

# WIP—TODAY'S COMPLEAT PATRIOT

## 1 ◦ THE *DOMESTIC* AXIS OF EVIL

By Ron Kenner

*The Domestic Axis of Evil* was first runner-up in an international essay contest in 2002 headquartered in Australia, and an updated version ran soon afterward with one other essay to lead off the 2,000<sup>th</sup> edition of the *American Reporter* (billed as the first online newspaper). Later the essay became the opening post for *The Compleat Patriot*.



[Updated from the original 2002 essay]

Patriotism is great. Opposing terrorism is essential. Compassion for terrorist victims is unquestionably called for. Yet we need a patriotism that also demonstrates serious concern for millions of other victims—a patriotism that confronts the culprits of the generally ignored, curiously unmentionable domestic Axis of Evil: *Access*, *Excess*, and *Obsess*.

The stunning September 11th attack on our nation prompted calls for justice and revenge and elicited immense sympathy for the victims. Yet even soon afterward—with an increased awareness of tragedy and vulnerability—we seemed little aware in the U.S. of many millions around the world (even those in the U.S.) for whom the big question is not whether there is life after death but a decent life *before* death.

Undoubtedly American patriots honor all we justly hold dear. Free speech. Freedom of religion. The idea of no taxation without representation. The idea that all people be treated as equals. The right to education. The Bill of Rights. The Constitution and the rule of law. Not least there's America as a grand tapestry of all of the peoples of the world!

Great stuff! But a true patriot acknowledges the full story of America: the inequities of access to power . . . the corporate excesses light-years beyond fair profit . . . the absurdity of obsessing over solutions simplistic in approach and unwinnable in end result, from our long-ago failed War in Vietnam to our failed 'War on Poverty' to our still failing decades-long 'War on Drugs' . . . .

Meanwhile, as such déjà vu wars continue there's been seemingly little official concern that millions in the U.S. lack health insurance, are without jobs, live not many paychecks away from being homeless, suffer seriously depleted pension or retirement funds. Nor have we worried much about those individuals long uncharged and hidden away unconstitutionally in jails. Let's face it, for millions it's been decades—and increasingly so in recent years—of compassion and security 'lite'.

And with few questions asked. If a senator received only a few minutes to speak his mind to other senators about a possible U.S. preemptive strike on Iraq, how much time could one likely expect with which to address an undeclared, barely noticed, somewhat embarrassing *Domestic Axis of Evil*?

The *complete* patriot sympathizes not only with terrorist victims but also with the victims of the U.S. Domestic Axis of Evil. The real patriot would be 'up in arms', at least metaphorically, against the regulators who should have seen it coming or who made only half-hearted efforts to prevent the exploitation or mistreatment of innocent victims. Or who speak out only after quitting, retiring, going to jail, getting fired, or when writing their books.

Considering the more recent déjà vu like 'housing bubble' and mortgage crisis in which it was anticipated that millions could lose their homes, obviously little has been done since the dot.com scandals to alter the most scandalous financial patterns of the *domestic* Axis of Evil. Soon after the 'dot.com' scandals, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times* and a few other dailies lambasted some of the more outrageous legal loopholes. Significantly, clever legal delays, lack of enforcement, lobbyist-encouraged obstructions, years' long appeals and the like undoubtedly had branched out—even at the time of the dot.com crisis—way beyond those multi-billion dollar 'rip-offs' in the financial world.

Perhaps we've been too distracted by the War on Terrorism, by the foreign 'Axis of Evil,' to observe the domestic 'axis'—a local scenario suggestive of the old time movie clowns, *The Three Stooges*, running wild in a car without brakes; except that the real life scenario more typically goes unnoticed until the sensational headlines emerge after the accident, crash, or rip-off. Despite the 'after-the-tragedy' headlines, relatively scarce official attention has been paid over the years and decades to the likes of dangerous tires, asbestos-laced building materials, 'fire trap' buildings, roads and bridges in poor repair, crumbling police and fire stations, and impoverished, overcrowded clinics or hospital emergency rooms. And nationally—with half the U.S. population now in the suburbs—we've barely officially noticed our many decaying cities.

Admittedly the U.S. is hardly the only nation with embarrassing problems. And hardly the worst! Despite easy pronouncements, 'democracy' sounds laughable—not least among some of our favored allies—for many parts of the Americas and for much of Africa and Asia. Most European countries—along with

the U.S.—for some four years offered merely convenient ‘lip service’ to protest self-pronounced, devastating “ethnic cleansing” of thousands in Bosnia.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in newly capitalized, ‘democratized’ Russia, life expectancy dropped significantly; helped along, no doubt, by robber baron mobsters who squirreled away billions. One also has to wonder about the bankers outside Russia, whether they ever pondered where all the billions came from. Later, with oil and gas revenues things would improve some for many in Russia, despite Putin’s somewhat autocratic rule.

Surely any claims of North Korea enjoying the “good life” also lack credibility. So, too, for Iraq—the one-time supposed Garden of Eden! Yet oil-rich Saudi Arabia (where most Sept. 11th terrorists originated) and royalist oil-rich Kuwait are no bargains, either! And among others (including allies), in parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, India, many alleged ‘impure’ women have been stoned or burned to death by mates or relatives—invariably with impunity.

Yet the U.S., though still the place that people *escape to*, has especially in the first and current Bush administration) clearly isolated itself from the international community. Despite some UN consensus with the US on Iraq, the U.S. remains at odds on Kyoto and worldwide global warming, establishment of the International Criminal Court, on worldwide efforts to deal with well over one-hundred-million planted land mines (most manufactured in the U.S.), on rejection of long recognized Geneva Conventions concerning treatment of prisoners, on our executions (in some states) of mental defectives, our lack of support for family planning abroad, our early position on a possible ‘first strike’ against Iraq, and other U.S. rejections of long-held international rules. We’ve been outvoted repeatedly. Not merely by the UN but, officially, by most every country in the world! Our embarrassing losing votes make even those teams with the most hopeless scores look good.

We fear extreme fundamentalists abroad yet millions of Americans honor homegrown religious extreme fundamentalists. Jerry Falwell actually sought to have us infer that legal abortions and our other supposed iniquitous ways contributed to God’s punishment on September 11th. This apocalyptic definition naturally precludes our legislators from being patriotic, moral Americans. Other simplistic absurdities continue. Too many professionals, government officials, businessmen and others could hardly tell the truth if they tried. Many don’t try—especially in the less-than-authentic ‘explanation’ for the latest mishap. As each new scandal rises out of the inactions or mishaps of the FAA, the INS, the EPA, the SEC, the FBI, the CIA (and more) it’s a tossup whether to laugh or cry. Much of our credibility now looks as tattered as a year-old flag on a Sports Utility Vehicle.

A true patriot worries about the plausibility of our actions, knowing that without plausibility there’s no credibility and that without credibility the words and values

and meanings are hollow. A brave patriot even raises dangerous questions! We need to pay closer attention to the words we use and the words we abuse. Unlike a good storyteller, many in society have lost touch with our past, present and likely future. In the fairly recent U.S. elections more than forty percent of the eligible voters didn't vote. They're not happy with the candidates' words. The pieces don't fit or connect! Specifics and credibility are lacking. Too much has gone wrong. Yet despite even the great commotion of the latest scandals there's been no call to arms against our domestic Axis of Evil.

Curiously, the inaction over internal problems persists, even among many intellectuals, in an overcooked, all-encompassing blanket of cynicism—the frustrated, impatient cynicism that rejects not the frequent abuses against language but *language* itself; rejects not the abuses in the name of reason and progress but *reason* and even the idea of progress; rejects not the abuses against civilization but civilization and humanity. Ironically, for all our sophisticated complaints about “progress,” for too many people the Renaissance is surely yet to come—East and West.

Meanwhile, though seriously short on skepticism the uncritical dark cynicism hardly does justice either to the U.S. as a nation or to the millions of decent, caring, diligent and responsible officials, workers, homemakers, laborers, serious-minded professionals . . . There are literally tens of millions of good people around yet the widespread cynical, indiscriminate view demeans all. The “non-participatory” ‘voter drop out’—often replaced by narrow moneyed-constituencies—ultimately mocks our democratic system and destroys confidence in the economy as effectively as the multi-mansioned CEOs and their many ineffective regulators. Given the many platitudes that often hold sway, unchallenged by serious credibility checks, you'd think we have enough legitimate challenges without cynics blaming the innocents (and innocent victims), too.

We've now switched from largely ignoring terrorists to generating a new anti-terrorist war machine; one big enough, some say, to keep obsessively alive the cold war military-industrial complex when we'd likely do better with a Marshall Plan for our ailing cities, places like Newark where mayors have regularly gone to jail and drugs may be the city's largest product.

Like the simplistic déjà vu wars—on poverty, crime, drugs, urban blight, illiteracy or attempts to curtail illegal immigration—our War on Terrorism emanates from a similarly narrow, near-obsessive focus. We're stunned by terrorism yet raise comparatively small concern for the more predictable failings that daily sweep away thousands of lives. Every four days or so as many people die from smoking as died from the September 11 terrorist attack. A thousand smaller perilous, persisting examples apply.

A full-sized American patriotism would not only stand up to foreign terrorists but also insist that everyone pay a full share of corporate and individual taxes, stand tall against racism, injustice, and hate crimes, and take aim at anyone wreaking havoc on the environment. True patriots might also well call for a long warranted attack against those committing domestic crimes so absurd, by a margin of billions of dollars, as to have been previously unimaginable. As Author John A. Byrne observed in Fall from Grace, the Business Week cover story of August 12, 2002, the now effectively disgraced and defunct accounting firm of Andersen “stamped its approval on the dirty books of Sunbeam, Waste Management, Enron, Global Crossing, Qwest, and WorldCom. The scandals that enveloped those corporations alone have cost investors more than \$300 billion and have put tens of thousands of people out of work.”

And that’s only a part of it. Yet no patriotic war has been launched to prevent the next set of sure-to-come scandals. A few legislators, judges, et al, have already “stepped down,” recused themselves over questionable access to government . . . a few businessmen will go and have since gone to jail for fraudulent excesses . . . a few companies are being fined or even put out of business. Yet any serious, widescale battle against evil-doers in the domestic Axis of Evil seems no more likely than serious campaign finance reform.

You’d think we’d conduct our lives more intelligently given our many supposed watchdogs against possible domestic evils: the government “watchdogs” . . . the “hard-nosed” banker we trust not to make risky loans . . . the “eagle-eyed” accountant and auditor we trust to keeps tabs . . . the “hard-driving” CEO we trust to build up the business . . . the Board of Directors we trust to take the “pragmatic,” conservative approach . . . the Wall Street “analyst” we trust to advise on the most reasonable investments . . . .

What went wrong? Taking even a cursory look, you’d think we could hardly miss the lack of substance and credibility in so many puffed-up communications: in hyped press reports . . . in manipulative advertising . . . in news capsule and sound bite television . . . in the increasingly tabloid-styled mainstream press . . . in films that sell out the fuller story and the bigger picture for the close-up and special effect . . . in too much teeny-bopper oriented entertainment . . . in art and art criticism lacking statement, meaning, serious evaluation . . . in much myopic, distorted, truncated, blurred, less than credible history telling . . . in increasingly sanitized science-denuded text books . . . in the painfully obtuse writings of bureaucracy . . . in the frequently abstruse writings of academia . . . in the oft-laughable communications of many company sponsored ‘think tanks’ . . . in the “money talks loudest” communications of lobbyists. . . . in pandering to the polls . . . in ludicrous political statements that often suggest everything or nothing . . . in dubious promises and less than credible rhetoric. We grouse a little. Sometimes a lot. Mostly we accept business as usual. Or our watchdogs or gurus, like Greenspan, speak up more seriously only after they retire or write their books.

In literature, the “set up” is typically so obvious it works to build suspense. In our everyday world we are more typically blind to the set up. As actor W.C. Fields once quipped, “You can fool half the people all of the time . . . and that’s enough to make a good living.”

We need the serious writer’s eye for authenticity. The writer doesn’t have to be successful or even greatly talented—just ‘desperately seeking’ credibility. At least most professional, serious writers could hardly deceive or lie in their stories if they tried. In literature the plots, characters, stories go where they must. In quality writing the character stays “in character” while the serious writer, true to his craft, follows. The serious non-fiction writer, too, needs specifics that justify, pieces that fit, odds that are plausible, and the right word, the *mot juste*—to add authenticity.

Are writers less gullible than others? Are they smarter? Probably not. Even the best can barely capture in words a passage from Mozart or the meaning of a raised eyebrow. Writers offer no clear consensus and make few claims—especially in postmodern times—to ultimate answers. It’s not even that the serious writer has mastered words; the words master the serious writer. The professional writer invariably lacks the tricks of the trade and starts fresh each time—that’s the good part! Talk about building a consensus, most any good writer knows that to get his or her new story across he or she can’t rely on old credibilities. Nor can he or she commit deceptions, make deals, promises, threats, demands, tradeoffs or even tell simple lies and expect to be believed or even read. The author, at least, must build a convincing, credible case. In non-fiction, too.

Patriots should demand reasonable oversight and accounting, a system that includes fully-informed shareholders and representatives and a board of directors who are not—as all too often they are—‘yes’ men. Not least, we need a well-informed citizenry with a larger view of society, the world around us, and, for the well-being of generations to come, a serious concern for a credible, sustainable future.

The U.S., the world’s only Super Power, the helmsman for the 21st century and thus probably the best hope as a partner, not an empire-builder for the world’s recovery from a half century of cold war absurdity , would do well to take a needed lesson.

It has not been a good year for credibility, not even for the Red Cross, the Boy Scouts or the Parish Priest. Society at large might well take a credibility lesson from the serious writer with an eye for credibility, before things turn into one big soap opera: *The Clichés of Our Lives*.