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Eleven Reason's I'm Ashamed to Be an American

I've Had It!

by DAVE LINDORFF

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I'm going to say it: I am ashamed to be a US citizen. This doesn't come easily, because having lived abroad and seen some pretty nasty places in my time, I know there are a lot of great things about this country, and a lot of great people who live here, but lately, I've reached the conclusion that the US is a sick and twisted country, in which the bad far outweighs the good.

I can remember first feeling revolted about my country several times. The first was when I realized, at the tender age of 17, what an atrocity the US was committing against the people of Vietnam in my name — the rape and murderous destruction of peasant villages and the napalming of children in the South, and the carpet bombing of North Vietnam (including dikes, schools and hospitals). Later, I was shocked and revolted when I belatedly learned how my country had rounded up native born and naturalized Japanese-Americans and Japanese legal residents into concentration camps during WWII, and how the national government had been complicit in the taking of those vilely incarcerated people's farms, homes and businesses by conniving white fascists in California.

But those crimes, horrific as they were, pale in the face of what I see this country doing now.

Let me count some of the ways that this country makes me sick:

1. It's not just the latest release of a heavily redacted report on the Bush/Cheney administration's deliberate program of torture, launched in 2001 in the wake of 9-11, and carried on for years against not just alleged terrorists, but even against people known or suspected to be completely innocent of anything. It's that nothing has been done, or likely will be done, to punish those who authorized and advocated for these war crimes and crimes against humanity. And it's not just that, but that so many of my fellow Americans are okay with that. Even in the media, including on NPR, I hear reporters saying that one of the "questions" about the government's torture program is whether it "worked" or not in obtaining information about acts of terrorism. Because it doesn't matter whether torture "worked" or not. The US and the rest of the nations of the world signed a treaty after World War II saying that torture is a criminal act (the penalty includes death under international law!). And so is covering up or failing to punish the crime of torture.

2. The police in the United States have become so militarized in both a physical sense and in terms of their training and self-image, that they are now more of an army of occupation than "peace officers" (there's an anachronistic term you don't even hear used anymore). Over and over we see police aggressively using force, including deadly force, in situations that call for calm and understanding. The most sickening thing to me, was watching a squad car in Cleveland race directly onto a park lawn right up to an enclosed gazebo where 12-year-old Tamir Rice was sitting, alone, playing with a toy gun. In less than two seconds, one of the cops exits the car and shoots the boy fatally in the stomach. There was absolutely no call for this execution. No one was around being threatened by the kid. The cops should have pulled up safely at a distance, assessed the situation, and then called on Rice to exit the gazebo and drop the gun, even if they feared it was real. Or they should have ordered him to stay put and drop the gun, and then, if he didn't comply, waited for back up, including a trained negotiator. Instead, they just raced in like it was a hostage rescue attempt, and blew a little kid away. Then they did nothing to help him after shooting him. Ugh! And yet, there is not a wave of universal outrage over this monstrous police murder.

Nor is there universal outrage at the cops involved in the execution slaying of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO or in the completely pointless choking death of Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, both of whose uniformed killers were exonerated by grossly manipulated and misled grand juries. Instead, we hear whites interviewed on TV shows saying that the cops did the right thing.

3. But that's just part of it. I'm disgusted by having as our president a man who lacks the intestinal fortitude to call out these above crimes and to insist that he will prosecute those who ordered the military and the CIA to use torture on captives in the so-called War on Terror. President Obama should be demanding that his so-called Justice Department aggressively prosecute those cops who are killing unarmed civilians if local prosecutors won't do it, and he should be ordering the prosecution of everyone who ordered, authorized, enabled or covered up torture by US government agents. (No wonder President Obama has been diagnosed with acid reflux: at least the man's alimentary canal appears to have a conscience!)

4. I'm disgusted that according to the Prison Policy Initiative, the US has at any given moment some 2.4 million people locked up (only two-thirds of whom have even been convicted of a

crime, with most of the rest awaiting trial because they can't post the excessive bail set by our corrupt court system). And no wonder: Just between the late '80s and 2008, the number of federal laws for which someone can end up being jailed has soared from 3000 to 4450, and it keeps rising as charlatans in Congress keep passing laws to create ever more "crimes" to punish. And that doesn't count state and local governments, which explains why the US, with 5% of the world's population, accounts for 25% of the world's prison inmates. Myself, I was threatened with jail not long ago by a thug cop in a neighboring town for hitch-hiking — an activity that actually is legal in my state, and that, if done improperly, is at most a citation offense like a parking violation calling for a ticket, not an arrest. No matter — if I hadn't put down my thumb, this bully in a uniform with sidearm would have cuffed me, and trumped up something: resisting arrest, disturbing the peace or some such tripe. We live in a punishment-obsessed society, overseen by cops who seem to derive pleasure in lording it over the public.

5. I'm sickened to see community after community pass laws making it illegal to feed the homeless. This in a country where in the wake of the Great Recession, we still have a real unemployment and underemployment rate of between 18% and 20% depending on how you're counting.

6. I'm ashamed and angry that Wall Street is essentially one gigantic crime scene — the place where trillions of dollars of wealth over the last decade has been siphoned out of the pockets of ordinary Americans into the hands of the wealthiest 1% or 5%, making this now the most unequal society among the 34 developed nations of the world. Not one leading banker from the nation's top so-called too-big-to-fail banks has even been charged with a crime, much less convicted and jailed for the biggest swindle the world has ever seen. On those rare occasions when the Justice Department has gone after some of these bankster crimes, it has reached "settlements" in the form of meaningless fines, and hasn't even, as part of the deal, required any of these crooked executives to leave their lucrative positions of power, or even to admit wrongdoing. In fact, these crooks in pinstripes instead of jail stripes are regularly invited guests at the White House and Congress, called upon to give their "wisdom" on points of government policy, for which they then reward their hosts generously with perks and "campaign contributions" that are little more than bribes.

7. I'm outraged and ashamed that my country spends well over \$1 trillion a year on its military, and has military personnel based in over 800 locations around the globe. This at a time when 50 million Americans are reportedly "food insecure" — another way of saying that 50 million people, many of them children, go hungry at some point in the year — and when support programs like Food Stamps and Unemployment Compensation are being cut to save money. Worse yet, there is no national scandal over this. In fact, many Americans, perhaps a majority, think that all that spending on the military is a good thing, because it supposedly "keeps us safe" and maybe "creates jobs." The sad truth is that today, the US, my country, is the world's largest terrorist state — based objectively on its recent unrivaled history of illegally invading other lands, conducting drone killings across borders, kidnapping, torturing and disappearing people, and funding and assisting in the overthrow of foreign, often democratically elected, governments.

8. I'm sick at heart because half a century after the Freedom Riders and courageous local people won an end to Jim Crow laws in the South that had for generations kept black people from voting, at least half the country, and not just in the south but everywhere, are now trying to make it hard or impossible for blacks, hispanics and other people of color to vote. And our corrupted court system is backing them in many cases, right up to the US Supreme Court, which is now dominated by fascists, proto-fascists, and religio-fascists.

9. I'm embarrassed that my fellow Americans, by and large, care more about whether they can get the latest iPhone, or whether they have a god-given right to own an unlicensed automatic weapon, than about whether we still have a right to privacy, a right not to be spied on by the government, or whether corporations should be allowed, as now under Citizens United, to buy government officials directly, like sides of beef.

10. I'm disgusted that my countrymen and women no longer believe it is important for society to provide everyone with the basic services that allow all people a fair shot at climbing out of poverty. There is no longer a sense that everyone should be able to attend a decently funded public school, or have access to a tax-funded state college for free or for a small tuition — the kind that could be covered with a 10-hour work-study job. There is no longer any sense that all Americans should be entitled to quality health care. Even what support there is for the so-called Affordable Care Act, far from being about making quality care available for all, is mostly from individuals who selfishly want to be able to afford insurance for themselves. It's not about making it available to all. It's like, if the ACA enables you to afford insurance, you're for it, but if you have employer-provided insurance, you're against it. This is basically true in every area. Americans today have lost any communal sense of shared responsibility and shared struggle. People used to talk (incorrectly, I think) about the '60s generation being the "me" generation. Actually, it's pretty much the entire US that has become a "me" country.

11. Finally, I can't forget the issue of climate change. The US has unquestionably been the primary contributor to climate change over the last century, as the most industrialized nation in the world. Even today, as it's carbon emissions are surpassed by China, the undeniable fact is that on a per capita basis, we Americans dump far more carbon into the atmosphere per person than anyone in China, by a factor of five or more. Yet our country has been a primary obstacle to any real efforts to slow or reverse climate change. The US, during this administration and the last, has actively subverted efforts to reach international agreements to limit greenhouse gases, even using the National Security Agency's spying abilities to monitor other countries' negotiation positions and to blackmail leaders. It is simply sickening too, how the selfishness of Americans even extends to caring not a whit about the horrors that will be faced by not just our grandchildren, but even our children (the World Bank, no environmental radical hotbed, warns that today's teens will face a world that is a staggering 6-8 degrees Fahrenheit hotter by the time they are 80!). This is selfishness — or — madness on a scale that is to me incomprehensible.

I could go on, but I think eleven reasons to be ashamed of one's country ought to be more than enough.

It is for me.