The New York Times and the case of John Walker

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The *New York Times*' editors have brought the full breadth of their cynicism and inhumanity to bear on the case of John Walker Lindh, the 20-year-old American citizen captured fighting with the Taliban forces in Afghanistan.

In a December 21 editorial ("The American Prisoner"), the *Times* solidarizes itself with the reported decision by the Justice Department to charge Walker with "aiding a terrorist organization," a crime punishable by life imprisonment, rather than treason. That "sounds about right," declares the voice of American liberalism. (It should be noted, however, that George Bush, at a Friday press conference referred to Walker as an "Al Qaeda fighter" and refused to rule out treason charges.)

One ought to consider, in the first place, the matter of the timing of the *Times* editorial. Walker was captured with other Taliban fighters in late November in the northern Afghan city of Kunduz and transferred to a prison near Mazar-i-Sharif. He was thereupon interrogated by CIA agents, an episode captured on videotape, during which he was taunted and threatened with death. Walker survived the subsequent massacre carried out by Northern Alliance and US forces at Qala-i-Jangi prison, at one point standing in freezing water in a cellar for perhaps 20 hours. The video of his interview with CNN shows a young man filthy, wounded and seemingly half-dead.

Walker was then spirited away by US military forces to a troop ship, the USS Pelilieu, in the Arabian Sea off the coast of Pakistan, where he has been held incommunicado for more than two weeks. US officials have refused a lawyer hired by Walker's parents, James Brosnahan of San Francisco, access to the young man. Brosnahan issued a brief statement this week protesting the American government decision not to allow Walker's parents permission to meet with their son and suggesting that Walker had an immediate right to counsel. "He has now been held in custody and reportedly subject to ongoing interrogations by various government agents for 16 days without any access to an attorney and without the ability to communicate with his family," Brosnahan said.

Far from raising the question of Walker's democratic rights, the *Times* essentially intervenes to further poison public opinion against Walker under conditions in which virtually nothing is known about his case, nothing has been proven against him and the full force of the state, armed to the teeth and in unrestrained military mode, is bearing down upon him—a 20-year-old who has seen things that no 20-year-old should have to see. In this the "liberals" at the *Times* demonstrate a horrifying callousness.

The Bush administration is in a genuine crisis as to what charges to pursue against Walker. This is extremely murky territory. What legal grounds are there for indicting him for treason? Walker wasn't involved in the September 11 attack, nor was he any kind of decision-maker in the Taliban regime. He traveled to Afghanistan last May, when the US was not at war with the Taliban. Indeed no declaration of war has ever been voted upon by Congress. Walker didn't "take up arms" against the US, the US took up arms, bombed and invaded Afghanistan.

As far as "aiding a terrorist organization" goes, the *Times* better to look closer to home. Let us recall once again, the Taliban regime and Islamic fundamentalism more generally are the products, in the final analysis, of America's tragic two-decade-long encounter with Afghanistan. Under the Carter, Reagan and Bush regimes, the US, as a matter of policy, cultivated and incited Islamic fundamentalism as an instrument of the Cold War against the former USSR. This has had the most dire consequences for the Afghan and Pakistani peoples, in particular, as well as for the several thousand innocents who died at the World Trade Center September 11. The entire cast of characters currently vilified in the American media, Osama bin Laden, Mullah Mohammed Omar and the rest, rose to prominence as the result of US government policy.

In March 1985 President Ronald Reagan declared, referring to the Soviet Union: "Throughout the world ... its agents, client states and satellites are on the defensive—on the moral defensive, the intellectual defensive, and the political and economic defensive. Freedom movements arise and assert themselves. They're doing so on almost every continent populated by man—in the hills of Afghanistan, in Angola, in Kampuchea, in Central America ... [They are] freedom fighters." Yesterday's "freedom fighter" is today's "evildoer," such is the cynicism of Washington's *realpolitik*.

In addition, there are the long-standing relations between the US government and corporate elite, particularly in big oil, and the Saudi establishment. This semi-feudal theocratic despotism, which produced bin Laden among others, has been propped up by the US for more than half a century at the expense of its own population and that of the region. The specific relations between the Bush family (as well as other members of the Bush senior inner circle, such as James Baker and Frank Carlucci)—through the Carlyle Group—and the Saudis and bin Laden family, are equally well documented. It is also a matter of public record that the FBI helped a number of the bin Ladens leave the US following the September 11 attack on a chartered 727.

Furthermore, the American role in helping consolidate the Taliban's grip on power would be the worthy subject of a full-scale public inquiry, although not one which would receive the warm support of the *Times* or any other segment of the US media and political establishment. It is a fact of history that an official of the US oil company, Unocal, informed news agencies in September 1996 that an oil pipeline project would be easier to implement now that the Taliban had captured Kabul. It is also a fact that within hours of the Taliban's conquest of Kabul, the US State Department announced it would establish diplomatic relations with the new regime (an announcement it later retracted).

The *Times*, in its December 21 editorial, pontificates about the "serious mistakes" Walker has committed, for which he "will have to face the legal consequences." Who else will have to face such consequences? When it comes to "aiding a terrorist organization," the *Times* might look to official Washington and find a host of possible suspects: Carter, Brzezinski,

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Kissinger, Bush Sr., etc. There are people in and around the present Bush administration who have far more experience with the Taliban, who are more familiar with its inner workings and crimes and who, one might also hazard a guess, know a good deal more about September 11 than John Walker.

The *Times*' contribution to an understanding of Walker's personal evolution is to heap insults on the imprisoned youth. It refers to "the appalling weight of what this 20-year-old doesn't know" and asserts that his quest for enlightenment "has been coupled with unspeakable ignorance from the beginning." Such language might be more appropriately applied to the current resident of the White House.

Based on the little one knows, the Walker case resounds with tragedy that has a sociological and historical significance. Walker's fate speaks to the more generalized American experience, and specifically to the experience of his generation.

Everything we know about him suggests that Walker was an exceptional young person and an idealist. "He wanted something pure, and he was definitely questing at an early age," his father, Frank Lindh, told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "We encouraged him to look."

From the start, however, his search seems to have been disoriented and confused, veering off into religious obscurantism. His quest apparently began with a reading *of The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and led him to investigate Islam. During visits as a teenager to Internet chat rooms and mosques in the San Francisco Bay area he encountered followers of the "'tablikhi jamaat,' a movement roughly translated as 'preaching society' that encourages Muslims to contact those whose faith is drifting and steer them back into the orbit of a mosque" (*Associated Press*).

"After graduating from an independent studies high school at 16, Lindh departed for Yemen in 1998 to study Arabic with his parents' blessing. He returned home in 1999, after 10 months in Yemen. He stayed in Marin County for about eight months, but apparently felt lonely and unsettled. In February 2000, he returned to Yemen and eventually moved to Pakistan, where he studied at an Islamic school near the Afghan border. It was there he fell in with the Taliban, Lindh told the CNN crew as he was being treated for wounds suffered during the deadly prisoner revolt in Mazar-e-Sharif."

Revulsion at the materialism of the West and a yearning for the apparently more spiritualistic East are not so odd or rare as they may first appear. Such sentiments reoccur throughout Western cultural and political history, from Sir Richard Burton to Lawrence of Arabia. In Walker's case this took a reactionary and tragic form.

The Walker case raises many troubling questions that the *Times* editors, in the sanctimonious tones known only to the wealthy elite, do not dare address. Why should an idealistic youth take such a path? What were the alternatives to which he was exposed?

The editorial asserts that to be in Walker's position "is to have fallen down a rabbit hole of one's own making." Earlier this year, in regard to another case with tragic dimensions, that of the right-wing terrorist, Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, the *Times* referred to "a mind warped by self-induced militancy." The refrain is similar. The fates of Walker and McVeigh are entirely self-produced, they have nothing to do with the general condition of American society or of its younger generation.

The anger and confusion of the *Times*' editorial reflect concerns that are not simply of an overtly political character. Somehow the Walker case strikes too close to home. The editors react furiously to any sign of youth rejecting their values, rejecting the society that has made them rich and complacent. It is incomprehensible to such people why anyone would be dissatisfied with the results of the stock market and profit boom of the 1990s, with the inequality blighting the US, with the corruption and arrogance of its ruling elite.

Walker and McVeigh listened to false prophets and took terribly false paths, but, again, who is primarily to blame for that? What were the options offered them? Such youth saw no possibility within the existing institutions for the creation of a just and equal society. There was nothing in the official culture and media, with its deadening worship of wealth and the market, to inspire their idealism and instinct for self-sacrifice. They are not alone. That a large number of American youth see no possibility of a meaningful life helps explain the atrocity at Columbine and other school shootings.

The Walker case is fascinating, and one that for all its extraordinary characteristics is hardly as alien to the American experience as Bush and the media would have us believe. The Bush administration has already apparently backed down from its intention to try Walker on treason charges. It would no doubt like to settle this business behind the scenes. If ever there were a need for a lawyer who would not cringe, who would challenge public opinion and force it to look at the circumstances, social and personal, underlying a case, this is it. There is something profound about the Walker case.

There is already a segment of the American population that senses that there is more involved in Walker's situation than the media will acknowledge, a segment of the population that has not made up its mind. There is no reason to believe that an American jury, presented with all the facts, would rush to convict John Walker.

A society reveals a great deal about itself by the way it treats its youth, even those who make mistakes. John Walker found himself, more or less accidentally, in a tragic position. The official response is out-and-out brutality. George Bush, the former president, told ABC TV, "Make him leave his hair the way it is and his face as dirty as it is and let him go wandering around this country and see what kind of sympathy he would get. I mean, he's just despicable." This from a man who never knew a day of poverty or deprivation in his life, whose own son, incidentally, had a checkered life well into his forties. The principal difference between Walker and Bush junior is that the latter was never motivated for an instant by altruistic, generous or humane interests.

The *Los Angeles Times* specifically editorialized against any consideration of Walker's age: "Does it really matter whether John Walker Lindh, the 20-year-old American who came to world attention after a bloody prison uprising among Taliban soldiers last month, is a purposeful and coldhearted Taliban warrior or just took a noir detour in his youthful odyssey of spiritual self-discovery? American courts increasingly have lost patience with such nuance in dealing with young criminals."

Is there no one to be found who will speak up for this youth?

The question—what brought Walker to Afghanistan?—is bound up with the still more complex one: what brought the US to Afghanistan? Walker is one element of the catastrophe that America has produced in that country. The present war originates, not in Central Asia, but in the US. The horrifying violence that the Bush administration and the US military have unleashed on Afghanistan cannot be understood without reference to the deep social contradictions within America itself, contradictions of which the *Times*' "liberal" inhumanity and John Walker's peculiar evolution are further expressions.

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