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Repeating History

By Richard W. Rahn

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Mad Men of 1939, 2009

Nineteen thirty-nine was not a good year. World War II started, and much of the world was still in the Depression. The leaders of too many countries were either despots or naive and weak.

And 2009 has not been a good year, considering the global recession. Seventy years later, as in 1939, the leaders of too many countries are either despots or naive and weak. Just look at the performance of the world's leaders at the United Nations and at the Group of 20 summit of major economic powers in Pittsburgh last week.

Crackpots such as Libya's Col. Moammar Gadhafi ranted on while leaders of major countries, including the United States, engaged in meaningless babble about how "we" (i.e. they) will do better this year. The final communique from the G-20 was a long, embarrassing, self-congratulatory statement of how, if it had not been for the wonderful attendees at the meeting, the world economy would be in even worse shape - conveniently overlooking the fact that it largely had been this group of people who had made the mess in the first place. The summit's final, and very predictable, conclusion was that the leaders were going to take away more of our financial freedom and more from our wallets. This is not a good omen for the future.

Too many of today's leaders all too closely resemble the leaders of 1939 and seem equally capable of starting the chain of events that destroyed much of mankind in the 1940s. Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the wannabe Adolf Hitler, not only in his hatred of the Jews, but in his plan for eliminating many of them. Hitler had his cult of the master race, which was supposed to govern all of mankind, and Mr. Ahmadinejad has, as his cult, a particular variant of Islam to which all are supposed to submit.

Many considered Hitler a clown and a fool in 1939, much as Mr. Ahmadinejad is portrayed by much of the press today. Germany in 1939 had about the same population as Iran of today. Hitler had a better-trained military, but he did not have a nuclear bomb, which Mr. Ahmadinejad will have soon. Hitler was a master at detecting and exploiting weakness in his opponents, and Mr. Ahmadinejad seems to have much the same talent.

Another 1939 throwback is Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, who is the Benito Mussolini of today - both national socialists, i.e. fascists. Like Mussolini, Mr. Chavez is a despotic clown who can be affable and charming while repressing his citizens. Mussolini had bigger ambitions than Italy, which caused him to first topple the government in Albania and then invade East Africa. Mr. Chavez has not confined his mischief to Venezuela. He has plotted against and engaged in covert operations against several of the democratic countries in Latin America.

Even though there is no Josef Stalin type on the world stage at the moment, the brothers Castro probably would have been capable of the massive crimes of Stalin if only they had a larger country.

Like Stalin, Fidel Castro is a hard-core, committed communist, more consumed with his own power than the well-being of his people. The brothers Castro, allied with the younger Mr. Chavez, may succeed in overthrowing governments in Latin America, particularly because they have reason to believe they have little to fear from the new U.S. administration.

Russia's Vladimir Putin seems cut out of the same mold as Japan's Hideki Tojo of 1939. Like Tojo, Mr. Putin has followed the fascist model of putting more emphasis on control of business than actually owning everything, unlike the traditional socialist.

Tojo invaded his neighbors when he thought it would serve his interest, assuming the big powers would tolerate it because they were bogged down with other problems. Mr. Putin has engaged in similar behavior in Georgia and may think he can get away with an invasion of Ukraine, in the same way Tojo correctly assumed that the United States and others would do nothing when he had his Japanese army invade China.

What is particularly disturbing is that President Obama seems to view the world as Britain's Neville Chamberlain did in the late 1930s. Chamberlain's name has become a synonym for the failure of appeasement.

Mr. Obama's dithering on making a decision about Afghanistan, his repeated use of words as a substitute for laying down firm markers in dealing with Iran, and the clumsy way he reneged on the missile-defense commitments to the Poles give the impression that he is made of no sterner stuff and is at least as naive as Chamberlain.

The world became safer when President Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher were in power. The world's tyrants were, for good reason, afraid of Reagan and Mrs. Thatcher. As a result, the Cold War ended almost without a shot being fired, and many petty dictators lost power or stayed bottled up in their holes - and freedom blossomed around the world as never before.

Unfortunately, Reagan has died, and Mrs. Thatcher has passed from the world stage, and now the economic and foreign-policy failures of the 1930s seem to be repeated every day - as if no one in power or in the mainstream media remembers (if any of them ever learned) history.

Do we have any indication that Iran's Mr. Ahmadinejad, Venezuela's Mr. Chavez, Russia's Mr. Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong-il have any real fear of Mr. Obama, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel? Do we have any reason for real confidence that Mr. Obama and his European allies really know what they are doing with both economic and foreign policy?

Richard W. Rahn is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and chairman of the Institute for Global Economic Growth.

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