

Contextualizing the Threat of Radical Islam: “Urgent Threats” of Yesteryear

November 6, 2010

[Editor’s note: This is the second in a series by Richard Greeman.] To understand the lunacy of the problematic Islamic “threat” currently being hyped in mainstream U.S. political discourse, we need to place the concept in the historical context of Western, particularly U.S. imperialism’s collective self-image. White American identity has from the beginning defined itself in opposition a dangerous, threatening, darker “other” who had to be conquered, subdued, and/or exterminated : in the first instance the “savages” native to the Americas. Thus European invaders projected their own inner savagery on the “Indians” in order to brutally displace them in the name of “Civilization” as Richard Slotkin has demonstrated in his seminal *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier* and subsequent works). After the “Indians” were deprived of their lands and nearly wiped out, the laboring classes replaced them as American capitalism’s terror-inspiring “other.” This “threat” was incarnated in two fear-inspiring images : the potent Negro slave ready to rape his mistress and slit his master’s throat in the South, and in the North the specter of bloody conspiracies among the immigrant workers, whether Irish (“Molly Maquires”), Italian (“anarchist bomb throwers”), Jewish (“subversive communists conspirators”) or just foreign-born (“disloyal”). These demonizing images of the “other” were useful for ruling class divide-and-rule domination, pitting native workers against immigrants and black bondsmen against free white labor - to the extent that even today labor in Dixie remains largely non-unionized under anti-labor “right to work” laws. The Red Scare of 1919 mobilized these stereotypes to justify government roundups (the Palmer Raids) more violent than the Cold War witch hunts or the post-9/11 anti-terrorist campaign. At the end of WWI, returning black and immigrant vets were full of democratic aspirations. The high hopes inspired by Wilson's “self-determination of peoples” and ignited by the 1917 Russian Revolution were met with union-busting, mass arrests and massacres of strikers, deportations of the foreign-born, lynchings and race-riots against “Negroes.” A nation-wide campaign of Nazi-type raids on Socialists, Communists and Wobblies was organized, with the FBI, vigilantes and local police sacking offices, smashing presses, beating and arresting leaders. It wasn't until the Depression of the Thirties that the American Left came back to life. Likewise, in the Forties, after WWII had once again raised democratic aspirations, the FBI, HUAC and the Truman Administration came up with the mass anti-Communist hysteria of the McCarthyite “witch-hunts” — investigations aimed at hounding alleged Communists and subversives out of their government jobs, purging radicals from the unions, the schools, the entertainment industry, the universities, thus silencing any political debate about foreign policy - henceforth considered “treasonable.” Americans were forced incriminate themselves and rat on their associates through compulsory Loyalty Oaths taken under pain of Perjury. To be sure, there were actually-existing Communists in the U.S., and yes some of them did agree to collect information for the Russians - albeit at a time when the Soviets were U.S. allies against Hitler. But the CPUSA had at most 180,000 members at its height, and by the late Fifties it had dwindled to the point where it was said that the dues payments of FBI infiltrators kept the Party treasury afloat. Back when I was coming of age in the Fifties, the word “Communist” was the functional equivalent of “terrorist” today in the world outside our Left-wing family circle. The sensational Rosenberg atom-spy trial was the Fifties “9/11 wake up call,” alerting Americans to the “urgent threat” of us Commies. After the 1989 collapse of Russian bureaucratic state-capitalism parading as “Communism” and with “Red” China born again as a U.S. capitalist trading partner, a new demon was needed to deflect from unrest over increasing economic and social inequality in the U.S. and around the world. The War on Drugs worked for a while. It proved useful for sending U.S. military advisors and equipment abroad to prop up pro-U.S. governments in Latin America while

profitably filling the U.S. expanding US private prison system with unwilling customers from among unemployed Black and Hispanic youth. But after Osama bin Laden and his cohort pulled off the attacks of September 11, 2001, the War on Terror took precedence and "Radical Islam" was suddenly discovered as the major threat to Western Civilization. This distant threat has proven a sufficient ideological pretext for curtailing democratic freedoms and creating a security state at home while using torture, terror bombing and outright invasion in pursuit of insanely unrealistic hegemonic foreign policy goals in the oil-rich Middle East. Next article in series: A Clash of Fundamentalisms