

Undoing Terrorism

East Bay Citizens for Peace

July 2009

Bristol, Barrington, East Providence, Portsmouth and Warren, Rhode Island

Extending a legacy of the Reagan and Bush administrations of 1981-92, the Bush administration of 2001-2008 made the “war on terrorism” the central focus of its foreign and domestic policy.

The administration used the “war on terrorism” to justify aggressive US policies toward Iran, Pakistan, North Korea, Afghanistan and Iraq. Fear and paranoia were made to seem more reasonable than trust and openness. The Bush administration’s response to the fear generated by terrorist acts was to become even more closed and defensive. Civil liberties were curtailed, domestic law and international treaties were circumvented, surveillance was increased, more public information was declared secret, and security spending was increased dramatically. The US military annual budget grew to more than \$500 billion – more than the combined military budgets of every other country in the world, a tax burden of some \$1,667 for every man, woman and child in the US.

Although there has been a shift away from a war on terrorism as a stated policy objective, the Obama administration continues to use military force to pursue al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Moreover, many of the policies implemented by the Bush administration as part of its war remain in effect and a new policy of “preventive detention” has been introduced to justify holding persons suspected of terrorist acts indefinitely without charge. We are concerned that the Obama administration is changing the rhetoric but not the practice, and is continuing to fight terrorism by extralegal means.

Terrorism is hard to define with any precision. By one count, more than 108 definitions are available and, as Walter Laqueur, historian and political commentator, points out, the “only general characteristic generally agreed upon is that terrorism involves violence and the threat of violence.”ⁱ According to US law, terrorism entails violent acts that are illegal and are intended to coerce civilians or governments.ⁱⁱ In other words, all that legally distinguishes terrorism from other forms of illegal violence is its coercive political intent.

An important characteristic of terrorist acts is that they are carried out by persons without formal government authority. One definition of a “state” or nation is that it is the only legitimate source of violence. Only the state has the right to appoint a police or military force to arrest, to imprison or execute, or to wage war. We might think of terrorism, then, as the use of violence by unauthorized persons intending to coerce civilians or governments. Because terrorists act without formal political authority, terrorist violence is by definition criminal. Terrorists and terrorist acts can be fully prosecuted under existing criminal laws.

It is important to note that nation-states can transgress their limits and become “terrorist” when they act outside of the law, and violate international treaties or agreements such as the Geneva Conventions in ways that the international community agrees are violent and politically coercive.

Generally, terrorist groups are invisible until they commit a violent act. It is this invisibility that makes them most dangerous to democracies. Because terrorists remain invisible, they exist in our imaginations as potential – we fear what they might do more than what they have done and from this flows their ability to coerce people and governments. Given the widespread perception that terrorism is a growing danger, it may come as a surprise to learn that between 1998 and 2006 the number of fatalities from terrorist acts worldwide has remained relatively small and stable at 3,000-6,000 per year.ⁱⁱⁱ The global peak in this decade, including the casualties of 9/11, was 6,000 deaths in 2001. This is not meant to minimize in any way the pain and suffering caused by those terrorist acts, but rather to suggest that the US war on terrorism is misguided and disproportionate given the hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded Americans, Iraqis and Afghans, the

suffering of refugees and displaced people, and the destruction of Iraqi and Afghani homelands since the start of hostilities in 2002.

It seems to us a self-fulfilling prophecy of the worst kind to meet terrorism with violence. A Fall 2008 research brief released by the RAND Corporation, an independent, non-partisan research group, argues that using violence to fight terrorism “raises public expectations that there is a battlefield solution” even as it “legitimize(s) the terrorists view that they are conducting a jihad (holy war)...” The RAND report recommends that the United States make “police and intelligence the backbone of US efforts,” and “minimize the use of US military force.”^{iv}

The alternative to the government’s continuing “war on terrorism”, by whatever name, is pursuit of terrorists and terrorist acts within the framework of existing domestic and international criminal law. Every effort should be made to bring persons who might support terrorism or become terrorists into relationship with those that they blame or fear, and to diminish the circumstances – typically poverty, racism and violence – that they believe justify their beliefs and actions. This three-part policy of prosecution, relationship and support should be pursued openly, and with resources adequate to its success.

Additionally, every effort should be made to lower, rather than raise, the public’s fear. Our collective response must allow us to step into a closer, more human relationship with those who might otherwise see terrorism as their best option. We need to find ways that we can all grow and undo the conditions that could make terrorism seem reasonable. It is worth noting that it was this insight and approach that ultimately succeeded in South Africa and in Northern Ireland.

We do not have to live in a world defined by terrorism as a “perpetual war.” We can realistically imagine a world of decreasing hostility, a world with a “peace economy” that returns more of our collective tax dollars to our domestic well-being. Conflict is an ever-present element of life. Our choice is how to engage and resolve it in such a way that it becomes creative and life-affirming.

Democracy depends on dialogue, it depends on citizens believing that they can speak the truth as they understand it, it depends on openness and it depends on tolerance of the “other.” The Bush administration’s response to terrorism made domestic and international dialogue difficult or impossible; it made dissent difficult and dangerous, and it caused people to label and become afraid of the “other”. As Ben Franklin once remarked, “They that give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.” Operating in a climate of fear, pursuing a “war on terror” in place of genuine vision will only guarantee that we end up with neither liberty nor safety. It rests on the administration of President Obama to chart a genuinely new course that will bring us both.

ⁱ Walter Laqueur (1996). “Reflections on Terrorism,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, 91.

ⁱⁱ US Code, Title 18 Part 1, Ch 113B, s2331.

ⁱⁱⁱ Human Security Brief 2007, Human Security Project <http://www.humansecuritybrief.info/figures.html>.

^{iv} RAND Corporation (2008). How Terrorist Groups End. Research Brief RB-9351-RC. http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9351/index1.html.