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Leadership in concocted crises



THERE are two kinds of international crises: the ones imposed from without (Iraq's invasion of Kuwait) and those destructively imposed from within. But both can have devastating effects on world order. Let's look at the latter.

We can say that bankrupt Greece imposed a rolling crisis for the euro zone, of which we have seen no end. But the American economic crisis, which now threatens, with recent data, to spread worldwide, was an unnecessary battle artificially imposed by an inexperienced but demanding bloc of legislators, as I argued last week.

American President Barack Obama has also had to endure continual carping for his distancing role in trying to achieve the least bad outcome.

A professor of psychiatry at my own university has argued (in the exalted *New York Times*) that, in general, and here in particular, we need more energy in the leadership.

He even argues that a degree of maniacness might be a good thing, as the only way to motivate a leader to take effective leadership.

I've never read worse advice from a professional.

Prof Nassir Ghaemi (see his "*Maybe Washington needs more craziness*" article last Thursday) uses an inapt comparison between former US president Franklin Delano Roosevelt's closing the banks upon assumption of office in 1933, and Obama's failure to invoke the 14th Amendment to legally end the current crisis.

As he admits, the circumstances were different. But he also misses the point, to which we return.

There certainly is a point to energised leadership (like Winston Churchill's during World War 2) but I would argue that such is an extreme exception. What has been harming the world far more is the collection of everything from manic to crazed leaderships.

The 20th century witnessed death from war to starvation — from political decision — of as many as a hundred million people.

At the top of the list of those who caused it were Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong.

The first two were certifiably diagnosable as manic-depressive, even psychotic in the first instance. Stalin was manifestly at least a sociopath whose worldview had no room for moral consequences.

But we don't have to go back half a century or more. The Third World has been plagued (and its economic progress effectively stalled) by everything from manic-depressive types to outright madmen.

The current flavour is, of course, Muammar Gaddafi, who wants to take his country down with him, but showed signs from the start of his pathology.

A leader in the Central African Republic declared himself emperor (of what?) and established a formal court around him.

A charismatic Ghanaian flight lieutenant seized power and then lined up the three living predecessors on a beach and had them gunned down.

From then on, he used physical prowess and sheer fear, rather than brains, to lead Ghana. Only the inevitable economic collapse of his country imposed on him some rational behaviour, painfully imposed by the International Monetary Fund.

A South African leader, convinced of a Western plot, saw HIV as phony and perhaps half a million lives have or will be lost to this vast stupidity.

I'm sure it's fun to grandstand while running a country. But the record is very poor.

In the case of Roosevelt, the country had run on bankrupt economics for almost four years. A devastating bank run might have finished off Roosevelt's chance to lighten the effects of depression, and closing the banks was the only way to buy time.

Yes, it was daring, but what were the alternatives?

In the present case, reasonable politicians would have foreseen the consequences of the shenanigans of this summer, with the downgrade of American credit only the first of many to come.

Obama cannily saw that the least bad outcome was to give ground and hope that the Tea Party paid the price of its craziness — and learned its lesson at the polls.

Now, Roosevelt was surely a special case, as had been his distant cousin president Theodore Roosevelt.

"Hypothermic manic symptoms," as with Roosevelt, we learn, are "ge-

netically related to manic-depression". The writer seems to confuse

"craziness" with what was just the talent of an extraordinarily energetic leader.

I still recall asking my 5th grade teacher, at age 10, who was the greatest person of the 20th century, and she replied before I'd finished the question: Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

He was adored and loved. My first memory as a tot is of the shades being lowered all over the neighbourhood when news of his death was announced. But he governed in a constitutional system.

Had he got away with packing the Supreme Court in 1937, he might have become even more constitutionally innovative, so to speak, and we would have had serious problems.

Luckily, he drew back, and saved his energy for getting into World War 2, against the then-inclinations of majority America.

But let's separate a *case sui generis* from the cruelty imposed by manic-depressives who seem to overpopulate the leadership fora.

Presidents get their parliaments to declare them "leader for life". The palaces and torture chambers then proliferate.

I've dealt with or studied professionally so many Third World leaders who certifiably showed "craziness", but there have been a few too many in the industrialised world as well, luckily usually hemmed in by legitimate constitutions.

We watch daily the humiliation of Hosni Mubarak, who for 30 years saw himself as a pharaoh and gunned down opponents while stealing the country blind.

The Philippines blissfully just last year saw the end of a self-enclosed and allegedly corrupt president and her family, who couldn't tolerate dissent and threw temper tantrums.

She was preceded by a drunk who revelled most nights at the palace. Craziness, for sure, but it nearly ruined the country.

Any country lucky enough to get a Roosevelt will understand it as a special case.

Meantime, I wish Prof Ghaemi would use his energy to campaign worldwide for medical certification of the fitness of candidates for office.

It would miss quite a few stealthy zealots, who don't reveal their nuttiness until in office, but certificates of unfitness might be difficult to fight in fair campaigns.

And if the likes of Gaddafi sneak into office by coup, they might find it needful to demonstrate their worthi-

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ness rather than their sheer ability to dominate and steal.

I'd like the 87 politicians who created the present American crisis to pass the fitness test as well.

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Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi wants to take his country down with him



Former president Franklin D. Roosevelt was adored and loved by the Americans