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Motive vs. Justification

by Jacob G. Hornberger

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Yesterday, I was involved in a lively debate on Afghanistan on Alan Colmes' Internet show. Among the questions Alan asked me whether I was "justifying" what the Ft. Hood killer did and what the terrorists did on 9/11.

What he was referring to was my contention that U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has been — and continues to be — the root cause of the anger and rage that motivates people to retaliate against the United States.

I responded to Colmes by stating that motivation is different from justification.

Let's assume that you learn that a man is trying to kill you. You think to yourself, "I haven't done anything to justify being killed by this man."

I say to you, "Maybe you ought to learn what the man's motive is. Motive is different from justification."

You telephone the guy and ask, "Why are you trying to kill me?"

The man says, "Because I happen to own the ranch adjacent to yours. Every week, you trespass onto my land and kill snakes on my property."

You respond, "But I'm doing it for your benefit. Why are you trying to kill me for that?"

He responds, “I’m a naturalist. I don’t want any animals killed on my ranch. And you’re killing snakes on my land without my permission or consent.”

Now, clearly your actions don’t justify that man’s attempts to kill you. Human life trumps environmental concerns. He has alternative remedies, such as going to court and seeking injunctive relief.

Nonetheless, while the man isn’t justified in trying to kill you, understanding his motive might cause you to change your behavior. You think to yourself, “I’m in the wrong here. Even though I meant well, I was breaking the law and violating his property rights by trespassing onto his land and killing the snakes. It’s not worth my life. I’m going to stop doing it.”

At that point, it’s likely that the man will stop trying to kill you. Sure, it’s possible that he might still try to kill you for previous trespasses and snake killings, but since you’ve stopped doing it, the man’s anger and rage is likely to dissipate because the source of continued anger and rage has been removed.

Thus, once we understand the motive of people who are intent on doing harm to the United States, the solution becomes obvious: Stop the sanctions and embargoes. Stop the invasions and occupations. Stop the killings, maiming, torture, and abuse. Stop the bombings. Stop the drone attacks. Stop the destruction. Immediately withdraw all troops and bring them home. Terminate all foreign aid, not only to Israel, Egypt, Saud Arabia, and Jordan but also to every other regime in the world. Stop the U.S. government from meddling in the internal affairs of other countries.

Sure, it’s theoretically possible that people might still want to retaliate for what the U.S. government has done in the past, but the likelihood is that once the U.S. government leaves people over there alone, people over there will return to their normal lives of making a living, raising a family, and so forth.

Why don’t U.S. officials favor examination into motive and instead do their best to confuse it with justification? Because they’re afraid that once Americans understand why foreigners are trying to kill them, Americans might demand an end to the U.S. government’s imperial overseas empire and its omnipotent power to sanction, embargo, invade, occupy, kill, maim, torture, and imprison people all over the world.