

Washington déjà vu: 'Hearts and Minds' rears its head again

"The casual use and misuse of the phrase 'hearts and minds' should be guarded against." – Sergio Miller, Small Wars Journal, 2012

President Obama was unaware of or undeterred by that warning when in a February 18 Los Angeles Times op-ed piece he wrote: "Our campaign to prevent people around the world from being radicalized to violence is ultimately a battle for hearts and minds."

To many American journalists and their audiences the campaign's more immediate strategy was not voiced in his remarks: stopping ISIS and other jihadist organizations and individuals from killing people around the world. Many had hoped to discover it.

Moreover, the administration is faring badly in the media battle against the terrorist organization ISIS, particularly in the social media. The task of leading our battle was handed to CSCC, the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications. This bureaucratic entity has not found ways to compete with the gruesomely bloody materials released by ISIS that immediately go viral. The suggestion that CSCC should expose the nihilistic destructiveness through competitively vivid releases has not yet been acted upon. Our Department of State wallows in goody-two-shoe mini-lectures as responses as well.

A day before his op-ed appeared, Department of State spokesperson Marie Harf insisted that a short-term strategy would not prevent the radicalization to violence the president hopes to thwart. Instead, she proposed that "we have to combat

the conditions that can lead people to turn to extremism.

“We can’t kill every terrorist around the world, nor should we try. How do you get at the root causes of this?...It’s really the smart way to combat it.”

The president expanded on her view in his op-ed: “Groups like al-Qaida and ISIL exploit the anger that festers when people feel that injustice and corruption leave them with no chance of improving their lives. The world has to offer today’s youth something better.”

The president’s take offers only one reason young people turn to the “violent extremism” he deplures. One day after his LA Times piece, the New York Times introduced readers to another in a front-page story by Mona El-Naggar: “From a private school in Cairo to ISIS killing fields in Syria.”

It tells the story of Islam Yakem who, “As a young man wanted to be a fitness instructor. He trained relentlessly, hoping that his effort would bring him success, girlfriends and wealth. But his goals never materialized. He left that life (in a middle-class Cairo neighborhood) and found religion, extremism and, ultimately, his way into a photograph where he knelt beside a decapitated corpse on the killing fields of Syria, smiling.”

The materialistic element of the American Dream and capitalism—“success, girlfriends and wealth”—had failed him, so he turned to the religious and spiritual dream offered by a segment of Islam, the holy jihad against Islam’s enemies. This is a “root cause” of “violent extremism” neither Obama nor Harf confront.

Brian Whitaker, former Middle East editor of the Guardian and author of “Arabs Without God: Atheism and Freedom of Belief in the Middle East,” did. In a 2014 article for the Guardian he wrote: “Compulsion in religion is the ideological foundation stone of ISIS and Islamist movements in general. Believing

they have superior knowledge of God's wishes for mankind such groups feel entitled – even required –to act on his behalf and punish those who fail to comply with the divine will. In doing so, of course, they do not claim to be seeking power for themselves but merely trying to make the world more holy.”

The terms Whitaker uses to describe the “mission” and actions of groups like ISIS remind us of similar terms which National Socialists used to sanctify the mission of their movement. At the core was the belief, first expressed by an obscure 19th century poet: “Am deutschen Wesen soll die Welt genesen.” It requires several translations to get the gist of it: “The German spirit shall heal the world”–“The German way of life shall cure the world”–“German values shall cure the world.”

And young Muslims, recruited to jihadist movements, are sold the absurd notion that they will, by killing and self-sacrifice, bring the “superior” way of life, spirit and values of Islam to the world, and if not accepted, impose or force them upon the world.

Economic hardship and denial of opportunity contribute to their escape from the often grim reality of life in a Paris or Cairo suburb. But when Harf offered as a cure what her critics described mockingly as a “Jobs for Jihad Delinquents Program ,” they made a solid point, based on the most documented example in history. When Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January of 1933, there were six million unemployed, or one third of the country's workforce. Six years later, the number was down to 300,000.

And just then, in 1939, young Germans marched off to the holy war to bring German values to the East and slaughter the millions of Jews, Slavs, and Gypsies not fit or willing to embrace them. A job in a Hamburg factory or Munich brewery was just a job, but this lifted them into something bigger than themselves and their jobs, something good and sacred. They believed that absurdity and committed atrocities, as the ISIS

murderers believe another absurdity and inflict their atrocities.

Obama might gain credibility in leading a world-wide campaign "to offer today's youth something better" (his words in the op-ed) if he started with offering America's underprivileged youths, say those in West Virginia's poorest county, some better things: better schooling, better housing, better opportunities for jobs. Today, in McDowell County*, young people escape from despair into drugs and petty crime. They are not killing others; they are destroying their own lives as they watch their communities crumble. And their values? As Brecht put it: "First the stomach, then morality."

Why do the young jihadists, from Islamic and non-Islamic countries, Muslims and non-Muslims, accept that the evil they commit is really for a greater good? Harf and Obama have not looked at answers that do not please them, answers they cannot accept, answers that run against what others have learned from history, from the history of Islam itself and from the history of destructive movements in other cultures and societies.

The president and Harf may not agree with Henry Ford's infamous "history is bunk," but they sound as if they want to act on it. They might want to remember, however, that Fascism had to be defeated before a Marshall Plan could help change the society that embraced it. A T-shirt for sale on the internet claims that "revolution starts in the mind." That is true of change as well.

*See the excellent "50 Years into the War on Poverty, Hardship Hits Back," by Trip Gabriel, The New York Times. April 20, 2014.