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U.S., Like McVeigh, Guilty of Terrorist Attacks

by Robert Jensen

AUSTIN, Texas - Timothy McVeigh killed twice in his life. For one of those acts, he was sentenced to die. For the other, he was awarded a Bronze Star.

To make that observation is not to equate McVeigh's bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City with the Persian Gulf war in which he fought nor to minimize the horror of the deaths of 168 innocents. Though his comments in the media have been unapologetic, even McVeigh seems to understand that he lost his humanity when he parked that truck and walked away as the fuse burned.

But what of the collective humanity of the people of the United States after the gulf war? Certainly Iraq's illegal invasion of Kuwait in 1990 demanded an international response. But rather than pursue diplomacy, the first Bush administration pushed for war and carried out a grotesque and gratuitously violent attack that killed thousands of civilians.

The United States has yet to come to terms with the fact the gulf war and Oklahoma City having one thing in common. Whatever the justification for each act, the method was the same: Killing civilians.

We rightly condemn McVeigh, but as a nation we congratulate ourselves for our "victory" in the gulf war. Yet in that victory, we indiscriminately bombed civilian areas, hitting residential neighborhoods and hospitals. We targeted power, water and sewage-treatment facilities, knowing that the result would be civilian death from disease and malnutrition. Pentagon planners after the war acknowledged such targets were bombed to give the United States "postwar leverage" in Iraq.

That is a way of saying the U.S. bombings were terrorist acts, the deliberate killing of civilians to achieve a political goal. That violates one of the central rules of international law: "The civilian population as such, as well as individual civilians, shall not be the object of attack," according to the Geneva Conventions.

Toward what end was that attack? President George H.W. Bush, who the previous year had illegally invaded Panama, talked of the need to stand up to aggression.

The United States' real goal in Iraq, however, was to enhance its strategic

domination over the Middle East's vital oil resources and over the profits from that oil. Even if one believes that is a valid foreign policy objective, it cannot justify large-scale killing of civilians.

As people search for meaning in McVeigh's execution, let us reflect on America's brutality in the gulf war and other contemporary conflicts. Even a person as fallen as McVeigh could see that brutality, and perhaps we can learn something about our own collective inhumanity from him. A year ago in a "60 Minutes" interview, McVeigh, who was a gunner on a Bradley fighting vehicle, said he went to Iraq "hyped up," believing "not only is Saddam evil, all Iraqis are evil."

"What I experienced, though, was an entirely different ballgame," he said, "and being face-to-face, close with these people in personal contact, you realize they're just people like you."

None of this absolves McVeigh. That the U.S. Army taught him to kill without feeling - "After the first time, it got easy," he told a relative - does not mean he is not responsible for the killing of innocents.

But just as McVeigh should face judgment for his crime in Oklahoma City, so should the United States for its actions in the gulf war. When McVeigh called the children he killed "collateral damage," we should remember that he learned the phrase from the military planners under whom he served. We should let that fact trouble our consciences and ponder difficult truths about Timothy McVeigh, and ourselves.

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