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Opportunistic Islamophobia

By Andrew Levine
January 1, 2016



If, as he and other true believers think, George W. Bush really does have to meet his Maker someday, and if He (sic) really is just and good, and if the point of the meeting is to decide whether George will spend eternity in Heaven or Hell, then that man should be thanking the alleged divinity every moment of his waking life for making ignorance bliss.

If he had any understanding at all of the harm he has done to his country and his world, “nervous as hell” would not even begin to describe what George Bush’s state of mind would now be. Among upper echelon American politicians, there is no one else in living memory, except perhaps Dick Cheney, with less chance of making out well on Judgment Day.

However, among the few and far between positive entries for George W. in the Great Book Up Yonder, there is one that will surely stand out: that in the days that followed the attacks on the

Twin Towers and the Pentagon, he urged Americans not to blame all Muslims, and not to blame Islam, the religion the perpetrators professed and in the name of which they claimed to act.

Too bad for him that his moment of decency was so short-lived! Within days, the Commander-in-Chief went before a joint session of Congress to proclaim that “they” did it because “they hate our freedom,” and that “we” will get “them,” just as surely as “whoever is not with us is against us.”

Then he and Cheney and the neocons they empowered got to work mobilizing public support for the perpetual wars on the Muslim world that they had been yearning to launch. To that end, they were not beyond turning a blind eye on flickers of Islamophobic rage or even sometimes stoking the flames.

Still, the fact remains: for at least a few days, Bush did do the right thing.

How much credit can he expect the Good Lord to give him for that? Quite a bit surely, but less perhaps than we might nowadays suppose.

According to theologians throughout the ages, God looks down upon His creation “from the aspect of Eternity,” not the present moment. But it is only from the standpoint of the present moment – or, rather, from the seemingly endless moment that began after 9/11 – that Bush’s admonitions even seem noteworthy.

Before that, it would probably not have occurred to most Americans to blame all Muslims for 9/11, or to think ill of Islam. We Americans have never been Islamophiles. We just never gave Muslims or Islam much thought.

To be sure, as high minded academics have been reminding us for years, Orientalism is endemic in the high and low cultures of Western countries. But at a visceral, intuitive level, Islamophobia never used to be – except perhaps in France and England, to the extent that habits of mind that took shape during the days of the French and British empires survive, or in Spain, where memories of Iberia’s Moorish past linger.

Or so it appeared. It is now plain that the seeds were present on American soil too, maintained in a state of seemingly permanent dormancy.

In the aftermath of Israel’s 1973 war with Egypt, when gas prices rose and Arabs got the blame, there were intimations of what could happen. But that blew over quickly, and was soon forgotten. It took 9/11 to break the spell.

There was a precedent for this.

Before Pearl Harbor, a different, more benign, even positive, strain of Orientalist thinking pervaded American views of Japan. But except along the West Coast in areas where citizens of Japanese descent lived, Americans never gave Japan or Japanese immigrants much thought.

Needless to say, white Americans despised the Japanese, along with other “Orientals,” the Chinese especially. They were even known to go on, half seriously, about the Yellow Peril. But no one obsessed over the Japanese in their midst or felt insecure on their account. After Pearl Harbor, this changed overnight.

Japanese bombers breached Fortress America, an intolerable affront.

No one can do that now – because Fortress America is a distant memory, a victim of technological progress in the transport, communications, and armaments industries. But vestiges of the old way of thinking survive. It is still a tenet of the American civil religion that the Home of the Brave can rightfully do almost anything it wants around the world, but that its own territory is inviolable, and that, when transgressions occur, the transgressors must dearly pay.

This is not a uniquely American sentiment, but probably nowhere else in the world is the feeling so deeply inscribed in the popular psyche.

Japan attacked Hawaii and Japanese-Americans were made to suffer on that account. There was no military necessity for this; the only purpose it served was psychological. Once the war ended, that purpose disappeared, and anti-Japanese sentiment faded away.

There was a minor recurrence in the Reagan days, as it was becoming clear that the Japanese auto industry was putting Detroit to shame. But this too passed. We Americans are fine with the Japanese now. Except for a few rough patches along the way, we always have been.

Neither Germany nor Italy attacked America on American soil, but this is not the only reason why Japanese-Americans were rounded up and put in internment camps, while German- and Italian-Americans were not.

America’s enemies in Europe were white — and, as Black Lives Matter activists keep reminding us, white skin privilege counts for a lot.

Also, a large part of the population of the United States was entirely or partly of German or Italian descent. Even if it wanted to, the American government could hardly haul so many of its citizens off to internment camps. The political class would never have allowed it, in any case; they were too dependent on German-American and Italian-American good will and votes.

But this is not the whole story.

In America, immigrants that come from countries or parts of the world that the American government might someday want to demonize had better organize politically and agitate for their own group interests. Working hard and minding their own business is not enough.

In the nineties, when, following Germany’s lead, the Clintons got a notion to dismantle Yugoslavia, Americans of Serbian origin learned this lesson the hard way. The opprobrium that fell on Serbs in the old country fell on them as well. And, unlike, say, their more politically active Croatian cousins, their influence on American policy in Yugoslavia was nil.

In truth, Serbs were no more villainous than any of the other ethnic groups caught up in Yugoslavia's troubles. Yet, Western politicians and media saw to it that they would be deemed the bad guys. On the merits alone, it could just as well have been the Croats or the Muslims in Bosnia or the Kosovo Albanians or, though their secession proceeded comparatively peacefully, even the Slovenians. But Serbs took the heat.

Geopolitical considerations factored in, as did the fact that Serbia's leaders were less biddable than the others. But the fact that Serbs in the United States and Canada were politically quiescent was decisive. With no organized interest groups to hold them to account, American politicians, like Joe Biden, could all but say that Serbs eat their own children, and get away with it.

Muslims in the United States now find themselves caught up in a similar situation. All the vast majority of them ever wanted was peace and quiet and opportunities to make a living. All they have been getting since 9/11 – or rather since the aura of George Bush's rare good deed faded away a few days later – is grief.

This hasn't all come out of nothing. The groundwork has been building since the waning days of the Carter administration.

First, there was the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis that followed. Americans knew nothing of the context, but they heard the call "Death to America!" loud and clear.

The conventional wisdom back then was that Shiites were the problem. Mainstream media assured an anxious public that mindless fanaticism is all but unknown in Sunni circles.

Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, knew better. With a view to getting the Soviet Union enmeshed in a Vietnam-like "quagmire," he did his best to stir up Sunni fanatics to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. It was thanks to him that Osama Bin Laden made his entry on the world stage.

To get his scheme started and to keep it going, the CIA was not enough. Brzezinski therefore got the Pakistani intelligence services involved, and he encouraged the Saudis and the Gulf States to channel public and private money, and Salafist ideology, to insurgents in Afghanistan and throughout the Muslim world.

Still, none of this did much to disrupt the equanimity of Muslim communities in the United States and other Western countries; it was happening at the other end of the world.

Even during the hostage crisis, Iranians, both pro- and anti-Shah, fared well in the United States — much like refugees from revolutionary Cuba had been doing. Muslims generally remained untouched.

Before 9/11, even Christian fundamentalists were not especially bothered by the Muslims in their midst. It would never have occurred to them that their Muslim neighbors were slyly biding their time, the better to unleash terror on God-fearing Christians, overthrow the U.S. government and Constitution, establish a Caliphate, and impose sharia law upon the Land of the (formerly) Free. Even words like “caliphate” and “sharia” were unknown in their benighted circles.

It may have been different in parts of Europe where memories of ancient conflicts between Christians and Turks (Ottomans) survived, along with attitudes shaped nearly a millennium ago, at the time of the Crusades. But American Protestants and Catholics knew little of any of this, and cared less. Those who did considered it ancient folklore.

Indeed, it was commonplace in the United States to use the word “crusade” in total innocence of its historical connotations, simply to mean a protracted and concerted effort. George Bush famously used it that way in almost the same breath that he advised Americans to stay calm — and also to shop up a storm.

This has now changed one hundred eighty degrees.

Christians are not the only problem. Lately, some rightwing Zionists have taken to championing Islamophobia too, creatively adapting many of the tropes of classical anti-Semitism to this end.

Jewish Islamophobia is a bastard offspring of the Zionist colonial project, but it should not be confused with settlers’ attitudes towards those Arabs, Muslim and Christian, whose land they coveted. In despising the indigenous peoples they dispossess, Zionists were, and still are, like colonists everywhere.

They therefore have never had much love for Arabs, or vice versa. In the past, though, when the level of Palestinian resistance was manageable, they were not beyond exploiting the exotic ways of Palestine’s *indigènes* for the benefit of the tourist trade. This is normal in settler societies: Americans, Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders exploit their dispossessed native populations in much the same way.

For the most part, though, Zionists respected Islam, and had no quarrel with Muslims generally. There are deep historical reasons for this. Until well into the modern era, Jews fared better in Muslim lands than in Christendom, and Muslims have always accorded the Jewish religion more respect than Christians did. The feeling was reciprocated.

But with Islamophobia on the rise in the West, and with Israel as dependent as ever on Western, especially American, military and diplomatic support, it seems to have occurred to Israel’s leaders, and therefore to its most zealous and retrograde supporters abroad, that it wouldn’t hurt to jump aboard the Islamophobia bandwagon.

The motive may have been opportunistic but, as happens when demons are aroused, the sentiments become heartfelt.

At this point in Zionism's history, Islamophobia actually makes sense. It is pointless now only to demonize Palestinians because, even with mainstream media working overtime to derogate their cause, there is hardly anyone in the West who does not understand that the people the Zionists dispossessed are victims, not victimizers.

And there is a limit to how much Zionists can target Arabs generally when the worst of the worst, the feudal rulers of Saudi Arabia, have become, in effect, Israel's best friends in the region.

Also, seven decades after the end of World War II, nearly all the moral capital that can be squeezed out of guilt over the Nazi Judeocide is exhausted. If Israeli governments want to keep on getting *carte blanche* from the West to do as they please to Palestinians, they need additional rationales. To that end, Islamophobia can be helpful.

But, at least in the American case, for this to work, the public must perceive Islamist inspired atrocities as greater or lesser variations on the Pearl Harbor theme.

Foreign policy gurus, fundamentalist Christian preachers, and Zionists struggling to keep public opinion on Israel's side have all contributed to the rise of modern Islamophobia. What a hodgepodge! But they all have at least one thing in common: opportunism.

However this is nothing compared to the rank opportunism of the Islamist thugs that America and its European junior partners, along with the Gulf monarchies and Pakistan's security services, conjured into being.

The contrast with the Japanese in World War II is stark. Having nothing to gain from making the lives of Japanese-Americans worse, they were not trying to stir up ethnic or racial discord.

The Empire of Japan attacked Pearl Harbor preemptively, for strategic reasons – thinking, correctly, that the United States stood in the way of its designs in the Pacific, China and Southeast Asia. The harm that the American and Canadian governments went on to do to their Japanese citizens was, from Japan's point of view, collateral damage.

It is different with the Islamists let loose by Brzezinski's machinations and the unholy alliance he forged between the United States and the darkest forces in the Muslim world.

More malicious even than America's neocons, the miscreants in Al Qaeda and its offshoots and affiliates, and now in the Islamic State (Daesh), yearn for a "clash of civilizations" that will disgorge the Muslim world from the clutches of the West.

To that end, they have taken the lesson of Pearl Harbor to heart, and built upon it.

The Japanese invented Judo, but their military strategists never figured out how to apply it against the United States. All they could think to do was drag the United States into war, and then try in vain to defeat it the old fashioned way.

This is not even an option for the radical Islamists America created. But they understand that they don't need to win any battles. As in Judo, they can win the war by getting America to defeat itself.

Bin Laden seems to have thought that this required pulling off the functional equivalent of a Pearl Harbor. To set the process in motion, he may have been right. But, by now, small scale, even amateurish, terrorism is enough — provided it makes Americans feel violated — and affronted that anyone would dare do unto them what the American government regularly does unto others.

When the perpetrators are Muslims, it only magnifies the power of even the smallest violations of this taboo. As IS strategists evidently understand: when “the other” attacks the West, the West will lash out mindlessly in response, America leading the way. This has happened time and again.

It is also plain that the more of “them” that the West kills, the more yet more of them will rise up to take their place.

This is so obvious that even Hillary Clinton gets it. It is the reason she gives for why America should put no “boots on the ground” in Syria – as if soldiers, “boots on the ground,” really are more likely to cause Syrians to want to fight back than the drones and bombs she, following Obama's lead, hankers to drop upon them.

Her real reason, of course, is that, like Bill – or, for that matter, like Donald Trump — Hillary will say and do whatever she thinks she must to get what she wants. What she wants now is to move back into the White House. After nearly a decade and a half of endless wars in the Near East, yet more body bags coming home from yet another Middle Eastern country is not likely to improve her chances. Hillary is therefore opposed.

Too bad for the IS. Their strategists would like nothing more than for America to become even more deeply immersed in the quagmire Bush and Cheney stumbled into, and that Obama and the Clinton State Department deepened.

This is why they would be pleased as could be if some Republican, even more bellicose than Hillary, would win the election in November. They know, however, that no matter how many atrocities they commit, this is not going to happen.

They know that no one acceptable to the GOP base can be elected President of the United States. In 2012, even Benjamin Netanyahu, with all his blather about “existential threats” to Israel, couldn't pull that off — and, instead of suicidal twenty-somethings to work with, he had Sheldon Adelson bankrolling his efforts.

But the IS can cause Islamophobia to spread in the United States – in accord with its designs.

For that, all they have to do is commit unspeakable atrocities anywhere in the world and, from time to time, violate the sanctity of the American homeland.

For them, this is child's play because they know how to get American politicians and American media to do their work for them.

They are not just lashing out; they are using terror strategically – to drive a wedge between the West and the Muslim world that, they hope, will leave the world's Muslims nowhere to go but into their clutches.

Because all but a handful of underage, disaffected Muslims know better, this strategy is, ultimately, bound to fail. But, for now and the foreseeable future, it is working anyway – because America's leaders, and their counterparts elsewhere in the West, have neither the intelligence nor the courage to do anything less imprudent than succumb.