2nd article:

Individual terrorism

By William R. Polk

In my first article, I discussed the kind of terrorism governments of states sometimes turn against their own citizens whom they regard as enemies, as the French did at stage of their revolution, the Russians did during the 1930s and the Cambodians did during the Khmer Rouge period of "Stone Age Communism." I also described a variant form of state terrorism which singles out and seeks to expel or massacre inhabitants whose color, language, culture or religion is alien to the the dominant group. We have recently seen horrifying examples of this "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkans, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

At the opposite extreme of the political spectrum from state terrorism is individual terrorism. We often think of the lone terrorist as a fanatic or a psychopath who, driven by inner demons, sets out to destroy those he regards as his enemies.

Often we are right. Mentally sick and violent people exist in every society. Usually, they are weeded out, hospitalized, incarcerated or even killed when their behavior becomes unacceptable to their families, neighbors or society. But under appropriate conditions, they stay free at least for long enough to engage in abnormal, deviant or violent actions.

A biological analogy springs to mind. Without pushing it to extremes, we may think of these terrorists as pathogens. Even in a healthy body, some will escape and cause mischief, but most are contained or removed by the body's safeguards. It is only when the body is weak or under great tension that they can escape; then they can cause

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great damage. It would be comforting to think of them just as aliens, but, in fact, just as every body contains pathogens so every community contains psychopaths.

In America in recent years, apparently meaningless acts of large-scale violence have been particularly noteworthy. As I write, a new and apparently random set of shootings is occuring in the state of Ohio where someone, as yet undetected, has been ambushing cars and even schoolbuses. This is not unique. The trial has just ended in Washington of two men convicted of indiscriminate killings at long range with sniper rifles. That, in turn, brings to mind the case of Charles Whitman, the "Texas Tower Sniper" who in 1966 randomly killed 17 people including his wife and mother. Others that have been widely publicized are Charles Mason's California "satanic" group, David Koresh in the Waco, Texas shootout that resulted in the death of nearly a hundred people, Timothy McVeigh, who in 1995 blew up the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 167 people and Eric Rudolph who planted a bomb at the 1996 Olymphics at Atlanta and wounded nearly 100 people. Finally, a person yet unknown, attempted to spread the lethal virus of anthrax throughout the United States and managed to kill five persons.

These are just the most publicized incidents among dozens of others. There is, obviously, a pool in the population of unidentified people ready and willing to act if or when the body politic grows weak. America may appear particularly prone to violence but it is hardly unique. Members of the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo cult released nerve gas in a Tokyo subway, trying to kill thousands, and scattered youth and neo-Nazi groups carried out over 5,000 attacks a few years ago in Germany.

There does not seem to be any foolproof way to identify such people or stop them before they commit acts of violence. For the most part, they are not ordinary criminals.

Their aim is not robbery and often the object of their attacks is not someone against whom they have personal grudges. When family members, friends or neighbors get hurt, they seem incidental to the general, diffused anger that is being acted out. Some of these people announce their intent in advance by proclaiming religiously-inspired commands to destroy their enemies, but many appear to be driven by idiosyncratic, irrational hatreds.

Allow me a personal example: When I was a professor of history at the University of Chicago, I received a death threat from a young student I had never met. Having seen my photograph in the newspapers and heard that I had been in the Kennedy administration, he somehow imagined that I was responsible for the Vietnam war and decided to kill me. The student, whose name I do not even know, had been identified as very disturbed and prone to violence by the University police. They shared their information with the FBI and the Chicago police. We got together to decide what I should do. It was quickly evident that none of the law enforcement agencies could act: their advice was just to "be careful." As they explained, they had no the legal right to arrest the young man. As the regional head of the FBI put it, "he hasn't done anything yet." I said, "Do you mean, he hasn't killed me yet." "Well," he said, "I wouldn't have used those words, but I guess that is what it comes down to."

My experience may be unusual, but, in fact, in a reasonably free society where civil liberties matter, people cannot be taken off the streets just because they look dangerous to makes vague and unlikely threats.

Given that mental health experts tell us that many people we encounter on the streets are mentally disturbed, why do some cross the line into actual violence? Some psychologists and sociologists believe that the steady diet of glorified violent behaviour

on television and cinema, to which we are all subjected, spurs latent hostility into attack. Others disagree. They believe that watching violence on the screen acts an outlet which somehow drains away angers vicariously. Whichever group is right, it does seem clear that certain groups -- unemployed young males, returning soldiers, dope addicts -- are particularly subject to suggestion. However, there are so many exceptions to these categories that they seem of little use in identifying potential terrorists.

What to do about them? As apparently random acts of violence so frequently occur, even in schools as the documentary film maker Michael Moore has so memorably portrayed in his widely-acclaimed "Bowling for Columbine," we need both to remove the sick from society at least for periods of therapy and to minimize the stimulus to violence. And, particularly in American society, to remove weapons from them.

But, in recent years, the American and several other governments have gone in exactly the opposite direction, closing mental health facilities and often putting those in need of help and supervision out onto the streets. Perhaps as many as a third or more of the street people in places like New York should be under psychiatric care. Few of them, of course, are potentially violent while many of relatively affluent people are. Clearly, there are no simple answers, but what is also clear is that Western societies need to spend more thought and money on the threat of psychosis in our society.

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