



My View: **Gary Bauer**

Reviving the Myth: Does Poverty Cause Terrorism?

Ignoring the true roots of terror attacks serves only to put more lives at risk.

It is an article of faith on the Left that poverty is at the root of violent crime. The notion undergirded the political philosophies of Leftist thinkers such as Hegel and Marx and informed the policies that led to the huge growth of government services that began under FDR and LBJ and continues today.

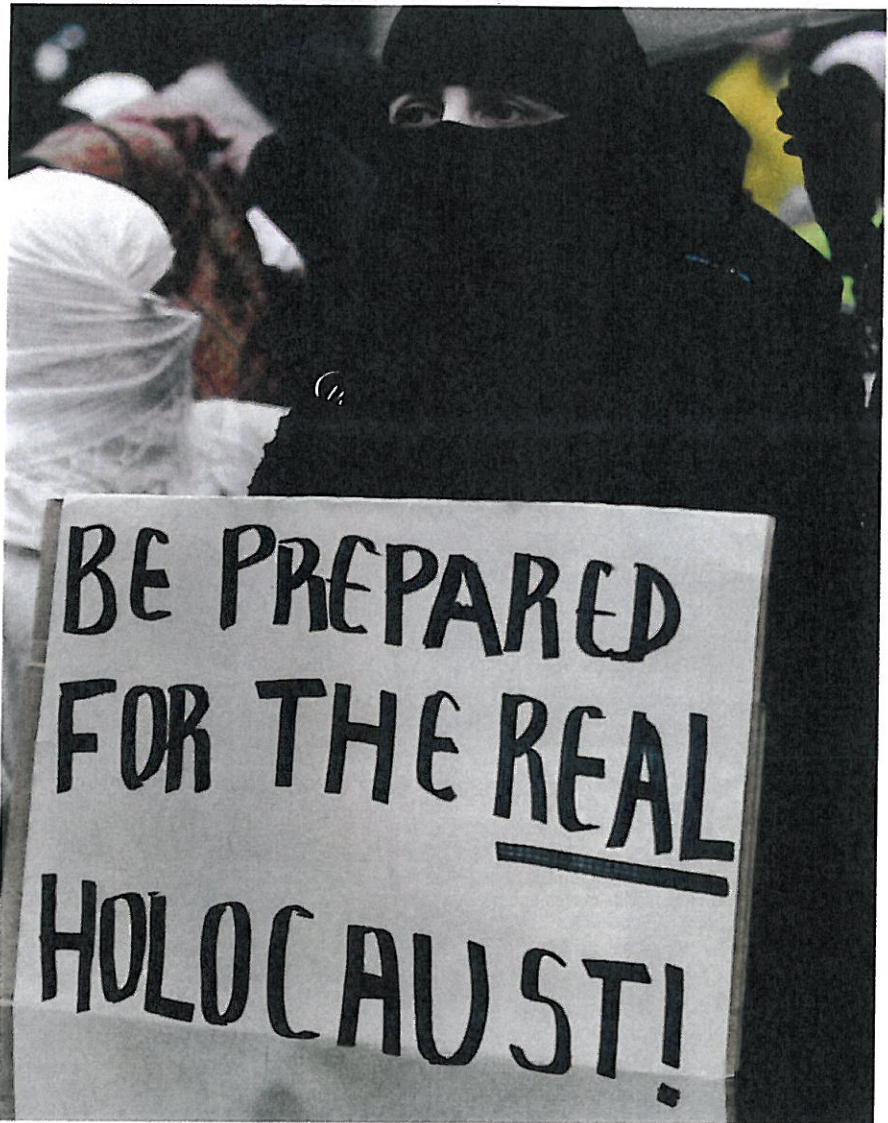
It is, therefore, not surprising that liberals often cite poverty as a primary cause of terrorism.

The poverty-causes-terrorism hypothesis enjoyed wide support in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. In the ensuing years, however, anecdotal and empirical evidence, including the conclusions of the 9/11 Commission, suggested that poverty was at most weakly correlated with terrorism, and the question was thought to have been settled.

But just as the reality of 50-year-low crime rates at a time of 10 percent unemployment has not disabused the Left of the idea that economic deprivation causes crime, the poverty-causes-terrorism thesis has proved remarkably durable. In fact, the theory animates the Obama administration's approach to national security, which simultaneously downplays more plausible explanations for terrorism such as the influence of radical Islam.

President Obama has suggested that poverty reduction is a prerequisite to defeating terrorists in Afghanistan. And he implied that poverty played a role in the botched Christmas Day terrorist attack over Detroit.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton



A veiled Muslim protester, holding a placard, marches towards the Danish embassy during a demonstration in London against the publication of cartoons in newspapers around Europe depicting the Prophet Muhammad. The Obama administration and its left-wing base ignore the influence of radical Islam in explaining the causes of terrorism. (AP/Lefteris Pitarakis)

has said, "We cannot stop terrorism or defeat the ideologies of violent extremism when hundreds of millions of young people see a future with no jobs, no hope and no way ever to catch up to the developed world."

The poverty explanation was understandable in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, which left a startled world groping for answers. But in subsequent years, numerous empirical studies undermined the notion that poverty

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In a 2003 paper published in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, professors Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova found "little reason for optimism that a reduction in poverty or an increase in educational attainment would meaningfully reduce international terrorism. Any connection between poverty, education and terrorism is indirect, complicated and probably quite weak."

Subsequent empirical research by Krueger and many other academics showed that it is the most educated and affluent citizens who are most likely to commit terrorism.

Today, the most significant terrorist danger to the U.S. comes not from the world's poorest regions but, increasingly, from its richest. As Douglas Murray and Robin Simcox wrote in the *American Spectator* recently, "40 percent of CIA operations against terrorist networks [are] conducted against targets in Britain."

And more attacks are originating on American soil. A RAND Corporation report states that of the more than two-dozen homegrown terror plots uncovered in the United States since 9/11, 10 surfaced in 2009.

Beyond the empirical data, anecdotal evidence also disrupts the poverty-causes-terrorism narrative. Osama bin Laden was born into one of the world's richest families. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda's second in command, is a medical doctor. Sept. 11 mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammed is a U.S.-educated mechanical engineer. Fifteen of the 9/11 hijackers were from middle- or high-income classes. Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan, the alleged Fort Hood killer, is a middle-class Army psychiatrist.

The five Americans recently arrested in Pakistan attempting to join terrorist groups come from middle-class homes and were educated in the United States. The alleged Christmas Day bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, is the son of a prominent Nigerian banker who lived in a \$4 million luxury apartment while attending the prestigious University College London.

The suicide bomber who killed eight people at a CIA base in Afghanistan in December was a middle-class medical doctor. In 2007, a group of 45 British



Men shout during a demonstration by the English Defence League in Birmingham, central England. Forty percent of CIA operations against terrorist networks are conducted against targets in Britain. (Reuters/Darren Staples)

Muslim doctors threatened to use car bombs in terrorist attacks in the United States. And so on.

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the poverty-causes-terrorism thesis endures because it fits snugly into the left-wing worldview and because it allows liberals to dismiss more plausible explanations for terrorism, namely radical Islam.

A 2006 Pentagon intelligence analysis found that most Muslim terrorists say they are motivated by the Koran's violent commands. The Sept. 11 hijackers and London transit bombers made martyrdom videos in which they recited the Koran while talking of "sacrificing life for Allah."

When former Muslim terrorist Hassan Butt was asked whether the rise of Islamic extremism among British Muslims is rooted in economic disadvantage, he responded, "I think that's a myth pushed forward by so-called moderate Muslims."

In addressing whether Islam is the problem, former terrorist Tawfik Hamid speculates, "If the problem is not one of religious beliefs, it leaves one to wonder why Christians who live among Muslims under identical circumstances refrain from contributing to wide-scale, systematic campaigns of terror."

None of this has deterred the Obama administration, which has developed a plan to win-over Taliban members with cash payments. But as one jihadist told *Newsweek*, "If you're committed to jihad, you won't leave for a mountain of

money." *Newsweek* interviewed dozens of Taliban members and "not one showed any interest in money or power-sharing deals."

This is not to say that poverty is never a factor in terrorism or that poverty reduction ought not be a goal. Surely Islamists exploit feelings of powerlessness to cultivate resentment. But the evidence clearly shows that poverty is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition of terrorism. And while not all terrorists are Muslim, extremist interpretations of Islam alone can cause terrorism. Unfortunately, a stifling political correctness about Islam prevents many people from identifying it as an important cause of terrorism.

Earlier this year, the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security issued a report on the Fort Hood Massacre and two reports outlining the administration's anti-terror strategies for the next four years. In the hundreds of pages contained in those reports, the words "Muslim," "Islam" and "Islamic" do not appear.

The Obama administration's reflexive attribution of terrorism to economic deprivation endangers American lives. Just as you cannot cure a disease without identifying its source, "violent extremism" will not be stopped until we acknowledge its predominant source, radical Islam. •

Former presidential candidate Gary Bauer is president of American Values and chairman of the Campaign for Working Families.