

The Buck's to Blame



by Theodore Dalrymple

The ability of governments to get everything the wrong way round is so commonplace that it should no longer surprise us. It is as if they feared to solve a problem lest they should have nothing to do.

The Iraqi government is the latest of many to announce that it will henceforth abandon the U.S. dollar as a medium of transaction. The Iraqi Ministry of the Interior has said that anyone in Iraq using dollars will be subject to punishment.

I cannot predict where the current fashion for de-dollarization will end or what it will bring in its wake. I suspect it will be nothing good. If successful in the sense that the dollar ceases to be the reserve currency of the world, it will cause even more instability than there is at present, and stability, even when unfair, has its value. If it fails, it will increase resentment, never a motive of the best policy.

The Iraqi government's scarcely concealed hostility to the United States is, in a way, ungrateful; for it would not have

been the government at all had it not been for that country's intervention in their own. Saddam Hussein might well still have been in power without it, but whether this would have been a good or a bad thing is a question not straightforwardly easy to answer. The war ended two millennia of Christian life in Iraq, it killed a huge number of people, it liberated the Kurds, it brought an end to minority Sunni domination, it increased Iranian influence in the country, it caused immense economic damage. Saddam Hussein was a very bad man, a murderer, but he was not a religious fanatic, and the second war against his regime was conducted on a patently bogus pretext. It created lasting chaos, and I doubt that there are many who, if they could turn the clock back, would want the same policy to be pursued.

No doubt smoldering hatred of the United States and national pride played a large part in the Iraqi government's decision to forbid the use of the American dollar in all internal transactions, whether in private or in settlement between companies. But like fine words, hatred butters no parsnips. The Iraqi government joins a long list of governments down the ages that have tried to improve, or at any rate control, whole economies by decree.

The government is reported to require traders to sign a pledge to use only the Iraqi dinar in their activities. If they break their word, they will be punished.

It is perfectly obvious that, humans being what they are, this will only make life in Iraq even more uncertain than it already is. It will most certainly enrich some. To tell people that they must not use the dollar but must use the dinar instead is like telling them they must believe in Jesus. It is like trying to reduce a housing shortage by rent control or, as in previous times, correct a shortage of bullion by clipping coins or reducing their content of precious metal.

This does not mean that the U.S. dollar is above reproach when

it comes to deserving confidence; but in these matters it is all a matter of relative trustworthiness, and confidence is not generally increased by making it compulsory. However rotten or shaky the U.S. dollar may be, who would rather be paid in Iraqi dinars, or Argentinean pesos, Sudanese pounds, Somali shillings, than in American dollars?

Getting hold of the wrong end of the stick is a human and not just a governmental propensity. One of its advantages, psychological though rarely practical, is that it encourages the ascription of blame to others, especially when one is oneself to blame, wholly or partly. And finding someone to blame is in turn an important and reassuring mental process, for it suggests that there is an easy solution to a complex problem: Get rid of the blameworthy people and all will be well. Blame reassures us that causes of unpleasant events are under human control.

It is all within our experience that this is sometimes the case. Someone may truly be trying to poison us by putting arsenic in our food, and removal of that person from the vicinity of our kitchen would obviously be advantageous to us. But usually, things are more complicated. Causes come in cascades, and we isolate the one we want to blame in order to preserve our own blamelessness.

I used sometimes to be asked for my opinion in a medical case in which death had avoidably resulted. Who was to blame? Officially, that was not the question: I was asked to find only *what* had happened, not *who* was to blame. But the enquiry always had what literary scholars call a subtext, namely the need to find the guilty party.

If fault could not be denied, if failing could not be hidden, if the shortcomings were too egregious, organizations such as hospitals then tried to ensure that blame was fixed at the lowest possible level of the hierarchy. This was done by a simple means: by searching for the laid-down procedure that

was not followed to the letter, for example a form that was not filled when, according to procedure, it should have been. This was the buried treasure that inquiries always sought, with the implication that, if only the form had been filled in, if only procedure had been followed to the letter, all would have been well and the deceased would not have died. Apart from that unfilled form, everything was perfect, and the person who failed to fill the form was the one responsible for the untoward death (by the time this was concluded, that person had usually, and luckily, moved on, so that no such unfortunate outcome could ever occur again—till the next time, of course).

But in reality, there had been incompetence or error from top to bottom, cascading down from the chief executive like a mountain stream. Blaming the lowliest person who had failed to follow procedure was to the hospital what de-dollarization is to Iraq.

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