

In the Company of Lone Terrorists

**Socio-cultural Influences On and By Timothy McVeigh,
Theodore Kaczynski, and Eric Rudolph**

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Lecture

Last night, Prof. Furedi informed us that we are experiencing an epidemic of fear. As he sees it, we are afraid, because we are confronted increasingly by a swelling sea of unknowns that are unknowable. We respond to this epidemic, mainly by withdrawal. We don't want to know what we don't know, because our capacity to cope is exhausted. But, if withdrawal is a common response, it's hardly the only one. Another common response in the face of menacing unknowns is to resort to language as a prophylaxis in the hope of staving off threats and anxieties they arouse in us. Curses can serve that function. But metaphors can also provide a convenient and appealing language tool for this purpose, because they make comparisons between what is unknown and what we are already familiar with; generally, what is known is comforting. Such is the case with the expression, "Lone Wolf" that has been used freely, including this afternoon, to refer to individual terrorists such as Timothy McVeigh, Theodore Kaczynski and Eric Rudolph among others. Maryann Vollers has taken full advantage of this figure of speech by adopting it as the title of her bestselling and widely discussed book with this same title.

Professionals in law enforcement and other fields have recognized that lone wolf terrorists pose the greatest challenge among all other forms of terrorism, and for good reason. In contrast to everything else you have heard before and during this conference about terrorists, they have all been group-affiliated. Loners are a different species. They are unaffiliated. I like to use the distinction between solo terrorists and affiliated terrorists, who are somehow connected with a group. Law enforcement professionals and others see so-called lone wolf terrorists as posing the greatest challenge because by definition and design they have no ties to groups that can be traced. But reliance on metaphors and other analogies is rarely cost-free, because such comparisons are always imperfect. While lone terrorists do share some commonalities with their namesakes in nature, such as their cunning and survival skills, there are two abilities that humans possess to a far greater extent than any other creatures and they make all the difference. One is language, and the other is the human capacity to imagine. This refers to our ability to mentally entertain alternative times, alternative places, alternative plans and activities prior to acting on them. In order to reveal these special capacities of individual terrorists, I have chosen to elevate the frame of comparison from inter-species to intra-species by comparing McVeigh, Kaczynski, and Rudolph, America's most notorious contemporary "lone wolves."

There is yet a further compelling reason for abandoning the lone wolf metaphor. Professor Jonathan White, at Grand Valley State University, is the author of one of the

most widely adopted textbooks on terrorism, simply called *Terrorism*. In the introduction, now in its 4th edition as of 2003, in his discussion of the lone wolf, White argues that the term (and I quote) "...suggests that a person suddenly pops out of nowhere, performs a sinister act, and then vanishes." This is a characterization that is refuted by facts gathered by experts who study so-called lone terrorists. White concludes with this recommendation, "...the term glorifies their actions and should not be used." In its place, he proposes adopting the label "berserker." This strikes me as a most unfortunate recommendation, because berserkers, by definition, are irrational. In contrast, McVeigh, Kaczynski, and Rudolph are anything but irrational. Their extraordinary skills at rational thinking and their capacity to devise self-justifying rationalizations are key features of their terrorist careers.

So like all metaphors and analogies, partial similarities can seduce us into the logic of *pars pro toto*, the assumption that if some similarities between human and infrahuman loners exist especially those that impress our imagination, then other similarities can be assumed across species. While lone terrorists perform their ultimate acts by themselves, they do so against a lifetime background of a special kind of socialization, that I call selective socio-cultural marination. This is the crux of the message I offer you. The language of lone terrorist or lone wolf blinds us to the essential socio-cultural nature of loners. We look at only certain features of loners but ignore many others. In the background of every so-called lone terrorist, there is a life-long history of interaction, and I want to distinguish two main kinds. One consists of direct interpersonal interactions including interactions with groups of individuals. In the case of Eric Rudolph, for example, his mother introduced him to diverse groups of religionists, most notoriously Christian Identity adherents.. In her own quest for spirituality, she tried on several religions to see how they fit. If one wasn't quite suitable, she divested that garb and tried on another. I think this a very important factor in Rudolph's becoming a pure believer. That is a new term that I am introducing in contrast to Eric Hoffer's true believer, which has been used illicitly by many people who study and report on terrorists. I'll return to this distinction shortly.

Direct interaction with other people constitutes one entire large set of lifetime interactions, which leave their residual effects on each individual even in the absence of continuing interaction. But there is another crucial source of influence on a loner's socio-cultural socialization or marination, as I like to say. That is the indirect influences of various cultural messages. I won't belabor my talk with considering the vagaries with defining the term culture. I'll accept the characterization of the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz that another student of terrorism adopts, Mark Juergensmeyer (2000, p.12f). Culture and cultural patterns consist of meanings, and significances that people attach to symbols and things in the realm of material culture. When we examine, for example, the serdab or some other relic of ancient Egypt, Egyptologists puzzle over what did these objects mean to those people. The meanings attached to symbols and objects are their culture. The material objects and artifacts are merely the vehicles for expressing and conveying their meanings. Other meanings are conveyed by very

subtle, but nonetheless, real and effective media such as the arts and books. Books were especially important in understanding these three terrorists.

Each of these loners can be referred to as a bibliolatryst, one who practices bibliolatrysty, a term I borrow from a recent discussion by Benn Schott (*NYT Book Rev.*, 10Dec'06, p. 87). Bibliolatrysts develop strong attachments, not only to books in general, but also to particular books. In the case of Timothy McVeigh, (which is how I got into all this in the first place, since my primary and long-term interest is analyzing the causes and consequences of the OKCB) his most prized book was William Luther Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* (first published in 1978) that continues even as of recently as this week to inspire terrorists and radical dissidents. In Canada, for example, there was a fellow who was sentenced to six months in prison for using hateful language, and he claimed inspiration from *The Turner Diaries* (Googling this title yields 69,800 hits). McVeigh had an interesting relationship to this book, because it is mainly a racist tract, aimed at fomenting a race war in the U.S. But if we look more closely at the meaning of that book to McVeigh - that "Bible," as others have referred to it in this context - we see that the race war message was not his primary focus. I take as proof of this claim is that when McVeigh was stopped by trooper Charlie Hanger on the highway, escaping from the bombing in the jalopy that he was driving (oddly enough and puzzling enough without a license plate), in his car were photocopies of particular pages of *The Turner Diaries*. As I had expected, those pages turned out to be instructions for building a bomb to blow up a federal building. Those particular pages were filled with blueprints, formulas, techniques, for bomb building, not Pierce's racist message. So, while McVeigh read widely in the anti-government and survivalist literatures (such as *The Soldier of Fortune*), the main object of McVeigh's bibliolatrysty was *The Turner Diaries*. Kaczynski and Rudolph are in a different category, because each of these loners had fairly substantial libraries of books in their respective hideouts. In Theodore Kaczynski's case, he had a personal collection of over 250 books, and that doesn't include other books that he cited and quoted in his notorious Manifesto. He was a scholar, a PhD in mathematics, who had developed an ecumenical and trans-historical view of our species. He recommended that we jettison the artifacts and dehumanizing effects of the industrial revolution in favor of a back-to-nature, almost primitive lifestyle. Which is, not incidentally, a program that Eric Rudolph would recommend. Among the many other books that were found in Kaczynski's hand hewn cabin and recognized explicitly by him as having a profound influence on him was one by the French philosopher and theologian, Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (1964), which opened Kaczynski's eyes to the dire and ill effects of the industrial revolution. What we see in each of these cases is (to indulge a neologism) bibliolatrystic selectivity. People see the broad panorama of cultural contents and one characteristic of people in general, but most especially with pure believers, is the idiosyncratic selection, the cherry-picking, of particular pieces, according to some inner guidance. Those pieces selected from one's cultural repertoire are then used to build a general weltanschauung, an ideology that serves their purpose and becomes crystallized. Once the selected

elements are crystallized, the ideology is frozen, and then all kinds of defenses are brought to bear to protect it from challenges or violations.

I am getting ahead of myself, I haven't yet talked about Rudolph's reading habits. They were quite extensive considering that he was a high school dropout. But the one book that he labored over most intensely was the Bible. As Maryann Vollers, author of the recently published *Lone Wolf*, describes, Rudolph had annotated in great detail but very selectively again certain particular passages, phrases, and words in various parts of the mainly old and new testaments. He was looking for scriptural substantiation to justify murder, and he believed he had found it. He read many other books that I can't get into now. So, books are just one and a primary source of socio-cultural influence on these people who later commit terrorist acts solo, but there are many other sources available in these individual' socio-cultural environments. There are CB radios, there are talk shows, and there are gun shows. McVeigh especially attended dozens of gun shows all over the country .

So, I suggest that in this sense McVeigh was not a loner, even though he is often portrayed as such. He was actively trying to recruit an organization while these other two lone terrorists were talking organization. Like the Army of God, a very elaborate website, which Rudolph constantly invoked, while Kaczynski pointedly affixed his group symbol, "FC," to his bombs. Both were using these corporate entities in order to make up for what they correctly perceived as the lack of appeal to their enemies as well as would-be followers as the act of just a single individual. Rudolph and Kaczynski were each an "Army of One," but understood that their singularity was not sufficient to carry their cause. So, cultural messages including values and goals and even means to achieve goals are readily available to anyone. For the pure believer (I think it's time in a moment that I get to that finally), these socio-cultural resources are their nourishment. Books, along with any sources of cultural meanings, can be regarded as projective devices. They are better thought of as quasi-projective in the sense that, in contrast to a TAT or Rorschach test, or a suggestively shaped cloud, the loner can read into it certain things that he is seeking: He selectively reads out of it and also reads into it in a bi-directional process. The socialized loner then comes up with confirmation, elaboration, and justification for an emerging ideology.

The term true believer is used heavily by commentators and students of terrorists and terrorism. However, only rarely is the originator of that term recognized and given credit and that is, of course, Eric Hoffer. Hoffer's skinny but profound book by that title is the source of the expression, "true believer." It is so appealing, that people have latched onto it and use it to mean something quite different than Hoffer intended. I want to suggest that what Hoffer meant by "true believer" in his study of attraction to mass movements is a process of conversion from one ideology to another without remainder. This process of switching from one ideology to another is not what Rudolph, Kaczynski and McVeigh were doing as they constructed their respective ideologies. They were, I am suggesting, not true believers, but pure believers. It is the purity, the sanctity of their beliefs that had to remain inviolate that characterizes the ideology,

the mental set if you will, of these individual terrorists. An example I ran across in Voller's meticulous discussion of Rudolph. It comes out in her discussion of his views on abortion. He presented a persona of great humor and even levity. But Vollers reports that at a certain point in her communication with Rudolph, suddenly his countenance changed from conviviality and mirth to dead seriousness. He could discuss all topics she raised with levity but not abortion. That was the core of his pure belief system. I think the need to keep his commitment to fighting abortion pure also explains why suddenly he dropped his career as a bomber of gay and lesbian bars. He did it once. He is the guy who has a brother living in New York City who is gay. He got over that. He gave up his career against gays and lesbians. My interpretation for that omission from his acts and from Voller's account is that it would have distracted him from the sacredness and purity of his crusade against abortion.

Further evidence of the purity interpretation of their belief systems comes from the very adamant refusal by McVeigh and separately by Kaczynski to allow their lawyers to dilute or distract from their preferred interpretation of their mission. Kaczynski was dead set against being classified as a mental case, which would undermine the seriousness of his call for revolution. Timothy McVeigh was dead set and protested unto death against having anyone share credit for the Oklahoma City bombing. He would barely agree to admit Terry Nichols' part in the preparations, but never a John Doe #2. A final argument for restricting Hoffer's "true believer" label to ideological switchers in favor of my more apt suggestion of "pure believer" can be understood immediately by realizing that the respective targets of each of these terrorists were not interchangeable.

As you may be aware, the OKCB is hotly contested as not being the work of only one or two individuals. Just a few days ago, representative Dan Rohrabacher concluded his investigation into the OKCB looking for the possible collaboration of Middle East suspects, in particular Iraqis left over from the Kuwaiti campaign. Also, as journalist Jayna Davis came out with a book a couple years ago called *The Third Terrorist*. Also, one of McVeigh's lawyers wrote a book a few years earlier entitled *Others Unknown*. In other words, we don't know the truth about who committed the OK City bombing. We know that McVeigh was most instrumental, but whether he was the engineer or simply the puppet at the end of a string of other agents remains an open question.

I think my time is just about up. I want to conclude on the reciprocal point of my main argument, and that is that there are socio-cultural forces that form the background of the so-called lone or solo terrorists. Further, once they have developed their ideology and frozen and defended it, they themselves become socializers of other people. I have found for each of these terrorists examples of their continuing influence. So the fund of cultural items becomes replenished after each terrorist exits his stage.

Discussion

BF = Bernard Finifter – the lecturer.

MARCUSE = Professor Peter Marcuse – an audience member.

MARCUSE: In my thinking, and this is obviously a truncated version, but some ways it's hard to eliminate any of those factors, to say they don't matter. I think they all come into play in some degree or another. The Idea of a sociological model, in particular with Eric Rudolph could be explanatory to some degree since his biography also includes things like failed attempts to make it through Ranger school. Then he comes back into civilized society, he was dishonorably discharged for marijuana use, then he comes back into society kind of broken down so to speak in a sense that he isn't able to achieve whatever kind of social or psychological things underpinned the critical or the ideological religious goals, so he became a heavy critic at some point. Their location in social structure as a more central set of values would stand out.

And also the language of one Umbrella is a big one. In the anti-abortion case of Shelly Chanley (?) there is a very significant problem on the page of the Army of God's website as well as the hall of fame. She's characterized as a "Holy Warrior"

As far as to the gender, colleagues would feel many ways there is a very masculine masculinity at play but when women are involved there is a kind of abandonment of the more traditional gender woman role

BF: First of all, after writing a book of more than 300 pages of detailed analysis of Eric Rudolph, Maryann Vollers concludes that she really doesn't understand this guy. To say that you understand someone after such thorough going exchanges and analysis and skillful reasoning is to acknowledge the complexity of the human mind. Having said that, your skepticism about the causal efficacy or explanatory power of ideology is well taken, and I had a question about professor Sigmüller's interpretation, because he'll be the first to recognize that the manifesto of Rudolph was written – see, there are two Rudolphs: the pre-incarceration and the post-incarceration and the Manifesto is post, and by that time he had a chance to learn all kinds of things about how to be a lifetime prisoner including from Tim McVeigh whom he knew. But I would recommend taking a look the notes Rudolph wrote in his bible, that can be taken to indicate his theological orientation.

I think it's important to avoid reductionism at any level of analysis including psychological reduction because that's the norm. Criminologists, criminology are just suffused

with all kinds of psychodynamic interpretations: the guy's nuts, he had a bad relation with his mother; he didn't have good sex, or any sex.... Where does that get us? It doesn't explain these people as socio-cultural beings.

But in regards to your question as to what these people hoped to accomplish. They were not very skillful revolutionaries like some presidents of recent note. They did not have a follow-through plan, much to our chagrin. But, we have to understand that ideology is something that grows up gradually, and becomes a motive force to the extent that the three terrorists, each having a distinct ideology would not be satisfied to trade their core beliefs for each others'. McVeigh would not have been satisfied to bomb every abortion clinic in the country. And Rudolph, even though he blamed the federal government for legally supporting abortion, he would not have been satisfied to bomb the federal building of Oklahoma City, nor would Kaczynski. And neither would McVeigh or Rudolph have been satisfied to have sent the kinds of bombs that the other used. They had very special targets, and they're not interchangeable because their motivations, their ideologies, their core beliefs are not interchangeable. They are pure believers and their targets are quite specific.

In terms of efficacy, well if there is any future to their efforts at fomenting a revolution against a technological society. In Rudolph's case in getting rid of the practice of abortion, in McVeigh's case in rectifying the crimes that the federal government committed at Ruby Ridge and Waco from August of '92 to 19th of April 93 - that remains to be seen. There are people in each case who are inspired by each of these terrorists for these reasons.

MARCUSE: I also wanted to add one interesting thing in Rudolph's writing, I can't remember exactly which ...I talk about it in a more extended article, he talks about a future time in which his actions will be vindicated, kind of like he will be known as like, a John Brown, where we don't look back in history and say "oh that crazy radical" we say "oh what a crazy abolitionist". The response to that's something I needed to be clear about in my presentation that I wasn't is that I was doing a comparison - a post-facto justification of writings and you're entirely right that Rudolph's earlier engagement was far more complicated.

OTHER: I'm not sure I'm satisfied with the where did it gets us.

Is the next step to go through what they're reading and see what's wrong with it.. for why this panel is relevant to discussion? Because unless you're going to take seriously the idea that what they read led them to crimes, rather than being an overlay on a desire to commit their crimes, it seems it doesn't get too far..

MARCUSE: It's a complex interplay versus one driving and one resulting..

OTHER: If you say that, then you're bound to look at what they're reading and say "this is the book in Kaczynski's library that LED him, not that he picked up on.."

MARCUSE That's an anthropology that you're speaking to that is drive

OTHER That's what I want to avoid, and it seems to me that you don't have an escape from going that way from what you're saying.

BF: We have to understand how these terrorists make sense out of their lives and the sense making function is something that our species seems not to be able to do without. It gives justification, it gives coherence. So if you're looking for the "so what?" of all this talk, you have to know whether you're asking that question in a long sense, or some other sense. We're looking for first of all, understanding of why these people did what they did, what was the base of it? Were they just NUTS as the media say? Or was there some deeper meaning to their acts? How did they come to their beliefs that then led them to their particular acts of terrorism? Through the kind of analysis that I pursue, we gain that understanding, without it, we have head scratches.

OTHER: What we then don't gain is an understanding of the material they read, of the ideas; it doesn't contribute to understanding the ideology.

MARCUSE: Well but the constructive aspect... many of these individuals, they are constructing an ideology. I mean they're drawing from multiple sources, but they're not necessarily signing on board to something, which complicates it, I think.

OTHER: But that is the relationship of their ideas to the ideological debates of the century.

BF: Now let me take a crack at this ...If we can look across cases, not just at one or the other as a clinician would do, but comparatively, as I'm trying to do, we may discover certain processes or principles of ideology construction. And this can be applied to anyone, to a philosopher, an artist, a sociologist: how do people construct their ideologies? The social psychology of ideology construction is not well developed, there are people working in that field, but once we understand that, we can gain some clues to think about possible interventions. That is a long way off, but unless we can understand how a terrorist goes about [in a Chinese menu sense]: choosing one from column A, one from column B, and then maybe getting another menu and piecing it all together in unique configurations that form a satisfying and motivating ideology... that's something we don't know yet and knowing that, I think would be a significant pay off.

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



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