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The Yemen Narrative: Cargo Cults and Cargo Security

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Abstract: The author gives a psychological perspective on the security of aviation cargo shipments.

In the May 1959 Issue of Scientific American, the sociologist Peter M. Worsley wrote an article on cargo cults. Some quotes follow... "...the collision of European civilization with the indigenous cultures....a people so radically different from themselves and so infinitely more powerful.....the frightening knowledge of the white man's magical power... the hopeful message...that a Messiah will come and that the present order of Creation will end ...The riches of the white man will accrue to...The believers [who] sit around tables with bottles of flowers in front of them, dressed in European clothes, waiting for the cargo ship or airplane to materialize ...Sometimes they spend days sitting gazing at the horizon for a glimpse of the long-awaited ship or airplane...Observers have not hesitated to use such words as "madness," "mania," and "irrationality" to characterize the cults. But the cults reflect quite logical and rational attempts to make sense out of a social order that appears senseless and chaotic...The cult rarely disappears, so long as the social situation which brings it into being persists."

With the ongoing narrative beginning on Thursday night EST, October 28th, 2010 on packages bearing explosive materiel originating from Yemen sent through the air cargo system intended to, first, destroy Chicago-based synagogues, then later, to test aviation security for future attacks, and, still later, aircraft in flight, the world order has truly been upended. Now it is the "indigenous" with the power, and the Europeans, Americans, and their allies enthralled with a cargo security cult of "madness," "mania," and "irrationality" about the quest for pure and unattainable safety. Now is the time to trot out Yeats's The Second Coming. "... Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed...Surely the Second Coming is at hand...And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

And the cargo security cult? It is one embraced not by most security and intelligence experts, but by too many of the citizens under their protection. As if the world could ever be free of risk. So even attacks wherein no one dies and nothing is destroyed produce huge, ineluctable terror and other psychological effects in recipients of the narrative. And it is the faith in logic and technology to totally protect us from inevitable death, destruction, and fear that is key. As if a supply chain amply defined by the Department of Homeland Security in a presentation dated December 14, 2009 consisting of manufacturing facilities, contract manufacturers, warehouse distribution, third party logistics providers, shipping facilities, freight forwarding facilities, and independent cargo screening facilities could be shorn of infinite vulnerabilities. As if screening tools ranging from canine to chemical trace detection systems for explosives, to physics-based explosive detection systems via electromagnetic radiation like X-rays and via fast-pulsed neutrons integrated with algorithms, to associated weapon and weapon component detectors, to human opening and search of cargo could be freed from varying error rates—especially when pressured by throughput mandates and constraints. As if [when compared to passenger checked baggage] the huge variability in cargo contents, weight, size, palletization, and containerization would not defy attempts to expunge security threat. As if judicious layering of security with screening and risk rating-methodologies—the latter based on the nature and location of seller and buyer, the differential between shipping costs and contents value, the location of cargo within an aircraft—would ensure the absence of danger. As if, to

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

borrow from Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth*, when it comes to that elusive safety at the essence of the cargo security cult "Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!"

There's only one thing that can deprogram the cargo security cult controlling too many people and largely aided and abetted by the mass media which constitutes a feeding frenzy with each intimation of an attack and adds to the terror—even if one hopes for habituation as opposed to sensitization. That's a long-term public education program executed by political leaders about the world and risk. What has to go is the intolerance for physical casualties and threats—whether of and towards people or things. The intolerance for even attempted attacks. The intolerance for a threat that is very low frequency and of variable physical consequence. This psychology makes Europeans, Americans, and their allies ever more lucrative as targets, because the objective success or failure of terrorist attack both are sure to generate subjective success. A different perspective on reality and the nature and meaning of life is needed. Political leadership of incumbent and opposition parties have all largely failed at telling it like it is and preventing the construction of a psychological reality of how it shouldn't be.

In the meantime, the single most effective approach to counterterrorism is intelligence activity. This includes the human and technical collection of information; its analysis; its production sanitized as needed concerning sources and methods; its secure and timely transmission to those entrusted with developing, implementing, and evaluating cargo security policy and programs; and the development, implementation, and evaluation of security activities. This needs to be a continuous process, because as the world turns, threat, vulnerabilities, and risk change. It's instructive that the latest cargo security narrative so far devoid of physical victims, features alleged security tips leading to actionable intelligence as opposed to a screening or risk-rating success.

Returning to Worsley, what magic power is it that so frightens members of the cargo (security) cult. As the German philosopher Martin Heidegger intimated in his *The Question Concerning Technology*, "Thus we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology so long as we merely conceive and push forward the technological, put up with it, or evade it. Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it." French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "Man was born free; and everywhere is in chains" never seemed so apt.

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