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2001

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Anthony Ashbolt
University of Wollongong, aashbolt@uow.edu.au

Publication Details
Ashbolt, A, US failing to heed any lessons from history, Illawarra Mercury, 21 September 2001.

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US failing to heed any lessons from history

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21.9.01

By Dr ANTHONY ASHBOLT
Lecturer, History and Politics Program
University of Wollongong

AS the world witnessed the cold ferocity of terrorism last week - the shattering loss of life, the enormous suffering of the American people - it became clear quickly that madness was to be met by madness.

It is perhaps understandable that irrational policy flows from seemingly irrational events.

It is not, however, good for world peace or even good for the fight against terrorism.

Xenophobia, jingoism and racism are not logical or considered responses to international terrorism.

Rather, it is important to get beyond the surface appearance of things and probe the reasons why.

If we fail to understand the motives and passions of the terrorists, we are doomed to repeat history.

It needs to be acknowledged at the outset that American foreign policy since World War II has been conducted in an aggressive indeed, at times, terroristic fashion.

From CIA assassinations of key political figures in the Third World, to the carpet bombing of Indochina; from the My Lai massacre (not, we now know, an isolated event) to the bombing of a pharmaceutical company in Sudan in 1998; from the invasion of Grenada to the support given to fundamentalist Islamic terrorists in Afghanistan (known in the west at the time as "freedom fighters"); from the backing of Israeli policy against the Palestinians to the bombings of Lebanon and Libya; from the 200,000 Iraqi civilians killed during the Gulf War, to the 500,000 who have died as a result of America's economic blockade - the legacy of American foreign policy is littered with blood and bodies.

No amount of sanctimonious moralising and patriotic breast-beating can obscure the terrible impact that US foreign policy has had on many people throughout the world.

Moreover, no amount of tub-thumping jingoistic rhetoric can bypass the reality that the US sowed many of the seeds which have spawned a spate of terrorist acts, culminating in last week's attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon.

US policy in the Middle East has generated enormous resentment among ordinary people in the region.

This resentment does not only concern American support for the state of Israel, but also its backing of certain corrupt and brutal Arab regimes.

Undeniably, however, the Palestinian cause is central.

Here we have a dispossessed people fighting for land and justice, a people who have suffered for more than 50 years at the hands of state terrorism, a people desperate for the US to rein in Israel but who watch on helplessly as American policy reinforces their status as a dispossessed people.

While turning a blind eye to the plight of the Palestinian people, in the 1980s the US-funded and armed the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan. The murderous Taliban regime arose out of this historical context.

Moreover, Osama bin Laden, the new personification of evil in American eyes, fought with the Mujahedeen and is being harboured by the Taliban.

If he is directly responsible for the recent terrorist attacks (and no hard evidence has yet been supplied), it is a tragic irony that he is, in part, a product of American policy.

Yet rather than ponder this paradox, US officials such as Vice-President Dick Cheney are talking about the need for the CIA to once again work with criminal elements and to revive a policy of political assassinations.

Those who do not learn from history are, indeed, doomed to repeat it.

That the Australian Government should put its hands up and support anything, absolutely anything, the Americans do at this time is political lunacy.

The best effort our Government can make is to try to influence the international community to work on helping remove some of the underlying causes of terrorism.

Those causes are not simply irrational fundamentalist faith but feelings of dispossession, of marginalisation, of victimhood; feelings of being subjected on a daily basis to the arrogance of power.

Behind the apparent madness of the recent events, there lies a history of injustice and oppression.

Rather than confront this history, the US seems determined to ignore it and pursue with arrogant contempt a policy that threatens to generate further acts of terror.