

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

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Who changed the rules?

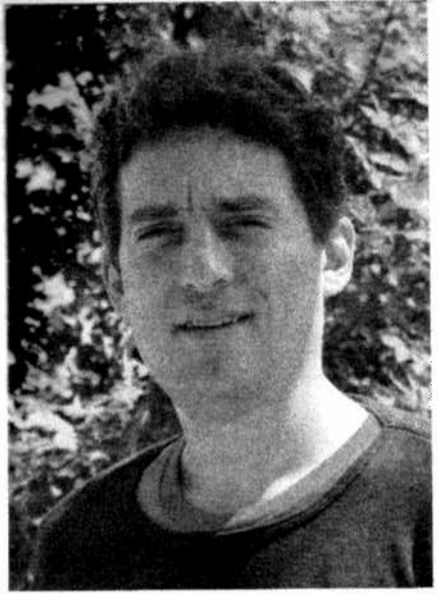
Spending my adolescence just miles from the White House gave me great occasion to consider the "rules" handed down by our government. Fortunately, I had teachers and mentors that suggested that I should not accept these "rules" without considerable deliberation. I was taught that I could weigh the "facts" and come to my own conclusions. I continue to follow this advice (and hence this column).

But some 20 years since my Washington, D.C. immersion, I feel like the "rules" have changed and yet so few realize this. It seems so hypocritical to change the "rules" midstream, and it appears that those in power don't think we'll notice. I've noticed and so have many others. Let me mention just a few of these "rule" changes.

In the 1980's, it was repeatedly taught to me that the U.S.S.R.'s invasion of Afghanistan was immoral and repugnant. It was supposedly a sign of a superpower forcing its will upon a helpless country—presumably to spread communism and to have rule over a strategic location. In response, the U.S. government felt justified supporting factions that wanted to remove the Soviet occupiers. (Ironically, it was this resistance that catapulted Osama bin Laden, born in Saudi Arabia to one of the leading Saudi families, to hero status within certain Muslim sects.) The Soviets ended up spending nearly ten years in Afghanistan trying "win." The death toll during this ten year "war" was huge—at least one million died (over 98% of whom were Afghans) and several million were wounded. In the end, the Soviets left and Afghanistan was left in brutal Civil War.

Now, just over 20 years since the Soviet debacle, the U.S. seems poised to follow in the same footsteps. Well, actually, we already have—in Iraq. We haven't lost as many Americans (yet) but over a million Iraqis have died in association with the U.S. invasion in 2003; March 20 marks six years since its beginning (so much for "Mission Accomplished"). Now, President Obama, in what appears to be an admission of failure, has called for the shifting of military focus from Iraq to Afghanistan. Will more killing bring peace to this region? How many more U.S. soldiers will die in Afghanistan before Obama (or his successor) recognizes the inanity (and insanity) of continuing a winless war and all the environmental destruction that it brings? Case in point: many areas of Afghanistan are still littered with land mines that were placed there by the U.S. backed guerillas during the Soviet entanglement; not surprisingly, the U.S. is one of few nations still unwilling to sign the Ottawa Treaty which would ban the use of antipersonnel land mines. When did it become okay to invade countries and engage in continual wars against humanity?

Since the 1980's, I have also been told repeatedly that the U.S. economy is the strongest in the world and that markets were the best way to regulate price, wages, and the distribution of goods. Now that we've had almost thirty years of deregulation, let's look at where it has taken us—into one of the most serious recessions ever. But why? Simply, unregulated markets do not work (and properly regulated ones are probably just wishful thinking in an era when corporations have so much political influence). So much of our economic troubles now stem from unconstrained



greed and speculation by banks (via predatory lending) and other financial institutions (through phony money on balance sheets).

So, how did the market avoid this problem or lessen its impact? It didn't. Worse yet, what have been the solutions to our problem? We (the taxpayers) have given (through acts of our congressional representatives) the same financial institutions that got us into this mess hundreds of billions of dollars (some say trillions, if one counts all the tax breaks and other incentives granted) to right the ship. There are many things wrong with this but, based on the lessons I was taught as a youth, two inconsistencies are glaring. First, banks and privately-owned financial institutions (market-sensitive enterprises) are not the instruments to ward off serious economic troubles in the first place. Second, these institutions shouldn't be given more of our money (through the government) as a "bonus" for their indiscretions and predations. Isn't it odd that "bail-outs" for the super rich seems to be fine and dandy while "handouts" to the poor, and increasingly underpaid and unemployed, are considered so wrong? Corporate welfare has been in place for a very long time, but the dollars we're talking about in these (never-ending) bail-outs are simply unbelievable; the AIG bonuses are just the tip of the iceberg. But before we attribute this to partisan politics, let's not forget that both President G.W. Bush and then Senator Obama supported the idea of bail-outs to banks and other powerful corporate entities as a means to improve the economy. How many jobs have been lost in the past few months? How much longer must we wait for this money to "trickle-down"?

Are our recent military activities related to the suffering economy? That is, are the two aforementioned "rules" connected? According to former President George W. Bush, recent U.S. wars have been good for the economy and jobs because "we are buying equipment and people are working." Unfortunately, this isn't a widely supported position. For instance, Joseph Stiglitz, 2002 Nobel Prize winning economist and former chief economist at The World Bank, conservatively estimates that the full cost of the last six years of the Iraq occupation will be at least \$3 trillion; he and, coauthor, Linda Bilmes, demonstrate the basis for this figure in their new book, *Three Trillion War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict*. The necons respond by saying things like, "There is no price for our freedom." Yet, this position completely ignores that war does have real costs—in terms of innocent civilian deaths, American soldier deaths and disfigurements, as well as suffering economies. We cannot afford to sweep \$3 trillion "under the rug."

So, when did the rules change? I guess it depends on who makes the rules. For me, inconsistencies on this grand a scale suggest major problems in governance and indicate that other "rules" are really operating. Perhaps we need to begin to make the "rules" and stop listening to all the rhetoric. What do you think?