

*A Response to A Political Response to Terrorism* by Nannene Gowdy  
Greenfield Group Fall Convocation — 2004  
Josh M. Pawelek

---

Thanks, Nannene! Your paper on the U.S. political response to terrorism over the past fifteen years nicely integrates many of the points presented in our readings as well as current critiques of U.S. counter-terrorism policies. Your writing is calm and reasonable, displaying the no-nonsense style I've come to expect and admire in you over the years. Underneath your words I sense your anger and your fire. When I wrote to you on November 3<sup>rd</sup> that I was looking forward to the inspiration I would draw from reading your paper, you responded—I forget the words exactly—that it was not inspirational, that I might experience it as a downer. Ahhh, but I was not looking for something “up” to inspire me. I was looking for anger and fire! I got what I was looking for. Thanks!

The paper's appraisal of the U.S. political response to terrorism is far from glowing. It shows how the U.S. government's analysis of domestic anti-abortion and/or white supremacist terrorism has historically identified perpetrators as lone wolves as opposed to what Jessica Stern would define as leaderless, networked resistance. Perpetrators are punished when apprehended, but there has been minimal political effort to curtail the larger movements which insight them to violence.

In response to international terrorism, the paper discusses how the U.S. has failed to coordinate its various intelligence services; failed to take seriously intelligence warning of terrorist plots; failed to bring to justice those primarily responsible for the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks before entering into war with Iraq; created more terrorists by engaging in a pre-emptive war in Iraq, which has included prisoner abuses in violation of the Geneva conventions; and failed to understand the relationship between anti-American terrorism and U.S. support for Israel in its conflict with Palestine. The paper argues that the U.S. must take the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission's report seriously; transform its relationships with and presentation of the Islamic world; and eliminate the death penalty so that more countries will cooperate with U.S. extradition requests. The paper ends on an appropriately pessimistic note, contending a second term for the Bush administration will bring “more of the same,” and “that we are not safer” as a nation since the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Oh my God!

I wish to make one major addition to Nannene's list of political responses the U.S. ought to take if it truly wants to deter anti-American terrorism: reduce U.S. dependence on oil. I'm not aware of any significant efforts the Bush administration has taken to transform the U.S. addiction to oil, but it is clear to me that the power of U.S. oil interests to shape Middle Eastern economies and governments is a source of anger and humiliation for many Muslims. My instinct is that for Middle Eastern Muslims of all economic classes it feels like a continuation of the long-standing colonial relationship between western capitalist democracies and Middle Eastern nations. Throughout *Terror in the Name of God* Jessica Stern argues that even western educated, middle and upper class Muslims embrace *jihad* against the U.S. out of the sense of humiliation the U.S. corporate, military, and political presence engenders. Obviously the U.S. will not change its patterns of energy consumption over night, but it's worth imagining what could transpire in a fifteen to twenty year period if the U.S. could shift to alternative forms of energy for the bulk of its energy needs. The U.S. would be able to reduce its status as a neo-colonizing force in the Middle East and thereby invite less overall animosity. U.S. policy makers would be able to think more clearly about the Middle East when it comes to the Israel-Palestine conflict, human rights issues, diversified economic development, religious pluralism, nuclear proliferation, narcotics production, water rights, etc.

As a parish minister I'm attracted to the idea of framing energy policy as critical to an effective political response to terrorism. Our congregations have an opportunity to locate themselves in the vanguard of the movement to decrease U.S. reliance on oil. Through efforts such as the Seventh Principle Project's Green Sanctuary program, environmentally-friendly congregations can participate in many activities that reduce energy consumption. Such programs help congregations model to other organizations and families how to reduce energy consumption in their own contexts. They also help build market demand for new energy technologies. I believe the long-term success of such programs can help reduce U.S. reliance on oil, and any politician serious about reducing anti-American terrorism ought to be supporting similar efforts in the legislative arena.

Of course, the current framers of U.S. energy policy don't publicly admit the link between U.S. oil consumption and anti-American terrorism. They tend to define terrorism as an attack on U.S. values and life ways, as in "terrorists are evil-doers who

hate our freedoms.” This is a problem. Our reductionist public discourse on the motivations for terrorism fuels the U.S.’s poor political response to terrorism. I want to reflect on this notion for the rest of this response paper. The motivations for terrorism are complex, yet if we frame them as conflicts over intangible values—even conflicts over lifestyle—and fail to offer accurate political, economic, social, and religious analyses, we fail as a people to understand what we are really up against. The old adage, “diagnosis determines therapy,” is appropriate. Our current diagnosis is wrong. Our therapy isn’t even close!

Of course, some terrorists actually do hate our values. As Stern points out, “religious extremists see themselves as under attack by the global spread of post-Enlightenment Western values such as secular humanism and the focus on individual liberties.” (p. xviii) But so often hatred of Western values is not the sole, let alone the primary, motivation behind terrorism. As the conversation about U.S. oil interests in the Middle East suggests, the deeper motivation behind terrorism often begins with a reasoned analysis of the negative ways Western institutions impact global life. Stern quotes Ayman Zawahiri, Osama Bin Laden’s second-in-command, who “accuses Western forces of employing international institutions such as the United Nations, multinational corporations, and international news agencies as weapons in their new crusade to dominate the Islamic world.” (p. xviii) Westerners can easily discard this argument, contending there is no such conspiracy! But in the lived experience of so many Middle Eastern Muslims, this is precisely what is happening. Hamas leader, Abu Shanab, tells Stern “globalization is just a new colonial system. It is America’s attempt to dominate the rest of the world economically.... It will worsen the gap between rich and poor. America is trying to spread its consumer culture.... The problem with pursuing capitalism as an end in itself is that the name of the game is the dollar. In the West, money really does talk. This is bad for the human being. It leads to disaster for communities.” (p. 41) This is not Islamic fundamentalist hatred of Western values. This is the standard, progressive critique of Western neo-colonialism. I agree with it. I often hear it stated in leftist media sources, activist communities, some communities of color, and UU congregations.

In the last week of October, while President Bush and John Kerry were trying to convince the American public how much more dead the terrorists would be if they were elected, Osama Bin Laden released a video telling the American people that it isn't an issue of who is elected. The issue, he said, is American policy in the Middle East. As much as I fear and revile Osama Bin Laden, I had to admit that here was a voice of sanity in the midst of a nasty, surreal, desperate political campaign. As the most wanted person in the world, Bin Laden's statement seemed strangely tame and reasonable. I wanted to ask him, "Osama, have you forgotten who you're dealing with? We Americans can't take reasoned analysis (even the simple kind) seriously in the middle of an election season. If you of all people want to be heard, you have to make a threat that is very easy for us to understand. Tell us you're going to blow up Mount Rushmore. You don't really need to be planning to blow it up. Just say it. Then we'll listen. Well, that is, provided you buy commercials in prime time; and, oh yeah, they need to run an average of twenty-eight times per week. That's a lot of money, Osama. On second thought, you could build a lot of schools and feed a lot of poor people throughout the Muslim world with that kind of money. Oh, I forgot, your organization already does that. Maybe that's why you're so popular in the Middle East and elsewhere." And so on. Maybe—just maybe—and here I know I'm being naïve—U.S. policy makers should learn to take seriously the voices that allege Western neo-colonialism. Maybe then we would begin to understand that extremist Islamic terrorism is not a reaction against American principles. It is a reaction against both perceived and real American abuses of power. Western values do not humiliate Middle Eastern Muslims. Western abuses of power humiliate Middle Eastern Muslims.

Our policy makers are not ready to take this kind of analysis seriously because the embrace of this critique of U.S. behavior abroad would naturally create a space for the same type of critique of U.S. behavior at home. We watched Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 911* in preparation for this Greenfield Group convocation, but I'm thinking about Moore's previous film, *Bowling for Columbine*, which addresses the history of state-sanctioned violence and, yes, terror, in the United States. Our history can be told as an ongoing continuum of violence, with state-sanctioned terror on one end, and the terror of leaderless, networked resistance on the other, and sometimes the boundaries between

them become quite blurry. Who was responsible for the Pequot Massacre, the middle passage, slavery, the Seminole Wars, the Trail of Tears, lynching, infected blankets, Wounded Knee, the KKK, the Tulsa “Race Riots,” the Japanese Internment, Operation Wetback, COINTELPRO, the death of Vincent Chin, the beating of Rodney King, church burnings, the death of Amadou Diallo, the sodomizing of Abner Luima, the death of Aquon Salmon, the recent prisoner abuses at the Hudson County Jail? Terrorism perpetrated by leaderless resistance today is not a historical anomaly. It is historically quite normal. State-sanctioned terror for the purpose of social, economic, and political control, both at home and abroad, is likewise, historically quite normal. But so many of us simply don’t see it. Sharon Thornton’s essay, “Pastoral Response for Uncertain Times,” quotes Robert Jay Lifton on this point. It is difficult for [many] American citizens to “recognize our country’s violent history and actions.... We rationalize, forget, ignore, ‘numb,’ ourselves to the realities we create, inherit, benefit from, feel we have little control over, cannot justify, and which we do not want to admit we participate in.”

I am often charged with overstating the case of America’s history of terror. I have many responses to this charge; I try to be as concrete as possible. For example, the man whose silhouette appears on the nickel, a slaveholder, while serving as president, once asked the man whose portrait appears on the twenty dollar bill, also a slaveholder, if he would use his military expertise in helping to achieve the goal of removing the southern Indians to the Stony Mountains. Mr. Twenty Dollar Bill was eager to help, largely because he had speculated in land where the southern Indians were living, and he stood to gain immense personal wealth from the Indian removal. For years, even after Mr. Nickel was no longer president, Mr. Twenty Dollar Bill continued his war on the southern Indians. In March of 1814, at the Battle of Horse Shoe Bend, Mr. Twenty Dollar Bill and his troops surrounded 800 Creek Indians and, in what today might be termed a preemptive strike, killed almost all of them, including the women and children. Afterward, his soldiers made bridle reins from strips of skin taken from Indian corpses; they also cut off the tip of each dead Indian’s nose for the body count. He sent the clothes of the dead Indian warriors to the ladies of his home state, and brought home a bow and quiver of arrows for his son. He later justified the killing of innocents to his troops: “How lamentable it is that the path to peace should lead through blood, and over the carcasses

of the slain!! But it is the dispensation of that providence, which inflicts partial evil to produce general good.”<sup>1</sup> At least he could see some evil in what he did.

Here’s another response. I recently sat down for coffee with a United Church of Christ minister from East Hartford, CT. She told me the story of the murder of her first husband a decade ago. He was Puerto Rican, clearly of African descent, and spoke with a heavy accent. A group of drunken white men murdered him in a diner because they didn’t like the way he spoke. That is literally what they said. She told this story in the context of a conversation about the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, which was in the context of a conversation about the recent presidential elections. She said “when the terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center I was horrified. But I understood why they did it. It resonated with how I still feel about my husband’s murder. Of course I couldn’t say this to anyone. But that’s how I felt. And I kinda feel it now that the election results are in.”

Perhaps no nation is free of such violence in its history. Perhaps no nation is free of the contradictions that enable and sometimes require it to engage in behaviors it claims to abhor. But for those of us who are American citizens, if we don’t do it already, we ought to make a thunderous, prophetic practice of naming just how many of our fellow Americans, if not we ourselves, have experienced terror historically, and still experience it today, either due to stated government policies or as a result of leaderless resistance that feels emboldened through its connection to larger hate-based movements that suffer little government restriction. And how does one get their face on money? And is it any wonder the American people are confused about the deep origins of anti-American terror, when we revere people who, despite their accomplishments on behalf of our nation, would certainly qualify as terrorists were we to apply our standards objectively or agree to abide by the rulings of the International Criminal Court and War Crimes Tribunal? Sometimes I think we’ve come a long way from state-sanctioned terror like the Battle of Horse Shoe Bend, but then I see the photos of wounded and dead women and children in Iraq, prisoner abuse, mistreatment and murder of wounded enemy combatants, and the most recent allegations of the abuse of detainees in the Hudson County Jail; I hear the misdirection and justifications coming from the administration—“how

---

<sup>1</sup> Takaki, Ronald, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and co., 1993) p. 85-86.

lamentable!”—and I realize our collective behavior has not changed all that much since Horse Shoe Bend, since COINTELPRO, since the Japanese Internment, since that terrible day in 1636 when British troops massacred hundreds of Pequots barely fifty miles to our west.

It may sound cliché, but it’s not. We reap what we sow. Our political leaders may deny anti-American terror is the net result of an abusive U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, which has its historical origins in American practices of terror at home. Still, U.S. abuse, manipulation, control, and the raping of natural resources is the daily, lived experience of many Middle Eastern people. The world does not hate us, but it does reflect back to us, sometimes violently, what we have done and continue to do. In “The Role of the Theologian in Times of Terror,” Rosemary Chinnici contends theologians must “enter into the experience of personal and collective suffering with which we claim familiarity and use this to fuel our collective speech and actions.” I believe liberal ministers can play a critical role in improving the U.S. political response to terror by relentlessly speaking the truth about the U.S. history of violence and terror. The more we collectively understand the atrocities we commit against our own people, the less willing we will be to commit the same kinds of atrocities abroad, and the harder it will be for radical Muslims to sustain their anti-Western *jihad*. No U.S. political response to terror will be truly effective until the day when we finally make ourselves accountable for our own, longstanding, unjust, illegal, immoral, and, dare I say it, evil tradition of violence and terror. Oh my God! That will be a day of transformation. That will be a day when we do not have to mortgage our future to pay for our “security.” That will be a day when the U.S., perhaps for the first time, truly has the respect of the rest of the world.