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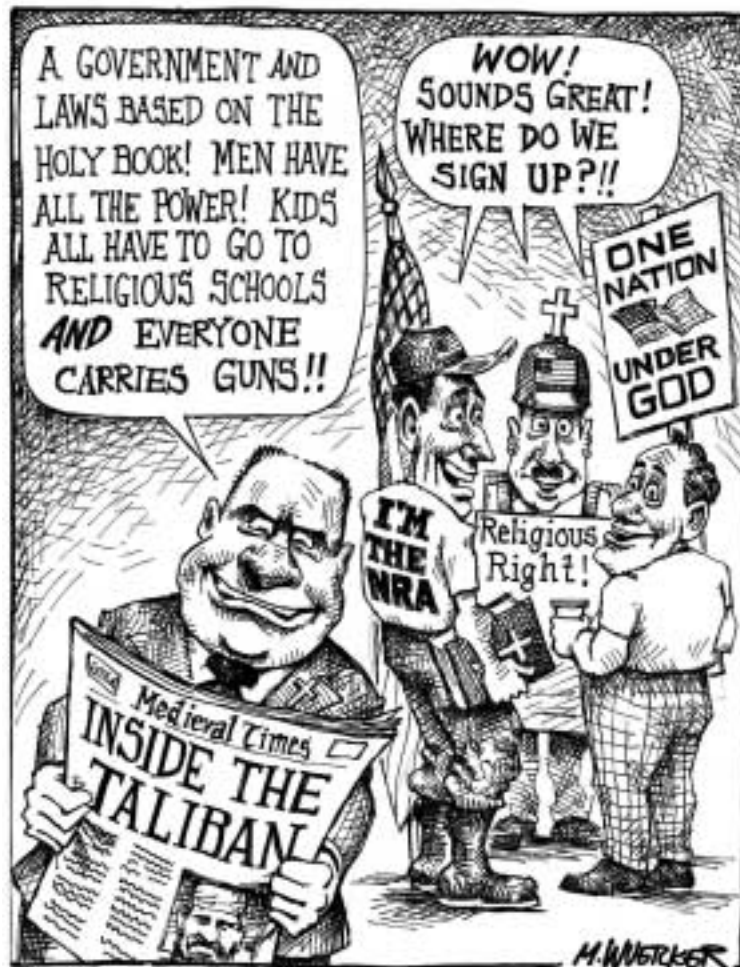
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Terrorism and Ideology

By Dan Petegorsky
Western States Center
Executive Director

“There is no such thing as a good terrorist. Any government that tries to pick and choose its terrorist friends will be regarded by us as a supporter of terrorism.”

President George Bush, 11/10/02

In his stated objective of bringing to justice those responsible for the September 11th attacks and disrupting their ability to mount further offensives, President Bush has had extraordinarily broad support. By declaring a universal “war against terrorism,” however, he raises a host of questions that demand our urgent attention.

Terrorism is a tactic. Rather than reflecting a specific ideology, terrorism is a tool that has been adopted by groups, movements and governments crossing all ideological boundaries. As the saying goes, one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter. As the recent history of Afghanistan demonstrates dramatically, tactical allies can swiftly turn into bitter enemies. Historically, United States policy has officially sanctioned, tolerated and sponsored terrorism when it suits its purposes, while it has also suppressed terrorism when its interests are threatened.

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Terrorism and *Ideology*

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WESTERN STATES CENTER
POST OFFICE BOX 40305
PORTLAND, OREGON
97240

TEL: (503) 228.8866
FAX: (503) 228.1965

www.westernstatescenter.org

We have no reason to believe that the current war will be any different. Both the U.S. and other countries will cast their opponents as terrorists similar to al-Qaida, and their own efforts to suppress those opponents as key battlegrounds in the newly proclaimed war. Indeed, in the wake of President Bush's pronouncements, other governments have sought to enlist in the war in order to win U.S. or world support for state actions that would otherwise warrant strong condemnation but which can now have political cover.

To cite just two examples — from opposite poles of the Arab-Israeli conflict: Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon now cloaks himself in the mantle of the “war against terrorism” as a way to justify a frightening escalation in the military suppression of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, even though virtually all observers know that ultimately the conflict will have to be solved at the negotiating table, not on the battlefield. As a result, terrorist attacks against Israel have escalated — and the Bush Administration has now given Sharon its strong support. Meanwhile, the Syrian government now claims that, by exterminating some 10-20,000 people in the city of Hama in 1982 as part of its campaign to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood, it was actually on the cutting edge of the war against Islamist militants. This argument may not pass the smell test, but in October Syria was given a seat on the U.N. Security Council.

Any political conflict has the potential to generate factions that will employ extreme forms of violence. Even if those factions are isolated and suppressed, however, the conflicts themselves are most often rooted in political, social and economic causes that will require political solutions. The various parties to any conflict will present their own analysis of its causes and put forward their own visions of a solution. As progressives, our job is to understand the dimensions of the conflict and to decide what solutions and actions best align with our own values.

Unfortunately, over the past several decades the right wing — domestically and internationally — has increasingly dominated the world stage with its interpretations and solutions. As the late Eqbal Ahmad observed, “The resurgence of right-wing religious movements in the eighties and nineties

was world-wide.” (*Dawn*, 1/24/99) This resurgence was evident not only in the Afghan Mujahideen, but in India and Pakistan, Israel and Palestine, the Sudan, the Balkans and elsewhere, not to mention here in the United States.

The rise of a militant Islamist movement across much of the Arab and Muslim world reflects as much as anything the demise of the Left as a potent force there. As a result of both the stagnation or collapse of secular and nationalist regimes and the often violent suppression of political opposition movements over the past decades, religious extremist movements often became regarded as the most viable forces for change or resistance to an oppressive status quo.

Although progressives have focused wide attention on the dynamics of religious political extremism in the U.S., discussions of “fundamentalism” as an international phenomenon have generally come from the right wing. The right-wing analysis of this phenomenon has emphasized the “clash of civilizations” (i.e., Islam versus the West), and proposes solutions that would only reinforce aggressive U.S. behaviors that are themselves the source of such widespread resentment overseas. For many, September 11th only confirmed the distorted fears and charges that the Right had been raising for years.

By contrast, few on the American Left have taken the rise of the Islamist movements seriously, focusing their critiques instead on U.S. policy itself and the history of U.S. support for oppressive regimes abroad. That sordid history certainly warrants our attention and action. However, it does not relieve us from the responsibility of understanding the danger in the ideology of groups like al-Qaida, nor does it diminish the very real threats that religious political extremists pose — not just to George Bush's version of American values, but to the lives and futures of peoples both here and abroad, and to our visions for progressive social change.

We in the Western States region are all too aware of the dangers of religious political extremists. We know what can happen when violent, reactionary organizations take root in our communities — from the Christian-identity based militia to anti-gay

and anti-abortion groups (see *Lessons from Timbertown*, page 6). And we know what we need to do to isolate and defeat such forces. But many social change organizers and leaders who are primarily focused on work within their own communities lack a similar understanding with respect to international issues.

September 11th gives us the opportunity — albeit a tragic one — to understand more deeply how movements and events that take place outside the U.S. affect and are affected by circumstances and policies inside the U.S. The media have tended to pose the question in inflammatory terms: “Why Do They Hate Us?” The Bush Administration, on the other hand, has forced a different question: “Are you with us, or are you against us?” Both questions assume a unified “us” and “them,” and do little to further our understanding.

While many progressive organizations have drawn attention to the history of U.S. interventions abroad, fewer have sought to understand and explain militant Islamist groups in a broader social context and define what an appropriate response would be from progressives. As Barbara Ehrenreich notes, “Liberal and left-wing commentators have done a thorough job of explaining why the fundamentalists hate America, but no one has bothered to figure out why they hate women.” (*LA Times*, 11/4/01)

Similarly, while many have mobilized to counter intimidation and harassment of Arab, Muslim and South Asian people in the wake of September 11th and have condemned the sudden respectability of new forms of racial profiling, most have been silent on the overtly exterminationist anti-Semitism of bin Laden’s pronouncements. Radical white supremacists, for their part, have applauded both the pronouncements and the attacks, seeking to make common cause with al-Qaida to defeat the “world Jewish conspiracy.”

Progressives remain focused primarily on the ways in which the Administration’s actions rest on a history of shameful policies, and less on the nature of al-Qaida’s ideology and what it means for people living in Arab and Muslim countries and for us here in the U.S. Understanding that ideology in the

context of the societies in which it arose, however, is vital to developing a sound progressive response.

The reluctance to examine this ideology as a serious phenomenon stems from several sources. One is ethnocentrism itself: as Americans we are conditioned to see the United States as the most important actor on the world stage, and to see most everything as a reflection or consequence of U.S. policies and actions. Progressives are not immune from this conditioning. Ironically, progressive critiques that focus almost exclusively on the U.S. role in the world serve to further reinforce the prejudice that the rest of the world really doesn’t matter — as if nothing significant could take place without being driven by the U.S. government or corporations. A preoccupation with America as the sole root of injustice is arrogant and, in this case, runs the risk of understating the potency of what many now regard as a growing clerical fascist movement.

The second factor is the low credibility of the Administration itself. Given the penchant of conservative administrations to define everyone from environmental activists to movements for national liberation as “terrorists,” progressives are wary of accepting Presidential declarations at face value. The more the President inflates his rhetoric, the more uncomfortable we become — especially as the “war on terrorism” and “homeland security” become covert synonyms for a host of regressive measures which would otherwise face nearly certain defeat. The Administration’s credibility is further undermined by the presence of religious political extremists within the Administration itself. As comedian Jon Stewart put it, “If the events of Sept. 11 have proven anything, it’s that the terrorists can attack us, but they can’t take away what makes us Americans — our freedom, our liberty, our civil rights. No, only Attorney General John Ashcroft can do that.”

The third factor may be as simple as fear. In many areas of the world, leadership in resisting oppressive regimes now resides with groups whose ideologies are the antithesis of progressive change. This is both demoralizing and challenging: demoralizing because, just as in this country, we would prefer the forces of change to be moving in a progressive

We have the responsibility to understand the danger in the ideology of groups like al-Qaida, and the very real threats that religious political extremists pose — not just to George Bush's version of American values, but to the lives and futures of peoples both here and abroad, and to our visions for progressive social change.

Dan Petegorsky
*Executive Director
Western States Center*



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