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Who Is a ‘Terrorist’?

By Justin Raimondo

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The recent attack on a predominantly African-American church by a murderous racist has provoked a passionate debate about who is – and is not – a “terrorist.” According to FBI director James Comey, the perpetrator of the Charleston massacre – in which nine people were killed – doesn’t qualify:

“Terrorism is act of violence done or threatens to in order to try to influence a public body or citizenry, so it’s more of a political act and again based on what I know so more I don’t see it as a political act.”

Many are baffled by this, and point to what appears to be a curious double standard: after all, if a Muslim commits violence the media and the authorities are unanimous in their verdict that it was a “terrorist” act, and should be treated as such. And this is not just a matter of terminology: it is legally significant, since the post-9/11 era has given us a whole body of “terrorism”-related law that mandates severe punishment for crimes so designated. A piece in *Newsweek* avers:

“For many, [Dylann] Roof does not evoke the cultural norm of a terrorist. ‘We often have things labeled as hate crimes but there’s a big leap from the label ‘hate crime’ to ‘terrorism,’ explains Ibrahim Hooper, the communications director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations. ‘We always wait when these incidents are first reported to hear if it was carried out by a Muslim to find out if it will be labeled terrorism.’”

Hooper's complaint, echoed in some quarters of the media, is seemingly well-justified: after all, Roof is quite explicit about the essentially political-ideological motive behind his heinous act. Before opening fire he told his victims he "had to do it" because blacks are "taking over the county." An online manifesto discovered after the Charleston attack explicates his racist views at some length. So why isn't Dylann Roof a terrorist?

Glenn Greenwald has taken a stab at the who-is-a-terrorist issue in a recent article for *The Intercept*. He points to one Joseph Stack, whom he describes as "an anti-tax, anti-government fanatic" with "largely libertarian views": Stack, you'll recall, drove a plane into an IRS building, and – like most ideologically-motivated killers – wrote a manifesto justifying his actions. "The attack," writes Greenwald, "had all of the elements of iconic terrorism, a model for how it's most commonly understood: down to flying a plane into the side of a building. But Stack was white and non-Muslim. As a result, not only was the word 'terrorism' not applied to Stack, but it was explicitly declared inapplicable by media outlets and government officials alike."

Greenwald goes on to list a number of incidents that seem to fit this "iconic" pattern, and yet were labeled mere "criminal" acts, as opposed to acts committed by Muslims, which seemingly qualify the perpetrator as a "terrorist." This issue, he avers, is "about the identity of those committing the violence and the identity of the targets. It manifestly has nothing to do with some neutral, objective assessment of the acts being labeled."

Yet Greenwald is too smart to fall into the same error as virtually all of the politically correct pundits waxing indignant over this question. He writes:

"The point here is not, as some very confused commentators suggested, to seek an expansion of the term "terrorism" beyond its current application. As someone who has spent the last decade more or less exclusively devoted to documenting the abuses and manipulations that term enables, the last thing I want is an expansion of its application."

This is important, because several on the left have bemoaned the fact that the Department of Homeland Security was forced to back off of their "report" on "right-wing extremism" as a result of protests by conservatives in Congress and the media: according to the PC crowd's logic, the Charleston incident shows they should be investigating "right-wing extremism" more seriously and strenuously. Which just goes to show that the left can be more of a threat to our civil liberties than even the right at its worst. Greenwald continues:

"But what I also don't want is for non-Muslims to rest in their privileged nest, satisfied that the term and its accompanying abuses is only for that marginalized group. And what I especially don't want is to have this glaring, damaging mythology persist that the term 'terrorism' is some sort of objectively discernible, consistently applied designation of a particularly hideous kind of violence. I'm eager to have the term recognized for what it is: a completely malleable, manipulated, vapid term of propaganda that has no consistent application whatsoever. Recognition of that reality is vital to draining the term of its potency."

Seen from the government's perspective, the issue has nothing fundamentally to do with Muslims. They are merely the latest group to get in Washington's sights as a credible threat to its

power and objectives. Back in the 1990s, you'll recall, the terrorist threat had a different face: that of Timothy McVeigh, the mastermind behind the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building. Like Stack, he was what Greenwald would characterize as an "anti-government fanatic," but unlike Stack he was apparently part of an organized "extremist" underworld, with affiliations with the "militia" and "patriot" movements. Unlike Stack, he acted in concert with others: and, also unlike Stack, he was linked by federal officials – notably President Bill Clinton – with a much larger movement which included "mainstream" conservative figures.

A May 1995 *New York Times* story reporting on a Clinton speech is headlined: "Terror in Oklahoma: The President; Clinton Assails the Teachings of the 'Militias'":

"If you appropriate our sacred symbols for paranoid purposes and compare yourselves to Colonial militias who fought for the democracy you now rail against, you are wrong," Mr. Clinton said here in a commencement address at Michigan State University. "How dare you suggest that we in the freest nation on earth live in tyranny? How dare you call yourselves patriots and heroes?"

"In an interview published in the Detroit Free Press today, Mr. Clinton also singled out for the first time a conservative radio talk show host, G. Gordon Liddy, as the sort of figure who had said things "I cannot defend." Mr. Liddy advised his listeners last week to shoot first to the body and then to the groin if confronted with force by Federal agents ...

"I say this to the militias and all others who believe that the greatest threat to freedom comes from the Government instead of those who would take away our freedom: If you say violence is an acceptable way to make change, you are wrong," Mr. Clinton said. "If you say that Government is in a conspiracy to take your freedom away, you are just plain wrong.

"If you treat law-enforcement officers who put their lives on the line for your safety every day like some kind of enemy army to be suspected, derided and, if they should enforce the law against you, to be shot, you are wrong."

Conflating "anti-government" ideology with violence, Clinton went around the country campaigning against the "far right," which was, as a result of the Oklahoma City bombing, the bogeyman-du-jour. The incident not only revived his failing presidency – crippled by GOP success in the congressional elections and the failure of Hillary's health insurance initiative – it paved the way for passage of draconian "anti-terrorism" legislation and the beginnings of a lucrative government-private sector industry centered around "terrorism prevention." For the first time in modern history, "terrorism" was utilized as a rationalization for limitations on the right of habeas corpus, and invoked to justify spying on political groups. The easing of the Posse Comitatus restrictions on the use of the military in domestic law enforcement, expanding the use of wiretaps, and extending the power of government officials to spy on the Internet, were encoded into law for the first time. All the elements of the post-9/11 "Patriot" Act were prefigured in this 1995 legislation – drafted in large part by then Senator Joe Biden.

Greenwald is wrong that US government officials lack an objectively discernible and consistently applied definition of a "terrorist." Simply put, terrorism is a term used by them to

describe any organized attempt to resist the state-sanctioned terror of the United States government, here at home or internationally.

Note that it isn't enough to commit violence on account of one's "anti-government" views: Joseph Stack was merely a lone wolf whose protest represented nothing and no one but himself. Although Greenwald identifies him as a "libertarian," in fact his act aroused no sympathy or defense from the libertarian movement for the simple reason that libertarians oppose violence. While one could argue that – from a libertarian point of view – Stack was acting defensively against a coercive institution, i.e. the federal government, this stance has close to zero support among libertarians not least because Stack's act did nothing to advance the cause of liberty, and, indeed, did much to discredit it.

McVeigh, on the other hand, did represent a movement, the growth of which President Clinton seized on to shore up his sinking political fortunes – and, not incidentally, to expand the power of the State. The "anti-right-wing extremist" campaign launched in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing gave Clinton the opportunity to link his political enemies in the Republican party to McVeigh's heinous act – just as the 9/11 attacks gave George W. Bush and his neoconservative amen corner the chance to smear anyone who opposed his foreign policy of unmitigated aggression with the "terrorist" brush. "You're either with us – or you're with the terrorists!"

From the anarchist bombings of the nineteenth century to the Oklahoma City bombing to the 9/11 attacks and now the Charleston massacre – governments utilize the moral panic and genuine physical fear generated by these incidents to encroach on our rights guaranteed by the Constitution. And the rationalization is always the same: the threat of *organized subversion*, either the prospect of domestic rebellion or foreign invasion.

During World War II, these dual threats were merged into one and used to justify not only the internment of Japanese Americans but also a series of "sedition" trials. Right-wing "isolationist" opponents of the war were rounded up and tried en masse, at President Franklin Roosevelt's insistence: the government tried to prove that the defendants were engaged in a "conspiracy" to encourage sedition in the military not on account of any actions they engaged in collectively – most had never even met each other – but because they represented *a conspiracy of shared ideas*. Likewise, the government charged the leaders of the Socialist Workers Party, an organization of Trotskyists, with a similar "crime," and succeeded in locking them up. Both trials were cheered on by "liberals" of the time – with the Communist Party loudest in its hosannas. (Even the American Civil Liberties Union fell down on the job, refusing to defend the rightists, although they did offer legal and moral assistance to the Trotskyists.)

Wherever government officials sense a credible threat to their power, they invariably take every opportunity to crush it by any means necessary: this is the first principle of how governments function, and every libertarian is all too familiar with it. The post-9/11 era has brought this lesson home, far beyond the relatively narrow confines of the libertarian movement. And this latest tragedy, you can be sure, will be used to accomplish the same anti-libertarian ends: the calls to investigate "hate groups," and even to ban "hate speech," are already being heard. Of course, who and what constitutes a "hate group," and who is hating whom are subjective evaluations that

no government official is qualified to make – not that this stops the largely left-wing proponents of such a dangerous idea, who cannot imagine that these pernicious proposals will ever be used to target them.

As that political hack Rahm Emmanuel put it:

“You never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that it’s an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.”