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Ahmed's Clock: "Counterterrorism" and Homeland "Security" in America's Schools

By Dr. Binoy Kampmark
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The rationale of seeing, in conscientious Texan-based 14-year old Ahmed Mohamed, a fledging terrorist, has a good number of followers. This takes the form of denial that this has anything to do with Islam, and everything to do with being sensible about security in the name of the homeland. Such logic demands that terrorists come in all forms, though even that assumes a clipped, selective form.

Given that the US school can be a dangerous place to learn, let alone teach in, the fear mongering apparatus has become as indispensable as debates about curricula. It all makes truancy or home schooling a far more attractive option. Ahmed may well have thought so when his home made clock was thought by school and police authorities as a terrorist device.

The *New York Post*, in first claiming this was not an issue of race, decided to make it just that, channelling fears of white anxieties and fantasies. One way of dealing with a problem is finding another one. "When is America going to get serious about the problem of white kids getting suspended from school for nothing?"

This tactic is a fundamental part of dog-whistle politics in education, of which no side is exempt.After conceding that the police overreacted to the treatment offered Ahmed, the apologia gathered steam: "the device did look like something Ethan Hunt would lob out of a helicopter at the last minute in 'Mission: Impossible.'"[1]

This fantasy of mass, incendiary violence, with its good Hollywood trimmings, takes shape in defiance of any empirical logic. In fact, there is an underlying sense that we should forget such irritating logic altogether.False analogies would follow. One child's mistreatment could be compared with that of another. But underlying such a response was a calculus: which child could have posed a graver threat? Charles Cooke, for instance, could only see wires in the clock that "looks a lot more like a bomb tan a pop tart looks like a gun."

Sarah Palin made the most direct, unvarnished point of all. This was the clarion call for white victimhood. "Yep, believing that's a clock in a school pencil box is like behaving Barack Obama is ruling over the most transparent administration in history. Right. That's a clock, and I am the queen of England."

Palin's remarks, more to the point, even suggest that the American playground is not only justifiably violent but morally appropriate in being so. Children should hardly be disciplined, she suggests, for being out on the deer hunt with the dad who forgot "he had ammo in his truck when he parked in the school's lot later that day." We then find ourselves in a semantic world of anticipated violence.

Much of the resentment stemmed from the sanctification of Ahmed, the liberal political stuffing that subsequently pillowed him. His mistreatment had assumed poster boy proportions. This is not what is done in America, a violation of its core values – and so forth. It also allowed for another form of orgiastic commemoration to take place, suggesting that change has to assume a public spectacle crowned by a single event.A person who endures a certain unjust fate becomes, as Alex the protagonist in *A Clockwork Orange* does, a victim of the political, moral parade. In Anthony Burgess' work, the violent Alex is subjected to the remorseless Ludovico technique administered by Dr. Brodsky to cure him of his "ultra-violent" tendencies. Beethoven's music becomes an accessory to forcibly curing him as his eyes are held open, thereby eviscerating freewill. Then come opponents of the technique, who also feature.Alex finds himself in the middle of an ideological scrum – one that has been read as a symbolic tussle between the views and writings of the more liberal monk Pelagius, and the doctrinaire and austere St. Augustine.

The public relations complex, seeing a chance to place boy with clock on a pedestal, went running. Perceived bleeding heart liberals stormed the bastions of their opponents by showing how cheesy tolerance and finger pointing will get you anywhere. But for all of that, the structural changes needed to affect such reform are never entertained. The agitprop of grievance, however, is the mother of necessity.The conservatives, in their own aggrieved responses, entertain suggestions of denial: there is no racial divide, and in heaven's name, do not bring the school into this context, except to perhaps chide the authorities for an understandable miscalculation. Kevin Williamson huffed at what he perceived to be a "phony case of Islamophobia". "If it's a comment on anything, it's on the astonishing deficit of common sense at MacArthur High School and among local authorities."[2] But if such assumptions are not battled in a school, where supposedly learning is forged, then where?

All in all, it did look frightfully disingenuous. As Robby Soave, writing for *Reason* explained: "I stand with Ahmed, too. But I also stand with Alex Stone." It meant that every child wrongly sent down for a misunderstanding would need a ticket to the White House with the accompanying fan fare and trinkets. At the very least, none should have to be there in the first place to deal with such a problem.

This has little to do with Ahmed so much as an establishment (or counter-establishment) that turns a dilemma into a fetish; and a case of humanity into celebrity tartdom. When it comes to the publicity divide, everyone needs manufactured heroes to exploit.

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Notes

[1] http://nypost.com/2015/09/19/how-ahmeds-clock-became-a-false-convenient-tale-of-racism/

[2] http://www.nationalreview.com/article/424202/ahmed-mohamed-clock

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