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RAYMOND PRICE

Learning the new neutrality

Once upon a time — before most of today's Americans were born — there was a territorial dispute called World War II. Chauvinists that we were back then, most Americans actually called the other side the "enemy." Some, even some in the news media, went so far as to use terms nearly as extreme as (chuckle, chuckle) "evil empire."

Today, of course, we know better.

Today we know that what threatens the world is not militaristic totalitarianism, but international misunderstanding. It's especially our own government's failure to address sufficiently the understandable concerns of those in the Kremlin who believe that American imperialism requires them to spend so heavily on arms that their beleaguered citizens can hardly spare a kopeck for a dram of vodka. We've reached this level of enlightenment by going to college, and by watching the evening news.

In World War II, news reporting was still prehistoric. That is, it was pre-television. And the counterculture ethic of the 1960s had not yet become so dominant in so many influential segments of the media.

We know today that reality is what we see on the 21-inch screen. Back then, people were so naive that they believed what their government told them about Adolf Hitler. They hadn't been conditioned by spectacles such as this week's summit swarm. They didn't have three networks fighting to promise the highest Nazi officials, the biggest U.S. audience, for an on-camera interview, so as to get a leg up in the ratings competition. Newsmen didn't feel that they had to achieve "balance" by equating what the U.S. secretary of state said with what Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels said.

But the primitivism of American news reporting showed itself in even more shocking ways, back in those early days. War correspondents, in effect, struck a deal with the American commanders: the commanders told them in advance about their strategies, their plans, their secret maneuvers, on the clear understanding that these were national security secrets which the correspondents would respect and therefore keep. Sharing the confidences enabled the correspondents to do a better job. The commanders knew they could trust the correspondents to keep the secrets. And the correspondents respected the confidences and kept the secrets. It was a matter partly of honor, but also of shared purpose. Back in those antedeluvian days, correspondents felt this was part of the duty they owed to their country.

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Funny, isn't it?

Back then it was assumed that the purpose of a military operation was to defeat the enemy, and that the business of news people who went along was to report what happened without getting in the way. That was long before Grenada, when the tube exploded with media nabobs sputtering their outrage that the Pentagon should dare stage an invasion as a military exercise rather than as public entertainment.

That was also before terrorism became the favorite outdoor sport of the world's progressives, and CIA-bashing the favorite indoor sport of America's media trendies. In fact, there wasn't yet a CIA, and Libyan strong man Muammar Qaddafi was barely out of swaddling clothes. So there was no way *The Washington Post* could, back then, have gotten hold of a secret CIA plan to destabilize Qaddafi's murderous regime and its terror network, and lethally splash the story across Page 1.

The effect of *The Post*'s doing so earlier this month was, of course, to kill the plan, to preserve the terror network, and to do more for Qaddafi then even the sainted Billy Carter did.

But if such an opportunity had arisen in the World War II era, editors would probably have resisted temptation. They had not yet been sensitized to the First Amendment's requirement that all government secrets be exposed, particularly those labeled (chuckle, chuckle) "national security."

There still are a few journalistic old fogies around, steeped in an earlier tradition, who would argue that taking a neutral position between freedom and tyranny encourages tyranny. They would even argue that treating U.S. and Soviet officials with equal skepticism is not even-handedness in the service of truth.

By equating the credibility of a system built on the systematic, deliberate lie with one built on free inquiry, we demean free inquiry, exalt the systematic lie, and ease the path of that tyranny based on lies.

We won World War II. One reason we won it was that we hadn't learned to equate Franklin D. Roosevelt with Hitler, or the Voice of America with the output of Joseph Goebbels. But now, of course, we know better. Now we've learned to be evenhanded.

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