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MARCH 30, 2010

They Hate Us for Lady Gaga



The Wall Street Journal's Bret Stephens **argues** that Lady Gaga and America's sexualized culture are vastly more responsible for jihadism than any of this business about America's foreign policy in the region for the past thirty years.

Justin Logan **objects**:

Dangerously, though, Stephens veers back toward falsifiability by writing that “the core complaint that the Islamists from Waziristan to Tahrir to Gaza have lodged against the West” is that we’re too sexualized.

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...men to Gaza have lodged against the West is that we're too secure-up. This is, of course, not accurate. Bin Laden's 1996 fatwa, after all, was not titled "Declaration of War against the Americans with their Supple Buttocks and Protuberant Breasts." Instead, it was called "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places." Or you can take a look at the second fatwa, released in 1998. The three big claims made against us in there were

1. Our presence in Saudi Arabia and support for the Saudi government, which he hates;
2. Our sanctions regime against Iraq and its alleged effects on Iraqi civilians; and
3. Our support for Israel.

There's a lot you can do with this information, up to and including supposing that bin Laden would not be satisfied even if these three conditions were somehow removed. You can also read the actual fatwas and conclude that the Israel stuff was far from the centerpiece of the argument and seemed sort of tacked on at the end for good measure. I actually think both these arguments are good ones. **But actually thinking about what's in those texts should cause you to ask why, of all the grievances he could have lodged, including our reverence for Josephine Baker, did he pick those three issues? The answer that presents itself is that he is not an idiot and he thinks the three points he made will be most effective in recruiting people to the cause.** [Emphasis mine.]

Larison **piles on:**

The recent Moscow subway bombings are instructive on this point. The bombings are outrageous atrocities for which there is no excuse or justification, but one would have to be a blind fool to say that Chechen grievances, which outside jihadists have been exploiting for the last decade, are based in morally offensive Russian pop culture. It is acceptable for hegemonists to acknowledge this when Russia is the target of terrorist attacks, but when it comes to acknowledging U.S. and allied policies as important contributing factors we are treated instead to these sweeping cultural arguments and close readings of Sayyid Qutb.

Larison also points out the Qutb penned his anti-Western diatribes in 1948. So why wasn't the West besieged with jihadist attacks since then? The answer, of course, is that whatever inchoate loathing radical Muslims felt toward the modern West did not galvanize into a violent reaction against us until we began to move militarily into the Middle East.

Again, I don't believe this can be reduced to an either/or proposition. It's obvious that Islamic radicals have no love for democracy or any culture besides their own puritanical brand of Islam. The **Bamyán Buddhas** had nothing to do with American foreign policy or the West, and the Taliban blew them up anyway. No doubt there are those who would kill simply to purge the world of Western/infidel cultural influences.

But this impulse has become a mass movement (to the extent that al Qaeda can be said to be a mass movement) precisely because it has hitched itself to a set of political grievances and objectives which are held by people who don't give a fig about Lady Gaga or Brittany Spears or who have no interest in living under retrograde Taliban rule.

As Logan notes:

For example, public opinion scholars Andrew Kohut and Richard Wike drew on six years of survey data in the Islamic world and concluded in 2008 that while "America's image in much of the Muslim world remains abysmal," "most of the story is opposition to American foreign policy rather than value divides or religious-based enmity." Or look at the U.S. Defense Department's reporting on the issue: "American direct intervention in the Muslim World has paradoxically elevated the stature of and support for radical Islamists, while diminishing support for the

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United States to single-digits in some Arab societies...Muslims do not 'hate our freedom,' but rather, they hate our policies." [.pdf] Basically everybody who's studied this question in any detail agrees with this general argument.

(AP Photo)

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