

High Time Bush Defines the Enemy

By Ronald Bruce St John (August 2, 2004)

Immediately after 9/11, President Bush addressed the American people, defining policy in the simplest terms. "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." In declaring a War on Terrorism, he defiantly stated his intent to pursue nations providing aid or safe haven to terrorism, suggesting every nation had a decision to make on the issue.

Three years later, the White House has yet to define clearly what constitutes a terrorist organization. The failure to do so has increasingly contributed to the administration's limited success in making America and the world a safer place. Filling the gap, individuals and groups are adopting their own definitions of terrorism with worrying, potentially disastrous results.

Coalition of the Willing

The administration's refusal to define terrorism served the White House well in the early days of the War on Terrorism. Employing terrorism as a catchall term for a potpourri of movements and organizations, Washington was in a position to label just about anyone opposed to its policies as a terrorist organization. Its subsequent inability to prove in a court of law, in the few cases accorded judicial procedure, that individuals and groups so identified were actually terrorists or terrorist organizations proved a later embarrassment.

The failure to define terrorism, what could be termed the "Opaque Corollary" to the Bush Doctrine, also served the administration well in the run up to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Desperately searching for recruits to its Coalition of the Willing, the White House was eager to add any number of diverse groups to the State Department's terrorist list if it meant the host country might then support U.S. policy in Iraq. For example, the list of terrorist organizations in the current issue of the

Patterns of Global Terrorism report includes the Anti-Imperialist Territorial Nuclei in Italy, the Great Islamic Raiders-Front in Turkey, Red Hand Defenders in Ireland, and the Riyadus-Salikhin Reconnaissance and Sabotage Battalion of Chechen Martyrs, a Chechen guerrilla group.

None of these organizations was listed in the *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report issued just before 9/11, and none of them would appear to pose an immediate threat to the United States, certainly not on a par with al-Qaida. But all of them are recognized opposition groups in countries the White House courted for support as it prepared to invade Iraq.

Official Terrorist Groups

Since many people are not familiar with the *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report, it might be helpful here to discuss briefly its format and content. The report is issued annually by the U.S. Department of State, normally in the late spring of the year, and covers events in the previous year. For example, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003* (www.state.gov) was first released in April 2004.

Each report contains two lists of terrorist groups. The first is the group of "Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations," which an earlier report described as those groups "designated by the Secretary of State as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), pursuant to section 219 of the Immigration



and Nationality Act, as amended by the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996.” This designation carries legal consequences, as it is unlawful to provide funds or other material support to an FTO, and their representatives can be denied visas or otherwise excluded from the United States.

The second list provides information on “Other Terrorist Groups,” which are loosely defined as terrorist groups active in the course of the year. In theory, terrorist groups whose activities were limited in the course of the year are not listed, but this distinction is honored in the breach. For example, the Abu Nidal organization is listed in the current report, but the accompanying text says it “has not staged a major attack against Western targets since the late 1980s.” There is also no suggestion in the report of non-Western attacks by the group in recent years. Abu Nidal died in 2002.

Both lists provide a wide-ranging, varied record of most unlikely partners in terror. The list of “Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” for example, includes Basque Fatherland and Liberty, the Communist Party of the Philippines/New People’s Army, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. Similarly, the list of “Other Terrorist Groups” includes the Japanese Red Army, the Lord’s Resistance Army of Uganda, and the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement of Peru. As should be clear even to the casual observer, the bulk of the organizations on both lists share nothing in the way of background, ideology, objectives, or organization.

Then there is the problem of volume. There are 76 groups on the latest list of official terrorist organizations, which is 32 more than were listed in 2000, a net gain of almost 75%. In a very real sense, the terrorist list is one of the few places the Bush administration has demonstrated a serious commitment to a policy of inclusion.

America now has some 5 million people on its terrorism watch list. By listing virtually every terrorist

organization in the world and every person in those organizations thought capable of a terrorist act, we have lost focus and created a bureaucratic nightmare. The Bush administration needs to define what terrorism is and which terrorist organizations pose a serious threat to the United States. Al-Qaida and its affiliates would be a good place to start.

War on Islam

The failure to define terrorism is producing other serious consequences. The Bush administration emphasized from day one that the War on Terrorism was not a war on Islam; however, administration supporters and others have increasingly defined it in exactly those terms. Buried in the heart of *The 9/11 Commission Report* is a shocking conclusion. In the chapter entitled, “What to Do?,” the Commission concludes the enemy is not just terrorism, what it terms “some generic evil,” but specifically *Islamist* terrorism [report’s emphasis]. With the stroke of a pen, the authors of the 9/11 report appear to have redefined the War on Terrorism, converting it into a War on Islamist terrorism alone.

Three days before the 9/11 Commission released its report, the Committee on Present Danger (CPD), a group founded in the early days of the Cold War, announced its reactivation. Chaired by Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona, Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, and former CIA director R. James Woolsey, CPD is a bipartisan group of mainly foreign policy hawks, including a number of well-known neoconservatives like Kenneth Adelman, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and Norman Podhoretz.

In describing “The Nature of the Global Threat,” CPD explains on its website (www.fightingterror.org) that it has been reactivated “because of the threat posed to America—and democracy everywhere—by Islamist terror organizations.” Their posted Mission Statement reads in part: “Our mission is to educate the American people about the threat posed by a global Islamist terror movement; to counsel against appeasement and accommodation with terrorists.” In

a *Washington Post* op-ed published on July 20, 2004, the same day as the CPD press conference, Senators Kyl and Lieberman argued “the world war against Islamic terrorism is the test of our time.”

Substituting Islamist extremism for terrorism as the enemy, both the 9/11 Commission and the Committee on Present Danger appear to play into the hands of Osama bin Laden. He warned America is not really concerned about terrorism, but instead, is at war with Islam itself.

Islamist vs. Non-Islamist Terrorism

None of this makes any sense in the context of the administration’s report on the *Patterns of Global Terrorism*. The most recent report lists 76 organizations as either “Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations” or “Other Terrorist Groups.” Of the total, only 36, less than half, are Islamic in orientation and membership. The remaining 40 groups, 53% of the total, have nothing to do with Islam. Examples of the latter are the Cambodian Freedom Fighters, Irish Republican Army, and Peru’s Sendero Luminoso.

Equally important, of the 36 organizations that are Islamic in orientation and membership, 29 of them—or 80%—are country-specific. Examples are the Abu Sayyaf Group, Muslim separatists long active in the Philippines, and the Armed Islamic Group, seeking to establish a Muslim state in Algeria. At least six of the organizations in this category are focused on the India-Pakistan struggle for Kashmir, and another three are Chechen separatist groups. Five of the organizations are trying to coerce the Israeli government into changing its policies and vacating Palestinian territories.

In short, while most of the 29 country-specific Islamic groups employ religion in support of their agenda, their goal is to persuade established governments to make significant political and territorial concessions. Moreover, while many of these groups sympathize with al-Qaida, area specialists agree that

almost none of them appear to have command-and-control ties with the Osama bin Laden organization.

Time to Define Terrorism

The administration’s failure to define terrorism is contributing directly to the growing confusion about the nature of our enemies in the War on Terrorism. Struggling to show progress in the war, the White House has eagerly applied the al-Qaida label to virtually any Islamic group threatening terrorist attacks. With little or no proof, regional terrorist groups invariably have been labeled al-Qaida supporters or affiliates. In so doing, the administration has contributed to the false impression, despite data to the contrary in its own *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report, that the sole enemy is a global conspiracy of Islamist groups. An Islamist definition of terrorism plays well with conservative elements in the U.S. electorate, especially after the August 2004 attacks on Christian churches in Iraq; but it is clearly wrong as the government’s own terrorism report amply demonstrates.

We are sliding toward disaster, identifying the wrong enemy and fighting the wrong war. The Bush administration needs to get America back on track, defining clearly the threat we face. At the same time, it needs to reach out to the Muslim community around the world, emphasizing this is not a war on Islam. Failing to do so, White House rhetoric stressing the War on Terrorism will last for years, if not decades, could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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