

A POLITICAL RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

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Rev. Nannene Gowdy

“Only two characteristics of terrorism are critical for distinguishing it from other forms of violence. First, terrorism is aimed at noncombatants. ... Second, terrorists use violence for dramatic purpose: instilling fear in the target audience is often more important than the physical result.” Jessica Stern

Before 1993, I was pretty sure the rest of the world handled its terrorists badly. Why couldn't the Irish see that a round of attacks only lead to counter attacks by the British, which led to counter-counter attacks by the IRA? Why couldn't the Israelis see that they were in a cycle of violence that only escalated with each punitive measure? Why was the world so intent on becoming a global Hatfield and McCoy battlefield?

For the purposes of this paper, I am only considering terrorist attacks that have occurred in the United States. However, many of the conclusions I have reached are applicable to other parts of the world.

In 1993, terrorism was brought to United States soil. The World Trade Center in New York City was bombed by a group we knew little about – the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which later merged with al Qaeda. That same year, the FBI caused a firestorm in Waco, Texas, at the Branch Davidian compound, which killed men, women and children. Both fit Jessica Stern's definition of terrorism because both resulted in the deaths of noncombatants, and both attackers wanted to instill fear.

Unfortunately, the United States did not learn anything useful from either attack. Our intelligence was so bad on al Qaeda, that we didn't make the connections about the perpetrators until eleven years later, after the second attack on the World Trade Center. Most of us were left confused about what our government's political response should be

at the time of the first attack since we were only told about a blind cleric from New Jersey and his followers. We only found out later that Bill Clinton, who tried to kill bin Laden four times, warned George Bush about bin Laden. As a candidate in 2000, George Bush criticized Clinton's efforts saying he would not send a "million dollar missile at a tent." Bush's cockiness was to come back to haunt him when confronted with 9/11.

Attorney General Janet Reno took responsibility for our heavy-handed response to the Branch Davidians, but the FBI continued to confuse might with right, and future attacks against our government were spawned. Again, the political response was totally inadequate. But even as I muttered "Oh my God!" while watching in disgust the storming of the compound, I didn't imagine what would follow.

There was another terrorist attack in 1993 that I knew, at the time, would have future consequences. In March, Doctor David Gunn, an abortion provider, was shot and killed in Pensacola, Florida. I knew that others in the antiabortion movement would follow this example. Sure enough, in August, five months later, Dr. George Tiller was shot in Wichita, Kansas. Fortunately, he was not killed.

Since the antiabortion movement had lost its battle in the courts, they had increasingly turned to physical pressure. When the political response to anthrax threats and to physical and verbal harassment of women and doctors at abortion clinics was not strongly countered by the government, an escalation was inevitable. As the number of attacks escalated, I thought, "Oh my God. They intend to stop with a gun what they couldn't stop in the courts."

Sure enough, the next year, 1994, saw an escalation. Paul Hill shot and killed Doctor Bayard Britton and his escort, Jim Barrett, at an abortion clinic in Florida. Jim

Barrett's wife was wounded. The escorts were Unitarian Universalists who were providing escort service as part of their church's social action program. Paul Hill was eventually caught and executed, but little was done politically to connect the antiabortion movement and their poisonous rhetoric with these so-called lone wolves.

Then, in December of that year, there was another attack. John Salvo entered an abortion clinic in Brookline, Massachusetts, and opened fire. Two women employees were killed. I found out about it when I was called to the phone at the nurse's station in Yale New Haven Hospital where I was taking care of my daughter during her stem cell transplant. Among the wounded was my stepdaughter's best friend, Jane, who grew up in our Carlisle, Massachusetts, Unitarian Universalist Church. "Oh my God!" I said. "She was shot?" Nurses immediately went into action. An arm went around me in case I collapsed, a chair was wheeled into position so I could sit down, and they stayed there until they were sure I was all right. Our government's political response was less helpful than that of the nurses'. John Salvo was treated as just another lone wolf. The systemic catalyst for these shootings was not addressed.

There were other so-called lone wolves roaming the country, part of the Aryan Nation. Killing a Jew, a black, or a homosexual here and there got little attention. The government failed to make the political connections that would have shown that these wolves were a pack on the prowl. On April 19, 1995, the day one of these wolves was scheduled to be executed, Timothy McVeigh bombed a government building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. One hundred and sixty eight men, women, and children were killed. The man to be executed had a last laugh as he watched the news coverage on television the day of his execution.

“Oh my God!” I thought, when I heard about the bombing. “I hope it wasn’t someone black or Muslim.” Had it been, I knew the retaliation would be swift. Early reports claimed it was the work of Arabs. An Arab target in Oklahoma City didn’t seem likely to me, but I couldn’t imagine who had done it. I’m not politically naïve, but I didn’t know that April 19th is a significant day for Aryan Nation types as the day the second American revolution will begin. I was as surprised as anyone to find out who was responsible for the bombing, and not a little relieved.

Finally, the right-wing fanatics who want to overthrow the government and cleanse the United States of polluters to the white race were taken seriously. The political response was to go after these people in every way legally possible – and, I suspect, in ways that were not completely legal. It must have been an effective political response because in the past nine years there have been no more major terrorist attacks by people affiliated with The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord, or their ilk.

The following year, 1996, at the Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia, there was another bombing. One pleasant summer night, as people were strolling around the center of Olympic Village, a bomb in a knapsack went off, killing Alice Hawthorne, a young mother and wife. For once, the death wasn’t discounted because she was black - it could have been any of the people in that square. “Oh my God,” I thought, “let’s not have another Munich.”

Once again, the authorities hadn’t a clue about who had done it. They focused on a security guard, pretty much ruining his life. Much later they discovered that the bomb had been left by an antiabortionist, Eric Rudolph. It took six years before he was

captured – partly because people who were sympathetic to his cause helped feed and hide him. Finally it was shown that lone wolves aren't necessarily so alone.

Little surprise then, that 1998 brought yet another terrorist attack. I heard about this attack while attending a UUA Board meeting. I knew that one of the other Board members, Carl Thitchener, lived near the scene of the shooting, so I told Carl about it. He knew Doctor Bennett Slepian, who had been shoot and killed in his home in Amherst, New York.

The political response was pretty much the same. About the only restriction imposed on antiabortionists was that they were no longer allowed to post a hit list of abortion providers on the Nuremberg Files on the Internet – at least temporarily. It is true that terrorist attacks on abortion clinics are down, but I believe that is because of the political climate. President George Bush has made it clear that he is anti-choice. The antiabortion movement has great hopes, not without reason, that Roe v. Wade will be overturned. Now that Bush has been elected for four more years, their hopes will probably come true. Nor is it just Bush. There were two senators elected who campaigned on ending all abortions. The popular vote is a political response, and the antiabortionists have won.

It was three years before the next terrorist attack in the United States. In 2001, the World Trade Center was again the target, and this time they succeeded in completely demolishing the twin towers. As I watched the second plane hit the tower, I was on the phone with my daughter. I said, "Oh my God, it wasn't an accident." On the way to work I heard about the plane plowing into the Pentagon. I screamed "Oh my God!" over

and over again. I was terrified. How many planes were still out there? What was the next target? This time the terrorists had succeeded in spreading terror across the country.

As we now know, it was Muslims affiliated with al Qaeda. What was our political response? To invade Iraq, a move that made little sense to many of us at the time and makes even less sense now.

This has been a quick overview of the political responses our government has made to terrorism in the past. By taking a look at how those responses could have been more effective, I hope to show a way to a better response in the future.

Starting with the World Trade Center attack in 1993, we could have learned a lot from even adequate intelligence. The FBI was told by Ramzi Yousef that the original plan had been to knock both buildings down, but they lacked the funds for that big a project. (Stern, p. 251) As many writers have pointed out, the FBI did not take a terrorist threat to the United States seriously, and failed to realize that the Egyptian Islamic Jihad/al Qaeda group would immediately begin making plans to carry out their original goal – the destruction of the twin towers.

Could the FBI and CIA not have made better use of their resources? Was FBI vs. CIA feuding over turf worth the loss of life? The political response to the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center was totally inadequate. It took us eleven years to find out who was really responsible, so we certainly were not able to stop the larger attack eight years later.

The proper political response to the World Trade Center bombing would have been a coordinated effort by all branches of our government to follow the trail, no matter where it led. Stopping with a blind cleric in New Jersey was hardly adequate. The

conspiracy theory thread in my mind wondered if there might be some truth in the claim by an elder Muslim who told Jessica Stern, “We believe the (1993) World Trade Center bombing was actually carried out by the CIA. How could a terrorist organization be so stupid as to go back to get the money from his rental car? Obviously, it was a CIA operation.” If the CIA and FBI didn’t screw up as often as they do, such thoughts would be more laughable.

Another political response that, in my opinion, is misguided is our overwhelming support of Israel. I have no quarrel with the idea of establishing the state of Israel, although I do have a quarrel with the way it was handled, dispossessing the Palestinians. I also have a quarrel with the continuation of our enormous financial support, enabling Israel to buy devastating weaponry while thumbing its nose at agreements reached in peace accords. Helping countries obtain food, water, and housing (although not on the West Bank) for their people are good political moves. It builds good will. But our money enabling them to militarily crush their neighbor is money badly spent. The resentment it causes is like ripples in a pond – we have no idea how far it goes in touching people.

I am not naïve about the Palestinians. The leaders probably are doing everything they can to keep the conflict going – it is their best guarantee of staying in power. This doesn’t mean that our support of Israel hasn’t been very unbalanced. What would the situation be like today if we had poured money into establishing good schools, farmland, and better water sources for the Palestinians? Why don’t we listen to people’s concerns and work on making their lives better? “Accepting the *scale* of what is wrong with the way we live together in this world can at least provide the commitment to working for

change.” (Sardar, p. 209) No Palestinian, whether in a high or low position, can possibly believe that we have treated them justly and equitably. We have sown our own seeds of resentment.

I am not optimistic about the U.S. government’s willingness to take a serious look at what our support of Israel is doing to our relationships in the Middle East. George Bush has shown his unequivocal support of Israel over the past four years. The reality, of course, is that probably neither Bush nor Kerry could have been elected without the Jewish vote, the majority of whom back our support of Israel.

1993 was the year of another political failure of the FBI. Janet Reno took the blame for this siege, but the truth is that she had barely taken over as the Attorney General, and was stuck with a plan that was already in position. Further, I have a sneaky suspicion that the FBI, with its history of racism, homophobia, and sexism, kept some information from Reno. The FBI had already had two shoot outs at survivalist compounds before Janet Reno took over – in 1983 with Gordon Kahl and in 1992 with Randy Weaver. The pattern was well established by 1993.

The Branch Davidians had barricaded themselves, with many weapons, in their compound in Waco, Texas. Yes, they had food and water that would sustain them for some time. Yes, David Koresh was a wacko who thought his death was going to bring about the end of the world. The best political response would have been to wait him out. Any deaths would have been his fault, not ours. The results, it turns out, were the same because some many people in the compound died. But our government can’t seem to operate on any level other than might makes right. We showed Koresh.

Under George Bush, I can't imagine that a situation like this would be handled with a different political response. With another four-year term of George Bush ahead, the cowboy is going to see **any** opposition as the Indians.

I do see exceptions to this, however. If the attacker is targeting homosexuals, there will be little political response from the government. The election has told the administration that the majority of the American people are not behind gay rights. And especially in the states in which a referendum was passed banning same sex marriage or civil union, we can expect an increase in terrorist actions against bisexuals, gays, lesbians, and transgendered people.

Also in 1993, we were faced with other instances of domestic terrorism – the shootings of Doctor David Gunn in Florida and Doctor George Tiller in Kansas. The political response fell far short of deterring future attacks. Despite bombings of clinics and other threatening behavior, antiabortionists were allowed to roam the country applying pressure on abortion providers and women seeking legal abortions, often under the claim of exercising their free speech. The government's complicit behavior caused an escalation. Surrounding women who are seeking an abortion, impeding their access and screaming at them is not a free speech right. Throwing blood on them is not free speech. Sending anthrax hoaxes through the mail to the clinics is not free speech. Yet, police often stood by and let these things happen.

The next year, 1994, there was a double murder and a wounding in Pensacola, Florida. Paul Hill, a minister and killer, was very much a part of the antiabortion network. Having been executed for the cause, he is now a martyr, a hero for the movement. Although the authorities “got tough” on this activist, they still didn't connect

the dots. Paul Hill, from death row, “called for the Supreme Court judges to be killed and also for chemical and biological weapons” ... (Stern, p. 152) The call was picked up and broadcast throughout the movement, and still the authorities did not connect the dots! The year wasn't out before the attack in Brookline, Massachusetts.

1995 showed us another example of the government treating a movement as only isolated cases. The racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, antigovernment, head for the hills groups are more organized than their treatment by the government would indicate. Each compound is not an isolated bunch of kooks that only have to be wiped out to end the problem. These people are networking, have conventions, and are no less a threat to us than al Qaeda. The government's political response has thus far been to prove to the movement that the survivalists are right – the government is dangerous and much to be feared, given to shoot outs that change nothing. The Southern Poverty Law Center, through court action, has done more to stop these people than our government has! Entire compounds have been awarded to plaintiffs who have been harmed by these racist, neo-Nazis. A bankrupt survivalist has fewer resources for spreading hate.

In a world that seems to have gone bomb happy, there should be little surprise that 1996 brought another bombing – this time by the antiabortionists. It took six years to find the bomber in our **own** country. No wonder they can't find Osama bin Laden. The proper political response would have been a widely publicized effort to hunt Eric Rudolph down. There was a manhunt for a few months. Then we moved on to other things. The government's lack of effort, once again, gave the message that defying the law of the land in a terrorist attack was, in this instance, acceptable. Small wonder, then, that there was another shooting in 1998.

I doubt that the shootings and bombings will start again. The political response under Bush has been to restrict abortion rights, starting with late term abortions. Now he can appoint new Supreme Court justices who pass the abortion litmus test, and he will have support in a Congress that has more Republicans. The political response of voters was that they were more afraid of terrorism than they were of having their rights, including the right to a safe abortion, protected.

Three years later was the terrorist attack that is burned on all of our retinas. The image of the plane flying into the second tower, the collapse of the towers, the devastation at Ground Zero, the hole in the Pentagon, the plane down in a field in Pennsylvania. These are sights we can all call up to our memories at will.

Our government has had no trouble demonizing those responsible. What they have had trouble with is punishing those responsible. While our political response to domestic terrorism has been bad, it pales in comparison to our response to international terrorism attacks.

First, there were the warnings. (Clarke, Moore, etc.) The Bush administration had ample warnings, starting with memos left by the Clinton administration, (Clarke) that something was coming, probably a plane, probably the Pentagon. Even something as simple as people who could accurately translate Middle Eastern material would have been helpful. Second, there was an inadequate attempt to get bin Laden. Third, the administration picked the wrong target by invading Iraq. “Although under consideration long before 9/11, the invasion of Iraq could be seen as a direct continuation of this unlimited war – all the more so because of a prevailing tone among the president and his advisers, who were described as eager ‘to emerge from the sea of words and to pull the

trigger.” (Lifton, p. 112) 9/11 was just the excuse Bush needed to carry out a plan he had already formed to invade Iraq. His political response may have been motivated by oil, maybe by getting even with the man who tried to assassinate his father. Whatever the real reason, we know it wasn't weapons of mass destruction.

The quagmire in Iraq shows how badly planned this erroneous political response to the international terrorist attack on the World Trade Center has been. In the days immediately following the 9/11 attack, the United States overwhelmingly had the world's support and sympathy. George Bush and his administration have squandered that support so thoroughly that we are now probably the most hated country in the world.

While I think the government's response to domestic terrorism has been inadequate, I think the response to international terrorism has been criminal and far more dangerous to the American people on many levels. Therefore, I will spend more time discussing the political response to international terrorism.

1. Our government's response has created more terrorists. Had we gone after the people responsible for 9/11 – Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda – the world would have understood. There would have been those who did not like it, but the vast majority of the world would have been behind us. Instead, in a move that reinforces the phrase “they all look alike”, we invaded Iraq. Apparently, with over 40% of the U.S. population still believing that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, the administration's guess that many people in the United States would think that all Muslims were guilty and should be punished was a calculated risk that paid off. However, in the Muslim world and beyond, the bully tactics of the United States have spawned innumerable future terrorists.

Further, our government's treatment of Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the United States has been abysmal. We have all seen the pictures of Abu Ghraib. We have heard of prisoner deaths in Afghanistan. We know that innocent people have been rounded up and imprisoned for years because they are Muslims. Each of these people has friends and relatives. Each is a convenient martyr for recruiting future terrorists. I was watching a television interview of an Iraqi official – I forget who. The American interviewer said, "But we didn't treat the prisoners any worse than Saddam Hussein himself did. Why are people so angry at us?" The interviewee, with a sad smile, said, "Yes, but we had hoped for better treatment from the U.S."

And then there is our continuing unbalanced support for Israel. The Palestinian refugee camps are terrorist breeding grounds.

2. The misguided attack on terrorism is an attack on our civil rights. By using the fear of another attack, our government has steadily decreased our rights. Red, orange, yellow – terrorist alert levels are great for manipulation. John Ashcroft has shown himself to be a master at using the alert levels. Free speech, the right to assemble, the right of privacy, the protection against search without court order have all been eroded. And the lesser infringements, like checking out a book at the library without government surveillance, are too numerous to list. It is ultimately our rights as citizens that have kept this country strong, not military might. If these rights are taken away, there will be no prophetic voices calling our government back to our

better selves. Reducing civil rights and labeling everyone who criticizes the war in Iraq as unpatriotic or a traitor is hardly an appropriate political response.

3. The government is misspending our resources. We know that the war has caused a deficit. We know our grandchildren will be paying for it. Our grandchildren will also be paying, in terrorist terms, for our not using that money to help third world countries create farm land, find water, develop jobs, and develop education programs.
4. Our government has set a bad example for the world. We are the richest country in the world. We are highly educated. We set most of the cultural standards in music, art, movies, television and print. Yet, when it comes to being an example of how to treat others, we are somewhere near the bottom. No wonder the rest of the world view us less favorably than they did before 2001. Britain went from an 83% favorable view to 70%, Germany from 78% to 45%, and France from 62% to 43%. That was in the West. In the Middle East, Morocco went from a 77% favorable view to 27%, Turkey from 52% to 15% and Jordan from 25% to 1%. (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2002) We have wasted our opportunity to “be a light unto the nations.”

Another way the Bush administration has set a bad example is by invading Iraq without significant international support. What damage this has done to our foreign relations. We are not calling the Saudis to task on their involvement with terrorism. We are showing the world that if you have

enough oil and have a long, friendly relationship with the President of the United States and his family (Moore and Unger), you can do as you please. Nor are we calling the North Koreans to account for their continuing development of nuclear weapons. Certainly they are a greater threat to us than Iraq was. Iran is also freer to do what it wants. Our resources are overextended in the Middle East as it is. Further involvement by taking on Iran would be even more disastrous.

I have written a lot about what our government has done wrong in its political response to international terrorism, and about areas in which it failed to act when it should have. There are still further counter-terrorism actions that the Bush administration could have taken that would have been appropriate political responses.

Stopping the internal battle over turf between the FBI and the CIA would have been a good first step. The struggle over whether or not to form a new Department of Homeland Security was a diversion. The time could have been better spent making both agencies share what information they had and verifying it. That would have told the United States what the next response should have been.

When Bush finally agreed to the 9/11 Report's recommendation to overhaul the United States spy agencies, I was hopeful. As it stands now, however, I am not. Congress had planned to begin talks on overhauling before the election. Surprise, surprise - Congress is behind schedule. Now they hope to begin talks after reconvening on November 16. Some in Congress are pessimistic about their

chances of drafting a bill and getting it to Bush to sign before the new Congress takes over in January. Now that Bush has been elected, I expect more stalling of this bill.

A positive presentation of Islam, instead of treating all Muslims as suspects, would have taken the wind out of the fundamentalists' sails – Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. Imagine how the image of the U.S. would be different if the government had talked about values that Americans and Muslims share. Imagine a world in which the fundamentalists – whether Osama bin Laden or Jerry Falwell who said, “You’ve got to kill the terrorists before the killing stops. And I’m for the president to chase them all over the world. If it takes 10 years, blow them all away in the name of the Lord” – don’t set the tone of discussion.

One more thing I believe we need to do to counter terrorism is to eliminate the death penalty. Countries which might cooperate with us in finding terrorist don’t because, once captured and extradited, the suspects might face the death penalty here in the U.S. This is just one more way in which we cut off international cooperation before it even begins.

Can we “win” the war on terrorism – regardless of the source? No. There will always be someone who is unhappy and willing to blame the government – both domestically and internationally. It is also much easier now for an individual or small group to obtain a weapon of mass destruction. Robert Jay Lifton wrote, “Surrendering the dream of invulnerability, more enlightened American leaders could begin to come to terms with the idea that there will always be some danger in our world, that reasonable and measured steps can be

taken to limit that danger and combat threats of violence, but that invulnerability is itself a perilous illusion.” (Lifton, p. 198) With the Bush election, there will be more talk about winning the war on terrorism. Bush will believe that he was elected because the voters bought his claim to be the “War President”. We can expect even more draconian measures from a man who wants to “stay the course.”

Can we reduce the risks? Yes. But I do not believe anything will be done to reduce the risks now that Bush is elected. He has a cowboys-saved-the-West, with a strain of Armeggedon-can-happen, view of the world. This is not a mix that seeks peace. Our political response to international terrorism will continue to produce more terrorists.

The election guarantees us more of the same. Domestic terrorism will change in focus from abortion to homosexuals. The radical right, having won politically on abortion, will now attempt to impose their morals on the rest of us through attacks – both organized and unorganized – on homosexuals. International terrorism will continue, and might well escalate, proving that we are **not** safer with George W. Bush. The election has set the political response to all types of terrorism for many years to come. Oh my God!