The Opposite of Right Society

Witches, Terrorists and the Discourse of Evil

Sabina Magliocco

This paper explores cultural antecedents for the idea of the "sleeper," the terrorist who appears to adapt to a host culture while secretly harboring plans to destroy it, in the discourse of European and American witch hunts. The idea of an evil infiltrator, who lives hidden within a society, clandestinely conspiring to overthrow it, has deep historical roots. The language used by American political leaders to describe Al-Qaeda echoes that of medieval inquisitors and New England witch hunter Cotton Mather, ferreting out diabolical conspiracies threatening to destroy the foundations of society. In this paper, I explore the similarities between the discourse of witch hunts and that of terrorism, arguing that language which creates an enemy simultaneously alien and internal to the host society accomplishes two rhetorical goals: it projects evil onto a racial, cultural, gendered or social Other, allowing the host culture to see itself as "pure" and "good;" and it dehumanizes the Other, making it easier to deprive him/her of basic human rights.

Prof. Sabina Magliocco, Department of Anthropology, California State University – Northridge, 18111 Nordhoff St., Northridge, CA 91330, USA.
E-mail: sm32646@csun.edu

Almost immediately after the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, news stories began to circulate about the terrorists who had perpetrated this heinous crime. According to reports, Mohammed Atta and his henchmen did not fit the profile of the typical terrorist drawn up by the FBI and the CIA: that of a poor, young male driven to fanatical acts by the desperation of his life circumstances. The terrorists who blew up the towers were of a different stripe: middle-aged, middle class, educated and by all appearances "average" immigrants to the United States who did not appear to be radical fanatics. They dressed in Western garb, smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol and in other ways blended in with their neighbors in the anonymous suburban apartment complexes where they resided. They were, it is said, "sleepers:" infiltrators "long in place but not yet activated" (Saffire 2001).

New York Times columnist William Saffire, writing his weekly piece "On Language" barely two months after the attacks, observed that the word, which has many meanings, was first used in this sense in the context of the Cold War: "a member of the Communist Party whose whole life was dedicated to the one big moment," according to mystery novelist Holly Roth in a 1955 book by that title (Saffire 2001).

In 1976, *The Times of London* observed, "There almost certainly exists within our political establishment, what is known as a 'sleeper' – a high-level political figure who is in fact a Soviet agent, infiltrated into the system many years ago." As the cold war ended, the word surfaced again with a slightly different meaning: in 1990, Prof. Paul Wilkinson, a British terrorism expert, told the Press Association that Iraq was unrivaled in the technique, with sleeper squads, known as "submarines," already in position (Saffire 2001).

The word surfaced again in 2000, when Benjamin Weiser reported in the New York Times that a former U.S. Army sergeant told the FBI about "networks of terrorists known as 'sleepers' who lie low for years but do not need to be told what to do." The sergeant, according to Weiser, knew that "that there are hundreds of

'sleepers' or 'submarines' in place who don't fit neatly into the terrorist profile" (Saffire 2001).

Two years later, the word "sleeper" became part of the national vocabulary.

"The pattern of bin Laden's terrorism," wrote Evan Thomas and Mark Hosenball in *Newsweek* two weeks after September 11, "is to insert operatives into a country where they are 'sleepers,' burrowed deep into the local culture, leading normal lives while awaiting orders" (quoted in Saffire 2001).

Yet the idea of a "sleeper," the terrorist who appears to adapt to a host culture while secretly harboring plans to destroy it, an evil infiltrator who lives hidden within a society, clandestinely conspiring to overthrow it, is not new in American culture. It has many historical antecedents; in fact, I will argue that it is part of a pattern of American political discourse that draws heavily from folklore to create an enemy simultaneously alien and internal to the host society, upon whom political problems can then be blamed. In American history, this discourse has often been used to project evil onto a racial, cultured, gendered or social Other, allowing the dominant culture to preserve an image of itself as "pure" and "good." It has been used to dehumanize it the Other, making it easier to deprive him/her of basic human rights. And by using the language of moral absolutes, of "good" vs. "evil," it has obscured the role of the state in creating the conditions in which political opposition and resistance leading to terrorism can flourish.

I wish to state at the outset that it is not my intent to justify terrorist actions, especially those of the hijackers on September 11. These crimes against innocent civilians remain unconscionable under any circumstances. Nor do I mean to cast doubt upon the very real fact that there are terrorist groups in many parts of the world, including the United States, engaged in plotting future crimes. Instead, I want to call attention to the ways in which the language of terrorism used by the current administration, and picked up by the news media, represents a long-standing pattern in American politics. This language transforms human beings with human motivations into political and folkloric symbols, ultimately blinding us to more subtle under-standings that could help us sway or undo them.

One of the earliest antecedents for the idea of the sleeper terrorist lies in the European folklore of witchcraft. *The Canon Episcopi*, a 9th century ecclesiastical document, describes witches literally as sleepers: women whose bodies remained in bed at night while they journeyed in spirit to the meetings of secret societies headed by a fantastical supernatural woman known by a variety of names: Diana, Herodias, Dame Abonde, Signora Oriente, la Signora del Giuoco. There, they would feast, dance, sing and receive advice from the queen of the assembly (Bonomo 1959:15–20; Ginzburg 1989:65–98). While early accounts of these nocturnal journeys emphasized their spiritual nature, around 1100, the Catholic Church's interpretation of these legends shifted, and the nighttime revels were understood as having taken place in the flesh (Muraro Vaiani 1976:142). That is, what was once commonly understood as cultural fantasy with heretical content was now understood as real. Thus was born the legend of the witches' sabbat, which came to dominate Europe and, later, the Americas for several centuries. While the original purpose of these folkloric night time assemblies was not to do evil, inquisitors inevitably interpreted these reports as wicked, or at the very least heretical, in intent, since the leaders of the assemblies could be understood as challenging the primacy of God and Christ. Even though the women who confessed to having participated in the "games of Diana" did not believe they were doing evil, they were never-theless executed as witches (Bonomo 1959; Caro Baroja 1965; Ginzburg 1989; Muraro Vaiani 1976).

Belief in witchcraft was brought to the new world by the English Puritans, who believed humans existed in a state of constant struggle against the forces of Satan and his demonic army. These were not mere figures of speech or metaphors for them, but represented a genuine dualistic cosmology. Puritan witch hunter Cotton Mather described witches as part of a "vast Power, or Army of Evil Spirits, under the Government of a Prince who employs them in a continual Opposition to the designs of GOD" (Mather, quoted in Dorson, 1973:32). Mather used the language of the state, with a political

leader, an army and a strategy of opposition, to describe the role of witches. Witches were thought to have a covenant, or contract, with the devil, their political leader, that could compel them to do things they would never otherwise consider (Dorson 1973:33). According to Richard Dorson, "In the eyes of the Puritans, witches in covenant with the devil and his army of demons threatened the fabric of their holy communion with their black magic aimed at … subverting the true church" (Dorson 1973:35). It was but a small step from the idea of witches subverting the church to that of witches as subverting the state: colonial diarist John Evelyn wrote that witches wished to subvert the government, and in the very next line discussed a conspiracy discovered among African slaves on Barbados to overthrow and kill their masters (Dorson 1973:41). It is clear that for Evelyn, the planned slave rebellion was on par with the overthrow of the colonial government by witches. Witches and slaves both existed as minorities living alongside the dominant culture, appearing to conform to its rules while secretly plotting its destruction. They were, in a sense, sleepers: dangerous infiltrators who were at once both insiders and evil aliens, whose presence was simultaneously both hidden and manifest. Their presence was rendered apparent by their difference: gender, in the case of most witches,[1] and race, in the case of African slaves.

The language of difference, especially that of darkness, both racial and spiritual, was already long in use in the witchcraft persecutions. Europeans had a history of equating light with goodness and dark with evil, and of presuming that an individual's physical aspect revealed their moral character. In the American colonial context, these assumptions extended to racial attributes. In court documents from American witch trials, for example, the devil was often referred to as a "black man" or a "dark stranger" (Dorson 1973:49). One of the first to be accused and prosecuted in the infamous Salem witch trials was Tituba, a slave variously described as Afro-Caribbean or American Indian (see Norton, 2002b) whose own religious practices, intended to rid the girls of their ailment, were misunderstood or misrepresented as witchcraft by the prosecutors.

The discourse of witchcraft as difference is not unique to Western cultures; anthropologists have found similar constructions in many societies. Witchcraft discourses generally portray witches as embodying the opposite of right society: the antithesis of what is considered to be proper, decent social behavior (Mair 1969:36–37). "The image of the ways witches behave, which is associated with the reasons why they should seek to destroy others, is an image of evil, of the antithesis of good," explains anthropologist Lucy Mair in a comparative, cross-cultural study of witchcraft beliefs (1969:38). Witches are often imagined as transgressing a number of social norms: they may have insatiate lusts for power, food, goods, and sexuality. They break fundamental rules in the social contract, killing relatives and attacking their neighbors. Disregarding life itself, they think nothing of murder, and are often also accused of cannibalism, incest and turning into animals, all actions which violate fundamental rules of human conduct that societies everywhere imagine separate humans from non-humans (Mair 1969:36–39). While such exaggerated portrayals belong to what Mair calls the "nightmare witch," a creature of fantasy, real-life, everyday witches — "the person who may actually be living among you, suspected or unsuspected" (Mair 1969:37) — also embody oppositional qualities: in this case, they are the opposite of the type of person one would wish to have as a neighbor. And those who repeatedly violate social norms for one reason or another, or who are considered socially or economically marginal to the community, are particularly vulnerable to being accused of witchcraft, since according to this system of reasoning, those who break one type of social rule may easily violate others (Mair 1969:37).

Witches in colonial New England were no exception to this cross-cultural pattern. Existing legend complexes depicted them as evildoers whose ordinary activities included copulation with the devil and his minions, sexual perversions, and the murder of children for cannibalistic purposes. According to the work of historian Mary Beth Norton, the language of difference accompanied the language of witchcraft in the Salem witch trials. The Salem

witch trials emerged at the same time as settlers were engaged in renewed, violent warfare against local Indians. The principal accusers belonged to families which had suffered great losses in the Indian wars. In their testimony, they claimed to have seen the devil in the shape of an Indian, and blamed the defeat of colonial soldiers by the Indians on sorcery (Norton 2002a). In this construction, the accused were not only guilty of conspiring with the devil, but of aiding and abetting the enemy. As Boyer and Nissenbaum's study of the Salem witch trials illustrates, accusations tended to follow existing political divisions, with the accused belonging to one and accusers to a rival faction (Boyer and Nissenbaum 1997). The language of witchcraft proved the ideal discourse to bring down political opponents.

The language used by American political leaders to describe Al-Qaeda terrorists echoes that of medieval inquisitors and New England witch hunters ferreting out diabolical conspiracies threatening to destroy the foundations of society. Attorney General John Ashcroft described the terrorist conspiracy as "A calculated, malignant, devastating evil [that] has arisen in our world. Civilization cannot afford to ignore the wrongs that have been done" (*The New York Times,* 2/24/02:4/1). According to this construction, the United States as well as many other parts of the world are filled with sleepers, dangerous terrorists who masquerade as ordinary citizens, but await word from their leader to explode into rageful, evil action. These sleepers are part of a vast, secret, worldwide network with tentacles in every nation, whose aim is nothing less than the overthrow of Western civilization itself. Like Satan's army of darkness, this network is headed by Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind of a great subversive plan. Without the direction and financing of Bin Laden, the current administration imagines, terrorists would never even conceive of their evil plans. Parallels between Bin Laden and the devil quickly emerged in popular culture as well. Less than a week after the attacks of September 11, an email began to circulate featuring a photograph of a huge cloud of smoke rising from the ruined towers. Texts accompanying the photograph interpreted the shape of the smoke cloud as the face of Satan, the head of Bin Laden, or both.

In the autumn of 2002, Saddam Hussein's name was added to the roster of terrorist financiers and sympathizers as the United States prepared to go to war against Iraq, even though the evidence of this link was later deemed to be manufactured. Whether Bin Laden or Hussein, the alleged mastermind takes on the role of the devil in the witchcraft conspiracies, creating covenants with his followers that force them to take on suicide missions and carry out other actions they would otherwise never think of themselves. Bin Laden and Hussein are portrayed as the masterminds of the operation, much as Satan was imagined by colonial witch hunters as the prince of a great army of minions ready to carry out his evil plans. Indeed, the capacity of both leaders to elude U.S. forces thus far has occasionally been depicted as almost preternatural.

During the Iraq war, media reports often focused on rather trivial details of Hussein's personal life and that of his family members in an effort to portray their moral debauchery and hypocrisy. When U.S. soldiers uncovered the abandoned house of Hussein's son in the spring of 2003, images of his extensive collection of pornographic videotapes were broadcast by CNN, ABC, CBS and NBC. Reports also focused on his stash of alcoholic beverages, which he held in apparent violation of Islamic law.

As was the case of the language of witchcraft, the language of terrorism converges with the discourse of difference, focusing on those deemed to be not fully members of the larger community. As the U.S. administration began its investigation of the September 11 attacks, suspicion focused increasingly on Others within American society: Muslims (non-Christians) as well as Middle Easterners, Central Asians, African Americans and Latinos (non-whites). Within one year of the 9/11 attacks, over 5000 Arab and Muslim Americans and immigrants had been rounded up and interrogated, and 1200 of these were detained. Detainees are being held without recourse to lawyers and without charges being filed while their alleged links to terrorist sleeper cells are investigated. Those who are U.S. citizens have been designated

as "enemy combatants," stripping them of due process and allowing them to be detained in military prisons and tried in military tribunals, without access to legal counsel or knowledge of the specific crimes of which they are accused. "We have documented many instances of immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia ... face[ing] cruel and degrading treatment at the hands of U.S. authorities," said William F. Schultz, the executive director of Amnesty International, in an interview with *New York Times Magazine* writer Matthew Brzezinski. "Those are the sort of practices we usually see in the most repressive regimes in the world" (M. Brzezinski 2002:52).

The state's focus on individuals of Middle Eastern provenance and Muslim faith as potential terrorists led to an alarming reaction of suspicion and hatred towards these Others among the general population. In Los Angeles county alone, 118 hate crimes were committed against Middle Easterners, South Asians and people of Arab descent between September 11, 2001 and September 11, 2002. According to LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) figures, this represents a 200% increase in the number of hate crimes against these minority groups since the previous year.[2] Some of the murdered individuals were mistakenly identified as Middle Eastern or Muslim by their attackers, including a Coptic shopkeeper, several Sikh men and a number of Latinos.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a watchdog political organization, began tracking the stories of individuals affected by anti-Muslim persecution following the state sponsored crackdown on potential terrorists. In an October 2002 issue of its newsletter, the ACLU documented the personal narratives of several victims of hate crimes. Among them was Ali Akbar, the Pakistani owner of a halal restaurant in Orange County (southern California).

"On the night of September 26, 2001, I saw my hard work and my family's source of income burn to the ground. The week before the fire, people were driving up to my restaurant honking and screaming. They saw the name of the restaurant, I think. They were very angry. Maybe they set the fire, I don't know. The Buena County Fire Department told me that the arsonist broke the glass door, poured fuel into the restaurant, then set it on fire. As a result of the fire, I had zero income for six months" (*Open Forum* 76/4 [2002], p. 5).

In the intensified political climate of California, all non-citizens became the focus of renewed suspicion. An NPR/Kaiser Foundation poll in the autumn of 2002 showed that the majority of Americans believe that naturalized U.S. citizens should not have as many rights if arrested as those born in the United States and holding only U.S. citizenship.

Attorney General Ashcroft's intensification of the FBI's authority to spy on U.S. residents, and his institution, in August 2002, of the TIPS (Terrorist Information and Prevention System) program in which neighbors and workers with access to homes and apartments were encouraged to report suspicious activities to the authorities, only heightened an already-existing trend. Already in October 2001, only weeks after the attacks, Suzanne Goodman of Islip, NY wrote to the *New York Times'* editorial page, suggesting that all landlords and motel operators were in a particularly good position to discover illegal activities among their tenants and guests:

"The sleeper terrorists aren't staying in American caves or in the backs of their cars. They're living anonymously among us, and it's the people who unwittingly provide shelter who are in the best position to detect the evildoers" (*NYTimes* Editorial Page 10/31/2001).

Shortly after the TIPS program's institution, Eunice Stone of Cartersville, GA reported to the authorities a conversation she overheard in a Shoney's restaurant between three men of Middle Eastern descent. Apparently, she mistook their black humor and discussion about transporting cars to Illinois, where they were to begin a medical residency program, as evidence that they were planning terrorist acts. She also expressed amazement that the men, two of whom are American citizens, spoke with "perfect American accents." Perhaps she believed that this was part of the sleepers' trick of blending in, since it was otherwise inconceivable to her

that "foreign-looking" people might lack a distinctive accent. The men were arrested, detained, extensively questioned and eventually released for lack of evidence. Unfortunately, they also lost their positions as medical residents in a Florida hospital.

Popular sentiment against Muslims and Middle Easterners was fomented by the publication of Steven Emerson's book *American Jihad: the Terrorists Living Among Us* (2001). Emerson, a former CNN correspondent with an M.A. in urban studies, attended the meetings of many Islamic organizations across the United States, where he heard fiery tirades filled with rhetoric against Western "idol worshippers" and "enemies of Allah." He also discovered that because of its constitutionally guaranteed protections, the United States provided Islamic militants with an ideal location from which to organize political movements, raise funds, and disseminate propaganda. Rushed into print following September 11, the book became an instant best seller. Yet while Emerson was being hailed as a modern-day Cassandra by many on the right, critics argued that his warnings verged on paranoia, and that many of the individuals and organizations mentioned in his book have been cleared of any wrong-doing by judicial inquiries (Block 2002:42).

Besides their obvious racial and ethnic difference, potential terrorists are also portrayed as incomprehensibly irrational, or childishly emotional. They are "cowards" who "hate our freedoms" and despise Western culture because of their religious beliefs, or they are "jealous" of American material success. But studies show that far from hating Western-style democracy, Muslim public opinion the world over strongly favors representative government, individual liberties and education (Atran 2003). Muslim religious beliefs themselves are distorted in an effort to further dehumanize terrorists: soon after the 9/11 attacks, the hijackers' suicidal acts were explained in many media accounts with the rationalization that Islam promises martyrs a heaven filled with sexually alluring virgins.

These misinterpretations are symptoms of more than just cultural and religious prejudice. They successfully divorce the concept of terrorism from any U.S. political actions that may have inspired it. As Zbigniew Brzezinski argued in a *New York Times* editorial a year after the attacks, "It is as if terrorism is suspended in outer space as an abstract phenomenon, with ruthless terrorists acting under some Satanic inspiration unrelated to any specific motivation" (Z. Brzezinski 2002). In fact, he continues, "almost all terrorist activity originates from some political cause and is sustained by it as well" (Brzezinski 2002). The problem is not that terrorists don't like American values; it is American *actions* they dislike. For many years now, historical documents have demonstrated a relationship between U.S. foreign policy and increased terrorist threats against the United States (Atran 2003). According to a United Nations report, Al-Qaeda recruitment increased in thirty to forty nations around the globe as soon as the United States began its military build-up against Iraq in the fall of 2002. Recruiters did not have to scour the bushes to find volunteers; they were "beating down the doors to join" (Atran 2003).

It should be evident by now that a number of parallels exist between the language used by witch hunters to make witches appear to be "the opposite of right society," and that of the American administration and media in portraying sleeper terrorists after the 9/11 attacks. The existence of these similarities is not accidental. Both discourses are part of a pattern of what Alan Dundes has termed "projection" and "projective inversion" in folklore (Dundes 1980: 1991:354). Projection, a term Dundes borrows from psychoanalytic theory, is a psychological defense mechanism consisting of the repression of emotions and experiences deemed unacceptable by the individual or society, and the projection of these characteristics onto an object (a person or a group of people). Projection is further characterized by a lack of empathy with what is projected and a feeling of distancing or estrangement from the object onto which the reviled characteristics have been projected (Kernberg 1987:94). In other words, through projection, the individual or society disowns feelings, characteristics and emotions considered inappropriate or intolerable, and sees them as existing outside of the self in the

person of an Other. The Other, stripped of humanity through the mechanism of projection, becomes a container for these negative qualities, and can be hated with impunity, while the projecting individual or society maintains an image of itself as entirely good. Moreover, the belief can then develop that by eliminating the Other, the negative characteristics can somehow be eliminated or purged altogether.

According to Dundes, projective inversion, a variant of the defense mechanism of projection, is in operation when A accuses B of doing something A would in fact like to do, or perhaps is already doing, but needs to keep hidden (Dundes 1991:355). It is the psychological mechanism at work behind the legend of the blood libel, used for centuries as a justification for the persecution of Jews in Europe. Jews were falsely accused of murdering Gentile children to use their blood in the making of Passover matzos. We see a similar motif of ritual cannibalism at work in the legends about witches, Catholics during the 1800s (Hofstadter 1966), and contemporary Satanists (Victor 1991), narratives which are clearly cultural fantasies without any factual elements whatsoever. While these legends all contain elements of projection, Dundes argues that the blood libel legend is a case of projective inversion, since it was the Christians who engaged in communion, a symbolic consumption of the body and blood of Christ, as the central ritual act of the mass. He maintains that their own ambivalence about the act of communion, with its symbolic cannibalism, was projected outside their group onto an Other that could be hated and reviled — in this case, the Jews. Historian Carlo Ginzburg argues that medieval depictions of cannibalism in witches' sabbats were drawn from the blood libel legend of anti-Jewish persecutions, which predated the witch craze by several centuries (Ginzburg 1989:36–61).

Projection is evident in American politics whenever minorities or imagined infiltrators are blamed for existing political and social ills. Historian Richard Hofstadter, writing not long after another episode of this nature, the hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1950s, called this pattern "the paranoid style in American politics" (Hofstadter 1966). He identified the basic elements of the style as:

- the idea of a vast, sinister conspiracy as the primary moving force behind historical events;
- the apocalyptic nature of the conspiracy – its intent to bring down entire ways of life;
- the portrayal of this conflict in absolute moral terms, good vs. evil;
- the personalization of the enemy, and his depiction as a model of malice;
- the dehumanization of the enemy through a focus on alleged acts of extreme cruelty and sadism;
- the perception that decisive events are caused by the enemy's personal will, rather than by a confluence of historical factors;
- the special attention and authority granted to renegades and apostates (Hofstadter 1966:29–39).

Hofstadter traced this style throughout American history, beginning with the colonial witch hunts, which we have already discussed. During the 1700s, as the colonial government gave way to the early Republic, fears of Masonic and Illuminati conspiracies to bring down the emergent nation became rife. During the 1800's, Catholics were suspect because of their alleged involvement in papist anti-government plots as the United States warred first with France, then with Spain for control of their former colonies on American soil. In the Cold War years following the Second World War, anti-Communist hysteria culminated in the McCarthyism of the 1950s, which journalists eventually dubbed a "witch hunt." One could add to this sad litany the murders of Sacco and Vanzetti, along with other innocent Italian immigrants imagined to be socialist agitators, at the turn of the 20th century; the internment of Japanese and Italian Americans during the second World War; and the Satanic panics of the 1980s, which led to the imprisonment of many innocent victims of accusations of ritual sexual abuse (Hofstadter 1966; Ray 2002; Fox 1990; Victor 1993). We can observe many of the same characteristics in the current discourse on terrorists as sleepers — characteristics rooted

in the mechanism of projection.

But can the same psychological mechanism really be at work in our portrayal of sleeper terrorists today? Terrorists are clearly not "nightmare witches" in Mair's sense of the word: a fantasy embodying the opposite of right society. Their existence is well documented, and the results of their actions are blatantly evident. Yet it is not the reality of terrorists that I am calling into question by comparing the language of terrorism to that of witchcraft persecutions. Rather, I wish to demonstrate how, when faced with a serious threat, old, familiar discourses can easily take hold in society, with two un-intended results: innocent people are invariably caught in the net meant for criminals, and the complex political relationships between self and other, state and terrorist, are reduced to essentializations. Black-and-white distinctions between good and evil, so characteristic of projection, protect the state from seeing its own part in creating the very circumstances that lead to the emergence of terrorism. Just as in the case of psychological defense mechanisms, they allow the state to exist in an imagined universe in which it is purely good, and all the evil is projected outside the boundaries of society onto foreign terrorists. By obliterating that evil through a protracted "war on terrorism," a state of purity can ultimately be achieved.

In order for projective inversion to be at work, according to Dundes' definition, the state, which accuses terrorists of plotting the demise of the American government and its entire way of life, would have to be engaged in exactly those same actions – or at least harbor a desire to do so. An examination of recent United States policy in the Middle East illustrates that in multiple settings, the United States is aiding or directly involved in planning military attacks against non-white Muslim populations or states. Since September 2001, the United States had made war on Afghanistan and Iraq. In each case, it fought against governments it had helped establish, supply and arm in order to combat Soviet expansionism, in the case of Afghanistan, and Iran's Fundamentalist Islamic regime, in the case of Iraq. The United States has historically been inimical to any regime which might restrict American access to valuable oil reserves in the Middle East and Central Asia. When it has supported Islamist states, they have often been governments which deny their citizens the very freedoms it claims to champion and cherish, and which it accuses the terrorists of coveting, as in the case of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, recent American foreign policy in Israel and Palestine has upheld the repressive policies of the Sharon government. It would be relatively easy for an outsider to interpret these facts as a desire on the part of the United States to destroy Islamist states and deprive their citizens of liberty and prosperity. This brief overview alone suggests that it is possible to interpret the discourse of sleeper terrorists as a case of projective inversion.

The discourse of the evil sleeper terrorist hiding among us, waiting to strike may reflect actual intelligence gathered by the FBI and CIA; but it is part of a continuing discourse in American history that blames social and political ills on evil infiltrators. Yet this apocalyptic narrative of moral struggle distracts public attention from the very real political causes underlying this situation. Moreover, discourses that contrast symbolic opposites – "good" vs. "evil" – without a more subtle delineation of cause and effect create an ideal medium for the growth of counter-cultural narratives of resistance. Targeted minority groups inevitably feel marginalized by these simplistic schemes, especially when they only heighten negative sentiments about them in the dominant culture.[3] In some cases, targeted groups may choose to identify with the negative pole of the symbolic system, reclaiming the narrative as one of heroism, martyrdom and sacrifice. It is not surprising, given this tendency, that in the two years since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, terrorist attacks against the United States and its perceived allies have increased, rather than decreased. The August 19, 2003 bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad illustrates that, as terrorism scholar Jessica Stern writes, "… America has taken a country that was not a terrorist threat and turned it into one" (Stern 2003). Columnist Maureen Dowd put it even more bluntly:

"The Bush team has now created the very monster that it conjured up to alarm Americans into backing a war on Iraq. Rushing to pummel Iraq after 9/11, Bush officials ginned up links between Saddam and Al Qaeda. They made it sound as if Islamic fighters on a jihad against America were slouching towards Baghdad to join forces with murderous Iraqis. There was scant evidence of it then, but it's coming true now. Since America began its occupation, Iraq has become the mecca for every angry, hate-crazed Arab extremist who wants to liberate the Middle East from the 'despoiling' grasp of the infidels (Dowd 8/20/2003)."

These reactions illustrate the perils of state discourses based on projection or projective inversion. While it seems likely that such discourses may arise spontaneously at times when states and social groups feel threatened by social change or outside pressures, their espousal by the state is a disturbing development. As the history of the witch trials illustrates, and as folklorist Bill Ellis points out in his study of the role of folklore in the spread of legends of Satanic activities in the 20th century United States (Ellis 2000), when popular discourses are instrumentalized by the state for political purposes, the results can be deadly and counter-productive. As poet W.H. Auden wrote:

"I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn:
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return."

Notes

1. The majority of witches tried and executed in the American colonies were female, although some were male – notably the farmer Giles Corey, who was pressed to death as a punishment for allegedly causing sleep paralysis in his victims. Likewise, the majority of European victims were female, except in certain areas of Europe – Iceland, Finland and Estonia – where they were male.
2. During 2002–2003, hate crimes against perceived Middle Easterners or Muslims once again returned to their pre-September 11 levels, according to LAPD statistics.
3. According to a Los Angeles Times poll, only 14% of Americans have a favorable view of Islam (Watanabe, 2002).

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