

Tom Palaima LOCAL CONTRIBUTOR

Viewing U.S. policies through rosy glasses

It is always easier to see and solve someone else's problems. This explains why counselors, therapists, consultants, pundits, think-tank specialists, academic, financial, legal and spiritual advisers, philosophers, cartoonists, bloggers and next-door neighbors will always be with us.

It also is why we say ironically, "Physician, heal thyself."

Self-diagnosis isn't easy. Getting a good perspective is hard.

This applies to nations and cultures as well as to individuals. It also applies, I recently discovered, to global policy experts.

In early June, I traveled with my wife and son through Messenia in southwestern Greece. Being a specialist in the history of the region, I visualized again in concrete terms how human beings

through time settled and organized themselves in the agriculturally rich district, what challenges they faced. Inevitably, in period after period, the cultures they had created collapsed and disappeared, mainly because they failed to identify and solve their domestic and foreign problems.

In the small town of Korone, while having lunch, I talked with the owners of the taverna, mother and son. She moved and sat in obvious pain. I asked about it.

She explained that she was among the students at the National Technical University of Athens in November 1973 protesting for democratic freedoms. The U.S.-supported military dictatorship ordered tanks to disperse the students. She was wounded in her hip. If she had gone to a public hospital, she would have been arrested and imprisoned, perhaps tortured. She received what treatment she could privately from someone whom the U.S. and the Greek governments then would have called a 'leftist sympathizer.' She is now disabled.

Back in Austin on June 12, I attended a daylong seminar at the LBJ Library sponsored by the American Assembly of Columbia University. Prominent business and government consultants, university specialists in international affairs and public policy, and media and legal strategists talked about U.S. global policy and the future of international institutions. The prevailing view was optimistic.

We heard that the United States was successful in its foreign policy from the end of World War II through the end of the Cold War. We created good will during that period.

Our position as a consumer giant was taken for granted. As 5 percent of the world's population, we consume, extravagantly, 30 percent of its oil resources.

The world should accept this with equanimity. We should be bullish about our educational systems. They will produce leaders to meet the hair-raisingly complex problems we will face. And the private sector can solve most of our problems. For

example, we can outsource aspects of intelligence gathering, on the model of military contracting.

As proof of the world's happiness with our foreign policy, one panelist cited friends in Romania and Poland. I wonder if he has ever spoken to people with different historical memories, such as my plain, middle-age restaurant owner in Korone, or the families of those who disappeared, were tortured or were exiled under Gen. Augusto Pinochet in Chile.

The optimism about our educational institutions baffles me. The joint national academies of the United States have issued well-publicized reports about our failures in the sciences, particularly in engineering.

After 9/11, foreign students who earn doctorates in the hard sciences at American universities have to return home to help their

countries, not ours.

Former University of Texas at Austin President Larry Faulkner was there, armed with his recent charge from President Bush to head the National Mathematics Advisory Panel that will try to improve our clear weaknesses in math education.

And UT professor emerita Elspeth Rostow spoke sagely about the need to educate students in foreign languages and cultures and world history.

I raised two points about education.

One, even at a highly ranked public research university such as UT Austin, many students can graduate having taken two, one or no semesters of a foreign language and a bare minimum of world history or world culture courses.

The situation is no better at system schools and community colleges.

Two, what goes on at top institutions of higher education does not address the knowledge of international affairs, foreign cultures and world history that the voting public will need to make informed choices about the potential leaders that our schools will provide.

As for the mantra that the private sector is a panacea, Ambassador Donald McHenry, who served at the United Nations from 1979 to 1981, provided some perspective, stating that in his experience private corporations are run no better than government.

They fail with regularity. They aim at profits and serve shareholders, even non-American shareholders, not the American people. Indeed, many government agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency were set up because the private sector was doing conspicuous public harm.

As for the privatizing craze, I hope everyone will read Los Angeles Times journalist T. Christian Miller's forthcoming book on contractor corruption in Iraq and its deadly consequences. It should give us all some much-needed perspective.

Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin.

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