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GOVERNMENT SHOULD STOP ITS OWN VIOLENCE FIRST

by Sheldon Richman
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The horrific bombings at the Boston Marathon have left us all stunned. We still don't know the perpetrators' motive, but there are some things we do know.

The bombers chose the most closely monitored location in all of Boston. They could have chosen a different site, knowing that all eyes were on the marathon route. But no. They chose the finish line of the oldest marathon in America.

Let that sink in. Since 9/11, law-abiding Americans have been subjected to intrusive "security" measures and civil-liberties infringements. We have been forced to pay billions of dollars for the Department of Homeland Security and increasingly militarized police departments.

What have we to show for it? Two men were able to detonate bombs at the most prominent point in a major city on its biggest day of the year. Intended or not, the bombing was a thumb in the eye of our so-called protectors. Bruce Schneier has aptly described the post-9/11 measures as "security theater."

Clearly, the emperor has no clothes.

Here's another thing we know: This was a crime, not an act of war. Even if a foreign organization or country was behind the heinous deed, the bombings in no way could have been

calculated to conquer the United States, overthrow the government, or destroy our society. Violence intended to murder, injure, and terrorize is evil — but in itself it is not an act of war.

This issue bears on how the surviving suspect (if he's caught alive) will be handled. Already it is being speculated that the perpetrator may not be read Miranda warnings, which are read to criminal suspects throughout the United States as part of the due process supposedly guaranteed by the Fifth Amendment. Former FBI special agent Donald Borelli told MSNBC host Chris Hayes that the authorities may want to interrogate the suspect without the traditional constraints of the criminal law. That could mean declaring the suspect an "enemy combatant," thus denying him the full protection of a trial in civilian criminal court — which unfortunately President Obama has the unilateral power to do.

One of the ominous features of the post-9/11 world is the president's arbitrary power to treat suspects either like criminal defendants or enemy combatants. In 2002 José Padilla, an American citizen, was arrested on U.S. soil on suspicion of planning to detonate a "dirty bomb." (He was never charged with that crime, however.) At first he was treated like an enemy combatant, deprived of the due process accorded criminal suspects, and during his three-and-a-half years in a military prison, subjected to torture (aka "enhanced interrogation techniques"). Padilla challenged his military detention in court, but before he could get to the Supreme Court, the Bush administration moved his case to the civilian criminal-justice system. This prompted a federal appeals court to wonder if, fearing a bad precedent, the administration did so simply to keep the case out of the Supreme Court. Padilla was eventually convicted of conspiring to "murder, kidnap, and maim people overseas."

Of course, after many years, enemy combatants still languish at Guantanamo Bay without charge or prospect of release.

Obama should immediately announce that the Boston bombing will be handled like a criminal case. That would set a good example for the world.

The tragedy in Boston shows that something is dreadfully wrong with how the U.S. government handles terrorism. If the government is willing to use aggressive force — including torture — to get its way, we should not be surprised when others are too. It's time for fresh thinking. If the politicians would break out of their old mindset, they might yet succeed in preventing such violence *without* interfering with the rights of Americans or others. In fact, they would show new respect for freedom. How so?

Governments at all levels must renounce all aggressive violence against Americans and people in other countries. This means ending military and CIA intervention abroad. Drones have murdered, wounded, and — yes — terrorized many people in several countries. Military occupation has killed and abused countless others. At home, police departments brutalize Americans every day in the dishonestly named "war on drugs" and "war on guns." All told, government's business is mayhem.

Violence begets violence. It is time for the official violence to stop.