

Public Domain

by Steve Krulick, Senior Civics Columnist

Ignorance and Want, Part 4

"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

— Thomas Jefferson, letter to Charles Yancey, Jan. 6, 1816

In Parts 1 and 2, I suggested that a significant number of today's Americans, being *ignorant* of history, law, geography, and religions, were susceptible to the same types of xenophobic *fears* and outbursts of *hatred* that afflicted other peoples in the past, as well as earlier generations of Americans. Often, it was the stress of *want* (economic/social/psychological deprivation) triggering or exacerbating the underlying bigotries, usually fomented and manipulated by demagogues for their own cynical purposes of gaining or maintaining power. We live in such stressful times.

In Parts 2 and 3, I noted that the latest targets of American bigotry and scapegoating were Muslims, and Islam in general, particularly as previous convenient bogeymen had either become our new allies or business partners, or didn't seem as scary now. Was it a premeditated, concerted plot to build up enthusiasm for invading and occupying resource-rich nations with predominantly Islamic populations, or merely a strange coincidence that assorted political, religious, and media figures began banging the same drum in bilious unison?

Either way, *ABC News* has reported that "public views of Islam are one casualty of the post-Sept. 11, 2001 conflict: Nearly six in 10 Americans think the religion is prone to violent extremism, nearly half regard it unfavorably, and a remarkable one in four admits to prejudicial feelings against Muslims and Arabs alike." According to Gallup polls, 40 percent of Americans admit to prejudice against Muslims, and 39 percent believe Muslims should carry special identification.

These are frightening statistics. These numbers speak of a pervasive undercurrent of Fear/Hatred large enough to sway elections, demand or justify domestic policies that may be unconstitutional, and support or tolerate international actions that violate treaties, international law, or recognized human rights.

When a majority of Americans believe a religion's adherents are "prone to violent extremism," should we be surprised when "pre-emptive" violence is applied to Muslims, here or abroad?

"A Muslim boy says four bullies made his life a living hell in the halls of a Staten Island public school, calling him a 'terrorist' and beating him every chance they got... [They] punched me in my groin, and I fell to the floor. They started kicking me, and calling me 'You f---in' terrorist,' 'You f---in' Muslim.' The bullying began when the thugs first called him gay and quickly escalated to him being battered for his Muslim heritage and blamed for terrorist bombings." — *NY Daily News*, 10/11/2010

Irrational? Sure. Surprising? Not given the pervasiveness of these attitudes. The suspect bullies were three 14-year-old Latinos and a 15-year-old African-American, arrested on charges of assault and aggravated harassment, both as hate crimes... sad and ironic, as their own parents or grandparents may have been subject to similar prejudice in earlier days. Where did they pick up these hateful ideas at such a young age? TV? Movies?

In Grahamsville, Tri-Valley student Xelina Encarnacion had endured insults since fifth grade; the taunts of *bomb baby*, *terrorist*, and *towel head* followed her into the seventh grade as she began wearing a hijab, a traditional head covering some Muslim women begin wearing at puberty. When a boy pulled her hijab, an altercation ensued, finally leading to punishments... after many previous complaints went unanswered.

On October 10th, in Florence, NC, a member of the Florence Islamic Center found bacon on the center's patio spelling out *Pig Chops*. "Islam bars practitioners from eating pork. The police officer on the scene told the *AP*, 'It's an insult, and I'm sure that's what it was intended for.'"

"We urge the FBI to add this incident to the growing list of possible bias-motivated attacks on American Muslims and their institutions," said Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) National Communications Director Ibrahim Hooper.

"We believe any time there's a possibility of a bias motive in a defacement or vandalism of a house of worship, that it's a hate crime," explained Hooper. "It's not hard to put two and two together when you have a mosque and pork products." This isn't the first time the Center has been targeted. A few months ago, vandals broke renovated windows. Hooper pointed out that in

recent months Islamic houses of worship all over the country have been hit in bias-motivated attacks."

In September, racial-slur graffiti was scrawled on the Hudson Islamic Center.

Will it take the Muslim equivalent of a *Kristallnacht* — when nearly 1,300 Jewish synagogues were ransacked and nearly 300 set ablaze (95 destroyed in Vienna alone) in November 1938, as 30,000 Jewish men (1/4 of all those in Germany) were taken to concentration camps — before we take all this seriously?

Add to this calls to prevent mosques and Islamic cultural centers from even being built. "The skyrocketing of opposition against mosques nationwide shows the impact of anti-Muslim sentiment based on unfounded fear and hatred," said Aliya Latif, civil rights director, CAIR-New York.

Even some members of the Ulster Legislature got into the chest-thumping act when they recently attempted to make Ulster the first county in NY to pass a resolution decrying the GZM, or (non) Ground Zero (non) Mosque; sponsor Kevin Roberts, R-Walkkill, brayed irrelevantly: "I feel it's important to send a message. Islamic terrorists commit crimes in the name of Allah throughout the world." Fortunately, less bigoted heads than Roberts and co-sponsors Wayne Harris, Gerald Hayes, Kenneth Ronk, and Catherine Terrizzi prevailed, and the embarrassing resolution was pulled from consideration.

In Sidney, Delaware County, *YNN* reports: "A Muslim burial ground has become the center of controversy... A Muslim community there is being threatened with legal action by town officials who say the cemetery is illegal. But the Muslim group got permission to bury loved ones there years ago... They believe the new supervisor is targeting them because of their religion. 'What else could it be? We're the only cemetery out here that's being attacked,' said Hans Hass of the Muslim center."

Since I began this series, one trail of comments occurred that crystallizes the casual but subtle bigotry and ignorance that pervades national, and even local, beliefs. On *ABC's The View*, blunderbuss Bill O'Reilly gave as his reason for opposing the GZM, "Muslims killed us on 9/11." *Not terrorists, or radical extremists who may have been Muslims* (assuming you buy the official story; that's for another column), but *Muslims*, which, in its sweeping bigotry, is exactly like saying "Christians killed us in Oklahoma City," for *that* is what bigotry is: unfairly tarring the vast majority of innocent members of a group with the acts of a tiny few whose overlap on *one* point may not even be relevant.

Brian Kilmeade of *Fox* then exacerbated that ugliness as he falsely claimed, in defense of O'Reilly, "Not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims." *Except for the 94% in the US that aren't!* (In Europe, 99.6% aren't!) The FBI's official website chronologically lists all terrorist attacks committed on US soil from 1980 to 2005: 42% from Latinos, 24% from extreme left wing groups, 7% from extremist Jews, 5% from communists, and 16% from all other groups. According to this data, there were more Jewish acts of terrorism in the US than Islamic (7% vs. 6%).

Then Juan Williams, on O'Reilly's show, said "When I get on the plane, I got to tell you, if I see people who are in Muslim garb and I think, you know, they are identifying themselves first and foremost as Muslims, I get worried. I get nervous." Well, besides wondering what "Muslim garb" is (what Muslims wear in Indonesia? Turkey? Egypt? Detroit?), this equating Muslims with Terrorism *is* the working definition of bigotry.

I don't have room here to expand on this particular kerfuffle, where Williams was sacked from *NPR* for his bigotry... and promptly given a \$2 million contract with *Fox*! However, I posted Glenn Greenwald's excellent essay about it on the *Journal* online forum comment thread tied to Part 3, as well as responding in great detail to some of the same ignorant bigotry from a few anonymous *Journal* readers, as if they lifted it verbatim from *Fox*, which is my point. (<http://www.shawangunkjournal.com/cgi-bin/gunk?g=cs&cid=1011119> or go to the Nov. 11 archives)

Some of the incidents I've mentioned may seem small and inconsequential in themselves, but that's how these things start... low-key, subtle, easy to pass off as pranks or cranks. Soon, we become de-sensitized, and accept the slurs, lies, and attacks as background static, because, hey, it doesn't affect *me!* (...Yet.)

And so, we don't speak up and denounce each chipping away at justice and decency that any such bigoted act represents. Every ignorant and vicious bigoted letter to the editor that isn't rebutted (local dailies ran purple with them when the GZM was ginned up), every defacing, bullying, or taunting that isn't taken seriously, every myth that isn't debunked, only keeps the Ignorance/Fear/Hatred/Violence cauldron bubbling. Ultimately, as Martin Luther King once said, the greatest tragedy is "not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."