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## Terrorism: Then & Now

By Conn Hallinan

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*The year 2016 is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Irish Easter Rebellion. Throughout the year I will try to revisit some of the lessons of Ireland's struggle for freedom.*

Bombs explode in a subway. The victims are everyday people who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. What follows is outrage: track down the perpetrators. The people who set off the bombs are monsters and inhuman fanatics, thunder the authorities.

But the year is not 2016, it is 1883 during the “Dynamite War” waged by mainly Irish-American members of the Fenians against the English occupation of Ireland. The Fenian Brotherhood was founded in 1848. The “War” targeted the underground, train stations, city halls, public plazas, and factories in London, Manchester, and Liverpool. The war spanned four years, and in the light of the current terrorist attacks in the Middle East and Europe, it is an instructive comparison.

On one level there is no similarity. The “Dynamite War” killed and injured very few people, while terrorist attacks and bombs in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, France and Belgium have murdered hundreds and wounded thousands. It is also hard to compare John Devoy and Patrick Tynan of the Fenians to the likes of the Islamic State’s Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Muslim al-Turkmani.

Yet there is an historical lesson here, and we ignore it at our peril. Terrorism is a difficult subject to talk about because anything other than outrage seems like one is making an excuse for unspeakably heinous acts. And yet if we are to seriously look for solutions, that requires asking “why,” even if the answers are uncomfortable.

There are certainly easy “solutions” out there: occupy Muslim communities and torture suspects we arrest. Unleash yet more drones, carpet bomb the bastards, and, if necessary, send in the Marines. But that is exactly what we have doing for the past three decades, and is there anyone who would seriously argue that things are better now than they were in 1981?

Did the invasion of Afghanistan muzzle terrorism? A decade and a half later, we are still at war in that poor benighted country, and the terrorism that we experienced on 9/11 has spread to Madrid, Paris, Beirut, Ankara, Cairo, Brussels, Damascus, Baghdad, and other cities. We sowed the wind in Somalia, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Syria. Did we expect to reap less than a whirlwind?

In his book “Blowback,” the late Chalmers Johnson chronicled the ricochets from American foreign policy. We raised up the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan to defeat the Russians and helped create Osama bin Laden. We ally ourselves with Saudi Arabia, the country that supplied most of the people who flew those airplanes into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, whose reactionary brand of Islam has helped create an army of jihadists worldwide.

The flood of refugees headed toward Europe is a roadmap of U.S. interventions in Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Libya. In the case of the latter, we created a failed state, whose massive arms caches has succeeded in destabilizing significant parts of Central Africa.

The nature of American foreign policy—as well as those of some of its allies—is where the conversation of what to do about terrorism has to begin. This is not to excuse terrorism, but to try to understand what it emerges from, instead of playing an endless—and eventually futile—game of whack-a-mole.

For people like Donald Trump and Ted Cruz the answer is simple: terrorists are evil Muslims (although sometimes just being a Muslim is enough). But how many of our leaders ask, “Why are they doing this” and are really interested in an answer? Hillary Clinton says she doesn’t think we should torture people, but she is all for bombing the bejesus out of them and overthrowing

their governments. Bernie Sanders is much more sensible, but even he voted for the Yugoslav War, which set off NATO's eastward march and led to the current crisis over the Ukraine.

Terrorism is not a thing you can wage war against, it is a tactic employed by the less powerful against the more powerful. If you can't defeat someone's armies you can always blow up their citizens. Simply using military power in response to terrorism is the most efficient way to recruit new terrorists. Drone strikes are supposed to be "surgical" weapons that only kill bad guys. But as the Bureau of Investigative Journalism has found, drones have killed thousands of civilians. Each of those civilians has a family, and each of those family (clan, tribe, etc.) members is now a potential recruit. The drone war is a perfect example of Johnson's "blowback."

Of course, terrorism generates its own "blowbacks." The "Dynamite War" didn't do much damage to the British, but it was a political catastrophe for the Irish. The English used it—along with the infamous 1882 Phoenix Park murders of the colonial authority's chief secretaries—to pass the "Perpetual Coercion Act" and imprison hundreds of Irish activists. The loss of those leaders seriously damaged efforts by the Land League to stop a wave of tenant farmer evictions that followed in the wake of the 1878-79 crop failures.

Those evictions produced a "blowback" of their own. Tens of thousands of Irish were forced to emigrate to America, bringing with them a deep rage at English landlords and the colonial authorities. That fury fed the anger that many Irish-Americans still held against the British, and that led to a revival of the Fenians and the launching of the "Dynamite War." It was good old American know how that built the bombs that blew up targets in England.

The "War" was actually similar to the current wave of terrorism, at least in conception. Rather than going after the English armed forces and police, most the bombs were set in public places with the explicit idea of terrorizing everyday life. The plan was to transplant the violence of the colonial occupation to the home country. It did, indeed, scare people, including many English who formerly favored the Irish cause, and turned those who were indifferent anti-Irish. It derailed the Home Rule movement for several decades.

The Colonial authorities responded with yet greater repression, much as many of the current candidates for the White House would if given a chance. But while the "Dynamite War" was ill conceived and counter productive, it was a reflection of the basic injustice of colonialism. The Islamic State is a genuine monstrosity, but it reflects a hundred years of European and American manipulation of the Middle East's resources and politics. When Britain and France divided up the Middle East to their liking in 1916—deliberately building in ethnic, tribal and religious instability—did they really think there would never be a day of reckoning?

There are monsters in the Middle East, but we have helped create them. The question is, can we stop them?

We should know by now that more bombs and troops do exactly the opposite. To seriously tackle terrorism will take a fundamental re-examination of U.S. foreign policy. It must start with challenging the idea that everything about this country is the "best," the ideology of "American exceptionalism" that underlies so much of our strategic policies. That idea of "exceptionalism"

gives us the right to intervene in other countries' internal affairs, to subvert their political structures, and, if necessary, seek regime change.

We preach “democracy” to Cuba, China and Russia, while being perfectly comfortable with Saudi Arabia and the other autocratic monarchies that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council. People take note of that contradiction and quite logically assume that it is hypocrisy and has more to do with our “interests” than any commitment to the right of people to choose how to run their own lives.

In any case our own political system increasingly looks like some grotesque caricature of democracy, where presidential candidates blithely propose ignoring the Constitution and violating international law, and where a handful of billionaires can dominate the public space.

We are the most powerful economic and military force on the planet, so overthrowing a government or strangling its economy is not all that hard to do. At least in the short run. But the world is simply far too complex to fit into one model of government or worldview and, sooner or later, people will dig in their heels.

How we respond to that resistance is what we need to examine. If the response is force, we can hardly complain when we find ourselves the target of “asymmetrical violence”—terrorism.

The people who set the bombs have to be caught and punished, but that will not end the problem. The Irish who murdered the colonial secretaries in Phoenix Park were caught and punished, but it did not make Ireland a calm place or end Irish resistance to the English occupation. That was resolved when the British finally realized that they could no longer determine the history of another country. We must do the same. And that will take a conversation that we have not yet had. It's time to start.