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Conceived by Michele, created by Alan, and authored by bloggers from around the world.

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March 2004

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20

OP-ED

« [The NY Daily News Weighs In On Maureen Dowd](#) | [Main](#) | [The Accordions of War, Part VI](#) »

MAY 29, 2003

Poverty Doesn't Breed Terrorism

Poverty Doesn't Create Terrorists

I have two questions: 1) How did this story get past Howell Raines; and 2) why has it taken so long to get a scientific study that proves that poverty has little to do with terrorism?

This is good news for the (classical) liberals and bad news for the Left. It's been a matter of Leftist dogma for decades that poverty leads to all sorts of evils, yet here we have a scientific study -- a regression analysis -- that holds other factors equal and finds that terrorism is positively correlated to freedom and not poverty. This lends much support to the idea that we should be working to create liberal democracies in the Middle East and should use Iraq as a jumping-off point.

For our long-term security it's essential that we create liberal democracies in the Middle East and that means the neocons were right. Doesn't it hurt?

The stereotype that terrorists are driven to extremes by economic deprivation may never have held anywhere, least of all in the Middle East. New research by Claude Berrebi, a graduate student at Princeton, has found that 13 percent of Palestinian suicide bombers are from impoverished families, while about a third of the Palestinian population is in poverty. A remarkable 57 percent of suicide bombers have some education beyond high school, compared with just 15 percent of the population of comparable age.

This evidence corroborates findings for other Middle Eastern and Latin American terrorist groups. There should be little doubt that terrorists are drawn from society's elites, not the dispossessed.

Yet some stereotypes die hard. In 1958 the political scientist Daniel Lerner argued, "The data obviate the conventional assumption that the extremists are simply the `have-nots.'"

It is still possible that well-off people in poor countries with oppressive governments are drawn to terrorism. President Bush argued something along these lines in an Op-Ed article in The New York Times on the anniversary of Sept. 11. "Poverty

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21 22 23 24 25 26 27
28 29 30 31

HISTORY AS IT HAPPENED

March 2004
February 2004
January 2004
December 2003
November 2003
October 2003
September 2003
August 2003
July 2003
June 2003
May 2003
April 2003
March 2003

THE REST



2.64



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does not transform poor people into terrorists and murderers," he acknowledged. "Yet poverty, corruption and repression are a toxic combination in many societies, leading to weak governments that are unable to enforce order or patrol their borders and are vulnerable to terrorist networks."

To investigate this possibility, I have analyzed data the State Department collects on significant international terrorist incidents. The home countries of the perpetrators of each event were identified. More terrorists do come from poor countries than rich ones, but this is because poor countries tend to lack civil liberties.

Once a country's degree of civil liberties is taken into account — measured by Freedom House, a nonprofit organization that promotes democracy, as the extent to which citizens are free to develop views, institutions and personal autonomy without interference from the state — income per capita bears no relation to involvement in terrorism. Countries like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, which have spawned relatively many terrorists, are economically well off yet lacking in civil liberties. Poor countries with a tradition of protecting civil liberties are unlikely to spawn terrorists.

Evidently, the freedom to assemble and protest peacefully without interference from the government goes a long way to providing an alternative to terrorism.

This reminds me of my Jefferson quote from the other day and its relevance now more than ever:

"I sincerely pray that all the members of the human family may, in the time prescribed by the Father of us all, find themselves securely established in the enjoyment of life, liberty, and happiness."
--Thomas Jefferson: Reply to Ellicot Thomas, et al., 1807. ME 16:290

Amen to that. Let's hope it's not too distant.

Posted By **Robert Prather (Insults Unpunished)** at May 29, 2003 03:58 AM | [TrackBack](#)

Comments

Did you know that 85% of all statistics are made up? Or that 99.3% of those fabricated statistics are used to back up otherwise facile arguments?

The statistical correlation between higher education and terrorism is not an indicator of the relevance of poverty to the terrorist. To suggest that ignores the factor of ideology.

Undergraduate militancy is prevelant in any university. That is true anywhere, but in Islamic regions where poverty, ignorance and repression walk abroad this militancy can be channeled by extremist recruiters (often on the teaching staff) attempting to co-opt and then brainwash impressionable, young, naive,

dispossessed students to their cause. Tertiary education is an ideal growth medium from reactionary politics because there are so many dispossessed, impressionable, young, naive folks there to choose from. They are called 'students'.

And it is far easier to sell an ideology to an 'intelligent' person than a fool.

Case in point of Islamic tertiary education (the sort that does 'Paradise' re-enactments) - Mohammed Al Faisal, recently convicted in the UK for preaching the use of chemical weapons against... well everyone that didn't agree with him in fact - in his poisonous sermons. He gave a brief interview on the BBC during his trial in which he explained how he had gone to university, was an educated man, (the establishment in question was in fact the University of Riddayh) and how he KNEW from his studies there that the Jewish Holocaust was a fabrication used to bring about a state of Israel.

I was eating whilst I was watching the interview and nearly choked to death. At the end of the interview I waited patiently for either the reporter or anchor to point out that the Jewish homeland had been created after the fall of the Ottoman empire in WWI and the holocaust was in WWII. It never came. Either they didn't know or didn't care. I stopped watching the BBC and switched to CNN - permanently.

Ignorance, even in the 'educated', is as much a battlefield in the GWOT as Afghanistan or Iraq.

In summation the demographic analysis of the terrorist in this way is largely redundant. The argument for Jihad is presented to different people with different focus. Jihad may mean a fight against poverty to the starving or it may mean ideological reasoning to the 'educated'. A far more useful demographic study would be to determine the reasoning of those who recruit and brainwash these pawns, not the study of the many and various 'reasons' given to those pawns for their actions.

Posted by: [Simon Barnett](#) at May 29, 2003 05:45 AM

I agree with a lot of what you said, Simon, but I have the nagging suspicion that you didn't read the entire article.

While the beginning of the article focuses on individual characteristics of terrorists, the end focuses on national characteristics — that is, the environments these terrorists grew up in.

It concluded that prosperity was irrelevant in the face of liberty.

Posted by: [TBox](#) at May 29, 2003 08:46 AM