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Unspeakable: the Black Book of Imperial Terrorism

By Paul Street
February 3, 2017

American “mainstream” journalists who want to keep their paychecks flowing and their status afloat know they must report current events in a way that respects the taboo status of the nation’s underlying inequality and oppression structures and its savage and relentless imperial criminality. Those topics are understood as off limits, as beyond the narrow parameters of acceptable and polite discussion. They are subjects that serious reporters and commentators have the deeply indoctrinated common sense to avoid.

“We’ve Done Enough as a Country”

An excellent example is a recent CNN report on how U.S. President Donald Trump’s Muslim travel ban is playing out in the small Vermont city of Rutland. A CNN reporter spoke to two local players on different sides of the question of whether Syrian refugees should be settled in Rutland. The first source was the town’s mayor, Chris Louras, who has been leading an effort to make Rutland a refugee resettlement hub that would welcome 25 Syrian families in 2017. When asked about why he’s been pushing for this, the mayor cited humanitarian concerns (“it’s the right thing to do”) but also (and above all) mentioned economic considerations. Rutland’s unemployment rate of 3 percent is “dangerously low,” making it hard for companies to find workers and thereby inhibiting investment and “growth,” the mayor told CNN.

CNN also featured an interview with Rutland doctor Timothy Cook, a Trump fan and an opponent of the mayor’s refugee resettlement plan. “I think we’ve done enough as a country,”

Cook told CNN. “I’m tapped out and this nation is tapped out. We need to fix our own problems first and then we can reconfigure and see if we can rescue the rest of the world.” Cook naturally supports Trump’s travel ban.

Capitalism 101

It was fine reporting as far as it went but notice what was, to use the title of Chris Hedges’ latest book, *Unspeakeable*. One unmentionable topic was capitalism’s reliance on what Karl Marx called “the reserve army of labor” – a mass of job-seeking unemployed people sufficiently large to keep the price of labor power to guarantee profitable exploitation of the working class. Is it unthinkable that Rutland might consider turning their town into a labor magnet that might attract workers by, say, raising the local minimum wage to \$15 an hour? Sadly, it probably is because local employers – including the global megacorporation and leading corporate welfare recipient and “defense” contractor General Electric (GE), which employs more than a thousand workers across two Rutland plants – want to keep wages as low as possible in the interest of sustaining an “acceptable” rate of profit. Grow the “reserve army” and grow the local tax base.

We can be sure Louras doesn’t want to give GE reason to shift its Rutland operations elsewhere in pursuit of cheaper labor. That’s Capitalist Labor Market economics 101 and Corporate Power 102.

Guns v. Butter: Spiritual Death

A second forbidden topic is the role of U.S. militarism in, to use Dr. Cook’s term, “tapping out” America. It is beyond the parameters of acceptable debate and commentary to note that the nation is impoverished thanks in no small part to the massive Pentagon budget (54% of federal discretionary spending), which pays for the global empire that has wreaked havoc, fueled jihadism, and generated massive refugee streams in places like Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Libya, Syria, and Iran (more on this below), all on Trump’s travel ban. It’s a taboo topic in dominant media: the role of the military budget in hollowing out American society from the inside.

Hedges gets this right in the following exchange in *Unspeakeable*, a compilation of interviews with left journalist David Talbot:

Talbot: “[Bernie Sanders] promised to impose much higher taxes on the wealthy and Wall Street speculators.”

Hedges: “Yes, but if we don’t get control of our military spending we are finished...Our infrastructure, our public educational system, our social services – everything is crumbling for a reason, we don’t have money for it. It is being consumed by the war machine. And Sanders didn’t touch the military-industrial complex. That would have been political suicide...There will be no socialism until we dismantle imperialism and dramatically slash military spending power. Martin Luther King understood that.”

And look what happened to Dr. King, who was assassinated (or perhaps executed) exactly one year to the day after giving a celebrated speech in which he made a deep connection between his

opposition to poverty and racism at home and his opposition to the U.S. war on Southeast Asia.

In explaining his decision to follow his conscience and speak out against U.S. militarism, King said, “I knew that America *would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube.* So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such... A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift,” King warned, “is approaching spiritual death” (emphasis added).

Don’t take it just from left radicals past (King) and present (Hedges). In his recent magisterial study of the overlapping “deep state” concentrations of corporate, financial, and governmental power that control American society beneath and beyond the nation’s quadrennial electoral carnivals, the former longtime Republican Congressional staffer Mike Lofgren notes that the U.S. struggles with widespread poverty, rotting infrastructure, inadequate health care, and deficient public services (schools, transportation, and more) not because the government lacks money but because too much of its money goes to serve entrenched interests. Top among those interests is the nation’s enormous military-industrial complex, funded by a Pentagon budget that accounts for more than half of U.S. federal discretionary spending and nearly half the world’s military outlay. As Lofgren notes in his indispensable book *The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of a Shadow Government* (2016):

“Even as commentators decry a broken government that cannot marshal the money, the will, or the competence to repair our roads and bridges, heal our war veterans, or even roll out a health care website, there is always enough money and will, and maybe just a bare minimum of competence to overthrow foreign governments, fight the longest war in U.S. history, and conduct dragnet surveillance over the entire surface of the planet (p.4)...It is as if Hadrian’s Wall was still fully manned and the fortifications along the border with Germania were never stronger, even as the city of Rome disintegrated from within and the life-sustaining aqueducts leading down from the hills began to crumble.” (p.216)

A Proven History of Terrorism

Also unspeakable is the criminality of what the America Empire – accurately described by Dr. King in 1967 as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world” – does abroad. It is unthinkable that CNN might challenge Dr. Cook’s notion of the U.S. as a nation that tries to “rescue the rest of the world.”

The correction would include confronting Washington’s role in criminally devastating some of the very nations from which Trump has tried to ban travelers and refugees. Iraq, for one leading example, has been subject to two mass-murderous U.S. invasions along with an intervening decade plus of deadly economic sanctions that have combined to kill millions, maim millions, and displace millions more.

Yemen has been ravaged by joint U.S. and Saudi Arabian air assaults, U.S. Special Forces, and U.S. drone attacks.

Sudan has long been tortured by the U.S., which has played a central in political dissolution and civil war there.

Libya was collapsed with U.S. and NATO bombs, miring that country in civil war and jihad.

Syria has been torn apart by an epically murderous Civil War that Washington has fueled along with the jihadism that the U.S. and its oil-rich Arab state allies and Pakistan have spread there and across the Muslim world.

“During his campaign,” CNN reported when the president announced his travel ban, “Trump vowed to ban Muslim immigrants from countries with a ‘proven history’ of terrorism against the United States or its allies.”

Orwell might have enjoyed that statement in light of the United States’ proven history of mass-murderous Superpower terrorism against the countries Trump has imposed his travel ban against.

Meritorious Service

Journalists and others looking for such a history might want to go back and review the July 3, 1988 incident in which U.S. Navy warship Vincennes shot down a civilian Iranian airliner (Iranian Air Flight 655) with a guided cruise missile, killing all 300 people on board, 71 of whom were children. This monstrous assault was perpetrated in Iranian airspace, over Iran’s territorial waters in the Persian Gulf. Six years later, the Navy awarded special commendation medals for “meritorious service” to the Vincennes’ commander, Capt. Will Rogers III and to his weapons systems officer, Lt. Cmdr. Scott E. Lustig.

Iranians are likely recalling that horrendous crime now that Trump is saber-rattling against Teheran. The new fascist president’s National Security Advisor Michael Flynn has put Iran “officially on notice” that Washington is considering action against it. He says that “we are considering a whole range of options.” Meanwhile, U.S., British, French, and Australian warships are engaged in provocative “naval exercises” off Iran’s shores.

Highway of Death

Journalists and others looking for *proven histories of terrorism* might also want to reflect on the hideous carnage wreaked by the U.S. military on Iraq’s notorious “Highway of Death,” where U.S. forces massacred tens of thousands of surrendered Iraqi troops retreating from Kuwait on February 26 and 27, 1991. The Lebanese-American journalist Joyce Chediak testified that:

“U.S. planes trapped the long convoys by disabling vehicles in the front, and at the rear, and then pounded the resulting traffic jams for hours. ‘It was like shooting fish in a barrel,’ said one U.S. pilot. On ...miles of coastal highway, Iraqi military units sit in gruesome repose, scorched skeletons of vehicles and men alike, black and awful under the sun...U.S. forces continued to drop bombs on the convoys until all humans were killed. So many jets swarmed over the inland road that it created an aerial traffic jam, and combat air controllers feared midair collisions....

The victims were not offering resistance...it was simply a one-sided massacre of tens of thousands of people who had no ability to fight back or defend.”

According to Wikipedia’s richly sourced account:

“The 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing’s A-6 Intruder aircraft blocked Highway 80, bombarding a massive vehicle column of mostly Iraqi Regular Army forces with Mk-20 Rockeye II cluster bombs, effectively boxing in the Iraqi forces in an enormous traffic jam of sitting targets for subsequent airstrikes...journalist Robert Fisk ... ‘lost count of the Iraqi corpses crammed into the smoldering wreckage or slumped face down in the sand’ at the main site and [saw] hundreds of corpses strewn up the road all the way to the Iraqi border....Some independent estimates go as high as 10,000 or more casualties (even ‘tens of thousands’).”

“Tempering Qualities of Humility and Restraint”

Truth be told, Uncle Sam was only getting warmed up building its Iraqi and Muslim Body Counts in early 1991. Washington had yet to enforce the economic sanctions that killed at least a million Iraqis or to undertake the 2003 invasion that killed more than a million more and devastated Iraq beyond repair. It had yet to ravage the Iraqi city of Fallujah (more on that below), as it did in 2004, using (among other things) radioactive ordnance that produced an epidemic of child leukemia there. It had yet to launch Barack Obama’s massive drone war across the Muslim world, recently described by Noam Chomsky as “the most extensive global terrorism campaign the world has yet seen.” It had yet to kill thousands upon thousands of innocent villagers and farmers in Afghanistan. It had not yet targeted a Doctors Without Borders hospital for repeated lethal bombing or undertaken the systematic torture and rape of Iraqi and other Muslims, including children, in places like Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and Bagram Air Force base.

“Our security,” Barack Obama said during his first Inaugural Address, “emanates from the...tempering qualities of humility and restraint.” No responsible “mainstream” U.S. commentators dared to question the Orwellian language of the new president’s speech. Uncle Sam can do no evil in the eyes of properly indoctrinated and/or fearful U.S. media and educational “elites” (coordinators and operatives).

The same deafening media silence was heard when George H.W. Bush said the following less than a year after his airborne armed forces turned vast stretches of a purposely blocked Middle Eastern highway into an epic monument of one-sided imperial criminality: “A world once divided into two armed camps now recognizes one sole and pre-eminent power, the United States of America. And they regard this with no dread. For the world trusts us with power, and the world is right. They trust us to be fair and restrained. They trust us to be on the side of decency.”

“The Streets of Fallujah”

As a soon-to-be fully declared presidential candidate, then-U.S. Senator Obama had this to say to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in the fall of 2006: “The American people have been

extraordinarily resolved [in support of the occupation of Iraq, P.S]...*They have seen their sons and daughters killed or wounded in the streets of Fallujah*" (emphasis added).

It was a *spine-chilling selection of locales*. Fallujah was the site for colossal U.S. war atrocity by the U.S. military in April and November of 2004. The crimes included the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians, the targeting even of ambulances and hospitals, and the practical leveling of an entire city. The town was designated for destruction as an example of the awesome state terror promised to those who dared to resist U.S. power. Not surprisingly, Fallujah became a powerful and instant symbol of American imperialism in the Arab and Muslim worlds. It was a deeply provocative and insulting place for Obama to have chosen to highlight American sacrifice and "resolve" in the imperialist occupation of Iraq.

A Shocking Scene

Obama would write his own name in the black book of U.S. imperial terrorism, later telling White House aides that "it turns out I'm pretty good at killing people" while commanding a drone program that became "the most extreme terrorist campaign of modern times" (Noam Chomsky). Among the many grisly scenes Obama will carry to his well-heated grave, one occurred early in his presidency in the first week of May 2009, a U.S. air-strike killed more than ten dozen civilians in Bola Boluk, a village in western Afghanistan's Farah Province. Ninety-three of the dead villagers torn apart by U.S. explosives were children. Just 22 were males 18 years or older. As the *New York Times* reported:

"In a phone call played on a loudspeaker on Wednesday to...the Afghan Parliament, the governor of Farah Province, Rohul Amin, said that as many as 130 civilians had been killed, according to a legislator, Mohammad Naim Farahi.... The governor said that the villagers have brought two tractor trailers full of pieces of human bodies to his office to prove the casualties that had occurred.... Everyone was crying...watching that shocking scene.' Mr. Farahi said he had talked to someone he knew personally who had counted 113 bodies being buried, including...many women and children" (*NYT*, May 6, 2009).

The initial response of the Obama Pentagon to this horrific incident—one among many mass U.S. aerial civilian killings in Afghanistan and Pakistan beginning in the fall of 2001—was to blame the deaths on "Taliban grenades." Obama's Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed "regret" about the loss of innocent life, but the Administration refused to issue an apology or to acknowledge U.S. responsibility. By contrast, Obama had just offered a full apology and fired a White House official for scaring New Yorkers with an ill-advised Air Force One photo-shoot flyover of Manhattan that reminded people there of 9/11.

"Peace prize? He's a killer." So said a young Pashtun man to an Al Jazeera English reporter on December 10, 2009—the day Obama was given the Nobel Peace Prize. "The man," the reporter wrote, "spoke from the village of Armal, where a large crowd gathered around the bodies of twelve people, one family from a single home, all killed by U.S. Special Forces during a late-night raid."

Murdering a Family One at a Time

Five months later, Obama would order the CIA to assassinate an American citizen in Yemen, the charismatic Islamic cleric Anwar al-Awlaki. The cleric was killed in a September 2011 drone strike “despite the fact that he had never been charged with (let alone convicted of) any crime” (Glenn Greenwald), but Obama’s lust for killing al-Awlakis still burned. Two weeks later, a shiny new CIA drone killed the cleric’s 16-year-old and American-born son, Abdulrahman, “along with the boy’s 17-year-old cousin and several other innocent Yemenis.”

It’s nice to hear that Obama has voiced support for the mass protests of Trump’s Muslim travel ban but it’s a hard to believe that he could care less about Muslim lives in light of his bloody foreign policy in the Middle East, northern Africa, and Southwest Asia.

Herr Trump ordered a drone assault and commando raid in Yemen last Sunday. The operation was set up and handed to him by the Obama administration. It killed 30 people. Among the murdered: Anwar’s 8-year old daughter, Abdulrahman’s little sister. She bled to death two hours after a U.S. Special Forces warrior shot her in the neck. Call it the orange-haired beast’s first imperial blood, scored with a big assist from the previous Child Killer-in-Chief, Barack Obama.

“What the Hell is Going On–

Candidate Trump said that he wanted a Muslim ban “until we can figure out what the Hell is going on” to cause fear and hatred of the United States in the Muslim world. *As if there is some mystery about that.*

Selective Revulsion

In its breathless coverage of mass protests of a leading American “alt-right” fascist scheduled to speak on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley last Wednesday night, CNN anchors and commentators were horrified to see windows broken and a bonfire started by Black Bloc anarchists. CNN and the rest of the corporate media have yet to convey the slightest hint of revulsion over the Obama-Trump murder of 30 people in Yemen, including many women and children and an 8-year-old girl. Also evading media disgust is the recent escalation of police state violence against the heroic water- and climate-protectors in Standing Rock.

“We’ve Done Enough”

So, yes, Dr. Timothy Cook and CNN, “we’ve done enough as a country” – well, as a murderous empire – not “for” but rather to the Muslim world. With “rescuers” like Uncle Sam, who needed the Third Reich?

“Fix our own problems first”? It might surprise many mass-mediated-mind-marinated Americans to know that transferring taxpayer dollars from the U.S. War Machine (the world’s greatest single institutional planet warmer and carbon-burner, by the way) to the meeting of basic social and civic needs in “the homeland” (lovely imperial term, that) would simultaneously help U.S. and global citizens fix a great problem they share: American militarism and imperialism.

Empire, it is worth recalling, is a great upward distributor of wealth and power, something to keep in mind in a nation (the U.S., that is) where the top thousandth (the 0.1 percent) has as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent. As Noam Chomsky noted in 1969, “There are, to be sure, costs of empire that benefit no one: 50,000 American corpses or the deterioration in the strength of the United States economy relative to its industrial rivals. The costs of empire to the imperial society as a whole may be considerable. These costs, however, are social costs, whereas, say, the profits from overseas investment guaranteed by military success are again highly concentrated in certain special segments of the society. The costs of empire are in general distributed over the society as a whole, while its profits revert to a few within.”

In the meantime, here’s something CNN will never tell Donald Trump, his fan Dr. Cook, and the many Democrats and Republicans who’ve been trained to stick their heads in Orwellian sand on Superpower’s crimes: the simplest and most reliable way to stem the Muslim refugee flow is to stop waging criminal wars against Muslim countries. The vast taxpayer largesse squandered on these unwarranted and racist wars should instead be given to the nations the U.S. and NATO have destroyed – and to addressing social, civic, and environmental needs at home.