



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on October 28, 2011

## U.S. Foreign Policy: Seeing and Believing

We are left to imagine what might have followed. Was the politically incorrect brat beheaded for that unseemly outbreak of candor? Placed in a dungeon? Enrolled in one of the emperor's schools to be reeducated, with a mind more attuned to the political "realities"? And what of the conniving "weavers"? Were they suitably punished for deceiving the emperor and his subjects with false "intelligence" on the nature of the fabric that went into the making of the magnificent new clothes? Or did they receive the emperor's Medal of Freedom and go off to write books and appear as experts at symposiums on royal apparel?



Had the incident occurred in 21st-century America, the emperor (or President) might have eliminated the young curbside critic by branding him a terrorist (or "enemy combatant") to be held in a military prison forever, or until the President's new clothes wore out, whichever came first. Or he might have silenced him in a gentler way by hiring him to churn out press releases under the supervision of those clever "weavers," who would be the new "spin masters" in the White House Press Office.

Andersen's story is, of course, fiction, rivaling but not surpassing the kind that comes out of the White House. In Dick Cheney's memoir, *In My Time*, the former Vice President recalled a story President Nixon related during the time Cheney was serving on the Cost of Living Council, created to monitor compliance with the wage and price controls that Nixon had assured the nation he would never impose. The story, as Cheney related it, came out of a visit Nixon paid in his vice presidential days to the ruler of the Soviet empire:

He recalled a conversation he had at the Soviet premier's dacha back in 1959. After a long lunch Khrushchev became expansive. He said that sometimes in order to be a statesman, you have to be a politician. If the public sees an imaginary river in front of them, the politician doesn't tell them there's no river. A politician builds an imaginary bridge over the imaginary river. Nixon told the story as though there was guidance to be found in it, and I took his point to be that if the public thought food prices were a problem, the politician should offer a solution, thereby preserving his ability to make statesmanlike decisions another day.

Yes, surely. By all means, save those "statesmanlike decisions" for another day. (The 30th of February might be good.) Meanwhile, the politician's imaginary solution goes marching on, leaving destruction in its wake. "A year after I heard President Nixon tell the Khrushchev story," Cheney wrote, "he imposed another price freeze, apparently hoping in the midst of Watergate for some political benefit. But he didn't get it. Among other things, the freeze made raising animals for market unprofitable. A Texas hatchery drowned 43,000 baby chicks. Pigs and cows were slaughtered — and the president announced an early end to his 1973 effort to freeze prices."



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But consider how much Cheney improved upon the lesson Nixon learned from Khrushchev about building imaginary bridges over imaginary rivers. Cheney built a real war over imaginary weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. And it wasn't just chickens, pigs, and cows that died. It brings to mind that famous couplet of Sir Walter Scott's:

"O, what a tangled web we weave

When first we practice to deceive."

To which some latter day wag added:

"But when we've practiced quite a while,

How vastly we've improved our style."

President Obama recently threatened retaliation against Iran over an alleged plot by Iranians to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the United States. Several "terrorist plots" thwarted over the past several years have turned out to have been instigated by the FBI as "sting" operations. Is this one real? Or are we about to be taken over another imaginary bridge to another real war? Is this just another new suit out of the emperor's fantastic wardrobe?

Where is that loudmouth kid when we need him?



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