

Radicalization and the Problems of War. Criminals and Converts. Every “Policy of Ideology” Starts with a Lie

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Every policy of ideology must necessarily start with a lie. The lie is festooned with good wishes and suggestions, till it becomes acceptable. What is not convenient to a tidy interpretation is cast aside. The case of radicalization is one of the more acceptable lies, because it is convenient, fabulously convincing and logical. The radicalized ones will do bad things. Once they start, they will not stop.

The radicalisation thesis about individuals fighting in another war is treated selectively. It is not government, and warring governments at that, that is the problem, but ideology and weakness. Standard recruits think that fighting for country (pro patria mori) is a legitimate, stated aim, that the effects of war will be confined to performing a job bloody but noble.

The narratives for the Australian cause have always been abstract in their conception, be it the Boer War (slaughtering Dutch settlers very much like the British settlers who found their feet in Australia); the First World War (protect empire by invading the Ottoman state and feeding the European meat grinder) and conflicts such as Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. In these conflicts, veterans have swelled the ranks of the disturbed, the troubled and the affected. For the most part, these are the lives of quiet, rather than noisy, desperation.

War makes cripples of its combatants. All combatants. They involve broken bones and mutilated limbs. They also involve shattered beings and the shattering of beings. It bores and buries, it crushes and shapes. It does it whether you believe in the sweet promises of the Prophet or the hollow promises of a national anthem. Individuals who return from combat zones are the wounded, the dead on furlough.

The mainly Muslim men who are serving in Syria and Iraq, be it British, US or Australian citizens who fluctuate in number depending on what intelligence briefing finds form with the relevant Defence Minister, will have their host of problems on returning. They will have their own injuries, their own revelations. They will not necessarily have a desire to go to the Melbourne Cricket Ground and ignite the stadium with body and bomb. Each unique case of injury and faith will have to be taken at a time.

The entire radicalisation debate has moved into the world of astrological speculation. What will those unfortunates do on their return? Is there any verifiable data above and beyond the standard disruptions caused by conflict on its combatants? For the current policy hack, evidence is sparse, subsisting on departmental minutiae. Individuals like Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary, suspected of beheading journalist James Foley, become the entire basis for far reaching surveillance measures and punitive regulations.

The occasional scribble¹ who has had some kind of difficult experience in their lives will go on to become terrorists”, though there is always that damning qualifier – “those who do, had contact with an individual or group of existing extremists, who prey on that vulnerability and exploit it.”

Joining this is the aggressive blame game that singles out such dangerous causes as liberal tolerance. Political figures, a classic example being UKIP’s Nigel Farage, see radicalisation as a product of “four decades of state-sponsored multiculturalism”. He might as well have pointed out to years of state sponsored occupations, interventions and killings by non-Islamic states in the Middle East. Things do come full circle.

makes the prosaic point that, “It’d be a mistake to assume that everyone War’s corroding effects provide the bleakest picture of all. All combat personnel risk falling into the cracks of marginal disregard, exclusion and estrangement. Then comes the resentment, something that is only kept in check by the opium of patriotic belief, the belief that holds that brutalising, and being brutalised for your country was worthwhile.

There is, in other words, no exclusive criteria of radicalisation, let alone Islamic radicalisation. The United States had been obsessed, for some time, with the phenomenon of “lone wolf”² one distinguished by the murderously successful Timothy McVeigh which involved a bomb that killed 168 people in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995.

A Gulf War veteran, McVeigh proved rather unhappy with the bullying exploits of his government, throwing some legal precedent and smidgens of political philosophy against his captors. In his parting letter to childhood friend Steve Hodge, he claimed that, “Those who betray or subvert the Constitution are guilty of sedition and/or treason, are domestic enemies and should and will be punished accordingly.” His inspiration for “radicalisation” was Washington’s very own policies, most notably its lethal handling of the Waco Siege of the Branch Davidian complex which saw the deaths of 76 people.

The true criminals, at the end of any debate in this regard, must be those statesmen and women who are convinced that solving an international crisis in a distant country requires the blood of its citizens, and the killing of locals. The United States, with its UK and Australian allies, have also been enthusiastic backers of interventions that made their young soldiers killers for causes they could barely articulate. The problem is not merely on our doorstep, but in our parliaments. The great robbers of life remain states, not non-state rogues who wish to leave their minor etchings on history with spectacular acts of violence.

Notes 1 <http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/gateway-to-radicalisation/>

2 <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=29620>

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