

Bin Laden and Mandela: Yesterday's Freedom Fighters, Today's Terrorist?

By William G. Martin

In 1985 a group of bearded men met with Ronald Reagan in the White House. These turbaned men were, Reagan stated, "the moral equivalent of America's founding fathers." These were the Afghan mujahedin, for whom Osama bin Laden worked and was undoubtedly funded, directly or indirectly, by the CIA. At the same time Nelson Mandela sat in prison in Robben Island. Mandela, according to the official watch list of the Pentagon, was a terrorist, the head of a terrorist organization attacking the anticommunist apartheid regime.

In 2001 we now watch U.S. policymakers, in both parties, repeat this past. We shouldn't let them do it. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s the U.S. government supported, time and time again, implacably repressive regimes and military dictatorships—from Chile and South Africa, to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, to the Congo, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Should it surprise us when people rise in anger against these regimes—or against the United States?

Decade after decade the U.S. government fostered, in pursuit of the grand, global visions hatched in the bowels of the Pentagon and the National Security Council, armed groups to carry on low-intensity wars—from the borders of Afghanistan, to UNITA in Angola, to

Renamo in Mozambique. After millions of deaths in these wars, should we really wonder why most of the planet's people balk at another crusade led by the U.S. government? Even in the wake of the horrific events and losses on September 11th?

There are, obviously, alternatives to the carpet bombing of Afghanistan, just as there were to the ground war in Gulf, the anticommunist crusade in Afghanistan, or the support for apartheid—all areas where U.S. policy failed. We should demand justice, pursued through democratic institutions and alliances. Attempting to bomb our way to justice won't end terrorism. It can only trigger yet another round of death, poverty, emboldened repressive states, and rising anger at America. Do we really want the world to see Bin Laden or his successors as the new George Washingtons, leaders of anti-imperial rebellions? If the answer is no, Bush and his buddies in their fortified bunkers need to change course.

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