

Dems Still Blaming Others for Trump

Failed Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton suggests she would have gone to war in Syria by now, but Democrats still can't grasp why some "peace" voters defected to third parties, as Nat Parry explains.

By Nat Parry

In the latest installment from *The Election That Will Not End*, a renewed attack on third party supporters for supposedly enabling Donald Trump's surprise victory last year is making headlines, with political commentator Bill Maher leading the charge against those who could not bring themselves to supporting the Hillary Clinton-Tim Kaine Democratic ticket in Election 2016.

Singling out Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein and leading academic Cornel West – who backed Stein in the general election – Maher suggests that they may be mentally defective for suggesting that Trump and Clinton both represented potential threats to the country and the world. "Have you lost your fucking minds?" Maher asks. "Go fuck yourselves with a locally grown organic cucumber," Maher tells the "liberal purists" who allegedly cost Clinton the election.

This renewed assault on Stein ignores the fact that her share of the vote was statistically negligible and there were far more people who chose not to vote or had their votes suppressed. Investigative journalist Greg Palast, for instance, has shown that tens of thousands of voters may have been improperly purged from the rolls in key states such as Michigan, which likely had a greater effect on the electoral outcome than Stein's vote totals. The analysis also rests on the flawed assumption that all of Stein's votes would have gone to Clinton had the Green Party not been competing.

Nevertheless, the attacks on Stein and West represent the latest salvo in a rather undemocratic and disingenuous effort to shame individuals who have decided to reject the limited choices offered by the two-party system and are exercising their democratic right to build independent political movements. This right is enshrined in a number of international human rights accords agreed to by the U.S. government, but apparently is still rather controversial in the United States.

For the most part, Democratic and Republican partisans grudgingly accept the right of other political parties to compete (even if no one should vote for them, of course, so as not to "spoil" the election), but in some cases they come out and actually make their true views known that parties such as the Greens and

Libertarians should simply not exist.

This was the case last week when a Democrat named Abbey Bartletmitzvah tweeted that “the Green Party does a disservice to America by existing,” a statement that was unique only in that it openly stated the desire among two-party system defenders for the elimination of any challenge to this system. More often, Democrats just lob accusations at Greens and independent voters insinuating that they are personally responsible for all the problems in the world.

Following the House vote to repeal Obamacare last week, for example, the Green Party reiterated its longstanding call for a universal health care model like those enjoyed by most of the world only to be met with hatred and anger by Democrats still seething over their loss a half-year ago.

“You’re responsible for this!” one hysterical Twitter user responded. “You & your minions brought this on us,” said another. “You realize you are the fucking reason Trumpcare is a thing, right?” asked another.

Quasi-Official Parties

There is a tinge of unfairness to the implication that every one of Trump’s misdeeds can be laid at the feet of dissidents who refused to vote in line with the Democratic Party establishment. Considering that many of these people have long been committed to activism only to come to the painful conclusion that the answers they are looking for could not be found in voting for one of the two quasi-official U.S. parties, it can be difficult for third party voters to accept that they are responsible for everything from the Supreme Court to climate change.

There are also some mixed messages in the U.S. approach to multi-party democracy, with on one hand, alternative parties being allowed to exist, but on the other hand, anyone who votes for them coming under criticism as “spoilers.” If Democrats were more upfront in their desire to ensure that voters have no options other than choosing between the Democratic or Republican parties, they might consider introducing legislation declaring these two parties as the officially recognized parties in the United States and prohibiting other parties from competing.

Of course, this would place the U.S. on par with totalitarian states and in clear violation of international standards for democratic elections, but at least the ambiguity would be removed as to whether third parties are allowed to compete or not. Voters would also have more clarity on whether they are permitted to cast ballots for these renegade parties.

But coming out and expressly banning third parties is not likely to happen because, for one, it could raise international concerns about the U.S. commitment to basic democratic principles and, perhaps more importantly, it would deprive supporters of the two-party system of one of their favorite scapegoats.

Democratic critics of the Greens take delight in pointing out their lack of electoral success on the national level, highlighting this as a repudiation of the Green Party platform and as legitimization of the Democrats. But despite the fact that the Greens' lack of success means that the Greens have never actually held power, they are still routinely blamed for all the country's problems.

Straw Man Arguments

There is also a tendency to distort the primary arguments of Green Party backers, with straw man arguments set up such as "Clinton and Trump are the same." This is called the "false equivalence" argument, which Democrats enjoy shooting down with counter-points about Trump's cabinet picks and xenophobic policies such as the "Muslim ban" and the proposed Mexico border wall.

The implication is that Republicans are obviously much worse than Democrats in all respects, so the "liberal purists" who may object to Clinton's hawkishness or close ties to Wall Street are just being unrealistic and holding her to a different standard. Clinton alluded to this straw man argument herself in an interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour last week.

Pointing to a number of factors that she says cost her the election – mainly the "Comey letter," which had informed Congress prior to the election that the FBI was reopening its examination of her use of a private email server as Secretary of State, and what she called "Russian Wikileaks," which had shared with the public excerpts of her paid Wall Street speeches and revealed collusion between the Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee to sideline insurgent Bernie Sanders' candidacy in the primaries – she complained that she had to overcome not only those obstacles, but also an "enormous barrage of negativity, of false equivalence, of so much else."

Clinton's "false equivalence" charge is one that is familiar to supporters of third parties, who are often accused of engaging in this logical fallacy when weighing options and evaluating candidates. When people decide that they cannot in good conscience support either of the candidates nominated by the two major parties, they are routinely accused of drawing a "false equivalence," i.e. falsely claiming that "they are all the same," when in fact this is rarely the view of people who decide on a third party option.

While the factors for people opting for a third party candidate are complex and varied, one of the main reasons is simply that the candidate is expressing views that the voter identifies with. Of course, this is the essence of democracy – being able to freely cast your vote for a candidate who represents your interests without fear of retribution or having to defend yourself against recriminations – but apparently it is still considered a radical concept in the United States.

Regime Change Wars

Ironically, in the same Amanpour interview in which Clinton warned against “false equivalence,” she also offered a substantive policy reminder of why many peace-minded voters decided they could not cast a ballot for the former Secretary of State who has built a reputation as a hawkish interventionist and a vocal proponent of regime change operations from Iraq to Libya to Syria.

In discussing Trump’s approach to Syria, Clinton said she supported the recent U.S. missile strike targeting a Syrian airfield, but nevertheless complained that it was too limited in scope and perhaps may have even been coordinated with Russia in order to keep East-West tensions under control.

“I am not convinced that it really made much of a difference, and I don’t know what kind of potentially backroom deals were made with the Russians,” Clinton told Amanpour. “There’s a lot that we don’t really yet fully know about what was part of that strike. And if after all it was a one-off effort, it’s not going to have much of an effect.”

In other words, Trump erred not by firing 59 cruise missiles against Syria, which violated international law and resulted in numerous civilian casualties, but by limiting the scope of this attack. The clear implication is that if Clinton were president, it would not have been “a one-off effort,” and probably would not have been done in consultation with Russia.

Instead, Clinton would likely be making U.S. intervention in Syria a centerpiece of her foreign policy, and would show little concern over how this might spiral out of control in terms of ratcheting up tensions – or all-out military confrontation – with nuclear-armed Russia.

So, despite what Democratic partisans may insist, in fact, there is reason to believe that in some ways, a hypothetical Clinton presidency may indeed have brought many of its own dangers. While a Muslim ban may not have been in the cards in a Clinton administration, another U.S. war in the Middle East certainly was. In some ways this vindicates the arguments of those who decided to cast a vote for an alternative to Clinton or Trump, or what Wikileaks’ Julian

Assange likened to a choice between “cholera or gonorrhoea.”

And indeed, despite the ongoing efforts to blame third party supporters for the calamities of the Trump presidency – most recently exemplified by Bill Maher’s malicious attacks on Stein and West – interestingly, public opinion surveys continue to indicate that many Americans are increasingly open to alternatives to the two-party system.

A recent ABC News/Washington Post poll found that if the election were held today, Jill Stein and Libertarian Gary Johnson would likely fare better than they did six months ago. While Stein and Johnson only received 2 and 4 percent of the vote, respectively, on Nov. 8, if the election took place now, 3 percent would vote for Stein and 5 percent for Johnson, the poll found.

This growing support for third parties reflects longstanding public-opinion trends in which Americans appear to be clamoring for alternatives, as shown in polling last year, and may stem from the fact that large numbers of Americans find that the two major parties do not represent their interests.

Indeed, in the same poll that found growing support for Stein and Johnson, 62 percent of voters said that the Republican Party is out of touch with Americans, and 67 percent said Democrats were out of touch.

If many Democrats have their way though, these disaffected voters would have no other options outside of the two-party system.

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Bill Maher’s Muddled Attacks on Islam

As an edgy comedian, Bill Maher prides himself on his “politically incorrect” religion-bashing, but his excessive attacks on Islam more aptly reflect a “politically correct” bigotry, as JP Sottile explains.

By JP Sottile

Bill Maher thinks he knows exactly why they hate us. In the world according to Bill, all those agitated Muslims on the receiving end of multiple interventions, numerous “double-tap” drone strikes, countless tons of falling bombs, the

systematic imprisonment of “rendered” individuals and the widespread use of lawless torture are, simply put, the outgrowth of a backwards belief system. And those beliefs also inspire a type of religious violence that’s become a destructive force unparalleled in today’s world.

The “today” part is important to Maher because he doesn’t like the “false equivalence” of historical context. Instead, he’s decidedly on the side of “that was then, this is now.” So, forget Christian Crusaders, Spanish Inquisitors, Philistine-purging Israelites or, one would assume, any of human history’s numerous examples of holy war-making.

Also not equivalent are recent mass murders of Sikhs in Wisconsin and of Muslims in Quebec. And don’t bother bringing up the growing list of identity-based violence against Muslims or, perhaps most tellingly, of mistaken identity-based violence against those who are ignorantly thought to be Muslims, but aren’t.

Somehow, America’s long, demonstrable history of putting ethnic cleanliness next to its own obsessive Godliness doesn’t quite cut it either, burning crosses and Native American genocide notwithstanding. No, history doesn’t reverberate in the Islamophobic echo chamber ... unless, of course, we’re talking about the “warlike” history of long-since faded Islamic empires. Then all’s fair in this one-sided front on the anti-religious war being waged by the so-called “New Atheists.”

The New Atheism

Maher and his confrontational cohorts – like famed geneticist Richard Dawkins and anti-Muslim gadfly Sam Harris – have targeted Islam as something far more pernicious than just another fantasy-based religion with the usual roster of fundamentalists, self-appointed prophets and violent opportunists.

For them, Islam is *sui generis*. Islam is, according to their unique atheist orthodoxy, both violent and repressive in ways that make it wholly unique. Islam is not just an intellectual error, but a dangerous cultural cancer.

Essentially, these New Atheists have simplified a question almost as old as the “War on Terror” it so inadequately tries to explain. For them, the answer is clear. They hate us because Islam is the enemy of the “liberal” values and, by extension, of the entire civilized world.

Perhaps that’s why Maher doesn’t think jihadi terrorist groups or random incidents of jihadi-inspired violence are better explained as the irrational acts of individual insanity or as the predictable blowback from 75 years of American meddling the Middle East. That is, of course, if you consider “meddling” an adequate description of America’s history of profitable relationships with brutal dictators.

Maheer's "they-hate-our-liberal values" explanation is certainly an inadequate characterization of 25 years of continuous bombing in the region ... and of CENTCOM's random application of kinetic force in numerous Muslim countries over the same period. "Meddling" also falls short of describing the multi-year drone war on "suspected militants" and, all-too-often, on innocent civilians.

On the other hand, "meddling with benefits" might best describe the post-colonial period in a poorly-partitioned region where receding Western powers exploited the maps they'd drawn to great effect. The divided nations they created were fairly easy for corporate neo-colonialists to conquer or control – whether they sought oil, or sold weapons to those who had the oil, but needed protection ... sometimes from their "own people." And then there's Uncle Sam's meddling (a.k.a. complicity) in the never-ending displacement of the Palestinian people.

But those niggling details tend to cloud the clear-as-day view of Islam that Maher shares with those who see it as an enemy of civilization. That's certainly the view of die-hard evangelicals like Franklin Graham, of defense industry shills at the American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, and of the assorted denizens of the increasingly profitable Islamophobia industry.

In effect, Maher and the New Atheists have joined a legion of doomsayers led by the indefatigable Pamela Geller, the paranoia-stricken Frank Gaffney, Steve Bannon's profit-seeking Breitbart and Trump's momentary National Security Advisor Lt. General Michael Flynn.

Packaged for Liberals

To be fair, Maher doesn't employ the same type of paranoid histrionics that both buoys and enriches those right-wing poseurs and the other troubling Islamophobes who've found a home in Trump's White House. Rather, Maher makes a "liberal" argument about the need to stand up for "progressive" values like equality for women, free speech and freedom of religious conscience. He rightly points to countries like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan as places where a basic level of human rights is not available to women, to religious minorities, to homosexuals or to anyone not willing to conform to fundamentalist orthodoxy.

Ironically, and perhaps not coincidentally, some of the places where progressive values are least likely to be embraced are the same countries America has mostly closely supported – Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Egypt, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Also not coincidentally, the places where America has exerted the most influence are also the places that produce many of the violent individuals and groups through which Maher judges the planet's Muslims.

Unsurprisingly, Maher and the New Atheists are loathe to concede the notable shades of gray around the Islamic world – from the women serving in parliament and working as professionals in Iran to the quite different Muslim experiences found in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Balkans. Nor do they mention the fact that Muslim-majority nations have had more women reach the top political spot (eleven) than the United States (zero). It doesn't quite fit into their zero-sum game.

Punchy Lines

Still, if Maher was making the point that the United States is too often a handmaiden to ... or crass beneficiary of ... repression in regimes that hold some economic and/or strategic value to the defense industry and/or the oil industry, he'd likely garner support from many of the progressives he often scolds. But he doesn't.

Instead he and his fellow finger-pointers rail against the Quran as the "motherlodeof bad ideas." Maher says Islam is "the only religion that acts like the Mafia" and even assured Muslim-American Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minnesota, that the Quran is "a hate-filled holy book."

Maher's presentation is a "schlock and awe" shtick that burnishes his credentials as a self-appointed bullshit detector. It preserves his long-standing brand as an anti-PC crusader and, like so many great comedians before him, as someone willing to "go there" even if it makes people uncomfortable.

Perhaps that's why Maher's accused his fellow liberals of giving Islam a "free pass" when it comes to their "repressive" culture. And why he's reprimanded anyone who disagrees with his assertion that Islam is both a particularly violent and a peculiarly "backward" religion that is totally incompatible with the modern world (whatever that is).

He's made a point of criticizing the "cultural relativism" that compares Islamic-based violence with violence linked to other religions – particularly violence linked to Christianity. As Maher infamoused told Charlie Rose back in 2014, to "claim that this religion is like other religions is just naive and plain wrong."

This politically incorrect posture has made fans of die-hard Christian commentators. But this is also where his punchy argument – and his disdain for context – betrays him. Why? Because it fails to account for the cruel crimes against humanity currently being driven by hard-line, radical Buddhists in Myanmar. Yes, it's true ... Buddhists have fomented a widespread program of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya minority which is, oddly enough, a Muslim

minority.

Hindus Too?

Maheer's posture ignores the rise of Hindu extremism in India, where the problem of religious violence and persecution is growing under the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Vice reported that religious minorities in India "averaged one attack per day" in 2015. Muslims in particular have experienced an increase of random violence since Modi came to power. And last year, attacks on the Christian minority grew three-fold with a church "burnt down or a cleric beaten on average 10 times a week," according to a report by Open Doors UK & Ireland.

It is also true that the radical settler movement in Israel has its own hyper-fundamentalists who believe divine right has given them carte blanche to purge the Holy Land of both Muslims and Christians. In 2016, radicalized settlers produced "an average of 2 incidents of settler violence per week," according to a United Nations report. Yes, we know about Hamas' radical Islamic violence.

But human rights organization B'Tselem is monitoring the persistent problem of Jewish violence because there is such a thing as "radical Judaism." And Israel's "Ultra-Orthodox" fundamentalists have a familiar, anti-liberal problem with women worshipping next to men, riding the bus with men and with a belief in the "unclean" nature of the feminine.

Let's be honest ... it's a fundamentalist tendency shared among the three Abrahamic cousins. Even now America's Vice President Mike Pence believes married men shouldn't risk cavorting with other women, may believe it's possible to "pray the Gay away," absolutely believes gay marriage is tantamount to "societal collapse" and is the standard bearer for a well-established Evangelical political movement that "inspired" violence against abortion providers. And, as noted earlier, there are those troubling, religiously-inspired burning crosses of the Ku Klux Klan.

Do these religiously-sourced incidents, some of which are part of long, identifiable patterns, mean that the religions themselves are inherently pernicious? Is it possible that Maheer, like the politically correct liberals he scorns, is handing out free passes to these non-Muslim religions? Or is it that religions are – like most belief or political systems – potentially useful tools to those seeking righteous justification or an organizing rationale for their rage and anger?

As a guest on Maheer's HBO show recently said regarding the "lone wolf" attack outside the Houses of Parliament in London, "it has nothing to do with Islam the

same way Timothy McVeigh had nothing to do with Roman Catholicism.”

But Maher wasn't having it. And when he was then presented with the fact that Irish Catholic separatists engaged in a deadly campaign of bombings and terrorism against those they perceived as their Protestant oppressors, again Maher bristled. He said that was “the past” (like the Inquisition, the Crusades and, apparently, those uniquely American burning crosses).

And he punctuated his point by dropping this headline-grabbing punch-line: “Every time some bomb goes off, before it goes off, somebody yells ‘Allahu Akbar!’ I never hear anybody go ‘Merry Christmas! This one's for the flying nun!’”

It got a nice chuckle from the crowd. But history usually gets the last laugh.

History Matters

First of all, not only did the IRA and IRA “elements” repeatedly attack Christmas shoppers in London in the week before the holiday, but one such attack outside Harrod's on Dec. 17, 1983, killed five shoppers and wounded 91 others. That bombing led to annual fears of a “Christmas Bombing” campaign all the way into the 1990s.

No, the proudly Catholic authors of that attack did not say “Merry Christmas,” but their intention was clear. The bombings were not *in spite of* the most important religious holiday for Christians, but *because of* the added impact that holiday had in creating a feeling of terror among the intended target. The timing of the bombing was itself a terrifying message.

Secondly and, perhaps more pertinently, the United States used the Christmas holiday as a backdrop for one of the most brutal bombing campaigns of the post-World War II era. Officially it was called “Linebacker II,” but ever since it began on Dec. 18, 1972, the round-the-clock bombardment of Hanoi, Haiphong and the surrounding environs has been known as the “Christmas Bombing.” It was ordered by President Nixon as a punitive measure meant to terrorize the Vietnamese people and, therefore, designed to apply pressure on the Communist government to (ironically) sign a peace agreement in Paris.

Although there was a pause on Christmas Day, this momentary “gift” was cold comfort to the 1,600 people who died in that campaign. Hanoi was laid waste as America's fleet B-52s flew a total of 741 sorties and “dropped at least 20,000 tonnes” of bombs, according to a 40th anniversary report on the bombing by the BBC. Another report put the total at 40,000 tons. A Vietnamese source says the total – and the lingering toll on the Vietnamese people – was much higher still.

LobeLog's David Bacon wrote a retrospective look at the psychological impact of the B-52 as an instrument of *de facto* terrorism. He dug up a newspaper report on a delegation visiting in the wake of the Christmas Bombing. It was led by Nuremburg jurist Telford Taylor. It also included Joan Baez and Yale University Divinity School Associate Dean Michael Allen, who said, "The most horrible scene that I've ever seen in my life was when we visited the residential area of Khan Thieu, and as far as I could see, everything was destroyed."

Like the IRA, Nixon didn't shout "Merry Christmas" when he delivered his explosive message. Then again, he didn't really have to. As noted journalist and columnist Anthony Lewis wrote in the New York Times, "To send B-52s against populous areas such as Haiphong or Hanoi could have only one purpose: terror." And Lewis wasn't alone in his assessment that Nixon's purpose was, in fact, terrorism.

Newspapers around the United States and the world condemned the bombing and the word "terror" was used by The Washington Post ("Terror Bombing in the Name of Peace," Dec. 28), the New York Times ("Terror From the Skies," Dec. 26), Joseph Kraft ("senseless terror") and Dan Rather ("large scale terror bombing"). The Christmas bombing message was clear to all.

God-Fearing 'Freedom'

But that simple symmetry is not the end of the story. That's because the underlying propaganda of that the war – like all of America's Cold War interventions, proxy battles and ad hoc bombings – was something Americans have (perhaps unsurprisingly, perhaps conveniently) forgotten. The plain fact is that Vietnam and the entire post-World War II period was sold as a struggle against "Godless Communism." That may sound like a quirky anachronism today, but rest assured that the "Godlessness" of Commies, Pinkos and interloping Socialists was not only a core foundation of Cold War propaganda, but it also fed the monster of paranoia that helped create McCarthyism.

Indeed, at the same time Sen. Joe McCarthy, R-Wisconsin, was railing against Commies in 1954, Congress was moving to add "One Nation Under God" to the pledge of allegiance. As the New York Times recalled in a 2002 article on a challenge to the constitutionality of that addition:

"The change was made to draw attention to the difference between the system of government in this country and 'godless Communism.' ... Introducing his resolution in the Senate, Senator Homer Ferguson, Republican of Michigan, declared, 'I believe this modification of the pledge is important because it highlights one of the real fundamental differences between the free world and the Communist world, namely belief in God.' No one in the Senate or the House spoke in

opposition.”

In fact, the vocal merger of American Christianity with Cold War anti-Communism has been cited as a spur for the 16 percent rise in church membership between 1940 and 1970. In a 2003 review of a well-received book of the topic, Dr. Merrilyn Thomas of University College London noted that it should be “self-evident” that “religion played a significant role in the Cold War ... given the powerful influence of Christianity on the lives of millions of people on both sides of the Iron Curtain.”

It may not be “self-evident” now because it is simply taken for granted. We’ve inherited that era’s holy warriorism and pushed it deep into our collective subconsciously through our gaping memory hole. It’s a subtext that came to the fore when the 9/11 “changed everything.” But, then again ... it really changed nothing.

Lessons Unlearnt

Perhaps the saddest fact to emerge from the bloodiest episode in America’s war on Godless Communism is that Ho Chi Minh didn’t really have to be America’s enemy. He actually thought America – with its own revolutionary past – might be an ally in his drive to liberate Vietnam from French colonial rule. It made sense since he’d worked with the OSS to battle the Japanese in World War II. But that nascent alliance became impossible as an almost religious form of zealous anti-Communism consumed Truman’s presidency, the foreign policy establishment and, by the mid-1950s, most of America’s institutions.

Instead of seeing Ho Chi Minh as a nationalist first and a Communist second, America policymakers missed an important fact. His main goal was to liberate his nation from foreign occupation. But the foreign policy establishment viewed Vietnam and the entire world through a Manichean lens. It was the Free World versus Communism. It was good versus evil. It was a civilizational battle between the God-fearing and the God-less. And this simplistic template made it impossible to see that Communism was often as much a means to an end as it was an end unto itself.

That’s one lesson Cornell University professor and historian Frederik Logevall took from writing his 2012 book *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam*.

As Logevall said in an interview referenced by the New York Times, Ho “saw communism as the best path of development for his country, but it was always *his country*.” And it was the liberation of “*his country*” that mattered most. Even the New York Times noted in its Sept. 4, 1969 obituary that Ho was a

“remarkable” statesman who “pursued his goal of Vietnamese independence” by successfully “blending Communism with nationalism.”

And that’s the unlearned lesson of the entire Cold War period. Wherever we look back and see Communist, Socialist and other radicalized insurgencies, we usually see a larger historical process of decolonization. The years after World War II are filled with examples of former colonies fighting against the re-imposition of empire after the end of World War II. Or we see the revolt of newly-liberated peoples against the post-colonial proxies, kleptocrats and petty dictatorships that essentially stood between the people and their right of true self-determination and/or economic power.

To be sure, there were also many instances of dyed-in-the-wool Reds who were true believers. Places like Cuba, China and the Soviet Union were secure enough on their own to turn inward and, ironically, transform the communist project into a statist-style religion with personality cults that smack of religion. We see it now today in North Korea. But it is undeniable that Communism was also an effective organizing and recruitment tool that gave adherents a strong sense of group cohesion and ideological discipline that made them both effective fighters and committed believers.

Moreover, Communism was itself often criticized as a pseudo-religious paradigm that crystallized the terms of the fight into divided the world into the oppressors and the oppressed (a.k.a. infidels and believers). This mirrored the way America divided the world into the God-loving free world and the “Evil” empire of Godless Communism. In many ways, Communism became the logical “belief system” for those organizing resistance to the real or perceived American imperialism of the post-war period. It’s almost an irrefutable matter of political physics that the forceful imposition of the American Century would elicit an equal and opposite reaction. These reactions are as predictable as gravity.

Belief System Breakdown

Sadly, the coming of the War on Terror revealed exactly how little America learned from the bloodletting of Vietnam. Osama bin Laden began his Holy War as a project to eject “infidels” from Saudi Arabia – the holiest of Islam’s lands and his home nation. The infidels were American troops and they were there because they were “meddling” in Iraq – a place where America’s one-time client had become its foe. But America’s oil-thirsty neo-colonial protection racket put it right in the crosshairs of bin Laden and many others who resented America’s presence. Ironically, that resentment had its roots in yet another resistance movement – the CIA-generated plot to expel another set of invaders from a Muslim land.

That's right ... like Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong and countless other ideological leaders of the Twentieth Century ... the CIA realized the power of a coherent belief system to create exactly the type group cohesion and hard-won discipline necessary to fight an asymmetrical war against a superior invader. That's what Saudi Wahhabism and Salafism offered the adherents who flocked to the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan.

Perhaps the CIA took note of the power of Shiite fundamentalism to organize resistance when their hand-picked, highly-Westernized leader in Iran was quickly toppled by a religious coup that was as much an anti-colonial fight as it was anything else. It's a lesson as Russia learned in neighboring Afghanistan when they were ejected by comparatively lightly-armed foe reinforced by their hardcore beliefs.

It's strangely fitting that the Muslim faith of the Mujahedeen helped to bring down the "Evil Empire" of Godless Communism. Unfortunately, their American benefactors filled that vacuum with their own ambitions for a unipolar world and, in the process, left Afghanistan with little more than rubble to show for their help.

With America now unopposed on the world stage, it began a renewed era of "meddling" around the Muslim world that led to the arrival troops in Saudi Arabia (1990), the basing of the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain (1995), the establishment of Camp Lemmonier in Djibouti (2002) and a vast array of smaller deployments around the globe. This compounded the damage from U.S. indifference to Palestinian aspirations for self-determination and from a decade of sanctions and bombing in Iraq that reportedly led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children.

Albright's Endorsement

Whether that story is a fact or a myth, all that really matters is that the story was widely known. In 1996, it was bitterly reinforced by then-U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Madeleine Albright when she infamously told Lesley Stahl of *60 Minutes* that the Iraq's sanction-related deaths were "worth it."

Why? Because America's former client – Saddam Hussein – needed to be punished. This is the same Saddam Hussein the United States armed in the 1980s to fight Iran. That's the same Iran the United States was simultaneously – and quite illegally – arming to fight Saddam. And this, like so many other details, may be inexorably stuffed somewhere in America's bottomless memory hole.

But, like a long litany of interventions, drone-delivered executions and troubling crimes committed since 9/11 (yes, torture and extralegal imprisonment

are crimes), it's a fact widely known around the Muslim world. Don't doubt for a minute that Gitmo, Abu Ghraib and the ever-present menace of hovering drones are foremost in the hearts and minds of many Muslims.

Given that fact, it is any real surprise that the Muslim world sees the United States and its allies as enemies? Is it really because – as the New Atheists and Right-wing Islamophobes believe (note that is, in fact, a belief) – the Muslim faith is uniquely ill-equipped to be part of their “civilized” world? Or is it that Islam is just the latest example of an ideology or religion being used to organize, to inspire and to marshal angry, displaced and/or aspirational human beings in a fight against a superior foe?

If history is our guide, radical jihadism looks like an opportune way to organize resistance to what many Muslims see as an American Century of violent “meddling” and political imposition through brutal proxies and neo-colonial adventurism. It is blowback. The New Atheists – and befuddled Americans – should look no further than the most recent slaughters of civilians in Yemen and Mosul for the replenishment of the already manifold reasons why they hate us.

And as for the often-cited the rejection of Western “liberal” values? Like the rejection of “decadent Capitalism” by fundamentalist Communism during the Cold War, it makes sense that Islamic fundamentalism would target anything that smacks of the Western world. And like other ideologies of resistance and revolution, it directs people's anger toward the accouterments and symbols of the dominant power in their lives – whether directly imposed or imposed through proxies.

If that's what radical Muslim jihadism is ... then it is infinitely more comprehensible than Bill Maher, the New Atheists and Right-wing Islamophobes are willing to accept or admit. Maybe Islam isn't a puzzling cancer that has to be excised. Maybe jihadism is a means, not an end. And maybe the brutal insanity of the Islamic State is more an echo of the excesses of the Khmer Rouge, Stalin's purges, Mao's Cultural Revolution and Robespierre's Reign of Terror than it is a logical conclusion of the Islamic faith. And maybe ... just maybe ... the radicalism around Muslim world can be seen in a larger context of history. That means acknowledging the extent to which America and its repressive proxies have set the terms of the debate around the Muslim world for the better part of a century.

Ultimately, it's most important to recognize that Maher is, at best, misguided when he says there aren't “Christian terrorist armies like ISIS.” As far as many Muslims on the receiving end of officially-sanctioned violence from the U.S. military, that's probably a distinction without much of a difference. And if there's any doubt about America's own lingering fundamentalism, take note that

few things would be more futile today than trying to get Congress to scrub that Cold War-era religious test from the Pledge of Allegiance.

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