

Public Domain

by Steve Krulick, Senior Civics Columnist

Ignorance and Want, Part 2

"Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge"
– Charles Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 1871

In Part 1, I put forth several premises: that a significant percentage of Americans are woefully ignorant about their own government, laws, and history, and are also clueless about religions, science, and geography; that *Want* – economic, social, or psychological deprivation – is often the trigger that unleashes toxic Ignorance; that Ignorance breeds Fear, Fear fuels Hate, and Hate ignites Violence.

The Rwandan Genocide was the 1994 mass murder of an estimated 800,000 people, or as much as 20% of that country's total population. If you saw the 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda*, there was no explanatory context provided to show how this could happen so quickly and thoroughly, or why it happened in 1994 and not years earlier, given that the underlying tribal rivalries went back centuries; inexplicably, it seemed, Hutu militias, egged on by spectral radio exhortations, roamed the country, and the next thing you see are hundreds of corpses lining the roadsides.

This is where Want offers a key... the culmination of longstanding ethnic tensions between the minority Tutsi, who had controlled power for centuries, and the majority Hutu peoples, was brought to a head by over 400% population growth from 1950 to 1994, leading to: inherited land parcels becoming too small to meet family needs, leading to farming uncultivable sloped land; demands for firewood more than double the sustainable yield, leading to loss of tree cover and the burning of straw and crop residue for fuel instead of putting it back into the soil as fertilizer, so that land fertility declined, leading to not enough food to go around, leading to poor health... and desperation.

So, when the president's plane was shot down on April 6, 1994, the simmering tensions and frustrations, aggravated by population pressure, boiled over, and 100 days of murder ensued. Fueled by vitriolic hate speech in newspapers and over the radio (take note), militias armed with AK-47s, grenades, and machetes systematically set out to murder all the Tutsis they could reach, regardless of age or sex, as well as the political moderates among the Hutu. They incited Hutu civilians to participate in the killings or be shot in turn, using radio broadcasts to tell them to kill their Tutsi neighbors. Again, Want shows its hand – in the villages, whole families of Tutsis were slaughtered to make sure there'd be no survivors to claim the family plot of land; further, deaths were concentrated in communities where caloric intake was lowest.

Oh, well, so what, can't happen here, you might say. But similar travesties already have! From the subtle to the blatant, Ignorance/Fear/Hate/Violence has taken its toll in our history, from the initial European invaders until today. Millions of Amerindians and Blacks, for a start. Frequent internal religious persecutions, from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1600s (against Anabaptists, Antinomians, Quakers, "witches," etc.); the anti-Masonic period of the 1820s and beyond, into the nativist "Know Nothing Party" of the 1840s and 50s, which targeted immigrants, mostly Irish and German Catholics (see Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*) then Chinese on the West Coast; the various incarnations of the Ku Klux Klan; the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII; hounding of supposed "Commies" during the Cold War era; renewed attacks on Blacks during the 50s and 60s; resentment of Vietnamese and other Asian immigrants after Saigon fell. And, like an ulcerous wound that never goes away, anti-Semitism and

anti-gay bigotry keep rearing their own ugly heads. It's part of our "American Way," as much as apple pie and baseball.

Each of these Hates had their roots in Ignorance/Fear, and many had a trigger of Want during periods of economic, political, or social stress, primarily as the haters saw the hated as job-takers, or obstacles to land or resources they coveted, or underminers of values and beliefs they held dear. When fears that "the Others" would take what was "theirs," or cause them to lose their preferred status, or compromise their "exceptionalism," otherwise peaceful and "law-abiding" Americans were as capable as Germans, Turks, Soviets, Cambodians, Bosnians, or Rwandans in "going postal" on a massive scale.

Some of these actions or "movements" bubbled up from mass resentments and biases, but it is rare that there weren't opportunists and demagogues fomenting the "cause" or stirring the pot for their own personal advantage.

And so we arrive at our current situation, where global depression finds us with a convenient new scapegoat to divert our attention from the real causes of our condition, as Muslims, and Islam itself, is seen as the greatest threat we face, as individuals and as a nation. Muslims, both here and abroad, are planning to either destroy or take over America, convert our Constitution to Sharia (Islamic law), desecrate our traditions, rub our noses in 9/11, and build mosques as terrorist cell training compounds from which to kill as many of us as possible. You can see it on TV and in the movies, hear it on talk radio and in political campaigns, bellowed from pulpits and podiums, as if this were suddenly the most pressing and over-riding issue before us.

How else to explain the nearly wall-to-wall media coverage of a heretofore unknown tinhorn pastor, with a congregation totaling only a few dozen in Gainesville, Florida, who merely threatened to burn some Qurans on 9/11 – and Talmuds, though that part was rarely mentioned?

(During this period, I was in Egypt, a country of over 80 million – over 90% Muslim; 6% Coptic Christian – and 24/7 coverage on international CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera – which is *not* what you see in the US – had elevated this execrable nobody into a global figure whose mere plans were enough to inspire riots in Pakistan and elsewhere in the 1.2 billion Muslim world, in a self-inflating spiral of mutual Hate and Fear. While there, I got an email from the US State Dept. to be on "heightened awareness" due to possible "consequences" that the potential Quran burning could lead to. Weird, because as an American Jew in a mostly-Muslim land, I probably felt less threatened than the average Muslim in America must be feeling today.)

How else to explain that a project to turn a vacant former Burlington Coat Factory in downtown Manhattan into a community center open to all, with a 500-seat auditorium, theater, performing arts center, fitness center, swimming pool, basketball court, childcare area, bookstore, culinary school, art studio, food court, 9/11 memorial, and Muslim prayer space – all of which easily passed local zoning and community board approval – suddenly became "insensitive" and "offensive" to the memory of those killed on 9/11/2001 (which included over 70 Muslims)?

Protests were sparked by a campaign launched by conservative bloggers Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer, founders of the group *Stop Islamization of America*, who dubbed the project the "Ground Zero mosque," and a national controversy ensued. Never mind that it's NOT a mosque, nor at "Ground Zero," but blocks away, and can't even be seen from the WTC location. Never mind that protesters couldn't raise equal ire over strip clubs, porn parlors, or bars *currently facing* the "sacred site," or concede a mosque *had been* on the 17th floor of one of the WTC towers, and *there now is* a mosque at the Pentagon.

In Part 3: scapegoating in the US; the geo-political roots of the Muslim bogeyman; strident examples of national Islamophobic bigotry.