

Testing free speech In America

USA

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AT the time that 9-11 stung America, I had been working on a book that would look into the question of Qur'anic reasoning; it would explore the different modes of reasoning that this Book employs to convey its message. I was pursuing this project primarily as a social scientist, to contest the claim — made by a long and distinguished line of Eurocentric thinkers — that the West possesses reasoning to a degree not found in other civilizations: and this is the essence of Europe's superiority over all 'Others.'

When the nineteen hijackers struck, all hell broke loose. The hijackers had 'changed the world for ever.' Instantly, the United States declared a war on terrorism. Most Muslims suspected that this was a cover for a war against them. Many in the United States also claimed that the "clash of civilizations" they had predicted was at hand. The United States was now fighting World War III or IV - take your pick - and this was going to be a war to the finish. At the end of it, the Islamic countries would be defeated and democratized — the way Germany, Italy and Japan had been.

Instantly, the rhetoric on the clash of civilizations also reached fever pitch. A variety of charges were being recycled against Islam and Islamic countries: that one or both are opposed to modernization; that Islam is incompatible with democracy; that the Qur'an denies women any rights comparable to what they enjoy in the West; that the Qur'an preaches hatred and war against Infidels; that Islamic countries have contributed nothing to human civilization over the past thousand years. In short, Islam was an aberration that had to be fixed.

This resounding rhetoric also changed my plans. Now I set aside my work on Qur'anic reasoning. I decided to enter the domain of public discourse in order to argue against the "clash:" to argue that 9-11 or the war on terrorism did not herald a clash of civilizations. They had to be examined in the context of the global capitalist system, divided between a rich and dominant Center and a poor or mostly poor and subordinate Periphery.

Americans happy; but this did not interest the attackers. Instead, they focused on my description of 9-11 as part of a global Islamic insurgency against imperialism, and, hence, its similarity with the American war of independence. This is what appears to have 'provoked' their orchestrated attacks — many of them death threats — against me. In addition, I gather from the e-mails sent to me that the attackers have also been calling on Northeastern University to have me fired.

I have since been wondering why my suggestion that Al Qaeda — like the American colonists before them — was leading an insurgency has provoked such a storm of vicious attacks. Are there no parallels between the two insurgencies? I point out that "the parallels are not exact. The colonists did not deliberately target civilians; the nineteen hijackers did." But this cannot obscure the fact that both were insurgencies, even though Al Qaeda for

Americans have been trained to see only their own greatness, not the human costs that others have been made to pay, and continue to pay, for these successes. Can peace — for America and the world — be founded on such greatness? One might imagine that this was the question that the attackers of 9/11 were asking Americans. Sadly, the United States has answered this question with a war on terrorism.

dom"), but because of what we do — because of specific aspects of US foreign policy.

(4) The doctrine that informs OBL/Al Qaeda is that of 'defensive jihad' — they see the Muslim world under attack by the US, and call upon scripture to support defensive military action by all faithful members of the "umma" (the universal body of Islam)."

If Al Qaeda is "part of and attempting to lead a global Muslim insurgency" and the American war of independence was an insurgency against the British, are we allowed to make the inference that there are parallels — not exact parallels — between the two insurgencies? The colonists fighting the British were rebels to the British; in America's official language, today, they might be called 'terrorists'. The Islamic insurgents today, whether those who led the 9-11 attacks or others fighting the American occupation of Iraq, are terrorists in the official lexicon of the United States.

The differences too between the two insurgencies may be worth noting. (a) The Americans fought not only to free themselves from the British but to establish liberty in their newly founded republic. The Al Qaeda does not espouse western ideals of democracy. (b) The Americans did not target civilians in their war of independence. The Al Qaeda has been targeting civilians; in particular, it targeted American civilians on September 11, 2001.

How categorical are these differences? (a) Although committed to the inalienable rights of 'man,' the American republic did not free its black population until 1866, and did not grant them a semblance of civil rights until 1966. (b) In their war of independence, the Americans may not have targeted civilians, but they did commit atrocities, and they did inflict collateral damage on civilians. Worse, the same American colonists — before, during and after their war of independence — continued their policies of driving out the Indians from their lands, producing a thinning of their population from perhaps 20 million in 1800 to 250,000 in 1900.

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man Center and a poor or mostly poor and subordinate Periphery.

I have since argued that 9-11 was a riposte from a particular segment of the Periphery — the Arab-Islamic segment — where the weight of the Center in recent decades had been more crushing than elsewhere. And this for two reasons, primarily: they had oil and they faced Israel, a new, expansionist colonial-settler state. These positions were considered 'radical' by America's mainstream media: and they shut me out. This wasn't the first time that I had tested free speech in America. My earlier foray into the domain of free speech, in 1990, had also been firmly repulsed. I was luckier this time. Now there was the internet. In particular, there was *Counterpunch*, which gave me a small entry into the public discourse on the 'clash' of civilizations.

I was thankful for the space opened up by the left and Islamic media on the internet. However, even this limited room for the exercise of free speech did not come without a cost. Over the past three years, some Americans have sought to silence me in a variety of ways that has included hate e-mails, spoofed e-mails that sent out scurrilous anti-Semitic screeds claiming to originate from me, massive spams, and, not least, pressures on Northeastern University to fire me. I have weathered these attacks, and survived the last — thanks in large measure to that wonderful institution that still works, academic freedom.

These attacks were resumed starting December 30, 2004, after several hate websites began posting selected paragraphs from an article, "America and Islam, Seeking Parallels," that had appeared on some websites in recent days. The article made several points. Indeed, much of it was dedicated to castigating Muslims for their political failure to resist, in their own countries, the surrogate tyrannies that have mangled their lives.

Indeed, in rhetorical flourish, I blamed the attacks of 9-11 on this Muslim failure. That should have made many right-wing

now uses different methods. I might add, more abhorrent methods.

But this is not the first time that insurgents have used such methods. The Zionists did so against the British and more massively against the Palestinians; several of them went on to lead Israel. So did the Irish, the Algerians and South Africans. Nelson Mandela, once jailed as a terrorist, is now the greatest world statesman.

Was it because I describe the attacks as "in many ways a work of daring and imagination: if one can think objectively of such horrors." This may have been indelicate, but, again, it would be the course of wisdom to recognize that with daring and imagination — but without weapons, much less WMDs — a handful of men succeeded in inflicting great harm on the world's greatest country. The United States cannot choose to ignore this only because it is disturbing.

In addition, my thesis about the global Islamic insurgency is not novel even in mainstream media. Michael Scheuer, the head of CIA's counterinsurgency cell against Osama bin Laden in the late 1990s, has made the same point — and very pointedly — in two books, *Through Our Enemy's Eyes* (February 2003) and *Imperial Hubris* (July 2004). More recently, since leaving the CIA, Scheuer has been articulating this thesis with great frequency on all the news networks. Could it be that America's rightwing has missed all this?

Here is a summary of the thesis Michael Scheuer has articulated in his books. I copy this from a review of the second book by R. Hutchinson: "(1) Osama bin Laden (OBL) is neither an evil madman nor just a criminal — he is a highly competent, religiously motivated, charismatic leader who we had best take seriously. (2) Al Qaeda is not a terrorist organization, but is rather part of and attempting to lead a global Muslim insurgency. (3) OBL & Al Qaeda are not opposed to the US because of "who we are," (i.e. "we stand for free-

million in 1800 to 250,000 in 1900.

The American experiment has been a great success: in the ways that the western world generally recognizes success — and in other ways too. It has been a great economic success, having built the world's largest economy on the foundations established in 1783. It has been a great political success, eventually rising to stride the world like a colossus, commanding a military budget now that nearly rivals that of the rest of the world.

But these successes weren't built overnight, and they weren't built from a scratch. More importantly, these successes were built on huge costs — to the Indians, African-Americans, and over the past centuries, one must recognize the baleful shadow that American power has cast over the Periphery, including the Islamic world.

Americans have been trained to see only their own greatness, not the human costs that others have been made to pay, and continue to pay, for these successes. Can peace — for America and the world — be founded on such greatness? One might imagine that this was the question that the attackers of 9-11 were asking Americans. Sadly, the United States has answered this question with a war on terrorism.

In the words of Michael Scheuer, and very to establish peace, the United States must now "proceed with relentless, brutal, and, yes, blood-soaked offensive military actions until we have annihilated the Islamists who threaten us."

I part company with Michael Scheuer on this prognostication. Perhaps that is why some elements of America's right wing would have me packed off to gitmo, hang me from a rope, or fry me with a J-Dam — only some of the colourful threats I have received. On my part, I will continue to speak for a just world — the only firm foundation of peace — even if this displeases those who find peace in devastating the world. ■

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