

Will Rabbani Hit Derail Afghan Peace?

The U.S. government and media are outraged over the Taliban assassination of the Afghan High Peace Council's chairman, but the attack should have been expected once the Obama administration and the Afghan government signaled a U.S. occupation extending more than a decade, reports Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

Did the Taliban assassination of Berhanuddin Rabbani, the Chairman of the Afghan High Peace Council, bring a potentially permanent end of peace talks in Afghanistan?

You would have to believe that, based on media coverage of the event. The New York Times reported that the assassination had "struck a body blow to the peace process," and that theme dominated almost every story.

Most stories included quotes from Rabbani supporters such as one in the Times article declaring: "The peace process is finished."

Dexter Filkins was more emphatic, opining in the New Yorker that the Rabbani assassination was a "blow to the very idea that reconciliation with the Taliban is possible – or even desirable." It could even be "the opening shot in the civil war that more and more Afghans believe could follow on the heels of the American and NATO withdrawal," Filkins wrote.

But this storyline is based on the premise that Rabbani and the High Peace Council had been offering the Taliban a good faith effort to negotiate a peace settlement.

In fact, what Rabbani was offering was the same thing Gen David Petraeus had offered to the bogus Quetta Shura official a year earlier: A discussion that could not possibly resolve the overriding issue for the Taliban, which is the indefinite presence of U.S. and NATO troops in the country.

Rabbani was one of the most outspoken enemies of the Taliban. As the president of the Northern Alliance during its civil war with the Taliban from 1996 to 2001, Rabbani was among the most vociferous foes of the Taliban.

He viewed even Karzai's rhetorical gestures toward "reconciliation" with the Taliban as a way of completing the process of Pashtun domination over Tajiks and other non-Pashtun minorities.

Playing a Card

In February 2010, seven months before he was named to head the High Peace Council, Rabbani had declared to Canadian author and journalist Terry Glavin: "Bringing back the Taliban by some kind of reconciliation is not to bring about security. This is to play a card against others. ... It is to bring an ethnic card into play in Afghanistan."

The only program for the Taliban Rabbani had embraced as Chairman of the HPC, in fact, was "offering amnesties and jobs to Taliban foot soldiers and asylum in third countries to leaders," as Reuters reported on Sept.20.

The Taliban leaders had never believed that the HPC was intended to negotiate a political settlement. Last Jan. 12, the Taliban declared on the website of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" that they regarded the High Peace Council as serving solely "cosmetic" purposes as "part and parcel of the American war strategy."

The article cited, in particular, the fact the HPC "do not consider the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan ... as an important item of the agenda."

More concretely, the Taliban complained that the HPC did not "follow a roadmap that would lead to a decisive stage where peace and reconciliation will become ... indispensable".

That was an apparent reference to a proposal dubbed a "road map" to a settlement by four former Taliban officials, including Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, an early leader of the Taliban movement who spent two and a half years in the U.S. detention center at Guantanamo Bay.

The "road map" proposal assumed that the United States would have to play the key role in any negotiations. It called for the United States to end its night raids and for the Taliban to stop attacks on government personnel and infrastructure as "confidence-building measures," after which the two sides would negotiate on the central issues of the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban's renunciation of ties with al-Qaeda.

Only after they reached agreement on foreign troops and al-Qaeda would the negotiators tackle the question of an internal political settlement, which would revolve around changes to the Afghan constitution. The same Taliban commentary seemed to leave the door open to dealing with the HPC, but only if it dealt with the central problem of the foreign troop presence.

What pullout?

"[The HPC should confront the Americans on] whether they are ready to respect

and accept a solution based on a pullout of their forces from Afghanistan.”

Taliban statement on the HPC: “If the peace council wants, in earnest, to usher in peace in Afghanistan,” it should confront the Americans on “whether they are ready to respect and accept a solution based on a pullout of their forces from Afghanistan.”

That is not what happened, however, in the months that followed that Taliban statement on the HPC. The Council initiated contact with the Taliban in May, and over the next four months interacted frequently with, and developed trust in, its Taliban interlocutors.

But the account provided of those contacts by Council Member Rahmatullah Wahidyar in his Sept. 22 press conference is revealing primarily for what it fails to mention. Rabbani and his advisors appear to have been unconcerned by the fact that the HPC could offer nothing to the Taliban on the central problem of U.S. and NATO troops.

And when the Taliban contact informed the Council a week before the assassination that the Taliban leadership was now prepared to enter into talks with the Afghan government, the Council officials were not worried by the fact that such talks would have contradicted the consistent public and private Taliban position that that they could be no negotiations on an internal settlement until the issue of foreign troop presence was resolved.

These all-too-amiable contacts were taking place, moreover, against a backdrop of the Obama administration and Karzai maneuvering to keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan indefinitely. In mid-March, U.S. Deputy Undersecretary of Defense Michele Flournoy revealed – in Congressional testimony – the U.S. intention to continue to carry out “counter-terrorism operations” from “joint bases” in Afghanistan well beyond 2014.

That announcement came just as the Obama administration was beginning a series of secret meetings with a Taliban representative in Germany and Qatar. They were explicitly understood to be “preliminary” rather than substantive talks, but the Taliban certainly posed the question whether the United States was prepared to offer a timetable for withdrawal in substantive negotiations.

The Taliban broke off the talks in May, and U.S. officials later claimed that it was because the existence of the talks had been leaked to the media. But if the United States had said anything to persuade the Taliban that it was prepared to offer such a withdrawal schedule, the talks would certainly not have been so abruptly terminated.

As I reported in July, former Afghan Prime Minister Ahmad Shah Ahmadzai told me

that a group of Taliban officials he had met earlier that month had said, once the Americans tell them “we are ready to withdraw,” they would agree to have peace talks.

The Taliban are interested in peace talks, assuming the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

‘Strategic Partnership’

By late August, however, the last ambiguity surrounding the U.S. policy on troops in Afghanistan had been removed. The Telegraph’s Ben Farmer reported Aug. 19 that the Obama administration and Karzai were close to an agreement that would keep up to 25,000 US troops, including Special Operations Forces as well as U.S. fighter planes and helicopter gunships, until at least 2024.

At that point, the Taliban and Rabbani both knew that the HPC had no power to negotiate a real peace settlement with the Taliban. It should be no surprise, therefore, that the Taliban took advantage of the opportunity to kill the credulous Rabbani.

The only surprise is that Rabbani and his advisors could have actually believed that the Taliban were giving up their primary war aim so easily.

After all, the Taliban were continuing to show, month after month, that they could strike at targets in most heavily protected zones in Kabul and elsewhere – and that their targets included prominent political, administrative and security officials such as Rabbani.

When Karzai’s national security advisor, Rangin Dadfar Spanta, revealed the outlines of the “strategic partnership” pact in early August, the Deputy Chairman of the HPC, Abdul Hakim Majid, made a highly revealing comment to The Telegraph’s Farmer.

He said he suspected the Taliban had “intensified” their insurgency in response to the news that Karzai was about to agree to allow the United States a semi-permanent military presence in Afghanistan.

That observation puts in sharp relief the profound lack of realism of the popular assumption that a “peace process” could have been underway in the context of the U.S.-Karzai maneuvering to take U.S. military presence off the negotiating table.

But we can now expect a cascade of stories for many months blaming the absence of Afghan peace negotiations on the Rabbani assassination – rather than on a fundamental policy decision by President Barack Obama to hold onto a semi-

permanent military presence.

Gareth Porter is an investigative journalist and historian specializing in U.S. national security policy. His latest book, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*, was published by University of California Press. [This article first appeared in Al Jazeera.]

Obama's Hollow Words on Palestine

President Barack Obama struggled to explain his planned veto of UN recognition of a Palestinian state just a year after he welcomed the idea. His speech was a painful example of a leader knowing what is right and calculating that he can't do what is right, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

On Sept. 21, President Barack Obama delivered his latest message to the United Nations: "I would like to talk to you about a subject that is at the heart of the United Nations the pursuit of peace in an imperfect world."

Actually, one thing that makes the world imperfect is the lopsided power distribution at the UN. This allows the permanent members of the Security Council (particularly the U.S.) to decide when peace does or does not get pursued.

But Obama did not call attention to this problem. Instead he pointed to Libya and the alleged achievement of freedom, security and peace in that North African land. Actually, what Libya amounted to, at least in part, was the destruction of a nation with a standard of living approaching that of Spain.

This destruction happened not because it was ruled by "the world's longest serving dictator," but because that particular dictator had a 40-year record of being an incredible pain in the rear end of the Western ruling elites.

Be that as it may, Obama was stuck with the conundrum that the people of Libya (and Tunisia and Egypt and maybe Yemen and Syria but, of course, not Bahrain) deserve self-determination and peace, while the Palestinians are apparently still out in the cold.

Obama explained that "I believe ... that the Palestine people deserve a state of their own." However, they only can have it if they follow a course which, over the last 20 years, has proved utterly bankrupt.

Indeed, Obama saved his most emphatic language for the moment when he insisted that bankruptcy is the only way to national success for the Palestinians: "Ultimately it is the Israelis and the Palestinians – not us – who must reach agreement ... *that is and will be the path to a Palestinian state.*"

Very odd. The President tells us that Washington won't dictate national self-determination, but it damn well can dictate the route the Palestinians *must* take to get it. Even if that route has proven worthless and will, most likely, lead them to their ultimate destruction.

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Two Critics

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Robert Fisk, the famous reporter for the British newspaper The Independent, wrote a scathing report on President Obama's speech. Here is part of what Fisk said:

"After praising the Arab Spring ... the man [Obama] dared to give the Palestinians 10 minutes of his time, slapping them in the face for daring to demand statehood from the UN. Obama even and this is the funniest part his preposterous address to the UN – suggested that the Palestinians and the Israelis were two equal 'parties' to the conflict."

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Fisk is angry and frustrated and one can only empathize with those feelings. But his piece leaves a lot unexplained. So let us look at Uri Avnery, founder and leader of Israel's Gush Shalom peace movement, who commented on the speech this way:

"A wonderful speech. A beautiful speech. The language expressive and elegant. The arguments clear and convincing. The delivery flawless. A work of art. The art of hypocrisy. Almost every statement in the passage concerning the Israeli-Palestinian issue was a lie.

"A blatant lie: the speaker knew it and so did the audience. ... Being a moral person, he [Obama] must have felt the urge to vomit. Being a pragmatic person, he knew that he had to do it if he wanted to be re-elected."

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Now that is more to the point. Avnery tells us why Obama was lying. Because in a land of the deceived, only really good liars get what? Get elected and then re-elected?

Well, that is probably true. However, in this particular case things are a bit more complicated. This might sound a bit shocking but, taken literally, Avnery is inaccurate. You *can* be critical of Israel and even sympathetic to the Palestinians and still, at least potentially, get elected to office in the

United States.

Consider a recent poll by the Pew Research Center. It indicates that 42 percent of Americans are in favor of U.S. recognition of Palestinian statehood as against 26 percent opposed. Nearly one-third, 32 percent, had no opinion.

That means an energetic and savvy politician running for national office, who is also publicly in favor of Palestinian statehood, would have a pool of 74 percent of American voters to work on.

The numbers are even more impressive when considering only Democratic voters. There 54 percent are in favor of Palestinian statehood and only 14 percent opposed. These are telling numbers for a politician with pro-Palestinian sympathies *if the voters are really the end game here*.

Neglected Voters

Unfortunately, they are not. Voters are only important at the actual time of election. At all other times the politicians' constituencies are special-interest groups. It is the special interests that supply the resources the politicians actually use to manipulate the voters at election time.

The political parties know this very well. They know that what political suicide actually consists of is putting forth a candidate that displeases the special interests. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, 95 percent of the time both Democrat and Republican parties won't even nominate a candidate who expresses opinions favorable to the Palestinians.

Therefore, such candidates hardly ever reach the voters. So, it is not quite as Avnery puts it, that Obama speaks lies so as to be re-elected. More accurately, *he speaks lies so he can be re-nominated*.

There is no politician in America capable of getting a presidential *nomination* who could or would have made a speech more sympathetic to the Palestinians than the one given by Barack Obama.

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The conclusion one can draw is that on the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, public opinion presently has no leverage.

And, for it ever to actually have leverage, it must reach a point where it overwhelms the standard factors of special-interest influence: giving campaign funding to a candidate or choosing to give it to his or her opponent; generating lots of TV air time in favor of the candidate or creating negative attack ads against him or her; and the overall control of the information on the subject of interest to the special interest that goes to the candidates and their staff.

In other words, unless you can get the public riled up on this subject to the point where millions see *it as a voting issue*, politicians and their party leaders won't respond to polls such as that recently put out by Pew. Such information simply does not indicate a level of public focus that will sway the party choices of candidates at the nomination level.

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To make the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a voting issue within the American political milieu is a tough goal, but it is not an impossible one. A growing number of local and national organizations are already engaged in this effort seeking to change public attitudes to the point that American voters will react to Israeli behavior as they once reacted to apartheid South Africa's policies.

To name just three, there are the U.S. Campaign Against the Occupation, the Council on the National Interest, and Jewish Voices for Peace. Many others are active as well. In Europe, the effort to build public opinion to the point that it has voting leverage is also going on apace.

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About ten years ago, I had a heated conversation with the Charge d'affaires of the U.S. Embassy in Israel. He told me that if I believed that the U.S. Congress could be freed from the influence of the Zionist lobby I was crazy.

"It will never happen" he told me. I disagreed with that sentiment then, and still do today.

The Pew Poll numbers show that there is fertile ground for an eventual sea change in popular opinion. And, with a lot of hard grassroots work, that change will have a powerful political impact. One must never say never.

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The One Answer: Tax the Rich

Exclusive: When President Barack Obama suggested a minor adjustment in tax rates for the rich to make sure they pay at least the same percentage as their employees Republicans cried "class warfare." But higher taxes on the rich may be the only way to rebuild the middle class, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

It is curious that the American Right, which waxes nostalgic for the happier days of the 1950s when the United States was supposedly more moral and more united, ignores one of the central reasons behind that middle-class era: very high taxes on the rich.

Granted, some on the Right may love the Fifties because it was a time of racial segregation and second-class status for women. But what arguably made the era work was the fact that the U.S. tax structure “disincentivized” greed by ensuring that excess wealth was mostly recycled back into the Treasury for use building the nation and supporting research and development.

During Dwight Eisenhower’s presidency the top marginal tax rate what the richest Americans paid on their top tranche of income was around 90 percent. In the 1960s, under John F. Kennedy, that was lowered to around 70 percent, but that rate still meant the rich had a limited incentive to be greedy since they wouldn’t get to keep most of their extra money.

All that changed with Ronald Reagan’s presidency and his slashing of the top marginal tax rate by more than half (before it was adjusted upward slightly late in Reagan’s years and then during Bill Clinton’s presidency before being reduced again to 35 percent under George W. Bush).

Various tax loopholes and lower rates for capital gains also have let many of the richest Americans enjoy tax rates about only half of even those lower marginal income tax rates. Billionaire Warren Buffett has famously described paying a lower tax rate than his secretary, meaning that he and others in his category get to keep about 80 percent of what they make.

In other words, the American tax structure has been roughly turned on its head. From the rich paying between 70 and 90 percent on their top income, some now pay 20 percent or less, which means there is a much bigger incentive to be greedy.

Arguably, it was that incentivized greed more than any of the social movements like civil rights for blacks and equal rights for women that eradicated the rhapsodized Fifties and the middle-class culture that it represented in the nostalgic view of many Americans.

So, it’s ironic that the defense of lower tax rates for the rich is at the heart of the Right’s current political agenda. Some leading Republicans have even suggested that “tax reform” should impose at least some income tax on the poor and working class so the tax rates on the rich can be lowered even more.

It’s ironic, too, that the core of today’s economic crisis is that American bankers became so excessively greedy spurred on by the prospects of “earning” bonuses in the tens of millions of dollars and keeping nearly all that money

that they blinded themselves to the risks from exotic financial products built on an unsustainable housing bubble.

If the tax rates had been kept at Eisenhower or Kennedy levels, not only would there have been plenty of money to keep the United States modern and strong but there likely would not have been the kind of financial crisis that, since 2008, has cost millions of jobs and required massive government borrowing to bail out the greedy bankers.

Thus, in a variety of ways, the Right's orthodoxy of low taxes on the rich (or the "job creators," as Republican wordsmiths prefer) has been a major driver in creating today's massive federal debt and in savaging the middle class.

Two Societies

The data is now clear that the last three decades have witnessed a divergence between haves and have-nots unprecedented in the United States, at least since the lead-up to the Great Depression when a similar era of income inequality set the stage for financial disaster.

For instance, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office in an analysis of data from 1979 to 2005 found that the inflation-adjusted income of middle-class Americans rose about 21 percent (only about one-fifth the increase enjoyed by the middle class during the post-World War II era).

Meanwhile, the income for the ultra-rich (the top 100th of one percent) jumped 480 percent from 1979 to 2005, rising from an average of \$4.2 million to \$24.3 million. And CBO's analysis ends in 2005, thus missing the decimation of the middle class from the Wall Street bust of 2008.

The other bitter irony about all this is that despite the oil shocks and other problems of the 1970s, the United States was actually poised to reap huge benefits from the government's investments in the 1950s and 1960s.

Eisenhower had used tax revenues to build the Interstate Highway system and other modern transportation infrastructure. Kennedy had pushed the Space Program which led to microprocessors and other crucial technological breakthroughs. Government funding also was behind major advances in medicine and in the creation of the Internet.

There were benefits emerging, too, from global markets based on an international system promoted and defended by the United States.

The wealth created by these various developments should reasonably have been shared by the American people, with some of the money reinvested to keep the

United States at the cutting edge of transportation, science and technology.

Though higher productivity and global trade would mean the inevitable loss of many factory jobs, the higher profits if recycled through the government to benefit the average American citizen could have meant new employment opportunities in areas such as construction, teaching, research, health care and the arts.

Instead, because Ronald Reagan became president in 1981 and won over much of the U.S. population to his message that "government is the problem," the new orthodoxy called for tax cuts to benefit the rich and the rollback of government enterprises.

The Right's larger strategy was to starve the government of resources and to make sure that the benefits from the era's economic gains went disproportionately to the investor class. Prosperity was supposed to come from "trickle-down" or "supply-side" economics.

Free-Market Propaganda

To ensure the political success of this project, the Right's wealthy benefactors poured billions of dollars into building right-wing media and other propaganda outlets. Inundated with anti-government agit-prop, many middle-class Americans, especially white males, got confused about where their interests lay.

These Americans were sold on the notion that the federal government represented "tyranny" and that "freedom" required letting corporations and the rich control almost everything.

Even as the results of this orthodoxy became apparent in recent years, the Right's well-funded political/media apparatus continued to dominate the national debate. Though polls showed sizeable portions of the American public favoring higher taxes on the rich, the political momentum still rested with the Tea Party and its billionaire patrons.

The Republicans in Congress have made clear they will reject any increased tax revenues at all (although some favor shifting more of the burden away from the rich and onto the poor). President Barack Obama's modest proposal for a "Buffett rule" to make sure that the rich at least pay as high a tax rate as their workers is denounced as "class warfare."

The Right also benefits politically from the fact that many key Democrats (and many top news media personalities) have benefited from the lower tax rates on the rich. The likes of Rahm Emanuel and Larry Summers key members of Obama's original White House team raked in millions of dollars from Wall Street work

while out of government.

The class orientation of many politicians and journalists match up more with the rich than with the middle-class and the poor. When I was a correspondent at Newsweek, I would sometimes marvel at office talk in which some of my colleagues would refer to themselves as members of the “meritocracy” and think there was nothing wrong with getting compensated accordingly.

It is perhaps human nature for people who make lots of money to convince themselves that they are truly worth it and that others are not.

This combination of elitism and incentivized greed has devastated the old social compact of the United States that emerged from the Great Depression and World War II that “we are all in this together.”

A Washington Post article on June 19 captured this division of America into winners and losers (although the Post editors not surprisingly failed to note the role of Reagan’s tax cuts and similar factors in this separation).

The article described the findings of researchers who gained access to economic data from the Internal Revenue Service, revealing which categories of taxpayers made the high incomes. To the surprise of some, the big bucks were not flowing primarily to athletes or actors or even stock market speculators. America’s new super-rich were mostly corporate chieftains.

Cultural Shift

As the Post’s Peter Whoriskey framed the story, U.S. business underwent a cultural transformation from the 1970s when chief executives believed more in sharing the wealth than they do today.

The article cited a U.S. dairy company CEO from the 1970s, Kenneth J. Douglas, who earned the equivalent of about \$1 million a year. He lived comfortably but not ostentatiously. Douglas had an office on the second floor of a milk distribution center, and he turned down raises because he felt it would hurt morale at the plant, Whoriskey reported.

However, just a few decades later, Gregg L. Engles, the current CEO of the same company, Dean Foods, averaged about 10 times what Douglas made. Engles worked in a glittering high-rise office building in Dallas; owned a vacation estate in Vail, Colorado; belonged to four golf clubs; and traveled in a \$10 million corporate jet.

Unlike Douglas who recognized the corporate value of team work and respect for one another, Engles apparently had little regard for what his workers thought

about his compensation.

“The evolution of executive grandeur from very comfortable to jet-setting reflects one of the primary reasons that the gap between those with the highest incomes and everyone else is widening,” Whoriskey reported.

“For years, statistics have depicted growing income disparity in the United States, and it has reached levels not seen since the Great Depression. In 2008, the last year for which data are available, for example, the top 0.1 percent of earners took in more than 10 percent of the personal income in the United States, including capital gains, and the top 1 percent took in more than 20 percent.”

The Post article continued: “The largest single chunk of the highest-income earners, it turns out, are executives and other managers in firms, according to a landmark analysis of tax returns by economists Jon Bakija, Adam Cole and Bradley T. Heim. These are not just executives from Wall Street, either, but from companies in even relatively mundane fields such as the milk business.

“The top 0.1 percent of earners make about \$1.7 million or more, including capital gains. Of those, 41 percent were executives, managers and supervisors at non-financial companies, according to the analysis, with nearly half of them deriving most of their income from their ownership in privately-held firms.

“An additional 18 percent were managers at financial firms or financial professionals at any sort of firm. In all, nearly 60 percent fell into one of those two categories. Other recent research, moreover, indicates that executive compensation at the nation’s largest firms has roughly quadrupled in real terms since the 1970s, even as pay for 90 percent of America has stalled.”

Not Blaming Reagan

While these new statistics were striking suggesting a broader problem with high-level greed than might have been believed the Post ducked any political analysis that would have laid blame on Ronald Reagan and various right-wing economic theories.

In a follow-up editorial on June 26, the Post lamented the nation’s growing income inequality but shied away from proposing higher marginal tax rates on the rich or faulting the past several decades of low tax rates.

Instead, the Post suggested perhaps going after deductions on employer-provided health insurance and mortgage interest, tax breaks that also help middle-class families.

The Post's peculiar reaction to America's vast economic disparity that the middle class should be hit once again is sadly typical of this blending of elitism and greed. Many Post editors presumably enjoy their six-figure salaries and see no reason why they or their even richer friends should pay higher taxes.

But this income disparity, which was made worse by Ronald Reagan's tax cuts, has effectively killed off the middle-class ethos of the 1950s, that sense of community and shared sacrifice with the goal of investing in the nation and building a better future for the children.

That has been replaced by a society of the greedy rich (surrounded by fairly well-compensated staff, including media and political propagandists) and then the rest of the country, facing lost employment, lost homes and lost hope.

The simplest answer to this national crisis would seem to be the restoration of the tax rates of the 1950s or the 1960s as politically difficult as that might be.

[For more on these topics, see Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a two-book set for the discount price of only \$19. For details, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.

Closing the Christian/Muslim Divide

Friction between Christians and Muslims is growing, as the world's two largest religions with a long history of conflict and animosity collide in a shrinking world. The Rev. Howard Bess sees some of that friction as unavoidable but urges dialogue and understanding to avert the worst.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

Like it or not, Christians and Muslims are going to be seeing a lot of each other. Together they have nearly four billion adherents, making up more than half of the world's population.

Both religions are growing, with Muslims (now about 1.5 billion) increasing faster than Christians (about 2.2 billion) mostly because of birthrates. The adherents of both are global. Both touch every corner of the earth. Adherents of the two faiths are becoming neighbors.

Christians and Muslims have a great difficulty in understanding one another, which is understandable because they are structurally and conceptually different, variations dating back to their origins and their founders.

Neither Jesus nor Muhammad set out to establish a new religion. They each attempted to restructure the society and the religious practices that they found.

In the case of Jesus, he was born into a community that was controlled by a heartless economic system that had succeeded in corrupting the leadership of the dominant religion, Judaism. Jesus led a rebellion, not of swords but of ideas seeking to reform theological understandings.

When Jesus took his reform movement to Jerusalem, he was greeted as a nuisance and was killed by Rome's occupying authorities, supported by cooperating religious leaders. He was executed by being hung on a cross, a cruel and humiliating death that was meant to end his challenge to the powers-that-be.

Instead his followers turned the cross into the most powerful symbol in the history of Western civilization. Jesus was deemed the son of God.

To his followers, Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world, a sacrifice that is celebrated in Christian worship as communion (or mass). Christians argue about the meaning of the communion service, but communion remains fixed as the heart of Christian worship centered on the death of Jesus on the cross.

While Christianity was the outcome of a failed reform movement, Islam was the result of a highly successful reform movement.

In the 7th century CE, Muhammad, a man of spiritual and social sensitivities, observed that his Arab people were constantly warring with one another and that wealth and the pursuit of wealth were driving people to terrible treatment of one another.

According to Muslim tradition, God spoke to Mohammad and gave him holy words to be shared with the Arab people. The message to the Arab communities was simple: "There is no God but Allah" and Allah's instructions were written down by Muhammad in a holy book, the Qur'an.

The people of Mecca responded to the message and the city was transformed. In a

period of about 10 years, Mohammad and Islam had put down all challenges and were on the path to regional domination. In contrast to the failure of the Jesus revolution, the revolution led by Mohammad was highly successful.

However, Muhammad, who died only 10 years after writing the Qur'an, claimed no divine status for himself. He was the prophet chosen to pass down God's revelation. The revelation was what was central, with the Qur'an becoming Islam's unquestioned Holy Book. (In the Qur'an, Jesus is regarded as an earlier prophet, or messenger, from God.)

The central act of worship for Muslims is an act of obedience. Faithful Muslims are required to prostrate themselves in prayer to Allah five times daily, always facing toward Mecca. The great symbol of devotion is the Qur'an.

Because of their origins, the differences between Islam and Christianity are real. Christianity is symbolized by the cross and God's sacrifice of his only son, while Islam is symbolized by a Holy Book containing Allah's instructions. One calls for faith, the other calls for an act of obedience.

Admittedly my summary of the differences between Christianity and Islam is flawed by simplicity. However, it does speak to a fact: the two faiths will never be fully reconciled.

There will continue to be examples of Christians becoming Muslims and Muslims becoming Christians. However, by and large, Christians will continue to be Christians, and Muslims will continue to be Muslims.

The challenge of the future is not which faith will win in a competition between neighbors. The challenge will be how we will live successfully with one another.

Stephen Prothero has called for respectful argument. Kirby Godsey suggests the formation of communities of conversation. I embrace both suggestions.

I believe that we will have abundant opportunities to converse and argue simply because we live so close to one another. But there should be rules to this constructive engagement as there are in sports regarding what a participant can and cannot do.

I offer some rules to govern these arguments and discussions. 1) Killing or threat of killing is totally rejected. 2) Harming another human being, physically or mentally, cannot be a part of the process. 3) The value of every human being is never to be questioned.

The sooner we form communities of conversation and the sooner we create forums for respectful arguments, the sooner we will have a chance to live together in

creative enjoyment.

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