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# Of Course We're Depressed — They Have Us Over a Barrel



By Marty Kaplan

It's not the news that's a downer — there's always been misery and ugliness around. It's our helplessness that's depressing us, the feeling that they have us over a barrel.

Who “they”?

Hamid Karzai has us over a barrel. He's as corrupt as they come, and the only thing he's good at is sabotaging investigations of corruption. Yet the mission and the fate of our 100,000 brave troops in Afghanistan are tied to his crooked little pinky, and apparently there's not a damn thing we can do about it.

Iraq has us over a barrel. The only thing that can prevent its collapse into failed statehood, the only hope to forestall a resurgence of the kind of violence that would return U.S. combat troops to Iraq, is a deadlocked Parliament that has met for 18 minutes in the six months since it was elected.

Pakistan has us over a barrel. Its president, Asif Ali Zadari, who spent 12 years in prison for corruption, makes Hamid Karzai look like a saint. Its intelligence service is in cahoots with the Taliban; its black-market nukes merchant A.Q. Khan is a national hero; it's “a site for recruiting and training American nationals intent on carrying out terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland,” says the Congressional Research Service. But as President Obama explained at West Point, our fight against Al-Qaeda and our success in Afghanistan are “inextricably linked to our partnership with Pakistan.”

Ultra-orthodox Israeli political parties have us over a barrel. They're contemptuous of secular Jews, they exempt themselves from the reach of Israeli law and from service to the Israeli state, and yet they hold Knesset coalitions and government policy hostage to their extremism. Nothing lets Hamas, Hezbollah and Fatah off the hook; nothing takes history off the table. But Americans who advocate a safe, secure Jewish democracy in the Middle East find themselves at the mercy of a fundamentalist fringe that has hijacked the definition of Jewishness and pre-empted the parameters of the peace process.

Wall Street banks have us over a barrel. That's what “too big to fail” means. They're exempt from moral hazard: their profits are privatized, but their risks are socialized.

Big Media has us over a barrel. Google and Verizon are planning an Internet toll-road. Megamergers like Comcast-NBC are giving more control of content to fewer distributors. TV licenses - the lucrative privilege

of local stations to use the public's spectrum for free - are automatically renewed, with no public interest obligations required or enforced. And when the Federal Communications Commission shows the slightest signs of independence, the indebtedness of both political parties to telecom largesse makes Congress a witting accomplice to industry demands. What good does sending letters and petitions do, when their recipients - the guarantors of our system's checks and balances - are in the oligarchs' pockets?

Republicans have Democrats over a barrel. Cost-free filibusters and secret holds on nominations keep GOP fingerprints off obstructionism. Lazy, sensation-dependent mass media, served up to an under-informed public, enables cynical strategists to concoct distracting non-issues like free Viagra for felons, and the non-Ground Zero non-mosque. Cowardice by prestige media - treating Fox, Breitbart and the rest not as partisan sock puppets, but as legitimate journalistic voices - has permitted demagoguery to flourish. Barack Obama's quixotic pursuit of bipartisanship has shifted the responsibility for his troubles away from the nihilists who've caused them, and onto his base, whose appeals to the White House to wake up and smell the Republican coffee have been met with exasperation and condescension. Small wonder that Democrats watching poll numbers tumble feel powerless to prevent a November train wreck.

Technology has us over a barrel: the more it empowers us, the more it enslaves us. For the past few months, BP has had us over millions of barrels. Even Alzheimer's has us over a barrel; as far as scientists know now, nothing can prevent it but luck.

Depression, of course, isn't the only available response to impotence. Glenn Beck's audience thinks Obama has them over a barrel. They believe that America has been usurped by a foreign-born Muslim bent on taking their Constitution, their God, their guns and their grannies away from them. Their frustration with the hand that democracy has dealt them isn't giving them the vapors; it's enraging them, stoking paranoia and resentment, fanning fiery talk about revolution. When they speak of the blood of patriots, you get the feeling they don't just mean it metaphorically.

Experts don't agree about the origin of the idiom "to have someone over a barrel." But whether it comes from the way British sailors were whipped, from the way drowning victims were resuscitated, from the way a pistol can make you compliant, or from the sexual place I'm not going to go, it's not a happy position to find yourself in.

"I read the news today oh boy," wrote John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Who can blame anyone for being bummed?

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*

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