

Rigoberto Alpizar and Jean Charles de Menezes: Two victims of state “anti-terror” killings

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The state killings of Rigoberto Alpizar and Jean Charles de Menezes came four-and-a-half months apart, and an ocean separated the scenes of their violent deaths. Yet the similarities between their fates is undeniable. Both were innocent men brutally executed by undercover agents—in one case American, in the other British—prosecuting the so-called “global war on terror.”

Both were Latin American immigrants, gunned down on the grounds that they supposedly posed a terrorist threat. The reaction in their home countries—Brazil in the case of de Menezes, Costa Rica in that of Alpizar—was one of anger and disbelief.

De Menezes, an electrician, was shot to death July 22 on a London subway car that he had boarded on his way to work. Plainclothes cops burst in after him and, without warning, grabbed him and shot him multiple times in the head.

Police initially reported that de Menezes had been followed leaving the home of a suspected terrorist wearing a bulky jacket on a hot day. They claimed that when they challenged him at the entrance to the subway station, de Menezes bolted over a ticket barrier and attempted to escape before he was caught, overpowered, and shot in the head by cops seeking to prevent him from detonating a bomb.

It quickly became evident that there was no bomb and that the man they had killed had no connection to terrorism whatsoever.

Citing security concerns in the “war on terror,” London’s metropolitan police commissioner tried to quash any independent investigation of the killing. Rejecting the notion that the police should be held accountable for killing an innocent man, he insisted that the public accept that cops have to make “hard decisions” in order to prevent terrorist attacks.

Within weeks of the killing, however, documents and film footage leaked to the media made it clear that every aspect of the police story on the killing was a lie, and the police commissioner’s concern for security was in reality part of an elaborate cover-up.

It emerged that de Menezes had come not from the house of suspected terrorists, but a different apartment in the same three-story building. He was not wearing a heavy coat, had not jumped over a ticket barrier and was never even challenged by police. He was calmly seated in the subway car when, without warning, one cop seized and held him while two others executed him, pumping seven bullets into his head.

The entire police story was made up after the fact to justify the murder of an innocent man.

Then last Wednesday came the killing of Rigoberto Alpizar, a naturalized US citizen from Costa Rica who had resided in the US for

more than two decades. Returning with his wife from a missionary trip to South America, he panicked after boarding an American Airlines jet in Miami for the short trip to Orlando, and ran up the aisle.

At the front of the plane, he was confronted by two plainclothes air marshals. According to spokesmen for the secretive air marshals service and the Department of Homeland Security, after Alpizar left the aircraft he said he had a bomb and disregarded orders to drop a bag he was carrying. According to these accounts, when he reached into the bag, the marshals shot him. Passengers reported hearing at least five shots.

No one has come forward to corroborate the marshals’ story, outside of an agency spokesperson who claimed that Alpizar had “run up and down the aisle shouting, ‘I have a bomb in my bag.’” This version of the event has been disputed by every passenger interviewed by the media.

Instead, Alpizar’s fellow passengers reported him saying, before he ran up the aisle, that he had to get off the plane. They further recounted that his wife came running after him shouting that he was sick, that he was bipolar and had not taken his medicine. Not one of them heard the word “bomb.”

Why did the marshals service spokesman make up the story about him shouting about a bomb as he ran “up and down the aisle”? Undoubtedly, for the same reason that the London police described Jean Charles de Menezes wearing a heavy coat and jumping over a ticket barrier in flight, when in fact he was wearing no such clothing and had paid his fare, not even knowing that he was being pursued.

In both cases, it quickly became apparent that the police had taken the life of an innocent man, and alibis were needed both to exonerate the individual officers and uphold the infallibility of the security forces.

How much else of the air marshals’ explanation of why they shot Rigoberto Alpizar—his talk of having a bomb, his disregarding their order to put down his bag, his reaching into it—is a lie? Like the official account of the de Menezes shooting, it is undoubtedly a fabrication.

There are, however, differences worth noting in the reactions to the two shootings in London and Washington. Last July, in Britain, police officials, the foreign minister and others quickly declared their “regrets” over the killing. Prime Minister Tony Blair announced how “desperately sorry” he was about the shooting and declared his “deep sympathy” for the de Menezes family’s loss. He quickly added, of course, that none of this should interfere with unconditional support for the police “in doing the job they have to do in order to protect

people in this country.” In other words, such killings were inevitable and more were to be expected.

In Washington, there was little expression of even feigned sorrow or sympathy. Bush has said nothing about the killing of Alpizar, and his spokesman merely praised the air marshals for their “extensive training,” declaring, “We are appreciative of all that our air marshals do day in and day out in terms of trying to protect the American people.”

The right-wing Republican Congressman from Florida—Alpizar’s own representative—John Mica, who heads up the House subcommittee dealing with aviation security, was clearly gratified by the state murder of his constituent. “This shows that the program has worked beyond our expectations,” he declared.

While the de Menezes killing was treated for some time by the British media as a significant controversy, the American press and broadcast news have dropped the Alpizar story after just three days, his murder eclipsed by an airplane overshooting the runway and accidentally killing a six-year-old child in Chicago. That could change, should damning videotape come to light in the Miami shooting.

The contrast—at least on the surface—between the reactions of the Blair and Bush governments and the media to two very similar events is not a mere accident. It is to be explained, in the first place, by differences in the social and cultural physiognomies of the two countries.

As reactionary as the British government of Tony Blair is, as profoundly antidemocratic its political agenda, and as polarized as British society is between the elite “haves” and the masses of “have nots,” Britain is still no match for the US when it comes to extremes of social inequality, the brutality and underlying violence of class relations, and the backwardness of the political and media establishment. The US is, after all, one of a handful of industrialized countries that continues the barbaric practice of capital punishment.

Hundreds of people are shot dead by police in the US every year. These killings are so commonplace that no government agency even bothers to keep accurate figures on how many die annually in fatal encounters with the police. According to some estimates, a third or more of the victims are mentally ill.

In Britain, police killings have claimed approximately 30 victims in the last dozen years—although, with the de Menezes killing and the Blair government’s “shoot to kill” policy, the British police may soon be catching up with their colleagues across the Atlantic.

Whatever the differences in form and style, however, the similarities are overwhelming and chilling.

The cold-blooded killing of an innocent, emotionally and mentally distraught man desperately trying to get off an airplane and the police execution of a young electrician taking a train to work are both defended as inevitable collateral damage in the “global war on terrorism.” The public is told that such atrocities are necessary—along with secret prisons, torture, disappearances, targeted assassinations and unprovoked wars of aggression—to keep everyone “safe.”

The same rationale has been given for sweeping attacks on democratic rights on both sides of the Atlantic, codified in the USA Patriot Act and the recently enacted Terrorism Bill in Britain. Bedrock legal principles such as habeas corpus that date back to the Magna Carta are being breached in the name of combating the supposedly unprecedented and omnipresent threat of terrorism. Giving police unfettered powers to act as judge, jury and executioner is an integral part of this process.

It is these measures themselves that constitute the gravest threat to the “safety,” lives and liberty of people in both Britain and America. This was confirmed in concrete terms on board American Airlines Flight 924 in the immediate and terrifying aftermath of the killing of Alpizar.

Police stormed the plane, threatening other passengers. “They stuck guns in our faces... They were waving the barrels, shouting ... ‘No one move!’,” passenger Jorge Borelli told the *New York Daily News*. “They didn’t say we’ll shoot you if you take your hands off your head, but they said, ‘You will be considered a threat and we will deal with you accordingly,’” he said. “That was the scariest part. I thought, God, if someone freaks out and jumps up, they’re going to start shooting.”

After being held at gunpoint for nearly half an hour, all of the passengers were marched off the plane, their hands on their heads, to be frisked, sniffed by dogs and then detained for several more hours of questioning.

There is no evidence whatsoever that such deranged police state measures—Miami authorities assured the public that the SWAT team, like the marshals, was following procedures—have any deterrent effect on terrorism.

Indeed, the bipartisan 9/11 Commission formed by the Bush administration to whitewash its response to—and possible complicity in—the September 11, 2001 attacks issued a report last week that declared the government’s failure to make substantive security improvements over the past four years “shocking.”

That is because the supposed concern over terrorism has from the beginning served merely as a multipurpose pretext. It has been used to justify the implementation of wide-ranging policies of war and repression that had been drawn up well before the planes ever struck New York’s Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

In the final analysis, these policies are aimed at benefiting a small financial oligarchy whose interests are so inimical to those of the vast majority of working people that it and its political representatives have abandoned even the pretense of a commitment to democratic rights. Rather, this ruling layer—both in Britain and the US—has increasingly seen constitutional rights and civil liberties as intolerable impediments to the pursuit of policies—the destruction of living standards and social services, tax cuts for the rich, predatory wars—that are opposed by the great majority of the people.

Jean Charles de Menezes and Rigoberto Alpizar were both victims of this process, and they will not be the last.



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