

April 9, 2010



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Posted: April 9, 2010 05:39 AM

Blowback: The Lessons of the Moscow Bombings for America

The horrid attacks of 9/11 led to the cry: Why do they hate us? The recent bombings in the Moscow subway remind us that terrorism is most often a political tool used to advance political ends.

Of course, after 9/11 President George W. Bush and his neoconservative supporters reassured Americans: we were attacked because we are beautiful. Evil, nasty, mean foreigners hate Americans because we are free, fabulous, nice, selfless, and all-around good guys, busily spreading freedom, liberty, capitalism, democracy, and the hallowed American way around the world.

Many Americans preferred to accept this explanation than to reflect on the sometimes less beautiful actions of our government. To seek an explanation was not to excuse the inexcusable: monstrous, murderous attacks on civilians. But understanding what motivated people to kill could help prevent future killing.

Terrorism long has been a common tool used by individuals, groups, and occasionally nations to promote political ends. Why some people hate other people often is complicated. Nevertheless, the historical pattern is clear. Terrorism has been deployed against Russian Tsars, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, British colonial officials, and Algerian governments from French colonial to recent military. Basque and Irish separatists employed assassination and bombing. Until Iraq, the most promiscuous suicide bombers were Tamils in Sri Lanka. Needless to say, in none of these cases did terrorism occur in response to American freedom or other values.

More tellingly, it is impossible to deny that U.S. foreign policy has inadvertently created enemies and turned Americans into targets. For instance, nearly three decades ago President Ronald Reagan intervened in a multi-sided civil war in Lebanon, taking the side of the minority Christian government which controlled little more than the capital of Beirut. The American military

actively targeted Muslim and Druze factions; the U.S.S. New Jersey bombarded Lebanese villages. It should have surprised no one when the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps barracks were attacked. Had Washington kept its forces at home, Islamic terrorists likely would have stayed home as well. They would have had no cause to pack their bags and head to America to wreak havoc and murder.

At times, U.S. policymakers have demonstrated extraordinary hubris and callousness. In 1996 United Nations Ambassador Madeleine Albright was asked to justify sanctions against Iraq, which had killed a half million Arab children. That number surely was inflated and Saddam Hussein bore the bulk of the blame for any deaths, but Amb. Albright did not contest the claim. Instead, she responded chillingly: "we think the price is worth it." Washington's assertion of the unilateral right to kill hundreds of thousands of Muslim kids did not suggest beauty to the Islamic world.

Still, we were told after 9/11 that to even ask whether U.S. government behavior might have sparked antagonism against America was unpatriotic. Why would anyone be upset with Washington imposing deadly sanctions, unseating democratically elected leaders, supporting dictatorships, backing another country's Apartheid-like system on a subject people, and promiscuously waging war for its own purposes? Perish the thought that someone somewhere might end up disliking the American government and seek to strike back.

The good news was that no angry individuals or groups had nuclear-tipped missiles or strategic air wings or carrier battle groups. (Some foreign governments possessed such weapons, but they had "return addresses" and faced devastating retaliation if they struck the U.S. for whatever reason.) The bad news was that terrorism became the tool by which those who hated American policy brought the war home to America.

The Moscow attacks should highlight the fact that there are consequences to intervention. The Putin government blames religious fanatics for Chechen terrorism, but Robert Pape, Lindsey O'Rourke, and Jenna McDermit, all of the University of Chicago, studied 63 Chechen suicide terrorists. Few had religious motives. Rather: "As we have discovered in our research on Lebanon, the West Bank, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, suicide terrorist campaigns are almost always a last resort against foreign military occupation. Chechnya is a powerful demonstration of this phenomenon at work."

Ignoring the obvious merely ensures future terrorist attacks. The *New York Times* reported: "Federal operatives have no way of knowing whom to trust. Opposition fighters might be the disheveled young fanatics evoked by Russian propaganda--or they could be local bureaucrats. Or policemen. And the more violence Russian forces use to hunt them down, the deeper the reservoir of hatred they leave behind."

Consider the Moscow bombings. Both suicide bombers apparently were so-called "Black Widows," whose militant husbands had been killed by Russian security forces. Forget about which side has the better cause in this brutal battle over Chechnya's future. Dzhennet Abdurakhmanova and Markha Ustrakhanova did not kill themselves because Russia is so free or because they hate freedom. Rather, they almost certainly were motivated by a mix of revenge for their husbands and desire for Chechen independence.

Even some conservatives, who typically decry discussion of "root causes" of terrorism against America, have a different take on Russian policy in Chechnya. In *National Review's* The Corner Alex Alexiev wrote about Kremlin-related "root causes" of Chechen terrorism: "it is impossible to imagine a harsher and more brutal treatment than the one Moscow and its henchmen have been inflicting on the local populace for the past decade."

Unfortunately, there is no reason to believe that America is exempt from the same sort of

blowback. The fact that the U.S. is not Russia, and it is not, is true but irrelevant. The determining issue is what those on the receiving end of American policies believe.

Consider the newly released WikiLeaks video of U.S. forces killing a dozen or so Iraqi civilians. Particularly striking was the attack on a second group of civilians who drove up to aid a wounded Iraqi--who had no weapon. One American soldier commented after the wounding of two children, whose father was killed: "Well it's their fault for bringing their kids into a battle"--at a time when entire Iraqi cities were potential battlegrounds. One can cite the fog of war as justification for the killings, but that is unlikely to placate relatives and friends of those who died. It would hardly surprise if an event like this pushed some angry young men toward insurgency and/or terrorism.

The same problem is evident in Afghanistan. Gen. Stanley McChrystal recently admitted: "We've shot an amazing number of people [at checkpoints] and killed a number and, to my knowledge, none has proven to have been a real threat to the force." Yet, he added, he knew of no case when "we have engaged in an escalation of force incident and hurt someone has it turned out that the vehicle had a suicide bomb or weapons in it."

There is no reason to expect Afghans, or Muslims elsewhere, to cheerfully wave off such deaths. We Americans may believe that we are beautiful. But others around the world likely are less convinced as the U.S. government is killing people, supporting tyrants, and engaging in other less than beautiful behavior. The fact that we believe, however reasonably, such conduct to be necessary--that "the price is worth it"--does not mean others will agree with us.

Terrorism cannot be justified, whether committed by Russian anarchists, Tamil Tigers, Basque separatists, the Irish Republican Army, Chechen militants, al-Qaeda, Palestinians, or Afghan and Iraqi insurgents. But terrorism can be understood and explained. And we should use that knowledge in making policy. It may be inevitable that the U.S. government will make some enemies. However, Washington should stop carelessly making unnecessary enemies.

America is not invulnerable. Washington cannot expect to act in the world without consequence. Jesus insisted that people "count the cost" before following him (Luke 14:28). Policymakers should do the same before they casually thrust the U.S. into military conflicts, political struggles, and other volatile controversies abroad. It turns out that the cost of global intervention can be high indeed.

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