

THE ISLAMIC VIETNAM

If the USA is serious about tackling Islamic fundamentalism, maybe it should first of all admit to its own role in nurturing it.

By Phil MacGiolla Bháin

I have often remarked to friends that I could not live in America. After America's reaction to the horror of Tuesday, 11 February 2001, I am convinced that I could not function in a society with such colossal irony by-pass. It is the irony, visible only from afar, that allows Americans to step back and ask, "How did it come to this?"

A failure to see cause and effect is something that psychologists have noted is a human universal among children. Under the age of seven they are egocentric – literally, they see themselves as the centre of everything and cannot see the world from any other perspective. It is not until a child has reached the age of 12 that this crucial human ability to see the world from the viewpoint of another is cognitively available. The behaviour of America in the decades after 1945 has been that of a bemused, bad-tempered toddler – they want it their way and they want it NOW! Moreover, they cannot trace back events to see that they have agency in their own problems. The awful events that stunned the world have a clear genesis in foreign policy decisions taken by successive American administrations since 1945. Their long-standing policy of bankrolling Israel has, of course, alienated much of the Arab world. The beacon of democracy and freedom of speech was happy to put autocrats on peacock thrones and then keep them there by equipping and training secret police and arming death squads. The use of the Shah of Iran in the 60s and 70s as "The Policeman of the Gulf" engen-

dered a deep hatred of America in Iran. That regime was toppled by a popular revolution, led and articulated by the Mullahs.

The Iranian revolution was the Middle East's Storming of the Bastille. Sixty-six Americans were subsequently taken hostage in Teheran and the Carter administration was humbled as were America's fabled "Special Forces", which came to grief in the Persian desert trying to rescue the hostages. With that history in place the Reagan administration in 1980 saw no potential trouble for them in setting up a Muslim International Brigade to fight in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, or with the CIA becoming involved in training and financing Iranian revolutionary guards (who had paraded blindfolded Americans outside the US embassy in Teheran) to fight against America's cold war opponent.

The carnage of Manhattan, then, can be traced to this eight-year, CIA-sponsored war in Afghanistan. On 25 December, 1979, the Soviets invaded that country. Within a year of the Soviet invasion, General Akhtar Rahman, director-general of the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) of the Pakistan Army, and William Casey, director of the CIA, had reached an understanding whereby the ISI would become the "sole channel for the multi-billion dollar" armed struggle against the occupying Red Army. During the 1980s, the Soviets committed close to 125,000 troops. Collective combat casualties were estimated at between 800,000 and 1.5 million. Afghanistan's economy was com-



pletely devastated. In February 1989, the Soviets completed their withdrawal.

When the celebrations had died down in the mountains of Afghanistan, a restlessness set in. The only business that these young guerrilla fighters have ever known is war. Like the European soldiers of fortune who waged the Crusades for Christendom against their Muslim ancestors, these young men were unemployed fighters. All they knew was war. They did not have to look far for other theatres of conflict, which would soon bring them to battle with the biggest Infidel of them all.

CIA-trained Afghan fighters have been involved in fighting in Kashmir, Chechnya, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Tajikistan, the Philippines and parts of the Middle East. The creation of Islamic terrorist organisations by the CIA has been a key part of US policy, first in attacking the Soviet Union, and since then in an on-going war against Russia, other countries of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

Furthermore, Washington was no distant financier of the Afghan Freedom Fighters/Terrorists, unaware of how its



money was being spent. Rather, it controlled the action.

A specially equipped C-141 Starlifter transport carrying William Casey touched down at a military air base south of Islamabad in October 1984 for a secret visit by the CIA director to plan strategy for the war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Helicopters lifted Casey to three secret training camps near the Afghan border, where he watched mujahadeen rebels fire heavy weapons and learn to make bombs with CIA-supplied plastic explosives and detonators. During the visit, Casey startled his Pakistani hosts by proposing that they take the Afghan war into enemy territory — into the Soviet Union itself. Casey wanted to ship subversive propaganda through Afghanistan to the Soviet Union's predominantly Muslim southern republics. The Pakistanis agreed, and the CIA soon supplied thousands of Korans, as well as books on Soviet atrocities in Uzbekistan and tracts on historical heroes of Uzbek nationalism. "We can do a lot of damage to the Soviet Union," said Casey, according to Mohammed Yousaf, a

Pakistani general who attended the meeting.

Casey's visit was a prelude to a secret Reagan administration decision in March 1985, reflected in National Security Decision Directive 166, to sharply escalate US covert action in Afghanistan.

Eight years after Casey's visit to Pakistan, the Soviet Union was no more. Afghanistan had triumphed, led to a stubborn and bloody victory by the heavily armed, fratricidal mujahadeen rebels. One of the heroes of that conflict was Osama bin Laden.

In an interview in the late 1990s he recalled his days fighting the Red Army: "There is a lesson to learn from this for he who wishes to learn," he said. "The Soviet Union entered Afghanistan in the last week of 1979, and with Allah's help their flag was folded a few years later and thrown in the trash, and there was nothing left to call the Soviet Union."

Like revolutionaries anywhere, anytime, the mujahadeen took assistance from anywhere without strings attached, and found willing benefactors in the US. It should

have been obvious to everyone that the Americans were equipping and training a future adversary — especially given their role as the guarantor of the Zionist State.

While the CIA was arming the mujahadeen, their client, Israel, was ploughing through Southern Lebanon to seek and destroy the PLO. This operation in 1982 awakened the sleeping giant of the Shi'ite people of Southern Lebanon. Traditionally apolitical and desperately poor, they became increasingly outraged by Israeli atrocities. Their young men swelled the ranks of Amal and Hizbollah. The Israelis — like their paymasters — could not see cause and effect. They went in after one enemy and made a more deadly one. Whereas a rapprochement was always available with secular Palestinians like Arafat and Habash, there can be no middle ground with those who are awakened to "jihad", and it was that strain of the Muslim world that levelled the World Trade centre, not the internationalist Marxist resistance that characterises much mainstream PLO thought.

Today, Washington publicly condemns

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Islamic terrorism, but at the same time Washington and its partners continue to create, support and manage an Islamic terrorist organisation, the "Kosovo Liberation Army", presented by most of the Western media as the plucky guerrilla heroes who doughtily defended their homeland from aggressive invaders. If it sounds familiar, that's because it is – the mujahadeen enjoyed the self-same fawning media coverage during the 80s in Afghanistan, and are now teetering on the brink of destruction at the hands of America's incensed military machine.

America's mistake in sponsoring these covert conflicts has always been to underestimate the powerful link in the mind of the Islamic fighter between politics and religion. Those who do not understand jihad therefore tend, sooner or later, to get burned by its indiscriminate and all-consuming flame.

The suicide soldier must be a volunteer. Poverty, resentment, religious and nationalistic zeal, even bitterness over a relative killed by the enemy, all are used to successfully recruit, motivate and train the volunteer.

The oldest recorded organisation using suicide volunteers existed a thousand years ago. A radical Islamic sect, it was established in the 11th century in Iran. Hasan, the founder, was the son of a noble family. He had a grudge and a genius for organisation and persuasion. The "ashishin" (from "users of hashish") had no regard for their own lives. The sect maintained a number of mountain fortresses and, over the two centuries it existed, came to control considerable territory in Iran and Syria. Terror was its main weapon, for its assassins were known to be virtually unstoppable. Finally, in the 13th century, Mongol and Arab armies

ist upsurges. When members believe their core faith is being corrupted, many are angered and some organise to rectify matters. In extreme cases the anger can turn into revolution. Faced with Jewish fundamentalism in permanent power in Israel, underwritten by Old Testament Christians in the US, a new fundamentalist Islamic international has emerged in response. Wherever Muslims live, one can see more and more covered women and bearded men. For many, if not most, that is jihad. For Westerners the term only means holy war, but Muslims point to the Koran where jihad means "to strive with might and main in God's cause."

I saw a small town in Bosnia-Herzegovina change over a period of three years, from a white secular Muslim outpost to a hotbed of fundamentalism. By the time of my last visit in 1997 there was a clear generation gap with the young men bearded and openly Islamic. They congregated around the only new building in the town that had been raped by Bosnian Serbs, the pan-Islamic centre, built with Iranian money, staffed by mujahadeen.

The older men (who saw themselves as white Western Europeans) looked on in dismay at their zealot sons. The jihad gave these young men a belief system that enabled them to understand what the Serbs had done to their people and why the West had done nothing.

Over the past two decades, Americans believe they have been hit hard by Islamic terrorists. All of those operations, of course, are now mere footnotes next to the major chapter in the Third World's war against America written in Manhattan on 11 September. America now faces an Islamic Vietnam on its own streets. As with the Vietnam era there is a now a Texan in the White House, a Texan who was not the people's first choice. LBJ would not have reached the Oval Office if he had not been JFK's Vice-President. Bush entered the White House with a quarter of a million votes less than his rival, Al Gore. The USA now swings behind a president who wasn't elected by the majority of the country and is clearly out of his depth. The USA is now facing an enemy who is simultaneously General Giap and Saladin. The only war the USA has lost was in a small country in South East Asia. That memory they could banish from their collective consciousness after a series of get-even Rambo movies. This time, in a society marked above all by its proliferation of media, defeat for the USA would be a global spectacle.

That America will eventually lose this war against the belief system of a billion Muslims is not in question. It will lose in the same way, and for the same essential reasons, as it eventually lost the war against the nationalist belief system of the Vietnamese people as articulated by Ho Chi Minh. The question is: how many innocent bystanders will be lost in the war that started in earnest on 11 September? ■



PHOTO: ALAN O'CONNOR

In the wake of the 11 September attacks, the US Congress voted the Bush administration \$40 billion of a budget to clean up New York and defeat bin Laden. The entire amount, however, wouldn't purchase one all-American suicide bomber.

Suicide soldiers are not born; they are made by their enemies. First, you need a cause to attract and motivate recruits. Suicide soldiers don't pop up just anywhere. You need a group of people, preferably poverty-stricken and feeling oppressed by powerful neighbours. Thus are suicide terrorists in the Middle East, Sri Lanka and Chechnya. Religion is often present, but it should be pointed out that it is not an essential component of the mindset. The Tamil terrorists in Sri Lanka don't use it, and the Chechens don't use it as much as their Muslim allies would like. But oppression and a well-run organisation to channel the resentment are essential. In Israel and in Afghanistan (Osama bin Laden's organisation), religious students are recruited.

went after the "assassins," destroyed their castles and killed their leaders.

Historically, it has been shown that there are only two ways to eliminate the suicide soldiers. One is the "Mongol method" (kill most of the population from which they are recruited). The other is to address the grievances that generate the suicidal volunteers.

That is the choice: mass murder or diplomacy. That will always be the choice in human affairs.

There is nothing new in any of this. The only thing that changes is the weapons and the means of transportation. In this case the means of transportation became the weapon. If alien spaceships had demolished the twin towers and the Pentagon, the Americans could not be facing a more foreign mindset than that of the jihad warrior.

If the US is to win against bin Laden and his comrades they must first understand him and his world. Every religion since ancient times has witnessed fundamental-