Pirates and Emperors, Old and New

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International Terrorism in the Real World

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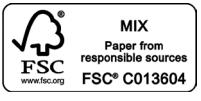

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Introduction (2002)

The impact of the terrorist atrocities of September 11, 2001 was so overwhelming that the identification just given is redundant: "9/11" suffices. It is widely agreed that the world has entered into a new age in which everything will be different: "the age of terror." Undoubtedly 9/11 will hold a prominent place in the annals of terrorism, though we should think carefully about just why this is the case. Anyone familiar with past and current history knows that the reason is not, regrettably, the scale of the crimes; rather, the choice of innocent victims. What the consequences will be depends substantially on how the rich and powerful interpret this dramatic demonstration that they are no longer immune from atrocities of the kind they routinely inflict on others, and how they choose to react.

In this connection, it is useful to consider several facts: 1) The "age of terror" was not unanticipated; 2) The "war on terror" declared on September 11 is no innovation, and the way it was conducted in the very recent past can hardly fail to be instructive today.

As for 1), though no one could have predicted the specific atrocities of 9/11, it had been understood for some time that with contemporary technology, the industrial world was likely to lose its virtual monopoly of violence. Well before 9/11, it was recognized that "a well-planned operation to smuggle [weapons of

mass destruction] into the United States would have at least a 90 percent probability of success."[1] Among the contemplated threats are "small nukes," "dirty bombs," and a variety of biological weapons. Execution might not require unusual technical proficiency or organization. Furthermore, the source of terror might be hard to identify, hence to confront. Nine months after 9/11 and the anthrax scare that many analysts found even more terrifying,[2] the FBI reported that it still had only suspicions about the origins and planning of the 9/11 attacks—basically, those assumed at once, prior to what must be the most extraordinary international investigations in history, which yielded very little, they acknowledge; and the FBI reported no progress on identifying the perpetrators of the anthrax terror, though the source had been localized to Federal laboratories within the United States, and huge resources had been devoted to the investigation.

Turning to point 2), it is important to remember that the "war on terror" was not declared by George W. Bush on 9/11, but rather re-declared. It had been declared 20 years earlier by the Reagan–Bush (No. 1) Administration, with similar rhetoric and much the same personnel in leading positions. They pledged to excise the "cancers" that are bringing "a return to barbarism in the modern age." They identified two main centers of the "evil scourge of terrorism": Central America and the Middle East/Mediterranean region. Their campaigns to eradicate the plague in these two regions ranked high among the foreign policy issues of the decade. In the case of Central America, these campaigns quickly led to popular mobilization that was unprecedented in character. It had deep roots in mainstream American society, and broke new ground in the actions that were undertaken; during the U.S. wars in Indochina, as in earlier Western rampages in much of the world, few even thought of going to live in a village to help the victims and, by their presence, to provide some minimal protection from the foreign invaders and their local clients. There was also a large lit-

erature on the Reagan Administration's "war on terror." It found its place within the popular movements that sought to counter state-supported international terrorism, though it remained virtually unmentionable in the mainstream under the convention that only crimes of others are to command attention and elicit passionate denunciation. Much of what follows is drawn from writings of the 1980s on this topic,[3] which has considerable relevance for what lies ahead, I believe.

Washington's Central American base for countering the plague was Honduras. The official in charge during the most violent years was Ambassador John Negroponte, who was appointed by George Bush (No. 2) in 2001 to lead the diplomatic component of the redeclared "war on terror" at the United Nations. Reagan's special envoy to the Middle East through the period of the worst atrocities there was Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who directs the military component of the new phase of the campaign. Other leading planners in Washington also bring to the new "war on terror" the experience they gained from the first phase.

In both regions, the Reagan Administration carried out massive terrorist atrocities, vastly exceeding anything they claimed to be combating. In the Middle East, by a large margin the worst atrocities trace back to the U.S. and its local clients, who left a trail of bloodshed and devastation, particularly in the shattered societies of Lebanon and in the territories under Israeli military occupation. Central America suffered even worse disasters at the hands of the terrorist commanders in Washington and their minions. One of the targets was a state, Nicaragua, which was therefore able to follow the course required by law and solemn treaties when a country is attacked: to appeal to international authorities. The World Court ruled in favor of Nicaragua, determining that the U.S. was guilty of "unlawful use of force" and violation of treaties, ordering Washington to terminate its international ter-

rorist crimes and pay substantial reparations. The U.S. dismissed the Court ruling with contempt, on the official grounds that other nations do not agree with us so we must decide for ourselves what lies within our "domestic jurisdiction"; in this case, a terrorist war against Nicaragua. With bipartisan support, the Administration immediately escalated the crimes. Nicaragua appealed to the Security Council, where the U.S. vetoed a resolution supporting the Court decision and calling on all states to observe international law, also voting alone (with one or two client-states) against similar General Assembly resolutions. The U.S. escalated the attack further while undermining efforts of the Central American presidents to achieve a negotiated settlement. When the population finally succumbed, the national press, while acknowledging the terrorist methods employed, did not try to conceal its ecstasy, informing the world that Americans are "United in joy" at this "Victory for U.S. Fair Play" (*New York Times*).

Elsewhere in Central America the population had no army to protect it. The atrocities carried out by the forces armed and trained by the U.S. and the states that joined its international terrorist network were therefore considerably more extreme than in Nicaragua, where they were horrifying enough. Conducted with unspeakable barbarism and brutality, the U.S. wars left some 200,000 corpses and millions of refugees and orphans in the shattered countries. One prime target of the "war on terror" was the Catholic Church, which had committed a grievous sin. Abandoning the traditional role of service to wealth and power, major segments of the Church adopted "the preferential option for the poor." Priests, nuns, and layworkers sought to organize people who lived in misery to take some control of their lives, thereby becoming "Communists" who must be exterminated. It was more than symbolic that the atrocious decade began with the assassination of a conservative Archbishop who had become "a voice for the voiceless," and ended with the brutal murder of six leading

Jesuit intellectuals, in both cases by Washington's favored clients. The events elicited little interest among those responsible. Few even know the names of the assassinated intellectuals, in dramatic contrast to dissidents in enemy states; one can imagine the reaction if they had not merely been jailed and exiled, but had their brains blown out by elite forces trained and armed by the Kremlin, capping a record of horrendous atrocities.

The basic facts are understood. The School of the Americas announces with pride that "liberation theology . . . was defeated with the assistance of the U.S. Army," thanks in no small measure to the training it provided to military officers of the client-states.

The "Victory for U.S. Fair Play" left more than a trail of mutilated corpses and ruined lives, in the midst of ecological disaster. After the U.S. took over again in 1990, Nicaragua declined to the rank of poorest country of the hemisphere after Haiti—which, by coincidence, has been the leading target of U.S. intervention and violence for a century, and now shares with Cuba the distinction of enduring a crushing U.S. embargo. Elsewhere in the region,

> neoliberal economic policies, such as ending price subsidies and increasing sales taxes, have worsened the situation for the poor, the UN believes. Annual social spending in the four drought-hit Central American countries is $100 a head, one sixth of the Latin American average [which is disgraceful enough]. Statistics compiled for the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization's annual meeting in Rome this week [June 11, 2002] show that the number of people with chronic hunger in Central America has risen by almost a third in the last decade, from 5 million to 6.4 million of the 28 million population.[4]

UN agencies are seeking remedies, "but without effective land reform these measures can have only limited impact." The popular organizations that might have led the way to land reform and other measures to benefit the poor majority were effectively destroyed by Washington's "war on terror." Formal democracy

was instituted, but it impresses mostly ideologues. Polls throughout the hemisphere reveal that faith in democracy has steadily declined, in part because of the destruction of the social base for effective democracy, and in part, very likely, because the institution of formal democracy was accompanied by neoliberal policies that reduce the space for democratic participation.

Reviewing the program of "bringing democracy to Latin America," Thomas Carothers, who served in the "democracy enhancement" projects of the Reagan Administration, concludes that the policies were "sincere" but a "failure," of a peculiarly systematic kind. Where Washington's influence was least—in the southern cone—successes were greatest, despite the efforts of the Reagan Administration to impede them; where Washington's influence was greatest, successes were least. The reason, Carothers concludes, is that Washington sought to maintain "the basic order of . . . quite undemocratic societies" and to avoid "populist-based change . . . inevitably [seeking] only limited, top-down forms of democratic change that did not risk upsetting the traditional structures of power with which the United States has long been allied." He dismisses the "liberal critique" of this approach because of its "perennial weak spot": it offers no alternative. The option of allowing the population a meaningful voice in running their own affairs is not on the agenda.[5]

In the reigning culture of terrorism, the crimes of the "war on terror" and their aftermath arouse little articulate concern, apart from tactical considerations. The facts were amply reported by human rights organizations, church groups, and others, sometimes even the press, but were mostly dismissed with shameful apologetics. They are to teach us nothing about the "war on terror." Most of the story was excised from history, even hailed as "an inspiration for the triumph of democracy in our time" (*New Republic*). With the threat of meaningful democracy and desperately needed reform drowned in blood, the region drifted back

to the obscurity of earlier years, when the vast majority suffered bitterly but in silence, while foreign investors and "the traditional structures of power with which the United States has long been allied" enriched themselves.

The reaction throughout makes good sense on the prevailing assumption that the victims are "mere things" whose lives have "no value," to borrow Hegel's elegant term for the lower orders. If they try to "raise their heads," they must be crushed by international terrorism, which will be honored as a noble cause. If they endure in silence, their misery can be ignored. History teaches few lessons with such crystal clarity.

Though Central America faded from view in the 1990s, terror elsewhere remained prominent on the policy agenda, and having defeated liberation theology, the U.S. military was directed to new tasks. In the Western hemisphere, Haiti and Colombia became the focus of concern. In Haiti, the U.S. had provided ample support for state violence through the 1980s (as before), but new problems arose in 1990, when to everyone's surprise, Haiti's first democratic election was won overwhelmingly by a populist priest, thanks to large-scale popular mobilization in the slums and rural areas that had been ignored. The democratic government was quickly overthrown by a military coup. The junta at once resorted to atrocious terror to destroy the popular organizations, with tacit support from Bush (No. 1) and Clinton. The elected president was finally restored, but on condition that he keep to the harsh neoliberal policies of the U.S.-backed candidate who had won 14 percent of the vote in the 1990 election. Haiti declined into further misery, while Washington again was hailed for its inspiring dedication to freedom, justice, and democracy.

Considerably more significant for U.S. policy is Colombia, where the terrible crimes of earlier years mounted sharply in the 1990s, and Colombia became the leading recipient of U.S. arms

and training in the hemisphere, in conformity to a consistent pattern. By the decade's end political murders were running at about ten a day (since perhaps doubled according to Colombian human rights organizations), and the number of displaced people had risen to two million, with some 300,000 more each year, regularly increasing. The State Department and Rand Corporation concur with human rights organizations that some 75–80 percent of the atrocities are attributable to the military and paramilitaries. The latter are so closely linked to the military that Human Rights Watch refers to them as the army's "sixth division," alongside the five official divisions. The proportion of atrocities attributed to the six divisions has remained fairly constant through the decade, but with a shift from the military to the paramilitaries as terror has been privatized, a familiar device, employed in recent years by Serbia, Indonesia, and other terror states that seek "plausible deniability" for their crimes. The U.S. is employing a similar tactic, privatizing the training and direction of atrocities, as well as implementation, as in the chemical warfare operations ("fumigation") that have had a devastating impact on much of the peasant society under derisory drug war pretexts.[6] Increasingly, these operations are being transferred to private companies (MPRI, Dyncorps), which are funded by Washington and employ U.S. military officers, a useful device to escape the limited congressional scrutiny for direct involvement in state terror.

In 1999, as atrocities mounted, Colombia became the leading recipient of U.S. military aid worldwide (apart from the perennials, Israel–Egypt), replacing Turkey. A strategically placed ally, Turkey had received substantial U.S. military aid and training from the 1940s, but there was a sharp increase in the mid-1980s as Turkey launched a counterinsurgency campaign targeting its miserably repressed Kurdish population. State terror operations escalated in the 1990s, becoming some of the worst crimes of that gory decade. The operations, conducted with rampant tor-

ture and unspeakable barbarism, drove millions of people from the devastated countryside while killing tens of thousands. The remaining population is confined to a virtual dungeon, deprived of even the most elementary rights.[7] As state terror escalated, so did U.S. support for the crimes. Clinton provided Turkey with 80 percent of its arms; in 1997 alone arms flow exceeded the entire Cold War period combined up to the onset of the counterinsurgency campaign.[8]

It is instructive that in the deluge of commentary on the second phase of the "war on terror," the very recent and highly relevant history merits no attention. There is also no detectable concern over the fact that the second phase is led by the only state to have been condemned for international terrorism by the highest international authorities, and that the coalition of the just brings together a remarkable array of terrorist states: Russia, China, and others, eagerly joining so as to obtain authorization for their terrorist atrocities from the global leader who pledges to drive evil from the world. No eyebrows are raised when the defense of Kabul against terror passes from the hands of one terrorist state (Britain) to another, Turkey, which qualified for the post by its "positive experiences" in combating terror, according to the State Department and the press. Turkey has become a "pivotal ally in Washington's new war against terrorism," a Brookings Institution study explains. It has "struggled with terrorist violence" in recent years and "is thus uniquely positioned to help shape the new global effort to eliminate this threat."[9]

As the few examples cited illustrate—there are many more—Washington's role in state-directed international terrorism persisted without notable change in the interim between the two phases of the "war on terror," along with the reaction to it.

Just as had been true throughout the first phase of the "war on terror," ample information about more recent exploits of state-supported international terrorism has been available from

the major human rights organizations and other highly reliable sources, which are eagerly sought when they have a story to tell that is ideologically serviceable. Here, that is most definitely not the case. The facts are therefore ignored, or if that is impossible, dismissed as a minor flaw or inadvertent deviation from our path of righteousness. The performance was particularly impressive in the 1990s, when it was necessary to suppress the role of the U.S. and its allies in Turkey, Colombia, East Timor, the Middle East, and elsewhere, while praising Washington for entering a "noble phase" in its foreign policy with a "saintly glow" as the leaders of the "idealistic New World bent on ending inhumanity," for the first time in history, dedicated themselves to "principles and values" in their zeal to uphold human rights and freedom. That the torrent could flow without embarrassment is remarkable enough; that it was unimpeded by the crucial participation of the same saintly figures in some of the worst crimes of the decade would have silenced even a Jonathan Swift.[10]

The successes of the first phase of the "war on terror" in Central America were mirrored in the second major area of concern, the Middle East/Mediterranean region. In Lebanon, Palestinian refugees were crushed by U.S.-backed terror operations, and Lebanese society suffered further trauma. Some 20,000 were killed during the 1982 Israeli invasion, many more in atrocities of the Israeli Army (IDF) and its mercenaries in occupied Lebanon in the years that followed, continuing through the 1990s with periodic Israeli invasions that drove hundreds of thousands from their homes, killing hundreds. The Lebanese government reports 25,000 killed after the 1982 invasion. There was rarely a credible pretext of self-defense, as Israeli authorities conceded (apart from propaganda directed to the U.S.). U.S. support was consistent and decisive throughout.

In the Israeli-occupied territories, terror and repression increased through the 1980s. Israel barred development in the oc-