

The Problems with Being Charlie

It's one thing to decry all terrorism and defend the principle of free expression; it's another to show disproportionate concern for some victims over others and to embrace offensive or irresponsible media content, troubling issues from the Charlie Hebdo case, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The responses, outside as well as inside France, to the recent attacks in Paris have become a bigger phenomenon, at least as worthy of analysis and explanation, as the attacks themselves. This pattern is hardly unprecedented regarding reactions, or overreactions, to terrorist incidents, but what has been going on over the past week exhibits several twists and dimensions that are especially misleading or misdirected.

—Scale of the attacks vs. scale of the reaction. Seventeen people, not counting the perpetrators, died in the Paris incidents. With the usual caveat that the death of even a single innocent as a result of malevolently applied violence is a tragedy and an outrage, the response has been far out of proportion to the stimulus.

The magnitude of what the Paris attackers did was modest by the standards even of international terrorism, let alone by the standards of all malevolently applied violence or of political violence in general. By way of comparison, about the same time as the Paris attacks the Nigerian extremist group Boko Haram conducted a massacre in a town in which probably several hundred, and possibly as many as 2,000, died. The international attention to this incident was minuscule compared to the Paris story.

Of course anything disturbing that happens in a major Western capital is bound to get more attention than an even bloodier happening in a remote part of an African country. Probably another reason why press coverage of the Paris story was enormous from the beginning was that the target of the first attack was part of the media, and that *ipso facto* makes the story of greater interest to the press itself.

But much of what we have been seeing over the past week is an example of how public and political attention to something, regardless of what that something is, tends to feed on itself. Once a certain level of salience is reached and enough people are talking and writing about a subject or an event, then for that very reason other people start talking and writing about it too.

As the attention snowballs, political leaders feel obligated to weigh in and to

appear responsive, regardless of their private assessment of whatever started the crescendo of public attention. Thus in the current instance even the White House feels obligated to answer for the President or Vice President of the United States not having flown off to join a crowd in Paris.

– *Consistency vs. inconsistency in upholding free speech.* With the initial attack being against the staff of a magazine, the whole story quickly became couched as one of upholding the right of free speech and freedom of the press (a particular reason for the interest of the press itself and thus the extensive coverage the press devoted to the story).

Lost sight of amid the swell of street-marching champions of such civil liberties is the inconsistency in getting so worked up about this one affront to free speech but not to others. Surely we ought to be worked up as much about other, comparable limitations on free expression, especially when the power of the state is used to enforce those limitations. In France itself the state enforces a variety of such limitations, some of which might be offensive to those who were offended by what the magazine published, and some of which are apt to be offensive to other groups, often with criminal penalties attached.

Of course, glaring examples become even easier to find outside Western liberal democracies. One thinks, for example, of the outrageous blasphemy laws in Pakistan. And last Friday Saudi Arabia administered the first 50 of 1,000 lashes as part of the punishment of a human rights advocate accused of “insulting Islam” because he established an online forum for discussing matters of faith. Some international protest was heard in response, but nothing remotely comparable to the outpouring in Paris.

– *Right to free speech vs. responsibility in exercising that right.* The exerciser of free speech in question in Paris was a satirical magazine that seems to specialize in cartoons that are bound to offend a lot of people. It is fair to say that in the centuries of struggles for civil liberties, this is probably not one of the nobler vehicles for the cause. We are not talking Thomas Paine here.

What is that “je suis Charlie” stuff supposed to mean? That we are all dedicated to putting down religious prophets? With most rights also go responsibilities, and prudence in the exercise of those rights, with an honest effort to bear in mind the consequences of what one does or says. Responsible, prudent exercise of a right does nothing to diminish or compromise that right.

We in the United States should have had occasion to think hard about such matters recently with the episode involving a comedic Hollywood movie that offended the North Koreans, and ordinary North Koreans, not only the regime,

were offended. If North Korea conducts computer sabotage against an American company, we certainly should strongly object to that. But we also might imagine how we would react if a North Korean film company, or any other film company for that matter, were to produce a movie with a plot centered around assassinating the President of the United States. We would understandably object, and it is unlikely that we would be discussing the issue primarily in terms of artistic freedom or a right of free speech.

– *Unity vs. disunity among world leaders.* That image of foreign leaders locking arms with French President Francois Hollande and each other suggests that they are of one mind about whatever they were marching down the avenue about. Don't believe it. It was a phony show of unity.

Each one of those leaders had his or her own reasons for being there, involving politics back home as well as international politics, and not just to show solidarity and good will toward the French. This may have been most apparent with the graceless Benjamin Netanyahu, who rebuffed the French government's request for him to stay away rather than inserting his own agenda, but he was not unique in having an agenda. (Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas initially acceded to a similar French request for him to stay away, before Netanyahu's decision to crash the event made it politically necessary for him to come as well.)

If President Obama had attended, it mainly would have been to avoid subsequent political criticism at home for not having attended. That is a bad basis for deciding how to apportion the President's time.

– *Debate about Islam.* The Paris events have rekindled an old debate about whether the seeds of violent Islamist extremism can be found in the content of Islam itself. That debate had a surge a couple of decades ago when Samuel Huntington was writing about a clash of civilizations and about how Islam has "bloody borders." The debate gets a renewed surge whenever, say, Congressman Peter King says something on the subject or events such as those in Paris transpire. The debate will never be resolved.

The debate as commonly framed is not very useful because even if those who argue that the content of Islam explains the motivations of those who commit violent acts in its name were right, and they are more wrong than right, that would not take us very far toward any implied policy recommendations.

There still would be the fact that the great majority of adherents to the same religion are not violent and are not terrorists. There still would be nonviolent Islamist parties, movements and regimes to deal with, and there still would be large Muslim populations whose emotions and preferences would have to be taken

into account.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt spoke the other day about the need for a reformation of Islam. Maybe he's right, but it certainly would not be up to Western governments to accomplish, push, or otherwise influence any such reformation. There probably isn't much else al-Sisi himself could do to accomplish it.

One of the essential policy-relevant points that Western governments do need to understand is that Islam provides a vocabulary for expressing a wide variety of ideologies (a fringe subset of which is used to justify violence).

Another essential point is that notwithstanding the very wide array of ideologies and objectives found under the banner of Islam, there is a widespread sense of a single Muslim community or *umma*; what happens to one part of that community can become a grievance or inspiration for actions of another part, including a violent part.

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'Justice' Hidden Behind a Screen

Exclusive: Behind a physical (and perhaps metaphorical) screen, the U.S. government is putting on its case to pin ten felony charges on ex-CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling for allegedly leaking secrets to a U.S. journalist about a risky and convoluted covert op against Iran, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern reports.

By Ray McGovern

The federal government claims it is prosecuting former CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling for leaking information to a journalist about a risky covert operation in which the spy agency funneled flawed nuclear-bomb schematics to Iran. But the opening days of the trial suggest that the government may be using the case more to overcome its reputation for shoddy intelligence work.

In opening statements and testimony on Wednesday, prosecutors seemed more concerned about refuting journalist/author James Risen's assessment of the CIA's scheme as botched and dangerous than in connecting Risen to Sterling. Eliciting

testimony from a nuclear engineer testifying behind a screen, prosecutors sought to portray the phony-blueprint gambit as meticulous and careful.

The dispute seems to center on whether the Russian operative code-named "Merlin," who was assigned to deliver the documents to Iranian representatives, easily detected the flaws, as Risen wrote in his 2006 book, *State of War*, or simply noticed that some pages were missing. An internal team of CIA experts when asked to examine the schematics spotted about 25 percent of the errors, but there is a clash of opinions over whether that showed how easy it was to unmask the fraud or how difficult it was to spot the flaws.

None of that, however, relates to whether Sterling was or was not a source for Risen regarding the "Merlin" operation, proof that may prove difficult for U.S. prosecutors to establish because Risen, a New York Times' national security reporter, has an array of sources within the intelligence community from whom to draw. Since the Justice Department has dropped attempts to force Risen to identify his sources, prosecutors may find it hard to substantiate that Sterling was one of the sources for the "Merlin" disclosures.

But the real subtext of the Sterling case is how the politicization of the CIA's analytical division over the past several decades has contributed to multiple intelligence failures, especially efforts to "prove" that targeted regimes in the Middle East were amassing weapons of mass destruction.

The false Iraq-WMD case provided the key rationale for a war that has spread devastation not only across Iraq but has prompted terrorism and other violence throughout the Middle East and into Europe. "Operation Merlin" hatched during the Clinton administration was part of a similar effort to show that Iran was engaged in an active program for building a nuclear bomb and thus would have interest in the flawed schematics that the CIA was peddling.

Yet, in the Sterling case, federal prosecutors seem to want to have it both ways. They want to broaden the case to burnish the CIA's reputation regarding its covert-op skills but then to narrow the case if defense attorneys try to show the jury the broader context in which the "Merlin" disclosures were made in 2006 how President George W. Bush's administration was trying to build a case for war with Iran over its nuclear program much as it did over Iraq's non-existent WMDs in 2002-2003.

Judge Leonie Brinkema appears to be bending to the U.S. government's wishes, allowing the prosecutors to polish up the "Merlin" gambit but then slip back to insisting on narrow relevance if defense attorneys try to broaden the frame to include the reasons why Risen considered it important to publish the story in the first place. Then, the case is just about the narrow question of whether

Sterling gave classified information to Risen.

But the two issues the bogus Iraq-WMD intelligence and the pressure to create another casus belli on Iran are inextricably linked, as Risen himself explained in his affidavit submitted in connection with the Sterling case.

Risen wrote, "I believe I performed a vitally important public service by exposing the reckless and badly mismanaged nature of intelligence on Iran's efforts to obtain weapons of mass destruction, so that the nation would not go to war once again based on flawed intelligence, as it had in Iraq."

Behind the Screen

In the federal courthouse in Alexandria, Virginia, there was a huge screen between those of us from the public and the proceedings, to permit a number of the witnesses to testify without their identities being revealed. Some witnesses even used partial or fake names.

The 12-foot-tall screen seemed like a metaphor for all the smoke and mirrors that we could hear but not see during the first "public" day of Sterling's trial on ten felony charges. Another scheduled witness was Bush's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, who famously helped sell the Iraq WMD claims by warning that she didn't want "the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

Another phrase from that era "not authentic" kept going through my mind, the words that Mohammed ElBaradei, head of the UN International Atomic Energy Agency, applied to forged documents supposedly proving that Iraq was hard at work on a nuclear-weapons program.

Those forged documents purportedly showed that Iraq was seeking "yellow-cake" (very low refined) uranium from the African country of Niger, a claim that President Bush referenced in his 2003 State of the Union Address as he sought to seal the deal on his Iraq invasion two months later.

No wonder the U.S. government wanted ElBaradei out as IAEA chief and a more pliable bureaucrat inserted to replace him. Then, the IAEA could be used to hype allegations about Iran's alleged nuclear-weapons program to justify ratcheting up U.S. sanctions and even possibly a bombing campaign. That is where leaked cables from Pvt. Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning to Wikileaks come in.

According to leaked U.S. embassy cables from Vienna, Austria, the site of IAEA's headquarters, American diplomats in 2009 were cheering how they had replaced ElBaradei with Japanese diplomat Yukiya Amano who had agreed to push U.S. interests on Iran in ways that ElBaradei wouldn't. After thanking the Americans for getting him his job, Amano put his hand out for more U.S. money to his

office. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[America's Debt to Bradley Manning](#)."]]

But ElBaradei's phrase "not authentic" could have been applied much more broadly to what was passing for an intelligence product during those years. For me, "not authentic" brought a horrid flashback to those embarrassing days before the attack on Iraq, when my profession of intelligence analysis was corrupted by Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and eager-to-please CIA Director George Tenet.

Commenting on the 2008 findings of a five-year bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee investigation of the pre-Iraq War intelligence, then-Chairman Jay Rockefeller described much of it as "uncorroborated, contradicted, or even non-existent."

UN weapons inspector Hans Blix put it this way: "I found it peculiar that those who wanted to take military action could with 100 percent certainty know that the weapons existed and turn out to have zero knowledge of where they were." (I had a rare opportunity to raise that issue with Rumsfeld in May 2006 at [a public session](#) in Atlanta, Georgia.)

The Iran Group Think

It was within the context of another "group think" the Inside-the-Beltway certainty that Iran was rushing to build a nuclear bomb that the CIA's eager-beaver practitioners of covert action adopted an overly clever way to sabotage the equally ephemeral nuclear weapons program of Iran. It was a scarcely believable story of over-imaginative sophomores with lots of money plotting to set back a "program" that, in all probability, did not exist.

The most definitive study of a post-Iraq "uncorroborated, contradicted, or even non-existent" nuclear weapons program, this time in Iran, is presented in Gareth Porter's [Manufactured Crisis](#) published a year ago (and viewed as untouchable by reviewers in the fawning corporate media). Porter brings together the results of his many years of research into the issue, including numerous interviews with former insiders.

He shows that the origins of the Iran nuclear "crisis" were not in an Iranian urge to obtain nuclear weapons but, rather, in a sustained effort by the United States and its allies to deny Iran its right, as guaranteed in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to have any nuclear program at all.

The book highlights the impact that the U.S. alliance with Israel had on Washington's belligerent policy toward Iran and sheds new light on the U.S. strategy of turning the IAEA into a tool of that policy, especially the mysterious intelligence from a laptop computer that supposedly "proved" Iranian

duplicity but that has since been traced to a possible Israeli covert op to plant “not authentic” evidence.

Here’s how Hans Blix describes the disclosures in Porter’s book: “National intelligence presented or peddled is often problematic as evidence. In the case of Iraq, defective intelligence contributed to a war against weapons of mass destruction that did not exist. Could unreliable or cooked intelligence one day lead to an attack on Iranian intentions that may not exist?”

“I feel grateful to Gareth Porter for his intrusive and critical examination of intelligence material passed to the IAEA. When security organizations do not shy away from assassinating nuclear scientists we can take it for certain that they do not for a moment hesitate to circulate false evidence.”

The allusion to the assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists, killings widely ascribed to Israeli intelligence services, is clear enough. And that is only a small part of the essential role played by Israel in building a case to “bomb-bomb-bomb” Iran. To his credit, Porter pulls no punches in exposing chapter and verse of this story.

So, the trial against Jeffrey Sterling seems to have multiple purposes beyond simply proving that Sterling leaked some secrets to James Risen. It is a chance for the CIA to contest the widespread impression that is some bumbling intelligence agency that comes up with harebrained schemes. It is also an opportunity to intimidate any other potential whistleblowers who would dare expose to the public more evidence that the CIA is just such a bumbling intelligence agency.

And, it would provide some protection for the next time the U.S. government needs some made-to-order “intelligence” to justify another conflict like the Iraq War. In that way, the prosecution of Jeffrey Sterling is a deterrent to future officials, who might be tempted to commit the unpardonable sin of putting loyalty to their conscience and the Constitution ahead of the non-disclosure contract they signed earlier as a condition of employment.

As Lord Acton, the Nineteenth Century English politician and historian, once said, “Everything secret degenerates, even the administration of justice; nothing is safe that does not show how it can bear discussion and publicity.”

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