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Terrorism: Made in the U.S.A.

by Sheldon Richman,
December 24, 2010

It's a perilous world, as our so-called leaders love to remind us. And for a change they're right. It is a perilous world. But guess who is most responsible for the peril to Americans? Those very same "leaders" and a long line of predecessors.

Moreover, they — along with anyone else who takes time to examine the matter — know that they create the greatest dangers Americans face. They just don't care. They have bigger fish to fry than keeping Americans safe, namely, geopolitical dominance. Besides, the dangers they create provide excuses for more power, such as the USA PATRIOT Act, warrantless wiretapping and other surveillance, no-due-process "kill lists," and secret CIA prisons. And let's not forget the big military appropriations that have put a good part of the U.S. economy in the Pentagon's service while driving the American people deeper into debt. (The resulting economic distress then justifies the exercise of even more government power.)

Let's just say what many people already know: the "war on terrorism" produces terrorists. No half-intelligent person could think that U.S. abuse of the Muslim world — the bombings, the indefinite detentions and torture, the kicking in of doors, the shootings at checkpoints, the propping up of corrupt rulers — could have any effect other than to produce violent, vengeful anti-Americanism. Even in the government-friendly mainstream media you will find the facts, though you'll have to connect the dots yourself.

When you treat people as if they are animals, or help others to treat them that way, some of those people will get angry and vow to get even. If desperate enough they will even be willing to give their lives to the cause — yes, even to fly airplanes into tall buildings.

Isn't this already obvious? For more than 50 years U.S. administrations, for the sake of geopolitical hegemony and preferential access to resources, have treated much of the Muslim world like personal property. They've backed brutal dictators, subverted governments, and invaded and occupied countries as it suited their agenda of "world leadership." The program included defying the will of the Iranian people and imposing a brutal monarch (1953), backing the repressive Saudi monarchy and the Egyptian and Iraqi dictatorships, financing Israel's periodic wars against Lebanon and oppression of the Palestinians, and so much more. It was bad enough that England and France had betrayed the trust of the Arabs after World War I and turned the Middle East into a colonial playground, with all the humiliation and repression that implies. The U.S. government then compounded the crime by picking up the mantle of empire after World War II. Power and oil were the reasons. Were the brutalized and mortified people supposed to be grateful to the West?

We kid ourselves when we pretend that history began on September 11, 2001. Can anyone say with a straight face that before that date America was minding its own business according to the noninterventionist guidelines set out by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson? Read some history. Or does American exceptionalism mean not having to know anything before dropping bombs on people and torturing detainees? No mystery

The Muslims who wish Americans ill have never been mysterious about their grievances. Osama bin Laden's fatwa against the United States, "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," is online. Read it for yourself. U.S. troops had been stationed in Saudi Arabia in 1990, after Iraqi president Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Long after the brief Gulf War ended, U.S. planes based in Saudi Arabia bombed southern Iraq to enforce U.S.-declared "no fly zones," often killing civilians. Meanwhile, the United States enforced an embargo on Iraq, killing hundreds of thousands of children and others by denying, among other things, equipment Iraqis needed to rebuild sanitation and water facilities.

Bin Laden's fatwa was issued in 1996, soon after U.S.-financed Israel conducted one of its regular onslaughts against the Lebanese. What were his specific grievances? American troops stationed near Muslim holy places in Saudi Arabia. The U.S. embargo on Iraq. U.S. sponsorship of Israel's domination of the Palestinians and its neighbors. "Terrorising you, while you are carrying arms on our land, is a legitimate and morally demanded duty," he wrote.

Bin Laden is not the only one with such grievances. According to the 9/11 Commission report, "By his own account, [mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's] animus toward the United States stemmed ... from his violent disagreement with U.S. foreign policy favoring Israel."

Mohamed Atta, one of the 9/11 suicide hijackers, committed himself to martyrdom on April 11, 1996, the day Israel attacked Lebanon in Operation Grapes of Wrath.

Ramzi Yousef, a planner of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, lashed out at U.S. foreign policy during his sentencing: “Yes, I am a terrorist, and proud of it as long as it is against the U.S. government and against Israel, because you are more than terrorists; you are the one who invented terrorism and using it every day. You are butchers, liars, and hypocrites.”

Richard Reid, who tried to ignite a shoe bomb aboard an airliner, told his sentencing judge, “With regards to what you said about killing innocent people, I will say one thing. Your government has killed two million children in Iraq.... Your government has sponsored the rape and torture of Muslims in the prisons of Egypt and Turkey and Syria and Jordan with their money and with their weapons.”

And Faisal Shahzad, who tried to ignite a car bomb in Times Square, said in court,

I want to plead guilty, and I’m going to plead guilty 100 times over because, until the hour the U.S. pulls its forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, and stops the drone strikes in Somalia and Yemen and in Pakistan, and stops the occupation of Muslim lands, and stops killing the Muslims, and stops reporting the Muslims to its government, we will be attacking U.S., and I plead guilty to that.

The government agrees

Incredibly, when such statements are cited by Americans who oppose U.S. foreign policy, they are accused of condoning terrorism. It is disconcerting to learn that one must spell out the difference between *comprehending* and *excusing* an action. Terrorism (which, oddly, is a term never applied to any U.S. government actions, no matter how violent or how harmful to civilians), by definition, is a political act. So it seems sensible to inquire into the motives of terrorists, if for no other reason than to determine whether such crimes might be avoided in the future.

Some dismiss the jihadists’ statements as mere propaganda, but you don’t need to take their word for it. Bush administration officials acknowledged that U.S. policy creates more terrorists than it kills. Bush strategist Paul Wolfowitz himself said that occupying Iraq permitted U.S. troops to leave Saudi Arabia, where they had created so much hostility to America.

In other words: American policy manufactures terrorism.

With impunity the U.S. government fires missiles from pilotless drones into Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere, killing innocents. Its occupation forces leave death and misery in their wake. (Building a few schools hardly compensates.) Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who

until recently ran the counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan, conceded, “We’ve shot an amazing number of people and killed a number and, to my knowledge, none has proven to have been a real threat to the force.” And recently Israel killed nine aid volunteers (including an American citizen) on the high seas while enforcing a cruel blockade of Gaza, the latest mistreatment of Palestinians. How can this not come back to haunt us, Israel’s enablers?

As if these actions were not enough, the U.S. government since 9/11 has held many Muslims without charge or other due process in prisons where they have been abused and tortured in violation of U.S. law and international conventions. Others have been sent to the custody of brutal foreign governments known to torture prisoners. Does anyone have trouble understanding why such prisoners would wish to harm Americans and attempt to do so as soon as they are freed? It is really unseemly for Americans to act like victims.

Citing this shameful record and connecting it to terrorism is sure to bring charges of “anti-Americanism” from some quarters. But who has acted against the best interests of the American people: those who carry out these savage policies or those who identify them for what they are and demand cessation?

U.S. policy — no matter who’s in power — couldn’t be better tailored to recruit terrorists. We can keep pretending we are innocent victims. Or we can finally put the responsibility where it belongs: in Washington, D.C. Then we must demand that the barbarism stop.