

Extremism and Terrorism in the Homeland

Over the past five years, America's "war" on terrorism and increasing global instability have become intimately connected to fundamental changes in this country's cultural geography. These changes could well lead to increased extremism and terrorism in the Homeland. Compared to the recent turmoil in Lebanon, ongoing sectarian violence in Iraq, political stalemate with Iran, and North Korean brinkmanship underway in East Asia, cultural conflicts in the U.S. can seem minor. Yet, simplistic "red state-blue state" divisions are merely shorthand for a much more profound and disturbing change in America. It is a change creating the conditions for the rise of extremist fundamentalism and home-grown terrorism right here in the "land of the free." This change is driven by a growing level of global ignorance; a failure by leaders, business people, and ordinary citizens to become more geographically literate. Geographical ignorance presents a clear and present danger to the nation and must be reversed to avoid long-term and permanent damage to American society.

How does the rise of geographical ignorance about the world around us translate into the conditions that could promote extreme fundamentalism and terrorism here at home? If we, the people, fail to understand even the most basic relationships within the global system, then how can we determine accountability for the growing gap between political rhetoric and reality at home or abroad? The absence of even the most basic level of inquisitiveness and concern about how the world works translates into ignorance and apathy about changes in our own society, from growing illegal immigration and the rise of domestic Islamism, to the long-term social and economic consequences of the Iraq war. For example, whatever one's political view might be of the war in Iraq, the fact that so few citizens have challenged the underlying geopolitical, economic, and social justifications of such a war is astonishing. In a society that is so inextricably intertwined with the global economy and whose way of life is ultimately shaped by how U.S. power is projected internationally, such a lack of engagement by the citizenry is dangerous.

Cultural geography theories argue that understanding differences between societies permits us to see ourselves in a broader, more enlightened context. People are shaped by their geographies and their view of the world is shaped, therefore, by how much they understand others' geographies, as well as their own. Ignorance can thus breed fear and misinterpretation, fear breeds hate, and hate can breed extreme fundamentalism and terrorism. There is little argument that the extremist Muslims who populate the Al-Qaeda ranks hate Western capitalism and democracy, and they fear (and thus hate) the power of the United States. Racists of all stripes hate because they fear, and they fear because they are ignorant. Home-grown terrorists (or criminals, depending on definitions) like Timothy McVeigh or the Weather Underground movement have demonstrated their hatred and fear of government with devastating effects. There is no end of debate about the circumstances that create these conditions, but there appears to be little agreement on how to overcome them. These are big challenges for societies to address, and pervasive ignorance about how the world works does not augur well for any quick resolutions.

Yet there is a more insidious ignorance in American society today, one that is a cancer in the political and social body of the country, and one that could lead to extremist fundamentalism and terrorism in the homeland if left unchecked and unchallenged. It is an ignorance stemming from the politics of fear and hatred. The unwillingness of Americans to challenge these insidious

yet full-frontal attacks on the very essence of their democracy and freedom is frightening and dangerous. From the politics of personal destruction and hate epitomized by rightists like Ann Coulter to the radical, extremist views of leftists like William Rivers Pitt, mainstream American society is under assault. Moreover, the government is fueling the fires of radicalism by pushing culturally sensitive issues like abortion, gay rights, flag burning, gun ownership, censorship, and religiously driven fundamentalist views on many aspects of private American life. These culture wars are diverting attention away from the real global and local challenges facing the U.S. and creating an environment of hate, fear, and ideological extremism right here at home.

Is it the government's strategy to divide Americans on what are, after all, very personal issues so that their attention will be diverted away from the bigger issues of global power, resources, and political control? After all, global ignorance is most certainly in a government's best interests, as uninformed voters provide no curb at all on governments' excesses. More cynical commentators might argue that creating the conditions for extremism and terrorism at home provides the government with ample ammunition to exert further control over the populace and to weaken the privacy rights of individuals. What better way to mobilize the government and the military against the general population than to argue that they are now fighting a "war" against extremism and terrorism on home soil.

As a democratic society, we have had the luxury of examining the cultural conditions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Guatemala, and in a host of other places, that lead to war and violence against civilians and outside powers. Post-facto studies of those environments suggest that a better understanding of the cultural geographies that shape people and places is critical if such conflicts are to be avoided. Extreme fundamentalism and terrorism in America by Americans are possible. By learning to overcome global ignorance, our society will be better prepared to help shape policies at home and abroad that avoid such extremism. Remaining globally unaware could well create the conditions in America that are currently experienced in Lebanon, Israel, Iraq, and elsewhere around the world.

David J. Keeling, Department of Geography and Geology, Western Kentucky University. The author is a member of the American Geographical Society's Writers Circle. The American Geographical Society is America's oldest geographical organization. Its mission is to link the business, professional, and scholarly worlds in the creation and application of geographical knowledge and techniques to address economic, social, and environmental programs. By distributing op-ed essays, it hopes to encourage public discussion of geographical issues.