

CNN: ONLY BROWN PEOPLE CAN BE LONE WOLVES

Just in time for the 9/11 fearmongering season, CNN comes out with this ridiculous article on lone wolf terrorists.

It starts by correctly identifying Khalid Aldawsari as a lone wolf (at least as far as is publicly known thus far). Piggybacking on an Obama comment, it then raises the example of Anders Behring Breivik, which leads to the following passage.

The president told CNN's Wolf Blitzer: "When you've got one person who is deranged or driven by a hateful ideology, they can do a lot of damage, and it's a lot harder to trace those lone wolf operators." He pointed to the case of Anders Breivik, who went on a bombing and shooting rampage in July in Norway, killing 77 people. No evidence has been uncovered linking Breivik to other conspirators.

A growing wave

The Norway attack and the Aldawsari case show how modern technological tools, especially the availability of vast amounts of information useful for bomb making and targeting, have made lone terrorists more dangerous than ever before.

In the last two years, eight of the 14 Islamist terrorist plots on U.S. soil involved individuals with no ties to terrorist organizations or other co-conspirators.

These included plans to blow up buildings in Illinois and Texas in September 2009, the November 2009 Fort Hood shootings allegedly carried out by U.S. Army Maj. Nidal Hasan, an alleged plot to bomb a tree-lighting ceremony in Portland in November 2010, and

another aimed at blowing up an Army recruiting station near Baltimore the following month.

As a threshold matter, while “no evidence has been uncovered” thus far that ties Breivik to others, Norwegian investigators are just getting around to interviewing some of the people mentioned in Breivik’s manifesto and the prosecutor does “not rule out the possibility” he had accomplices.

But what’s more troubling about this passage is the way it mentions Breivik to support the claim that “lone terrorists [are] more dangerous than ever before,” but then completely ignores the problem of any right wing terrorism save Breivik’s! Given that Aldawsari was nowhere close to actually making a bomb, and given that the only actually executed attack mentioned in this passage (the article later mentions Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, a Muslim convert who killed one soldier at an Army recruiting center) is that of Nidal Hasan, a man trained by the US Government who relied on nothing more than readily accessible guns, it’s not clear that technology is making these Islamic terrorists all that more dangerous.

Indeed, the article ignores that almost every single attack it describes here was solved—but also created in part—by the FBI. It was not the Internet that taught Mohamed Osman Mohamud how to make a bomb. It was the FBI.

Which supports the conclusion that the US Government—whether it be the Army or the FBI—is the thing making Islamic “lone wolves” more dangerous, not technology. Not that I believe that is or necessarily has to be the case (though while we’re talking our dangerous government I will mention the still unsolved anthrax attack), but it is what CNN’s evidence supports.

Yet, as the example of Breivik does show, apparent lone wolves can be dangerous. So why does CNN let this assertion stand?

A senior U.S. counter-terrorism official told CNN that lone assailants have been responsible for every deadly terrorist attack in the West since June 2009, when a U.S. serviceman was shot dead outside a recruiting station in Arkansas by a convert to Islam, Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad.

The stat is almost meaningless in any case; what this counter-terrorism official spewing nonsense under cover of anonymity really means is that there have been exactly two “deadly terrorist attacks” committed by Muslims in the US since June 2009, Muhammad’s and Hasan’s, and both happened to be lone wolves.

But this senior counter-terrorism official appears to be ignorant of or ignoring other deadly terrorist attacks, such as Scott Roeder’s killing of George Tiller (the attack actually happened on May 31, 2009, and the DOJ investigated, but did not charge, Roeder’s accomplices in the anti-choice movement), James von Brunn’s attack on the Holocaust Museum, Jerry and Joseph Kane’s attack on a police station, or Jared Lee Loughner’s attack on Gabby Giffords. Sure, some of these count as lone wolves (others as organized members of right wing terrorist groups), but it seems these attacks—as well as the other right wing terrorist attacks that did not result in death—deserve to be part of this discussion, not least because it in part supports CNN’s discussion of how reading extremist materials online may radicalize potential terrorists.

And then, finally, there’s CNN’s uncritical invocation of informants.

Counter-terrorism analysts say that outreach by U.S. law enforcement into Muslim communities is key in providing early warnings of threats. U.S. law enforcement agencies have also kept a watchful eye over individuals who may be moving toward violent extremism. Warning signs include ties individuals may have developed with known Islamist radicals or online interaction

through jihadist websites.

Undercover agents and informants have also played a key role in helping the FBI and other U.S. law enforcement agencies uncover threats. The New York Police Department has developed the most extensive informant network in the country and has the largest number of undercover police officers assigned to terrorism cases. It has also developed a Cyber Intelligence Unit in which undercover "cyber agents" track the online activities of suspected violent extremists and interact with them online to gauge the potential threat they pose.

I'll respond to CNN's approving mention of the NYPD's spy system by reminding, again, that it failed to find the two most dangerous terrorists, Faisal Shahzad and Najibullah Zazi, in spite of ties to Zazi's imam.

But I'll also suggest that if this effort remains focused primarily on Muslims it will continue to miss the MLK Day bombers, the George Roeders, and indeed, the Breiviks of the world.

CNN's biggest piece of evidence that apparent lone wolf terrorists can be dangerous is the lethality of Breivik's attack. But the entire article takes the example of a right wing terrorist as justification to otherwise ignore the problem of right wing terrorism.