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The Greatest Covert Operation Ever: The Politics of Terror as the Business of Terror

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The politics of terror are the greatest covert operation ever.

In explaining why, I'll begin by defining some terms, because, when discussing the covert operation called "the politics of terror," words and their management are all important.

How are politics and terror actually defined: how are these meanings manipulated; for what purposes, and by whom?

Terrorism is defined as "violence against civilians intended to obtain a political purpose." This is an ambiguous phrase, which begs the questions: what are politics and violence?

Politics is defined as "the process by which groups of people make collective decisions." And violence is the use of force to compel a person or group to do or think something against their will. That includes the violence of words – of threatening to hurt – and of social structures, as well as the violence of deeds.

So, by definition, terrorism is political violence – hurting people, or threatening to hurt them, in order to make them govern themselves against their will.

In America , terrorism is always condemned by the government, and, accordingly, America is never a perpetrator of terrorism, but always the victims of it. The US war on terror is the ultimate expression of this principle: it is a military response to terrorism; violence in self-defense, not (ostensibly) violence for a political purpose.

That's the official story – the assumption. But I'm going to show that America does engage in terrorism – violence against civilians for political purposes. This “state” terrorism, however, is covert, in so far as it is equated with national security, and thanks to that built-in ambiguity, it has both stated and unstated purpose.

The State and Unstated Policy in America

Politics is a process by which groups of people make collective decisions. But who really makes the overarching political decisions in America ? Who governs us?

The two political parties represent the people and they compete for control of the government. Republicans generally favor business and Democrats favor labor. The political division is, generally, class based.

Now, the government can be controlled by either political party; but the state endures – “the state” being the nation's indispensable industries and infrastructure (banking, auto industry, insurance, Microsoft), and the institutions which defend the nation's enduring interests: the military, law enforcement, the intelligence & security services.

In Europe they often, cynically, refer to the state as “industry” or Big Business. In America we tend to call “the state” the Establishment – an ambiguous word that needs to be defined.

The dictionary defines Establishment as, “An exclusive group of powerful people who rule a government or society by means of private agreements and decisions.” I would venture to say that the interests of the state and the Establishment are the same, and that the definition of Establishment with a capital E is the pivotal phrase in discussing “state” terrorism.

Consider this: there is the politics of the two parties vying for control of the government, and there is the Establishment, the state, making the covert (ostensibly non-political) decisions that effectively govern America .

Many of those covert decisions concern national security: they are unstated policy.

Moreover, these covert policy decisions about national security are made by people who control the military, law enforcement, and intelligence & security services. These guardians of “the state” are collectively called the National Security Establishment.

Like the Establishment that secretly rules the “state,” the National Security Establishment is an exclusive group that is not accountable to the political whims of the people.

These professional guardians of the state – the Establishment – are assumed to be above partisan politics. Their loyalty is assumed to be to the law or national security. And that assumption is the Big Lie upon which state terrorism is based.

Yes, it is true that the National Security Establishment is not accountable to the people: and, in fact, it has built a series of ever-larger, concentric moats around itself called the National Security State, precisely to keep the people out of its business.

The National Security Establishment rules the National Security State, with an iron fist, but it is pure propaganda that the National Security Establishment and State are not political.

In order to get inside the National Security Establishment, and rise to a position of authority within it, one must be born there (like Bush – make a billion like Gates), or submit to years of right-wing political indoctrination calibrated to a series of increasingly restrictive security clearances.

Political indoctrination – adopting the correct right-wing ideology – and security clearances represent the drawbridge across the moats.

The National Security State is the covert social structure of the Establishment, and it has as its job not just defending the Establishment from foreign enemies, but also expanding the Establishment’s economic and military influence abroad, while preserving its class prerogatives at home.

By “class prerogatives,” I mean the National Security State is designed to keep the lower class from exerting any political control over the state; especially, redistributing the Establishment’s private wealth.

To these unstated ends – imperialism abroad and repression at home – the National Security State engages in terrorism – political violence – on behalf of the Establishment.

Indeed, the National Security State is political violence, terrorism, in its purest form.

The Establishment and its National Security State as Terrorism

The lower classes in America have little voice in making government or state policy. Some are hopeless, others content: but in either case, voter turnout is a mere 54%.

Whether hopeless or content, they know they cannot fight conventional thinking. For example, when the Establishment exerts its influence, it is not considered politics; it is simply the status quo. The rich create jobs and must be accommodated with trillion dollar bailouts, paid for by workers taking furloughs.

That's just the way it is. Politicians in the service of the Establishment, for over-arching reasons of national security, have to keep the capitalist financial system afloat.

It is the same thing with the National Security Establishment: America invaded Iraq , and there was nothing the people do about it. The decision was made for them. Peace activists, least of all, had no voice in the decision, because they are assumed to have no stake in national security. You will not find peace activists in the National Security Establishment; and that political repression is covert state terrorism.

Likewise, if labor seeks to exercise influence, its efforts are described as exploiting the state for more than it deserves, because it does not have an enduring stake in the state.

It is a fact: only Establishment wealth – ownership – is equated with national security.

Consider the immortal words of Leona Helmsley: “Only the little people pay taxes.”

That injustice in the tax code is political repression and, in so far as it makes the people fearful, it is state terrorism. The Establishment fears losing its loopholes, while workers and the poor fear losing their homes: two types of terror, one for each class, one stated, one unstated.

The Establishment engages imperialism and political repression through propaganda (word management violence) and social structures. This state terrorism is unstated, covert.

Only when the people rebel and challenge the Establishment is the word terrorism applied.

Likewise, the military, police or intelligence causes of rebellion, or responses to it, are never called terrorism: they are national security.

And that's how the management of words helps to repress the lower classes.

Language and the Psychology of State Terror

America's industrial sized war machine was never said to terrorize Iraq ; the invasion was not political – because the war machine is owned by the Establishment. The Establishment profiting from war is not politics; it is ideological neutral “profits.”

In fact, America exerts its unwanted political influence overseas, through the state terror of aircraft carrier fleets, bombers, nuclear subs, shock and awe invasions, pacification programs, the overthrow of governments, and support of repressive puppet regimes.

This state terrorism, which you never hear about, is the biggest covert psychological warfare operation of all time. This psywar operation depends on narrowly defining terrorism as a suicide bomber, a hijacked plane, the decapitated body of a collaborator: the “selective terrorism” of rebels and nationalists who, outgunned, and outlawed in their own country, have no other options, other than submission.

The purpose of selective terror is psychological: to isolate collaborators, while demonstrating to the people the ability of the rebels to strike at their oppressors. Shock and Awe, and brutal pacification campaigns – state terrorism – prevent people from making a living – selective terrorism does not. That’s a big, meaningful “class” difference.

The National Security Establishment understands that selective terror achieves political and psychological goals that state terror does not – that it rallies people to revolutionary ideals. So the National Security Establishment engages in selective terror too, by targeting the rebel, his family and friends in their homes.

This is the selective terror conducted by counter-terrorists. But don’t be confused: it is terrorism. All terror is psychological and political; state terror by immobilizing people and making them responsive, submissive, apathetic, and/or ostensibly “content.”

The National Security Establishment fully understands that once people have been terrorized, they have been politically defeated, without necessarily receiving bullets.

As former Director of Central Intelligence William Colby once said: “The implication or latent threat of terror was sufficient to insure that the people would comply.”

This principle of the psychological use of “the implication or latent threat of terror” is what brings us back to America and the business of terror.

The Business of Terror

State terror – colonization abroad and political repression at home – is a key means of extracting profits and maintaining ownership of property. Ask the American Indian.

In its colonies, the US engages in state terrorism by removing all legal protections for rebels; detention, torture, and summary execution are the price for rebellion against US policy.

State terrorism overseas, imperialism, is never acknowledged by the media, because the media is a big business; indeed, two of the major networks are owned by defense contractors.

And state terrorism applied domestically to ensure “internal” security is never acknowledged – America says it has no political prisoners. But the National Security State is well thought out, by professionals in language management, and political and psychological warfare, aimed at you.

“Personal violence is for the amateur in dominance,” says two-time Nobel Prize winner Johan Galtung, but “structural violence is the tool of the professional. The amateur who wants to dominate uses guns; the professional uses social structure. The legal criminality of the social system and its institutions, of government...is tacit violence. Structural violence is a structure of exploitation and social injustice.”

As Colby said: “The implication or latent threat is enough to insure people will comply.”

The war on terror and its domestic version “homeland security” are the law of the land – America’s new legally criminal social structure based on administrative detention, enshrined in The Patriot Act and a number of executive orders, some secret.

This lack of due process comes on top of a justice system already skewed to protect the propertied elite and pack the prisons with the poor, through “structural violence,” mainly the drug wars.

The Establishment’s new anti-terror and anti-drug laws make the National Security State the most fearsome covert political and psywar machine the world has ever seen. And the National Security State is growing: the “Top Secret America” series in the Washington Post put it at 750,000 cadres.

This secret state within a state extends into the homeland’s critical infrastructure and beyond. For example, the arms industry provides good jobs, making American imperial aggression seem a positive value.

And this is how the psyched-out people become one of the moats.

As it is modeled on the totalitarian corporate paradigm, the National Security State in all its manifestations fits the classic definition of a fascist dictatorship. And we know what its intentions are. They have been stated.

In the days after 9-11, right wing Republican stalwart Kenneth W. Starr, the Clinton inquisitor, said the danger of terrorism requires “deference to the judgments of the political branches with respect to matters of national security.”

But is there an on-going emergency that requires defer to the political branches, meaning the right-wing ideologues who rule the National Security State ? And what does it mean for Establishment opponents if due process is completely abandoned at home, and subjected to politics?

Michael Ledeen, a former counter-terror expert on Reagan’s National Security Council, blamed 9-11 on Clinton “for failing to properly organize our nation’s security apparatus.” Ledeen’s solution to the problem of those who sneered at security was “to stamp out” the “corrupt habits of mind.” By which he means Liberalism.

In other words, the reactionary right wing that owns the National Security State wants to impose its total rule on the people in order to create a security conscious, uniform citizenry – marching in lock step, flags waving – that is necessary to win the war on terror. This is how the National Security professionals are incrementally creating the requisite fascist social structure – through terror, the best organizing principle ever. “This is time for the old motto, ‘kill them all, let God sort ‘em out.’ New times require new people with new standards,” Ledeen asserted. “The entire political world will understand it and applaud it. And it will give us a chance to prevail.”

When Ledeen says “political” world he means the “owners of the business” of state terror, the right wing ideologues who pack the National Security State and the capitalist Establishment they serve.

And they have won the propaganda war, folks.