

# WHO WE ARE: ZEITOUN AND CAMP GREYHOUND FIVE YEARS ON

In a country founded on “self evident truths” such as life, liberty, equality, and due process of law, the timeless quote from Ben Franklin speaks to the peril imposed when the founding principles are discarded or compromised:



Those who desire to give up freedom in order to gain security will not have, nor do they deserve, either one.

Yet, of course, since 9/11 that is exactly what the United States has done and what has resulted in return. Fareed Zakaria has a piece up at Newsweek speaking to the senseless and destructive madness that has consumed the US since the 9/11 attacks:

The error this time is more damaging. September 11 was a shock to the American psyche and the American system. As a result, we overreacted.

...

Some 30,000 people are now employed exclusively to listen in on phone conversations and other communications in the United States. And yet no one in Army intelligence noticed that Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan had been making a series of strange threats at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where he trained. The father of the Nigerian “Christmas bomber” reported his son’s radicalism to the U.S. Embassy. But that message never made its way to the right people in this vast security apparatus. The plot was foiled only by the bomber’s own incompetence and some alert passengers.

Such mistakes might be excusable. But the rise of this national-security state has entailed a vast expansion in the government's powers that now touches every aspect of American life, even when seemingly unrelated to terrorism.

....

In the past, the U.S. government has built up for wars, assumed emergency authority, and sometimes abused that power, yet always demobilized after the war. But this is a war without end. When do we declare victory? When do the emergency powers cease?

Conservatives are worried about the growing power of the state. Surely this usurpation is more worrisome than a few federal stimulus programs. When James Madison pondered this issue, he came to a simple conclusion: "Of all the enemies to public liberty war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germs of every other ... In war, too, the discretionary power of the executive is extended?...and all the means of seducing the minds, are added to those of subduing the force, of the people.

"No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual war," Madison concluded.

Indeed it is a chilling picture we have allowed our political "leaders" to paint us into, and Zakaria does not even hit some of the most disturbing impingements on due process and the rule of law such as the government arrogating itself the right to summarily execute American citizens with no judicial trial or due process whatsoever and the legal black hole that is Guantanamo and the Obama Military Commission and indefinite detention program. That is, as a nation, who and what we are today and it has

bought us nothing except world scorn,  
geometrically more enemies, a plundered  
treasury, ignored and dilapidated domestic  
infrastructure, swelling joblessness and  
exploding income inequality.

But, hey, at least we have increased security  
and all those oppressive terrorist modalities  
are only for al-Qaida and the bad foreigners,  
right? No. The rot is now *who we are*, towards  
ourselves in addition to "them". And that is  
where we finally get to the subject of the title  
of this post. Nothing demonstrates the deadly  
rot virus that has been injected into the blood  
of the American ethos than the story of Zeitoun.  
(more after jump)

Zeitoun is Abdulrahman Zeitoun, the subject of  
author Dave Eggers' 2009 book *Zeitoun*, and his  
story is fascinating, chilling and the perfect  
illustration of the depths the United States has  
fallen from its founding principles. Zeitoun,  
originally of Syrian descent, is a long time  
resident of New Orleans who, along with his  
American born wife Kathy, owned and operated a  
successful contracting business, have four  
wonderful children and was (and still is) a  
beloved pillar of his community held in the  
highest regard by literally everybody who has  
ever come in contact with him. Literally the  
kind of folks that America daily claims to be  
built on. And so it was for Zeitoun and his  
family.

Then came Katrina and the ground changed. August  
29, 2005 all hell broke loose in New Orleans and  
Zeitoun loaded up Kathy and their children and  
sent them off in the evacuation to Baton Rouge  
and later to stay with friends in Texas. But not  
Zeitoun, he stayed, not for himself, but for the  
city and community that he loved and which  
coursed through his veins. As the levees gave  
way and the city filled with water, so too did  
Zeitoun's neighborhood and home. Zeitoun dug a  
battered old canoe from his garage, put into the  
teeming water and set about trying to help  
others; it was reflex for him, that is just who

he is.

And help others he did. Zeitoun paddled his canoe to bring food to stranded neighbors and animals and literally saved the life of at least one elderly woman and likely others as well.

From The Guardian:

Zeitoun takes us on a guided tour of the route that he negotiated in his canoe in the days after the storm. He begins by pointing to a pillar at the front of his house. "That's where I kept the canoe tied, like you'd tie up your horse."

We set off by car along the maze of streets around his neighbourhood. On every street corner he has a tale to tell. The first stop we make is at a house of grey clapboard standing on stilts. In the hurricane, the flood waters reached almost up to its windows. As he paddled by, Zeitoun explains, he heard a voice faintly crying "Help!". He swam to the front door and inside found a woman in her 70s hovering above him. In one of the most memorable phrases of the book, Eggers writes: "Her patterned dress was spread out on the surface of the water like a great floating flower."

"She was inside the house holding on to the bookshelf with water up to her shoulder," Zeitoun recalls, as we stand outside the house. "She must have been in the water for about 24 hours by then."

Zeitoun helped the woman reach safety in a fishing boat, which was no small feat given that she weighed 90kg (14st). His construction skills and great strength proved invaluable as he levered her on a ladder out to the vessel.

Our tour continues and we pass the house of a local Baptist church pastor and his wife whom the Zeitouns had known for years and who similarly cried out for

help. Further on, we come to the residence of a man who was stranded and to whom Zeitoun brought food and water every day while he still had his canoe and his liberty.

All in all, Zeitoun reckons he must have helped to save or rescue more than 10 neighbours. "The way I thought of it was, anything you can do to help. God left me here for a reason. I did what I was brought up to do – to help people."

But a new hell was about to descend on Zeitoun. The roiling waters and uncertainty were, as Zacharia described the US in the aftermath of 9/11, causing a gross overreaction from government and its leaders. The new militaristic ethos that now seems to grip every facet of American governance was about to swallow up family man and community hero Zeitoun. On September 6, 2005, exactly five years ago today, Zeitoun made his way to a rental property he and Kathy owned to check the status of the friends he leased the house to and to use the telephone, as it was in one of the few locations in the city left with active phone service.

This is when things for Zeitoun went from the darkness of Katrina's wake to the black hole that is now, thanks to the cowed and craven political leadership in the United States, the American "rule of law". As Zeitoun spoke on the phone to a concerned relative overseas, a group of at least six National Guardsmen and police officers, in full out battle dress and armed with automatic weapons, broke the door down, stormed in and seized Zeitoun and the three other men in the house. Zeitoun tried desperately to show his legal identification and convey that he was the owner of the house, that the others were legitimately there and there was nothing improper going on. This, of course, was all to no avail whatsoever.

Zeitoun and the others were handcuffed and shackled at automatic weapon point, thrown like

meat into a boat and transported to “Camp Greyhound”. If you are not familiar with Camp Greyhound, you should be. If there was any doubt as to whether American citizens could be portaged off to a Gitmo like gulag with no due process right here on American soil, Camp Greyhound will disabuse you of such notion.

While unable to rescue stranded and dying citizens from their sweltering attics and rooftops, or get food and water to the festering Superdome refugees, the federal government, commissioned through the Louisiana Prison Bureau, amazingly managed to complete the first reconstruction program, the Camp Greyhound detention facility:

...an outdoor jail built in New Orleans’ central bus station within hours of the hurricane’s landfall at the behest of the federal Department of Homeland Security and FEMA. Similar to Guantanamo Bay, Camp Greyhound (the guards’ name for it) was a kennel, runs of wire fencing and concrete flooring; there was nothing to sit or sleep on, and toilet facilities were portables outside the enclosures. Power was provided by a running diesel locomotive parked within yards of the cages, providing a continuous deafening hum and diesel pall.

Once the sudden stormtroopers had packed Zeitoun and his three fellow innocent compatriots from Zeitoun’s own property into the boat, it was to Camp Greyhound they were rendered to and, along with hundreds of other citizens, caged like animals. No Miranda, no initial appearance, no charges, no evidence of wrongdoing, no explanation, no communication permitted to the outside, no due process and no humanity. All sanctioned by the government against American citizens. Surely Zeitoun and friends were the unfortunate exception at Camp Greyhound. No.

Again from the review of Eggers’ book in the

Buffalo News by Ed Taylor linked above:

Fellow prisoners he was able to talk to included a New Orleans firefighter ordered to stay in the city to work who was arrested in his own yard, and a Houston sanitation worker whose company contracted to help in the cleanup effort – arrested wearing his work uniform, possessing ID, and with the keys to his garbage truck in his hand.

Prisoners included Marlene Maten, 73-year-old diabetic deaconess at Resurrection Mission Baptist Church, arrested as she carried a package of sausages from a cooler in her car, parked beside the hotel to which she was returning.

Marlene, along with Zeitoun and hundreds of others from Camp Greyhound, ended up at maximum security Elayn Hunt Correctional Center, in St. Gabriel, La., 70 miles from New Orleans. They were FEMA prisoners: FEMA rented state prison space and Camp Greyhound transfers were, according to prison staff, "FEMA's problem." Again: transferred with no charges, no information, no opportunity to make a phone call or talk to a lawyer.

Thanks only to a volunteer missionary making rounds at the Hunt Prison facility, Zeitoun was able to get word to his wife and family, who had presumed him dead, where he was. On September 29, well over three Kafkaesque weeks after being rendered, and after having to post \$75,000 bail, Zeitoun finally was released. The three other innocent men taken with him from the house he owned were not as fortunate and spent nearly half a year more in prison. No substantial prosecution was completed against any of them and all charges dismissed.

Their experiences were just a blip in

the civil rights catastrophe that was Katrina. Camp Greyhound held a total of 1,200 detainees in the aftermath of the hurricane, most of whom were African-Americans and all of whom suffered the indignity of having their right to habeas corpus removed.

Detention, rendition, torture, waterboarding, extrajudicial assassination – even of American citizens, secret foreign prisons, indefinite detention, Gitmo and Camp Greyhound. It is all of the same immoral and un-American cloth. From 9/11's global war on terror to Zeitoun in the post Katrina aftermath, the new American response paradigm is increasingly militaristic and totalitarian. It is driven by political cowardice and opportunism, fueled by the insatiable greed of the military industrial security complex. The blog Dystopolitik addressed the same conclusion from the governmental reaction to Katrina:

The "criminals of Katrina" are clearly victims of circumstance. A government that could not ensure their survival criminalized their survival techniques. A government terrified of armed citizens armed itself to the teeth. A government whose jail flooded constructed a camp to administer justice. A simple reading of these events would be that of projection, or scapegoating, and there is no doubt that media attention shifted from a scathing portrayal of government problems to a terrifying portrait of chaos.

The spectacular drama of a breakdown in "Law & Order" appears to be a drama of anarchy, rebellion and criminality. At a deeper level of analysis, the situation is actually a crisis of *raison d'état*. A government that failed it's citizens with poorly constructed levees, bad crisis management and delayed evacuations, violently reestablished its

legitimacy with force. "Camp Greyhound" and the militarization of New Orleans are flip sides of a cypher that we might use to uncover our contemporary political situation. If government failures in the Katrina crisis transformed the human figures of that failure into detainees at one end of the spectrum and refugees at the other, might the large scale socio-economic failures of government be transforming similar figures into America's swelling prison population? In this analysis, Katrina appears to have exposed the dark underbelly of a generalized governmental failure and a corresponding expansion of military tactics over the population. Put concisely, when the state's power to protect its citizens floundered, the criminalization of citizens of New Orleans reestablished a reason for the existence of the state.

We might extend our argument even further. Perhaps, the fact that scenarios of this sort are popping up around the globe is evidence of a larger scale crisis of *raison d'état*. That is certainly the perspective of the military establishment. Pentagon planners, and military officials are using Katrina data to conduct war-games of future domestic scenarios, according to *Army Times*. In fact, Congress passed legislation in 2006 overturning the century old Posse Comitatus Act, banning the deployment of active duty military personnel on domestic soil. The law was repealed in subsequent legislation in 2008, but the precedent has been set.

In the security complex that responded to Katrina, we can see the growing indistinction between police and military operations. The combat mission has been generalized, and so have the camps.

That strikes home pretty hard, but pretty accurately. And you see the trend not just in complete breakdowns such as Katrina, but every day in seemingly normal life. The burgeoning use and abuse of Tasers by law enforcement and security personnel is a prime example; it is now second nature to Taser citizens for any perceived slight or non-compliance, no matter how trivial.

The mark of a society is not how it enjoys peace, calm and prosperity, but how it reacts and carries itself in times of trouble and despair. That is a test the United States is rapidly failing. The direction of our country under the Bush/Cheney administration and, quite disappointingly, the not nearly so enlightened as advertised administration of Barack Obama, will not be treated kindly in history's analysis. And while economic strife is the order of the day now, you can bet that the loss of the American ethos will be the lasting imprint from our time now.

When a society refuses to inspect its mistakes and wrongs, mete out appropriate accountability and learn from the exercise, it loses its moral authority. When Barack Obama and the Democratic Congress belligerently refused to honor their oaths of office by defending and protecting the Constitution via bringing accountability for the attacks on it by the previous administration, it served to ingrain and ratify the offenses and abuses into our fabric of society and law; it set a new and disturbing norm.

And thus, bit by bit, we have waived and forfeited our founding principles. Nine years from September 11, and five years from Zeitoun's Katrina gulag hell, what Ben Franklin presciently predicted, and what Fareed Zakaria lamented occurring in the wake of 9/11, has come to pass.

It is who we are now.

[The wonderful graphic is by Mirko Ilić. Mirko is an artist par excellence in New York who also

teaches illustration and design. Please visit  
Mirko and check out his stock of work, it is  
really superb.]