

Obama and the pirates: the glorification of state violence

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The four-day standoff between the Fifth Fleet and a handful of Somali pirates ended Easter Sunday with the shooting deaths of three of the Somalis and the release of Richard Phillips, the American captain of the Maersk Alabama.

On the scale of world events, the standoff was in and of itself a fairly minor episode—a hostage situation.

Every police department is trained to deal with such events. Manuals for how they should be handled universally stress that the objective is to resolve the incident peacefully, protect the lives of the hostages and the police, and, if possible, avoid the application of lethal force.

In this instance, the hostage-taking was transformed into a media-orchestrated drama and a high-stakes political test of President Barack Obama's willingness to use armed force. The killing of the pirates became a political objective in its own right.

In the aftermath of the killings, the media exploited the American public's understandable relief over Captain Phillips' survival and turned it into a bloodthirsty celebration of executions by sniper fire. Totally lost in the media's perverse satisfaction that the pirates—three Somali teenagers—were killed has been any questioning of whether the shootings were justified or, even within the framework of US foreign policy, advisable.

The official claim that the killings were necessary because the captain was in imminent danger is not convincing. Before the pirates were killed, a fourth member of their band, aged 16, had given himself up to the US Navy to get treatment for wounds suffered in the attempt to hijack the American cargo ship. His three associates, exhausted and thinking they were negotiating to secure their own lives in exchange for the release of the captain, had allowed themselves to be

attached to the US warship Bainbridge with a tow line, which was then reeled to within 75 feet of the ship. This hardly indicates that the pirates were preparing for a desperate last stand. Moreover, for the military snipers, trained to hit targets at a distance of a mile or more, the killing of the pirates presented no serious challenge.

The decision to execute the pirates was taken for political reasons. It served to disarm Obama's critics on the right and prove the president's mettle to the military and the American ruling elite. This was made clear as the White House almost immediately issued an official statement crediting Obama with the authorization of deadly force. That Captain Phillips emerged alive from this situation was an accidental byproduct of a politically motivated decision.

The most telling indication of the nature of these killings is the reaction of the corporate media, which combined articles on how much of a political "win" the incident was for Obama with obscene bloodlust in relation to the dead Somalis.

It is hard to be shocked anymore by the media; its political servility, backwardness and appeals to the basest instincts have been part of the American political landscape for so long. But in this case, there was a savagery that seemed almost unhinged.

Most notable was the response of the *Washington Post*, which functions as a paper of record in the US capital. Two days after the rescue, it carried a banner headline on its front page: "Three pirates, three rounds, three dead bodies."

The paper's foreign affairs columnist David Ignatius penned a column entitled "In praise of snipers." It read: "Just as the policy mavens were beginning to debate elaborate political-military strategies for dealing with the Somali pirates, we were reminded that the best

solution is sometimes the simplest and most direct—in this case, a sniper’s rifle.” The column goes on to argue that the solution to the crisis in Somalia—and those elsewhere—is to be found in covert CIA and Special Forces killing squads moving “quickly and quietly to alter the balance of power on the ground.”

Finally, the *Post* published an article by Stephen Hunter, the paper’s former movie critic and author of pulp fiction, glorifying snipers. Hunter’s piece hails the sniper as “a kind of chivalric hero. He is the state, speaking in thunder, restoring order to the moral universe. Or he is civilization, informing the barbarians of the fecklessness of their plight.”

For those old enough to remember the role of the sniper in American history—the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King come to mind—the publication of this sort of fascist-minded filth in a major newspaper is especially disgusting.

It is noteworthy that this worship of the lone gunman appears as barely a week goes by in America without at least one mass killing by deranged and desperate individuals with guns. Is there any doubt that the fetid political environment in which armed force is propagated as the solution to complex problems contributes to this mayhem?

Almost entirely absent from the media is intelligent commentary on Somalia’s crisis and the repeated US military interventions that have contributed so decisively to its breakdown and to the growth of piracy. Much in the same way that the media eschewed any political explanation for the 9/11 attacks for fear of being accused of “justifying terrorism,” so the same rhetorical terrorism is used to silence any critical assessment of the US role in Somalia, which is branded as “defending piracy.”

There are obvious political motives for glorifying the sniper killings in the Indian Ocean. On the one hand, they serve as a useful distraction from the continuing plunge of the US and world economy into depression and the destruction of the jobs and living standards of millions.

On the other, following wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—begun by Bush and continued by Obama—characterized by setbacks and failures, here is an instance in which Washington can proclaim to the American people that military force really does work. For a US ruling class that rests heavily on its relative

military superiority to advance its global interests, this is an ideological conception of key importance.

When Obama’s powerful backers within the US political establishment were putting his candidacy together, one of their arguments was that an African-American president would serve to improve relations with Africa, with its strategic energy and mineral resources coveted not only by Washington, but also by China and Europe.

The summary executions of three Somali teenagers will serve to inflame already powerful anti-American sentiments among the Somali people and discredit throughout the continent the notion that Obama means “change.”

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