Look at the big picture

Based on available information, Christmas Day 2009, a young passenger from Yemen was attempted to blow up a plane on route to Detroit from The Netherlands. President Obama has stated that there is evidence linking this man to radical Islamic religious groups based in Yemen, a country of around twenty-three million people located on the Southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. In response to this event, airports worldwide are raising the bar on security inspections and many are planning to move to full body scans rapidly. U.S. politicians are demanding immediate action. Yet, the story dominated our news over the holidays.

Is it worth so much attention? Are we asking the right questions? Are we responding appropriately?

The fact that someone would board a plane with the intention of killing everyone on it is definitely something we should know about. Whatever the precise motivations, if someone was behind this attempt at great violence, they should be brought to justice.

The two elements that I don’t know about and we cannot continue to understand these situations in isolation or as part of some master plan by “insane evil” people who want to destroy our way of life. We have to begin to look at the full picture, something that is hidden largely from us by the main media, political commentators, and political parties, and others who have lots to gain from increased militarization and the absolute control of fossil fuel resources.

When one begins to see what has happened since 9/11/2001, a clear picture emerges. The U.S. has reasserted its military might in two key regions of the world: Afghanistan and Iraq (the capitals of which are 1,420 miles apart). The governing principle has been, “Get them before they get us.” We have deployed hundreds of thousands of our troops and citizens (working under government contracts as mercenaries and developers) to West and Central Asia in an attempt to “kill those that are preparing to kill us,” which, of course, makes perfect sense to a certain percentage of our population (and why shouldn’t it given that the press makes it seem so cut and dry). When one looks closely at the big picture, one can’t help to recognize the major failings in this type of response.

The idea of the “big picture” on modern terrorism has been rather complex. So much has happened in the world over the past 100 years that is relevant to the situation today. But, in the case of the big picture, consider what else happened in only the past few weeks. A bomb went off at an outdoor volleyball tournament Northern Pakistan over killing one hundred people. This appears to be work of the Taliban in Pakistan. A federal U.S. judge threw out “all charges against the Five Blackwater operatives involved in the 2007 Nisoor Square massacre that killed seventeen Iraqi civilians” (Democracy Now, 1/10/04). This court ruling is related to the killing of tens of civilians throughout the country who have been killed by raids of villages including at least eight children. Elsewhere in Afghanistan, seven CIA agents were killed by a suicide bomber who appears to be a double agent from Jordan, a country just northwest of Saudi Arabia, and, as reported in the Times, a major British newspaper, "US-led troops dragged innocent children from their beds and shot them during a night raid on December 27" (Democracy Now, 1/10/04). Meanwhile, hundreds of "Gaza Freedom" marches were directed this past week to the Gaza by the Egyptian government.

These six events are also major news stories but none got nearly as much attention as the American terrorist attacks, and the reason is that this is because each of these is much more complex, and, thus, requires connecting dots and bringing in historical information that our public is largely unaware of and unwilling to grapple with. Many want things simple, where there is a clear “good” and “evil” (with us on the “good” side, of course). Thus, it is easier to focus on the young man, the “terrorist.” The above events are all interconnected, and they probably have a lot to do with why a young man was compelled to sacrifice his life aboard a plane. To a person from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Peru, or most nations of the world, these news stories represent horrors perpetuated by global warfare and militarization. And, when they look at the situation objectively, they notice that the U.S. military is 1 in the world—largest budgets (now 48% of global expenditures), most nuclear weapons, most military bases in foreign countries (in 130 nations according to Chalmers Johnson, etc.) Add to this, the extreme poverty and unemployment found all around the world (while we comparatively thrive) and it becomes clear why people elsewhere would feel animosity and distrust towards our government and an extreme few would contemplate a violent crime. People with anti-U.S. sentiments appears to be growing and how can it not when so many innocent people end up getting killed as a result (or in association) of our presence in Iraq and elsewhere? In 2003, a Time Magazine (Europe) poll showed that 87% of voters thought that the U.S. posed the “greatest danger for world peace,” and they believed that Iraq received only 13% of the votes. What does this tell us? It tells me that we have to begin to think more honestly about our military programs and the effectiveness in preventing and resolving conflicts.

During our involvement in the Middle East over the past 60 years, the opium trade appears to have flourished. Additionally, the heavy violence and willingness of people to commit suicide missions has spread from Iraq (where it was once rare) to Iraq and elsewhere. Will it end with more drone missiles fired into neighborhoods? Will we end with increased battalions of troops? Will we end with full body screenings at all our airports (not to mention trains, boats, and buses)? I don’t think so.

I don’t condone the acts of terrorism. Violence (preemptive or retaliatory) is not the answer. It must stop somewhere before it will stop everywhere. When you are perceived as the biggest bully on the world scene, you have to use your might very carefully. The “big picture” makes us aware that we are less than 5% of the world’s population and we cannot control all others by force. The world is too big, our growing number of enemies too many (throughout the world, we have 140,000 enemies, do we make when one child is killed and brushed off as “collateral damage?”), and our historical record too blemished. We must lead the world in peace not war. Then, and only then, will our planes (and streets) will be safe.