to an 'indefinite detention' lasting as long, and at whatever justification, as the state chooses." She goes on to note the surge in surveillance and the growing violations of privacy rights.

Those aspects are all the more troubling, since they do not include most of the subsequent revelations of National Security Agency abuses in the documents that Edward Snowden revealed. Miss Ortiz reaches the depressing conclusion that "liberties are perhaps impossible to sustain by a shocked and awed citizenry." If current trends continue, she warns, "the laws and customs and oppression of the Third World might not look so foreign to Americans."

Miss Ortiz has written a disturbing, provocative book that deserves serious attention. She is on very strong ground when she examines the deleterious aftermath of Sept. 11 on government spending, foreign policy and civil liberties.

Her treatment of some other issues is not as persuasive. For example, her argument that the psychological shock of the terrorist attacks has encouraged an escapist mentality, including a fondness for mindless entertainment, on the part of the American people is dubious. That social phenomenon was prominent long before Sept. 11. Her comparison of American trends with the political and ideological pathologies of the Third World is also a bit overstated. Although the trends are certainly worrisome, America is still a long way from that nightmarish outcome.

Nevertheless, "The Shock and Aweing of America" should be a wake-up call for citizens who have too readily accepted an alarming growth of arbitrary governmental power in the name of

waging a war on terrorism. Miss Ortiz makes a compelling case that the United States has reacted in unhealthy, dangerous ways to the trauma of Sept. 11.

Americans ignore her timely warning only at the peril of their nation's well-being and their own fundamental freedoms.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of nine books and more than 550 articles and policy studies on international affairs, civil liberties and other topics.