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Undoing the Blindfold of Old Glory: Observations on 9/11 and the War on Terrorism From Lockdown USA

Mario Alberto Rocha
Calipatria State Prison

Written from the perspective of a wrongfully incarcerated young man of color in a California prison, this essay argues that the U.S. response to 9/11 parallels the ways local police forces have responded to inner city gang warfare, by acting out of vengeance and anger rather than critically examining the causes of the problem. Moreover, just as the “war on gangs” in California has led to more crime, more violence, and more imprisoned young men—hence creating precisely the context for the alienation that fuels gangs and gang violence—so the U.S. war on terrorism has triggered an international wave of anger and has increased the violence directed toward the U.S.

Keywords: 9/11; terrorism; gang warfare; prison

From a prison cell on the other side of the country, I watched as New York’s giant black and gray twins of glass and steel prominence collapsed. It was a horrific, sickening sight. And as I reflect on those images on the eve of 9/11/2002, I struggle to make sense of my reaction to terror, my response to the resulting war, and what these things mean to my community-in-captivity at Calipatria State Prison in the Southern California desert. As a wrongly incarcerated Chicano, I have seen the downside of empire, the anguish that lurks outside the gated communities marking the winners and losers of globalization. I thus hope to offer readers some sense of why people become terrorists, why their anger drives them to hatred or, in the lingo of my community, “why Qaeda does

Editor’s Note: Mario Rocha is serving a double life sentence for a crime I am convinced he did not commit. Despite this injustice, Mario has dedicated himself to becoming an activist artist, thus producing a remarkable number of poems, stories, and essays, which readers may find in *Broken Chains*, *Color Lines*, *Clamor*, *Onward*, and other grassroots journals fighting for peace and justice. Readers may write to Mario using this address: Mario Rocha, #K-91379, Calipatria State Prison, P.O. Box 5002, Calipatria, CA 92233. Readers who wish to make financial contributions to help buy Mario books, paper, stamps and other materials may send tax-deductible contributions in his name to Each One Reach One, Box 1098, Pacifica CA 94044; www.each1reach1.org. Readers who would like more information on Mario’s case, or to publish his work elsewhere, should contact Stephen Hartnett, Department of Speech Communication, 244 Lincoln Hall, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801; e-mail: Hartnett@uiuc.edu.

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crazy shit.” In this article, I thus draw from my experience as an incarcerated Third-World person in the United States, numerous sources in the mainstream and independent printed media, and the ignored points of view of my fellow prisoners to offer testimony on our current global crisis.

This essay consists of two parts. In part one, I study my thoughts on 9/11 and explain why my reaction to the spectacle of terror might have differed from that of most Americans. In part two, I recount the perspectives I gathered from several discussions on 9/11 and the war on terrorism with the people of my community. Combining these two parts, I argue that the mentality currently driving the Bush administration’s endless global war is reminiscent of the mentality driving gang warfare in urban America, and that the war on terrorism’s structure parallels the failed war on gangs in California.

Struggling to Make Sense of 9/11 From Behind Bars

In remembering 9/11, I try to understand my initial reaction. I try not to picture what went on inside the doomed towers as they suddenly crumbled—but I do. I see the man sitting at his desk, gazing 90 flights down upon the beautiful, busy city, the morning sun and bright sky persuading him to put off billion-dollar business deals for later and instead write poetry when seconds later, flames finish his poem. I see the woman smiling before her computer, e-mailing her best friend with the good news, “I’m gonna have a baby!” when seconds later—darkness. I imagine all those people—people in offices, people in cubicles, people in restrooms, people in hallways, people in maintenance rooms, people in elevators, people in stairwells—enjoying a normal day and then seconds later finding themselves thrust into the scene of terror unfolding before them, screaming as windows burst, running as lights flicker, shoving as ceilings and floors collapse, praying as pitch blackness foreshadows death. The towers of high hope and modern majesty slowly, then suddenly, plunge into perpetual silence. Debris and dust, ash and smoke, wind . . . memory.

How can one avoid drifting off to that inner place where emotion and imagination meet? How can one reflect on the tragedy of 9/11 and not relive the repulsive event from the imagined perspective of the victims inside those towers of terror? I believe this ability to think from multiple, varying perspectives is what nurtures our humanity and sustains our sense of connection with our fellow human beings. For we look back on how we personally experienced an event, a tragedy, and amidst the quest for remembrance, compassion compels us to search beyond the terrain of self, to reach for the hand of our brothers and sisters, to imagine how that moment in memory looked through the eyes of someone else. More important, this empathetic way of thinking distinguishes us from a person who could commit such unspeakable damage. As Daisaku Ikeda (2002) writes in his peace proposal,

Because the minds of terrorists are so obsessed with an objectified “enemy,” there is no room for individual “others” in all their infinite variation—even the fundamental distinction between soldier and civilian is not recognized. . . . It is this utter and complete numbness to the suffering, sorrow, pain and grief of their fellow humans that enables terrorists to commit acts of such brutality. (p. 16)¹

Ikeda’s point leads me to confront my own troubling response to 9/11. For although I clearly see evil in the indiscriminate killing of civilians, I knew not how or what to feel when I first saw a quintessential symbol of U.S. capitalist domination destroyed before me. A part of me saw that overgrown pile of shattered stone and twisted steel at Ground Zero as a massive hill of mangled, meaningless material, as a leviathan of property destruction representing not a “terrorist” strike but the logical outcome of global capitalism. But that response was short-lived and is now embarrassing, for compassion leads us to see that the wreckage in New York was a mountain of many lovable lives lost. The question, then, is how could my anticapitalist sentiments blindfold me, even if for a brief moment, to the reality of human tragedy? Had I become in my short 23 years of existence an anti-American American? Did I secretly, or perhaps subconsciously, share the terrorists’ contempt toward my country? By asking these tough questions, I began first to unravel and then to understand my response to that terrible Tuesday.

For as I awakened to the surreal sight of king and queen capitalism engulfed in the flames and smoke of jihad, my instinctive radicalism triggered a montage of the atrocious scenes caused by American imperialism: from the first bloody incursions into now-conquered Indian land to the merciless mass killings and mistreatment of now-assimilated African slaves; from the expansionist war against Mexico to the nefarious neocolonization of Latin America; from the brutal bombardment of Japanese cities—100,000 people incinerated at Hiroshima and 50,000 more vanished at Nagasaki—to the savage napalm theater in Vietnam; from the criminal contra war against Nicaragua and the massacres in El Salvador and Guatemala to the villainous invasions of Grenada and Panama and the bombings of Laos and Beirut; from the bloodthirsty Gulf War—leading to 110,000 military and 1,200,000 civilian deaths, including those resulting from economic sanctions—to the aerial bullying of Sudan to the endless backing of Israel’s occupation in Palestine; from the daily assault against the poor people of Cuba by a living relic of the cold war (the embargo) to the hourly exploitation of the poor people of the world by U.S.-led neoliberal globalization to the minute-by-minute harassment of humanity by U.S. military bases in 69 different countries across the globe. In short, when the image of America’s twin towers of capitalism and its castle of war appeared on TV, I thought initially not of my dead neighbors in New York and Washington but of all the people—the millions of men, women, and children—who have suffered around the globe at the hands of U.S. military might and economic domination.²

I must confess, then, that my response to 9/11 initially had little to do with that day's horrors and more to do with many years of reading and thinking about the costs of U.S. power. In trying to understand this response I recalled the words of George Lakoff (2001). In "Metaphors of Terror," he argues that "Our systems of metaphorical thought, interacting with our mirror neuron systems, turn external literal horrors into felt metaphorical horrors." This helps explain my initial, confused reaction to 9/11. Indeed, as I metaphorized both the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as symbols of oppression, I sensed an oppressed peoples' redemptive backlash against empire. I saw the immediate spectacle of terror as a metaphorical boomerang of the terror returning to wreak vengeance for the terror that America had historically hurled upon the world's downtrodden. In other words, as Lakoff suggests above, my systems of metaphorical thought, interacting with my mirror neuron systems, turned the literal horror on TV into the metaphorical horror in my mind, leading me to think of the victims of U.S. imperialism rather than the victims of the boomerang on 9/11.

But then I learned about the plane crash near the town of Shanksville, Pennsylvania, resulting from the fight that its passengers put up against the hijackers of United Flight 93, and my obscure perception of the strikes attained a higher degree of clarity. I saw their resistance as that of the long, living resistance of all human beings who have risen up against the violence of indignity, who have died fighting against the violence of oppression. And I realized that the victims of 9/11 were no different than those honored in my montage of human struggle. For the American dead of 9/11 too were slaughtered for the self-righteous cause of narcissistic fanaticism, they too were sacrificed on the bloodstained altar of xenophobic ideology. No matter how one views the strikes—as an attack against our way of life or as an attack against our foreign policy—nothing can justify the fact that innocent people died. Nonetheless, the fact that I took this intellectual journey from 9/11 back through the history of U.S. imperialism and then finally back again to the dignity of those who died on 9/11 suggests why so many people have responded to 9/11 in ways that many Americans have found troubling.

Thinking About 9/11 in Prison, the Land of Gang Bangers

After discussing 9/11 with a group of inmate friends, I discovered that their reactions to the tragedy were generally similar to my own: initial confusion at what they witnessed followed by condemnation of the carnage. Although my peers tended to see the terrorist strikes as "a taste of our own medicine," thus acknowledging the U.S. government's culpability in sowing the seeds of terrorism globally, their overall view on the war fell in line with the establishment's portrayal of the war as a war of civilization against barbarism. Their responses

thus merged well-practiced cynicism with hefty doses of state propaganda. Yet, when I asked them questions in search of responses free from ingrained sound bites of popular pro-war rhetoric—for example, “But don’t you think bombing innocents in Afghanistan will only fuel the flames of jihad throughout Islam?” or “Do you really feel that unencumbered empire is the solution to terror?”—I discovered that when they spoke in their own words, their collective response offered a unique angle on the production of violence.

For it seems they view the military chess match between America and terrorists as little more than a global version of the gang warfare played out in their communities every day. It seems they regard the underlying strategy steering the war on terrorism as similar to the way that law enforcement agencies and police departments explain the war on gangs in California. In this light, 9/11 amounts to the world’s worst drive-by shooting, a maniacal *fly-by assault*, killing not 1 or 2 but 3,000 innocent people on America’s turf. And like a gang whose turf has been transgressed, America not only must retaliate, it must annihilate as well; it must show *no weakness* and attack the terrorists with even greater force. Although I disagree with their position, it demonstrates how the kind of thinking that has spearheaded endless gang warfare in urban America perpetuates the cycle of international violence. More ominously, this perspective suggests that much as the war on gangs in California has only escalated violence and animosity, so too the war on terrorism, at least as currently run, can only produce unwelcome results.

Although this comparison is meant to be more suggestive than analytic, my community’s point of view lends us a down-to-earth look at the politics of vengeance and force. For even if we disagree with their position—one largely influenced by their gang-related backgrounds, experiences as Third-World people in America, and, presumably, unconscious sentiments of American nationalism—it is important in these times when fanaticism contaminates the clear air of reason that we listen to their words and consider their opinions, for the voice of the unheard holds out truths untold. Indeed, two critical points emerge in examining my community’s metaphor of the war on terrorism as an international form of gang warfare.

First, in learning that my peers generally believe America must retaliate, we see how the gang mentality, which prioritizes violence according to the desire to carry out reprisals in the name of honor, aptly corresponds to the Bush administration’s response. This mode of thinking has perpetuated conditions in urban America in which rival street gangs are locked in a bloody cycle of senseless killing and aimless fighting, consuming countless young lives through death or incarceration with no end in sight. On a deadlier and more drastic level, this mode of thinking drives conditions across the globe, and particularly in the Third World, where conflicting ethnic or religious groups and/or opposing political factions are stuck in self-perpetuating cycles of violent struggle. If one considers that gang warfare often stems from criminal feuds over control of

profitable drug-market turf, then this comparison may appear inapplicable, yet when we focus on the international political economy of oil, suddenly the comparison takes on new life. Most important, though, the gang metaphor helps us to think more clearly about why young people willingly take up arms, aim them at other youngsters whom they perceive as “the enemy,” and shoot to kill solely to commit a retaliatory homicide for the gang (or, as it is sometimes described, to “put in work for the neighborhood”). The point is that this cycle of retribution teaches young people to seek vengeance without justice.

Just as the teenage boy guns down a young rival gang member as vengeance for the murder of his homeboy in the violent streets of East Los Angeles, paramilitaries clean out villages of *campesinos* as vengeance for the kidnapping of government officials by the guerrilla army in the cutthroat countryside of Colombia. And just as the deceased youth’s homeboys strike back, contributing to the cycle of blood spilled in East L.A., the guerrillas return, raiding towns and cities, contributing to the cycle of mass-murdering civil war in Colombia. A classic example of the destruction caused by this pathological mentality is the war of liberation in Palestine. On one side, Hamas kills several Israeli civilians in its latest round of suicide bombings and justifies these crimes as a righteous response to continued Israeli aggression against Palestinian civilians in the occupied territories. On the other side, the Israeli army responds by demolishing more homes and seizing more towns, its tanks crushing land and liberty and its midnight missiles fired from ever-lurking fighter helicopter jets intensifying the bloodbath. In short, both sides immortalize the cycle of retribution and the war without solution. The point here is that whenever two opposing sides succumb to fighting for vengeance rather than justice, the two peoples surrender the hope of one day attaining peace. Therefore, if we adopt the mind-set which believes that “Bin Laden’s boys must pay *in blood* for their deed,” we too become adherents to the cause of vengeance without justice; we too stain our hands with the bloodshed that results when people become entangled in the illogical battle for revenge.

Second, in learning that my peers generally believe America must respond to terrorism with greater force, we see how the kind of strategy that authorities have employed to combat gangs can be compared to the strategy the Bush administration has used so far to combat terrorism. This strategy is marked by outright repression and violence, as cops respond to gang violence with greater force. It is manifested publicly by the passage of egregious legislation designed to sweep up *suspected* gang members from society and expel them to the criminal justice system, and by the existence of elite antigang paramilitary units in police departments across the state that carry out the no-holds-barred crusade against “gangs.”³ Though some would argue otherwise, a massive body of evidence demonstrates that force as a strategy to end gang warfare does not work (Currie, 1998). No matter how many SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams the state funds, low-income kids in the barrio continue to fight, hurt, and kill each other *for the neighborhood*. And like gang members, “terrorists”

spring up from the socioeconomic conditions in which they are raised—they are not monsters so much as the products of a world over which they have little control. As Luis Rodriguez (1994) explains in *Always Running*,

Gangs are not alien powers. They begin as unstructured groupings, our children, who desire the same as any young person. Respect. A sense of belonging. Protection. The same thing that the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], Little League or the Boy Scouts want. It wasn't any more than what I wanted as a child. Gangs flourish when there's a lack of social recreation, decent education or employment. Today, many young people will never know what it is to work. They can only satisfy their needs through collective strength—against the police, who hold the power of life and death, against poverty, against idleness, against their impotence in society.

Darken this scene and the roots of terrorism begin to emerge. We will probably never understand what provoked the perpetrators of 9/11 to do what they did, yet we must demystify our conception of these people in order to understand their motives. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Rosa Ehrenreich Brooks (2001) write in "A Twisted Sense of Duty and Love",

We shrink from the idea that the terrorists could have been motivated by the same impulses that drive soldiers in respectable wars. But imagine growing up, even in a middle-class household, surrounded by suffering, hopelessness, poverty, and pain, in the ruins of Kabul, in the Gaza Strip, in Algeria's ransacked towns, or the bleak streets of Baghdad; imagine being brought up to believe that the suffering you see around you is caused by the hypocrisy, greed, obtuseness, and injustice of the arrogant and licentious American superpower.

For millions of people in the Third World . . . it may seem that nothing can stop America from taking far more than its fair share of the world's wealth, or from trampling those with less power. . . . Striking out to teach America a lesson might then, for some in the Middle East and elsewhere, come to seem like a necessary action, arising out of duty, compassion, and, ultimately, love. (pp. 10-11)

Given this explanation of why someone might become a terrorist, can we still believe that America's brute force will eradicate terrorism, or that executing and/or imprisoning every suspected terrorist is the solution? In attempting to answer these questions we see how the war on terrorism's structure parallels the failed war on gangs. This war, born of and during a greater domestic war, the war on drugs, has led to an unprecedented increase in the number of young people (particularly of color) behind bars—a fact corroborated by the seven-fold increase of the prison population in California in the past two decades (Domanick, 1999). But the war on gangs did not eradicate gangs. Why? Because militarizing the police, activating draconian laws, and demonizing *the enemy* in order to *justify* the means used to serve the war did not (and does not) change the socioeconomic conditions that breed criminality and gangs (Goldberg & Evans, 1998).

Although an increasing number of suspected gang members get tossed in the criminal justice system, to become chattel in the state's punishment industry, their little brothers and sisters, the next generation of dispossessed children, grow up in the same bleak and brutal environment. In fact, these youngsters often find themselves living under worse conditions as a result of the war on gangs, as their communities are affected by social service cuts due to a growing prison system due to massive incarceration (Males, 1996; Rosenblatt, 1996). Indeed, this is how the war on gangs has in many ways perpetuated, rather than eradicated, gang warfare. And in a similar manner—although magnified to an ugly extreme—the war on terrorism will fail to eradicate terrorism. It will fail because just as America cannot force its own dispossessed children to stop forming and joining gangs, America cannot force dispossessed children overseas to stop attempting, as Rodriguez puts it, to satisfy their needs through collective strength—against hunger, against poverty, against injustice, against America.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to produce the ideas that if terrorism is unjustifiable, then imperialism—the *cause* of terrorism—is equally unjustifiable, and that the war on terrorism, like the war on gangs in California, only perpetuates the injustice feeding violence. That is why I can both condemn the tragedy of 9/11 and oppose the war. And as I see the error that only time can lay bare, I must ask the agitating, liberating question: If we really want to end terrorism, then shouldn't we wage a humanistic struggle against imperialism? Shouldn't we, conscious people of the empire, rise up against 21st-century Rome? Shouldn't we realize that like the children from our own crumbling inner cities—of which I am one—the children in the Third World's perpetual war zones need education, health care, housing, and hope, not another crusade of violence?

Notes

1. Ikeda is president of Soka Gakkai International.
2. The information set forth in this montage derives primarily from Zinn (1999). Other useful sources included Blum (1995), Meszaros (2001), and "U.S. Military Interventions" (2001).
3. One example of egregious legislation is Proposition 21, The Gang Violence and Juvenile Crime Prevention Act, approved by California voters in 2000. Among many other questionable features, the law stripped judges in the juvenile justice system of their power to decide whether a minor as young as 14 years old should be tried as an adult or as a juvenile, giving the prosecutor *carte blanche* to make that decision (see Parenti, 2000). Additionally, the notorious (recently disbanded) C.R.A.S.H. unit in

the Los Angeles Police Department serve as a prime example of the antigang armies that carry out the crusade (see Lait & Glover, 2000).

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