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HOBBS WAS RIGHT: ANARCHY SUCKS

Posted by [Tom Streithorst](#) on Apr 2nd 2014, [8 Comments](#)

Takhar Province, 2001

You know, in cartoons, when the wolf stares at porky pig and he morphs into pork chops? I look into the villagers' eyes and realize they see me as prey. "Give me your passport," a burly 18 year-old pokes me in the chest.

"Give me your camera," another, more practical, insists.

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Economics is a toolkit that enables better understanding of how people live, and how societies work.

I try to be jocular, try not to show any fear. “I can’t give you the camera. It is my camera. I need it. I am the cameraman.”

“No I am cameraman, give it to me.”

The crowd presses closer. A week after the fall of Kabul, we are travelling through the mountainous back lands of Afghanistan to the capital. In my colleagues’ pockets tens of thousands of dollars. On our trucks hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of gear and supplies. Every third man in the crowd has a rifle on his back. We have a single AK-47. Considering that the per capita income in Afghanistan is under \$400 a year, we are carrying enough cash to make these villagers rich beyond the dreams of avarice.

While I am pretending not to be frightened by this pack of ravenous adolescents, Commander Mustafa, our Northern Alliance escort, is calmly explaining to more senior villagers that we are travelling under the protection of the new regime. He doesn’t touch his gun, our only weapon. It remains tranquilly on the backseat of his jeep. The implicit message: yes of course you can rob and kill us now but then the wrath of our big brother will be upon you. Do you want to take that chance?

In rural Afghanistan it is the tradition of family loyalty and the threat of vengeance that maintains order. No Afghan government has ever controlled much more than the ring road connecting the four main cities, so the people themselves have created their own system of justice. Despite per capita automatic weapon ownership greater than Utah or East St. Louis, some semblance of peace is maintained. If you were to kill me, then my brothers would be duty bound to try and kill you. The certainty of their need for revenge is a damper on violence. It isn’t the best system but it is better than nothing.

Slowly calmly, we work our way back into our cars and drive off. Some kids chase after us, but no one shoots at us, they let us go. Afterwards, our translator Maboub tells me this town is known as a bandit village, legendary in the area for robbing travellers. He tells me we were fools to have stopped. He says the only reason we aren’t dead is that the biggest bandit just happened to be out of town.

I think a deeper explanation has to do with timing. If we were to find ourselves in the same village today, with Commander Mustafa and just one gun, we would most likely be robbed and killed. Fear and respect for the Northern Alliance and its government has dissipated.

Today I would never travel those roads unless embedded with the overwhelming firepower



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Today, I would never travel those roads unless embedded with the overwhelming firepower of an American army convoy.

But back in November 2001, helped by precision US bombing, the Northern Alliance had just defeated the Taliban and retaken Kabul. To ordinary Afghans, they were the rising force, to be scoffed at at peril. I think the villagers reckoned that though they could kill us and steal our money, the risk of vengeance by our Northern Alliance protectors outweighed any possible gain. And this of course is the same logic that drives law-abiding behaviour in our more civilized lands. It is the fear of a larger power that will at some later date make us pay for our depredations that keeps us all in line.

Times Square 1975

The man with the gold tooth sidles up and mutters “loose joints, loose joints.” 42nd street is a cornucopia of illegal activity. Pimps, whores, drug dealers and an array of hustlers whose scam is not immediately apparent crowd the sidewalks. PCP, heroin, marijuana and sex are all on offer by men who seem spectacularly unreliable. The besuited commuters stride by, dodging the criminals, trying to avoid eye contact. Wow. For a 17 year old new to the city, Times Square is both exhilarating and a bit scary.

Even when I do see a cop on the Deuce, he is strikingly ineffectual. The hustlers might be momentarily circumspect but since they know the policeman can only search them if he has “probable cause”, they continue their business without undue concern. The cop recognizes his impotence and walks without confidence or authority, forced to pretend he does not see the illegality all around him. The thugs are more in control than he is. The streets of New York have been abandoned to the bad guys.

In the early 1960s, for reasons of cost and convenience, the New York City Police Department changed its way of doing business. No longer would the local cop wander the streets of his neighbourhood, chatting with old ladies as they swept their stoops, taking apples from grocery stores, sipping free cups of coffee from diners. That sort of ordinary interaction was seen as a temptation to corruption and so officers were put in squad cars, their mandate not to patrol their beat but rather to respond to reported incidents of crime. Stuck in their vehicles, busy reacting to 911 calls, their very presence no longer prevented wrongdoing. By the 1980s, sirens blaring, cops would flash by drug dealers openly plying their trade or pimps beating their whores and do nothing. Providing public order was no longer their responsibility.

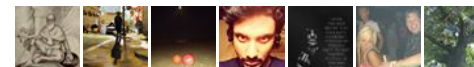


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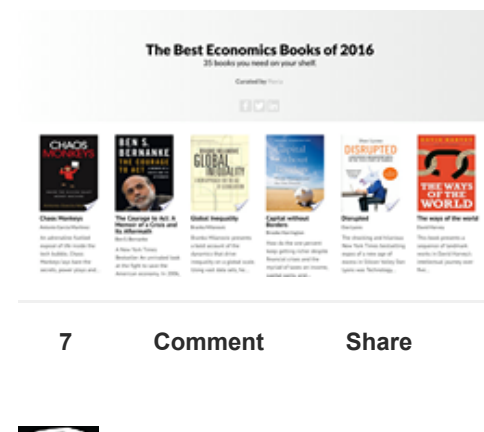
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Entire neighbourhoods were abandoned to the drug trade. The bodegas of Alphabet City stopped stocking milk; all you could buy was dope. Even midtown streets were perilous. I was mugged in the middle of a crowded sidewalk between Fifth and Sixth Avenues at two in the afternoon. The citizens who espied my assailants' knives just walked around me without a word, noticing but not interfering, knowing that getting involved could be dangerous. The rise of crime, the collapse of civility seemed inexorable. In 1980, John Carpenter directed *Escape From New York*, a blockbuster motion picture that predicted that within twenty years all of Manhattan would be a maximum-security prison ruled by criminal gangs. At the time, it didn't seem that far fetched.

New York is different now. You can't buy drugs or blowjobs on 42nd street anymore. Little boutiques on Avenue C sell \$800 lamps. What happened? Yes the rise of finance brought higher paying jobs to Manhattan, yes rents went up, pricing out the mooks. But the simplest, most basic answer is that cops came back to the streets.

A few years ago, coming out of a bar late at night on 9th avenue just south of the bus terminal, I thought to myself, how sketchy the area still looked, how wary I would have been had I found myself in that landscape a decade earlier. And then, before I even had time to get nervous, two cops strode by, just walking their normal beat, and I recognized the mechanism by which Manhattan was transformed. The police force expanded by a third (to 40,000 officers, one policeman for every 200 citizens) but more important cops returned to their traditional role. With NYPD boots on the ground, they, rather than the criminals own the night. Police presence inhibits criminal activity and so is a prerequisite for any sort of economic growth. Without more cops and their more aggressive policing, the average Manhattan apartment today would not be worth \$1 million.

Basra 2008.

The Marine lounges on his cot. We sit in an old garage that he and his comrades have commandeered and turned into a firebase. Two weeks before, when they marched into Basra, they expected heavy fighting, been told by their superior officers to expect the block-to-block brutal slog of Falluja. So they packed light, carrying little but water and ammo.

But when the Iraqi 1st Army and their American Marine mentors marched in, ready for war, the militias melted away and the Basrawis greeted their new protectors with open arms. The expected gunfights never happened. The Marine takes a puff on his cigarette, and asks me

“Did you hear any bullets today?” I shake my head no. “Didn’t think so,” he smiles. The Mahdi Militia could have fought vicious battles in the narrow alleys throughout of the city but instead they dissipated. The reason: the ordinary citizens of Basra wanted them out, wanted the government back.

For years much of Basra had been a no go zone for coalition forces and the Iraqi military. Most British soldiers based here did not even know the basic geography of the city. Many spent their entire tour in country holed up at their base near the airport, having abandoned the city to the Shia militias and their gangster allies. Once the authority of the government evaporated, inevitably, thugs took over. Women were murdered for wearing makeup, for having jobs. Anarchy is so much less attractive than it sounds.

Our desire for safety and peace trumps just about everything else. The Iraqi citizens in the poor neighbourhoods of town, still have posters of Muqtadr al Sadr on their walls, and probably still identify with him, his party, his family and his policies but getting rid of the gangsters in Islamic garb that had been running the city took precedence over political affiliation. After the success of Operation Charge of the Knights, President Maliki, long thought a second rate politician, a pawn of the Iranians, a pawn of the Americans, gained in authority and finally received the respect due to the leader of his nation. The Basrawis were pleased.

Beirut 1972

My Tante Janine is a beauty, a society woman, and a militant on the politburo of the Lebanese Socialist Party. I’ve been living far away in America with my father so she feels the need to explain the politics of my maternal homeland. So far, I’m enjoying my stay in Beirut, going to movies, playing pinball, staying out late. Hamra Street is a sea of neon. The people are fashionably dressed, Mercedes and Jaguars honk their horns in traffic jams. The city seems rich and modern. In 1972, Beirut is still the “Paris of the Middle East”. Liz Taylor and Richard Burton come here to vacation.

Janine explains the country’s confusing confessional system, in which various religious groups are guaranteed political offices. A Maronite must be President, a Sunni Prime Minister, a Shia speaker of Parliament. The Maronites, no longer the majority, retain disproportionate power. This strikes Janine as criminal. “They are silly,” she tells me. She hates that they pretend they are Phoenicians and deny their Arab heritage. She predicts an uprising that will drive her enemies from power. Sitting in her tasteful flat, she calls for war.

More tears are shed for answered prayers. Three years later, she gets her wish. A strike in Sidon, violently repressed, a drive by shooting of a Maronite church, the murder of a bus full of Palestinians. The police and the army dissolve into their religious components. Without the traditional authorities in charge, militias take over. The city is divided in half. Checkpoints appear. Men who don't believe in God are murdered for the religion noted on their identity card. Beirut is no longer a jet set destination but a byword for hell. For fifteen years, the banking, insurance, media, and commercial hub of the Middle East becomes a warzone.

Janine soon recognizes her error. She understands that even the rule of those she loathes is preferable to militia anarchy. Unlike many of her social class, she remains in Lebanon for most of the Civil War. She could leave but feels the need to share her country's agony. She quits the party. A Christian, she uses her contacts on the left to save the lives of coreligionists in the Chouf. With art exhibitions and discussion groups she does her small part to maintain the cultural life of the city she loves. On her deathbed she weeps that she given her life to failed ideologies, to socialism and pan Arabism. I remember her as glamorous and tragic.

Lebanon is still paying the price for its civil war. With its location, commercial background, and educated people it should have continued to hold a central position in the Levantine economy but it has never recovered from fifteen years of war. Today tacky Dubai rather than beautiful Beirut is the hub of the Middle East.

In times of tranquillity, it is easy to see the appeal of violence. Like my aunt, the men who planned the American invasion of Iraq probably thought no government could be worse than the one they hoped to overthrow. But even a corrupt and brutal government is better than no government at all. I'll never forget, during the darkest days of the Iraqi civil war, a Baghdadi telling me bitterly how life had been better under Saddam. Fuad was no Ba'athist; he had spent years in Saddam's jails. But life without rulers had become too precarious. Every neighbourhood had its own militia. Checkpoints, manned by god knows who were everywhere. Murder and torture were endemic. As a Kurd in a Shiite neighbourhood, Fuad constantly feared for the safety of his family. No wonder he missed the stability of the old regime when Iraqis were wary of the government, but not each other.

Hobbes was right. Without the government monopoly on violence, life is nasty brutish and short. The moral of Takhar Province: it is the fear of the greater power of the state that

keeps us in line. The moral of Beirut: injustice is better than civil war. The moral of New York: abandoning state control is a political decision, as is reclaiming it. The moral of Basra: the return of stability will be welcomed everyone of no matter what political affiliation, except perhaps the gunmen.

We in the west are so accustomed to police and courts of law and calling 911 that we take them for granted. The conservative antipathy to government, the Reaganite notion that “Government is the problem,” is a tad adolescent, complaining about mom and dad, forgetting they feed us, house us and do the laundry. And the liberal assumption that government exists to serve the interest of the people is also naïve. Government power at its deepest level is coercive. I don’t pay my taxes because I support government policies, I pay my taxes because if I don’t the state can take my house, or throw me in jail. Thank God for that.

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