

Will France Repeat US Mistakes after 9/11?

Exclusive: As three suspects in the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre die in a shootout with French police, the cycle of violence that has engulfed the Mideast again reaches into the West, but the challenge is to learn from U.S. mistakes after 9/11 and address root causes, not react with another round of mindless violence, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

First, a hat tip to Elias Groll, assistant editor at *Foreign Policy*, whose [report](#) just a few hours after the killings on Wednesday at the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, included this key piece of background on the younger of the two brother suspects:

“Carif Kouachi was previously known to the authorities, as he was convicted by a French court in 2008 of trying to travel to Iraq to fight in that country’s insurgent movement. Kouachi told the court that he wished to fight the American occupation after viewing images of detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib prison.”

The next morning, Amy Goodman of [Democracynow.org](#) and Juan Cole (in his blog) also carried this highly instructive aspect of the story of the unconscionable terrorist attack, noting that the brothers were well known to French intelligence; that the younger brother, Cherif, had been sentenced to three years in prison for his role in a network involved in sending volunteer fighters to Iraq to fight alongside al-Qaeda; and that he said he had been motivated by seeing the images of atrocities by U.S. troops at Abu Ghraib.

An article in the *Christian Science Monitor* added: “During Cherif Kouachi’s 2008 trial, he told the court, ‘I really believed in the idea’ of fighting the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq.” But one would look in vain for any allusion to Abu Ghraib or U.S. torture in coverage by the Wall Street Journal or Washington Post. If you read to the end of a New York Times article, you would find in paragraph 10 of 10 a brief (CYA?) reference to Abu Ghraib.

So I guess we’ll have to try to do their work for them. Would it be unpatriotic to suggest that a war of aggression and part of its “accumulated evil” torture as well as other kinds of state terrorism like drone killings are principal catalysts for this kind of non-state terrorism? Do any Parisians yet see blowback from France’s Siamese-twin relationship with the U.S. on war in the Middle East and the Mahgreb, together with their government’s failure to speak out against torture by Americans? Might this fit some sort of pattern?

Well, duh. Not that this realization should be anything new. In an interview on Dec. 3, 2008, Amy Goodman posed some highly relevant questions to a former U.S. Air Force Major who uses the pseudonym Matthew Alexander, who personally conducted more than 300 interrogations in Iraq and supervised more than a thousand.

AMY GOODMAN: “I want to go to some larger issues, this very important point that you make that you believe that more than 3,000 U.S. soldiers were killed in Iraq, I mean, this is a huge number, because of torture, because of U.S. practices of torture. Explain what you mean.”

MATTHEW ALEXANDER: “Well, you know, when I was in Iraq, we routinely handled foreign fighters, who we would capture. Many of, several of them had been scheduled to be suicide bombers, and we had captured them before they carried out their missions.

“They came from all over the area. They came from Yemen. They came from northern Africa. They came from Saudi. All over the place. And the number one reason these foreign fighters gave for coming to Iraq was routinely because of Abu Ghraib, because of Guantanamo Bay, because of torture practices.

“In their eyes, they see us as not living up to the ideals that we have subscribed to. You know, we say that we represent freedom, liberty and justice. But when we torture people, we’re not living up to those ideals. And it’s a huge incentive for them to join al-Qaeda.

“You also have to kind of put this in the context of Arab culture and Muslim culture and how important shame, the role of shame in that culture. And when we torture people, we bring a tremendous amount of shame on them. And so, it is a huge motivator for these people to join al-Qaeda and come to Iraq.”

However, if you listen to the corporate media, there is almost no discussion about why so many people in the Muslim world object to U.S. policies so strongly that they resist violently and even resort to suicide attacks. The average consumer of this thin gruel of “information” might come away thinking that Muslims are hard-wired to despise Westerners or they might recall President George W. Bush’s favorite explanation, “they hate our freedoms.”

One has to go back five years to find a White House correspondent worth his or her salt who bluntly raised this central question. In early January 2010, after President Barack Obama gave a flaccid account of the intelligence screw-up that almost downed an airliner over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, the late Helen Thomas asked why the culprit, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, did what he did.

Like Carif Kouachi, he had trained in Yemen; like Carif Kouachi, he had slipped

through the U.S. counter-terrorist security sieve despite intelligence that should have nailed him and despite the billions of dollars frivolously spent on eavesdropping on virtually everyone in the world. (The eavesdropping had created such a giant haystack of data that intelligence analysts couldn't locate the crucial needle even when Abdulmutallab's father called to warn U.S. officials about his son's dangerous radicalization.)

Here's the revealing exchange between Thomas and John Brennan, who was then White House counterterrorism adviser and is now CIA director:

Thomas: "And what is the motivation? We never hear what you find out on why."

Brennan: "Al Qaeda is an organization that is dedicated to murder and wanton slaughter of innocents. They attract individuals like Mr. Abdulmutallab and use them for these types of attacks. He was motivated by a sense of religious sort of drive. Unfortunately, al Qaeda has perverted Islam, and has corrupted the concept of Islam, so that he's (sic) able to attract these individuals. But al Qaeda has the agenda of destruction and death."

Thomas: "And you're saying it's because of religion?"

Brennan: "I'm saying it's because of an al Qaeda organization that used the banner of religion in a very perverse and corrupt way."

Thomas: "Why?"

Brennan: "I think this is a, long issue, but al Qaeda is just determined to carry out attacks here against the homeland."

Thomas: "But you haven't explained why."

Neither did President Obama, nor anyone else in the U.S. political/media hierarchy. All the American public gets is the boilerplate about how al-Qaeda evildoers are perverting a religion and exploiting impressionable young men.

Palace Pundits Make It Worse

The intelligence tradecraft term of art for a "cooperating" journalist, businessperson or academic is "agent of influence." Some housebroken journalists take such scrupulous notes that they end up sounding dangerously close to their confidential government sources. Some have gone even further and actually worked for the CIA.

For a recent example of the housebroken variety, count the number of cooperating journalists who repeated the CIA and Republican line that the Senate Intelligence Committee report on torture released last month was "flawed and

partisan," even though it was based on CIA cables and other original documents.

Or think further back to those vengeful days in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and the macho pose taken by President George W. Bush, who won oohs and aahs for posturing with a bullhorn and throwing an opening pitch at a Yankees game (and later for dressing up in a flight suit as he arrived to deliver his "Mission Accomplished" speech).

CIA operative Gary Schroen told National Public Radio that, just days after 9/11, Counterterrorist chief Cofer Black sent him to Afghanistan with orders to "Capture bin Laden, kill him, and bring his head back in a box on dry ice." As for other al-Qaeda leaders, Black reportedly said, "I want their heads up on pikes."

This bloodthirsty tone reverberated among Bush-friendly pundits who sought to out-macho each other. One consummate insider, *Washington Post* veteran Jim Hoagland went so far as to publish a letter to President Bush on Oct. 31, 2001, that was no Halloween prank. Rather, Hoagland strongly endorsed what he termed the "wish" for "Osama bin Laden's head on a pike," which he claimed was the objective of Bush's "generals and diplomats."

In his open letter to Bush, Hoagland also lifted the curtain on the actual neoconservative game plan by giving Bush the following ordering of priorities: "The need to deal with Iraq's continuing accumulation of biological and chemical weapons and the technology to build a nuclear bomb can in no way be lessened by the demands of the Afghan campaign. You must conduct that campaign so that you can pivot quickly from it to end the threat Saddam Hussein's regime poses."

Thus, Hoagland had the "pivot" idea three weeks before Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called Gen. Tommy Franks to tell him the President wanted the military to shift focus to Iraq. Franks and his senior aides had been working on plans for attacks on Tora Bora where bin Laden was believed hiding but attention, planning and resources were abruptly diverted toward Iraq. And Osama bin Laden, of course, walked out of Tora Bora through the mountain passes to Pakistan.

The point here is that some media favorites are extremely well briefed partly because they are willing to promote what the powerful want to do and because they are careful not to bite the hands that feed them by criticizing the CIA or other national security agencies. Still fewer are inclined to point out basic structural faults, not to mention the crimes of recent years.

So it is up to those of us who know something of intelligence and how structural faults, above-the-law mentality and flexible consciences can spell disaster

– how reckless reactions to terrorist provocations can make matters worse by accelerating a truly vicious cycle and doing nothing to address the underlying causes that prompted the violence in the first place.

Because of the refusal to seriously address the question of **why** that Helen Thomas posed to John Brennan or to do more than compete like bodybuilders adopting the most muscular poses disaster after disaster is what the West is in for, if it does not come to its senses.

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Obama's Narrative of Deceits

Though President Obama promised “transparency” and “openness,” he has slipped so far from those goals that some wonder how many sides of his mouth he can speak through. He has surely not broken from the longstanding pattern of presidential deceits that have eroded the Republic, as Jason Hirthler writes.

By Jason Hirthler

If the American public knew what was being perpetrated in its name, it might put an end to the slow-motion coup d'État of the United States by corporate wealth. But it is kept in the shadows, pinioned by a harness of half-truths that underwrite its ignorance and enable its indifference.

The public will likely remain in this state until it hears the whole truth, and not the abridged version peddled by an unscrupulous administration, its Pavlovian Cabinet, our obsequious Congress, and the sycophant media (those dutiful court stenographers of state power). Until this confederacy of knaves is exposed at scale, the Janus-faced narrative streaming from the lips of the Commander-in-Chief, whomever he or she may be, will neither change nor falter. Ringing in a New Year will not matter.

Let's take a look at a few of the key storylines in foreign policy. Note how each is fundamentally incomplete. Key facts are elided. Context is erased. Ulterior motives buried. American action is thus cast in the lambent light of good intentions. From the administration's standpoint, the fundamental goal of selective storytelling is to portray offensive acts of aggression as defensive acts of nobility, the backbone of the myth of American exceptionalism.

Defending Ukrainian Sovereignty

Perhaps the story of the year in 2014 was Ukraine. President Barack Obama has roamed the world declaiming on the sacred rights of our dear Ukrainian friends in Kiev. As Obama has it, these freedom-loving patriots have suffered multiple injustices this past year: When their former Crimean province endured the indignity of annexation by the Russian bear. When they were forced to bravely face down a savage uprising in the East, where Moscow infected the people with failed ideas and false hopes.

These poor Kiev allies, who overturned a corrupt government and instilled the leaders it wanted, still hopes in the humblest of terms to integrate with Europe. We must stand beside it, support its dreams, and defend its fledgling liberty from those who would usurp it.

Most of this is fog-addled dissembling from the estimable firm of Balder and Dash, recently retained by the White House. But a few facts persist. There was a coup, but America facilitated it. A new government did take office, but it was comprised not of democrats but fascist sympathizers and neoliberal technocrats. There was an uprising in the East, but it was led by ethnic Russians who rejected the Kiev putsch. There was a plebiscite, in which Crimeans overwhelming opted to join the Russian Federation rather than sign up for ECB-style austerity and a phalanx of NATO bases.

Notice how Obama's version casts the conflict as a defensive one. It employs the threadbare rationale that America is the noble enforcer of democratic values the world over. Here it is defending defenseless borderland Slavs from unquenchable imperialist thirst of Moscow. In truth, Russia has always indicated that interventions in its border states would be considered provocations, just as the U.S. nearly went nuclear when the Soviets deployed missiles in Cuba.

Despite promises from the first Bush administration, successive administrations have moved shamelessly to the east, absorbing new states into NATO and slowly working to marginalize Russian influence from its eastern border to the Atlantic. An aggressive posture if there ever was one.

Iran and the Persian Threat

The President has told us that the "international community" has made tremendous progress in eliminating Iran's capacity to "breakout" and "sprint" to a nuclear weapon, as it most assuredly hopes to do in its endless quest for apocalypse. But while he warns that nations with honest intentions must be wary of scheming nations, the supporting evidence for the madness of the mullahs is sketchy and ignores Tehran's IAEA right to pursue civilian nuclear energy.

But the President won't mention the Ayatollah's *fatwa* against nuclear devices. Nor will he remind you that our dangerous sanctions, notoriously killing 500,000 Iraqi children in the 1990s, have significantly damaged the Iranian medical industry and restricted healthcare for the gravely ill.

He might tell you, quite rightly, how naive Iranian President Hassan Rouhani was to think that making nuclear concessions, softening Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's provocative language, and glad-handing a few dignitaries would make the slightest difference to the U.S. perception of Tehran. But he won't ask you any hypotheticals either, such as how you might feel were you watching a hyper-nuclear aggressor run roughshod over your largely defenseless neighbors? If the U.S. really believes Iran is chasing a nuke, then why not quit giving them a reason to?

ISIS and the Long War

President Obama quite rightly expressed his contempt for ISIS and their unconscionable acts of decapitation of captives and discriminatory slaughter of Shiites. The revolting behavior of ISIS is plain to see. But the President will not summon the image of our own allies, Wahhabi autocrats that savagely behead their own for the sin of sorcery and other fiendish behaviors.

What Obama will also not do is move to end the brutal actions of the U.S. military. He does not mention the drone strikes that slaughter suspected plotters and their families, drawing diabolical schemes in the dirt behind their village hovels. The evidence against them, mind you, is buried in clandestine bureaucratic enclaves, unfit for untrained eyes. And still, village Arabs are nothing more than illuminated targets on a heat map.

Obama will not mention our own sordid history of malevolence. For instance, what we backed in Central America throughout the presidency of his political hero, Ronald Reagan, including brutality through our proxy forces in Nicaragua and El Salvador, which the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) found to be unique in the hemisphere because they "abducted, killed, and tortured political opponents on a systematic and widespread basis." Torture techniques were said to have been learnt at American counter-insurgency schools and overseen by the CIA. And yes, these atrocities included decapitations.

If you're looking for evidence that American troops performed these deeds themselves, look no further than Iraq. Or into the annals of American history. During the Wilson administration, for example, marines invaded the Dominican Republic and leading a criminal and savage repression in order to secure a profitable market for U.S. sugar concerns. At the time, the advantages of outsourcing were little known.

False Flags and a Paranoid Pyongyang

The President will publicly affect a grandiose outrage and claim that invidious rogue state North Korea has hacked Sony Corporation and leaked millions of files, an act of war under international law. What kind of barbaric society would think to conduct such outlandish cyber attacks on a harmless corporation, our flabbergasted White House spokesmen and press flacks ask us in disbelief?

But what our great leader will not tell you is that we have no firm evidence that North Korea is behind the attack. Much like the United States affected certainty when assessing the Damascus chemical attack in 2013, the degree of certainty rises in inverse proportion to the paucity of proof. The FBI released a bantamweight statement suggesting codes, IP addresses, and other surface indicators pointed to North Korea. These claims have been met with derision by those familiar with digital hacking.

Nor has the President bothered to note that his administration has largely pioneered the art of the cyber-attack by smuggling sinister viruses into the Iranian grid hoping to infect and destroy its nuclear capacities and undermine its feverish obsession with a bomb (again, sans evidence). This is not to mention the heroic efforts of the National Security Agency to hack into and imbed trackers in millions of domestic computers.

A Tortured Exception

At all times, the President poses as a man who cherishes justice, peace, and the sovereignty of nations. He will tell you as much. He claims Iraq was a “strategic blunder”; he plaintively concedes that “we tortured some folks” and behaved in a manner not in keeping with “who we really are.”

But perhaps the best way to prevent future torture is first, to quit practicing it, and second, to punish those that did it in the past, even if they are members of your own clan. Neither has been comprehensively achieved.

The President claims to have banned torture. But he hasn’t banned the practice of outsourcing it via rendition. And he has evidently only banned it for the interrogation of prisoners (“detainees”) captured in “armed conflict,” which leaves a broad loophole concerning noncombatant detainees.

As for the authors of our elaborate torture of Arabs across the Muslim world in infamous Bagram and Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo and in anonymous black sites where the gloves truly come off, well, let’s put that behind us. He has also decided that to prosecute the war crimes of administrations past would simply be unhelpful, and that we ought to look forward and not into the (unhelpful) past.

Yet his elegies to lawfulness include his steadfast defense of CIA Director John Brennan, who himself had the audacity to defend CIA war crimes before the press from Langley, in which he repeatedly claimed, once more without evidence, that torture works. Not surprising from a CIA director. But Obama will always take a more nuanced view, insisting that these minor missteps are not in keeping with “our values.”

Turning a Blind Eye to Tel Aviv

Whenever an exchange of fire occurs between Palestine and Israel, Obama is swift to commandeer the nearest microphone, only to remind us that Israel has a right to defend itself. This is not only a prejudiced view, but it isn't actually true. Under international law, occupying powers don't have the right to attack the populations they occupy, let alone to collectively punish them for the crimes of their leadership, which in this case are resistance to occupation.

Obama will also forget to mention that the Palestinian occupied territories represent the world's most salient example of persistent state terror. He will instead authorize yet more money and munitions and gunships to be quietly shipped to Tel Aviv, trumpeting Israeli democracy. Before the ink dries on these forms of Israeli welfare, the President will reject U.N. resolutions that acknowledge Palestinians' right to be free. To live unoccupied. To escape the grinding gears of racism that have transformed Israel into the South Africa of its day, a nation purblind to its own fascism.

The Energy Subtext

Of course, Obama has never acknowledged that the rise of ISIS, Iranian fundamentalism, Palestinian oppression, and North Korean isolationism are partially creditable to U.S. policies and interventions. We exacerbate the things we claim to deplore. We commit the behaviors we hope to curtail. The reason why is the nasty little secret at the heart of the American empire: the profits of the few trump the prosperity of the many.

The fact is that Russia, Syria and Iran are the West's three great nemeses in the contest for control of the earth's resources. All three have variously conspired to build pipelines across their nations and others, such as Ukraine, that lead to Europe, where these Slav and Shiite alliances hope to supply oil and gas to the lucrative EU market. But this cannot happen.

This is the silent meta-narrative lurking beneath Obama's patriotic vagaries, that these are proactive resource wars. Pipeline conflict that will benefit defense contractors (Raytheon) and energy companies (Exxon). They are also wars over market access through “free trade” agreements that will privilege Western

industry (agribusiness) and finance (IMF).

Victory in these conflicts will keep America's dollar hegemony intact, forcing energy purchases to be denominated in dollars, which will be used to buy U.S. debt and thus help fund the next energy conflict. But these delicate facts are left out of the final draft of the President's talking points. Nobody in the government believes Americans would back wars perpetrated for control of fossil fuels, guaranteed markets for GMO seeds, and globalized serfdom via compound-interest debt regimes.

Paul Wolfowitz, while a senior Pentagon official, made it plain enough in his 1992 defense policy paper for the first Bush administration: in the post-Soviet world America would permit no rivals to materialize on any front, the better to achieve "full spectrum superiority," that dreamy Elysium that sends chills down the spines of the habitués of the Bilderberg Group. Military superiority as a guarantor of market dominance and profit optimization. Simple as that.

As William Hartung, Director for the Center for International Policy, has said, "War is good business for those in the business of war." If these are the businesses that put candidates in the White House, does it not stand to reason that administration policy reflect their interests? Energy conflicts obviously do.

By lining the Eastern front with NATO troops and the peripheries of the Persian Gulf with U.S. bases; and by controlling all government concessions in Kiev and Damascus, the United States can ensure that no Slavic Islamic pipelines will cross either nation, and that Europe will be nearly severed from its umbilical dependence on Russian energy.

But this is not part of the story. Our dutiful press assures us that Vlad the Conqueror now rabidly seeks regional hegemony and unchecked sway over befuddled but peaceable Europeans. Again we are forced into the fray.

Promoting the Ideal, Demoting the Reality

In his book *The Purpose of American Politics*, author and authority on the realist school of foreign policy Hans Morgenthau claimed America had "a transcendent purpose to uphold equality and freedom." As Noam Chomsky has said, Morgenthau believed that to deny the validity of our national purpose was to "confound the abuse of reality with reality itself." Thus the ideal is more real than the reality of history. It seems President Obama is of the same mind as Morgenthau.

It is time someone informed our arch idealist that values are distilled from actions, not homilies. In the arena of action, we are an empire created by

genocide, built on slavery, and maintained by violence.

As Abraham Lincoln once said, America is “a nation dedicated to a proposition,” that all men are created equal. But the wattage of that lovely conceit has dimmed with time. If there is anything exceptional about America, it is the abyss that yawns between the eloquent phrases of the Constitution and the barbaric actions that defy its every word.

Maybe our values were once noble, and perhaps those of the average American still are, but the government has long veered off on a path of its own, its habitus corrupted by the clichés of power, empowering cronies for all manner of criminality. For peace, they’ve substituted violence. For transparency, intrigue. For economic equality, lawful pillage. For consensus, conclave. For participation, exclusion. For representation, a price tag.

Our flight path may once have aimed at popular rule, but that was a long time ago.

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