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The American Century Is Over

A state that can't keep its citizens secure at Camden Yards is not going to make Ukraine safe for neoliberalism.

By SCOTT MCCONNELL

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Someday American politicians will recognize that the world isn't asking for their leadership. The image of America as benevolent superpower may endure in parts of Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Republics, where some imagine American jets are going to abolish geography and clear out the Russians. But nowhere else.

At the time of this writing, an Orioles-White Sox game in Baltimore has been cancelled because of rioting in the city, while on Saturday 37,000 fans were confined inside the stadium for hours after a game ended because of mayhem outside. The state, which cannot protect crowds of dating couples and parents with children outside of Camden Yards, is not going to make eastern Ukraine safe for neoliberalism.

In the run-up to the Baltimore riots, Congress debated ways to tell Europeans what their Mideast policies should be. Working with an AIPAC-drafted playbook, Maryland senator Ben Cardin and Illinois representative Peter Roskam attached language to a large trade bill intended to squelch the growing movement in Europe to label as such Israeli products that originate in the occupied

territories. The AIPAC amendments defined as primary American goals in trade talks the discouragement of European economic sanctions against Israel. Mike Coogan's account of the behind-the-scenes maneuvers highlighted some glimpses of House legislators stunned at the brazenness of AIPAC in action. First hearings on the bill were moved to a smaller room to keep out the public. Then, at the last moment, pro-Israel anti-boycott amendments were tacked on, with language treating Israel and "Israeli-controlled territories" as identical. One congressman asked Chairman Paul Ryan why members of the Ways and Means Committee were unable to consider public health, or labor standards, or food safety in debating the trade legislation, but were able on short notice to rubberstamp an AIPAC-sponsored amendment. He didn't receive an answer.

The larger point made by the U.S. Congress is that it is wrong for Palestinians to fight for their freedom by terrorism or any form of armed struggle, but it is also wrong to seek their rights by peaceful political means such as boycott. If you are a Palestinian, you have no legitimate way to seek political and civil rights, no avenue is open to you—and Congress is going to intervene in American trade policy to try to enforce that. Congress will make it a priority to instruct U.S. trade policymakers to protect Israeli settlements, considered illegal by virtually every country in the world. About measures (labor practices, health and safety standards) which might protect U.S. workers and U.S. consumers, Congress doesn't have time for. By the way, Cardin, who introduced the senate version, represents Baltimore.

One connection between U.S. trade policy and the Baltimore riots was made explicit by John Angelos, the Oriole's chief operating officer and son of the Oriole's owner. Wrote Angelos:

That said, my greater source of personal concern, outrage and sympathy beyond this particular case is focused neither upon one night's property damage nor upon the acts, but is focused rather upon the past four-decade period during which an American political elite have shipped middle class and working class jobs away from Baltimore and cities and towns around the U.S. to third-world dictatorships like China and others, plunged tens of millions of good, hard-working Americans into economic devastation, and then followed that action around the nation by diminishing every American's civil rights protections in order to control an unfairly impoverished population living under an ever-declining standard of living and suffering at the butt end of an ever-more militarized and aggressive surveillance state.

The innocent working families of all backgrounds whose lives and dreams have been cut short by excessive violence, surveillance, and other abuses of the Bill of Rights by government pay the true price, and ultimate price, and one that far exceeds the importances of any kids' game played tonight, or ever, at Camden Yards. We need to keep in mind people are suffering and dying around the U.S., and while we are thankful no one was injured at Camden Yards, there is a far bigger picture for poor Americans in Baltimore and everywhere who don't have jobs and are

losing economic civil and legal rights, and this makes inconvenience at a ballgame irrelevant in light of the needless suffering government is inflicting upon ordinary Americans.

You need not hold the rioters as blameless as Angelos does to recognize there is truth in his argument. For two generations, while politicians have been celebrating “free trade,” America has been hemorrhaging good working class jobs. The economic devastation has probably hit the white working class harder than blacks, but as William Julius Wilson and others have argued, de-industrialization which followed on the heels of the civil rights revolution ensured that the black community would remain largely impoverished, despite its political gains. In any case, we live in a far less equal and economically secure country than we did in the 1950s and 1960s.

As images of hoodlums rampaging in Baltimore traverse the globe, the Solons of Capitol Hill still imagine the world is eager to follow American leadership. The tacking on of “pro-Israel” provisions to a trade bill without debate is but a prequel: the big enchilada for Republicans in Congress is the derailment of the Iran negotiations. In the Capitol Hill bubble, it is assumed that the countries of Western Europe and Russia and China would follow the American lead and intensify sanctions against Iran on America’s say-so, a belief with no basis in reality. Obama and John Kerry have recognized correctly that the sanctions regime has gained as much from Iran as it is going to get; Europe or China (and of course Russia) will not sign up for more.

Already, Washington has found to its consternation that its Western partners can’t be dissuaded from joining a China-sponsored international banking arrangement. If the Republicans in Congress succeed in collapsing the Iran negotiations—altogether possible—they will discover that Washington is in a coalition with Israel and Saudi Arabia and no one else. Any future president, Republican or Democrat, will find his ability to negotiate terminally compromised, as world leaders will conclude that an American chief executive cannot keep his or her word.

The American century ended some time ago; perhaps the curtain was finally drawn when Secretary of State Colin Powell laid out the case for war before the UN and said things about Iraq which turned out simply not to be true. Those in Congress don’t yet realize it, but they will.