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Institute for
Latino Policy
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25 West 18th Street
New York, NY 10011
800-590-2516
info@latinopolicy.org
www.latinopolicy.org

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Commentary

The War at Home

Bringing the Iraq and Afghan Wars Home to Latino and African American Communities

By José Ramon Sánchez (April 7, 2013)

The Iraq and Afghan wars reintroduced the use of torture to extract information from captives as well as the use of drones and other new technologies of surveillance and attack. The Obama Administration has done less of the former and more of the latter. But largely missed in discussions of these issues is the extent to which these new technologies, even torture to some extent, have become an increasing part of the government's efforts to control minority communities inside the U.S. In more ways than we care to see, the lessons of war in Iraq are being imported back into the U.S.

The Iraq and Afghan wars had a tremendous impact on political policy. The **first very important reason** is that those wars exposed the [deep ironic vulnerability of the U.S.](#), as the world's only superpower. Terrorist enemies can skirt around the superpower's vast and deep capabilities and often flummox its efforts to dominate. Terrorists have always operated in an uneven, asymmetrical, and unorthodox terrain. They wear no uniforms, have no standing armies or clear command structures, and can be found anywhere. They are also now globally dispersed and armed with conventional weapons.

Terrorists can also make themselves formidable opponents by simply making use of the [technologies developed by the Superpower](#). They easily armed themselves with modern technologies like computers and cell phones in order to coordinate and send destruction almost anywhere. All of this [blunts the effectiveness of the U.S.'s mighty armed forces](#) as well as limits the usefulness of its expensive and deadly weapons. Modern terrorists have exposed the lone [Superpower's Achilles' heel](#) and compelled their determined political leaders to turn to [unlawful and, largely, unproductive strategies](#) to diminish the terrorist advantage.

Second, the reality is that the "war on terror" is not really a war and cannot be settled by the use of overwhelming force. Terrorist movements can last forever and can impose a great cost to the blood and treasure of the superpower. They spring, for the most part, from the weakness of a population that views itself colonized and suppressed. For these reasons, the U.S. has resorted increasingly to technological methods of combat. Since these methods are [supposedly cheaper and don't endanger American troops](#), they can, theoretically, also be used forever.

The **third** and most important contribution from the Iraq and Afghan wars is the policy of pre-emption. The U.S. launched its war against Iraq because it claimed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. But the Bush Administration actually lied and manipulated the United Nations, the U.S. Congress, and the American people into believing this charge was true. It did so primarily because the Bush Administration was flooded with a group of war minded ideologues called the [Neo-Cons](#) (Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and others). This bunch had pushed a plan since the early 1990s to [topple Saddam as part of a grand strategy](#) to reshape the politics of the Middle East. The philosophical and political principle behind this strategy was called "preemption."

All three of these products of the Iraq and Afghan wars are becoming increasingly evident in the strategies now being used to contain minority communities within U.S. cities and to "close the borders" to Latino migrants. The strategies for fighting and containing terrorist threats now being used inside the U.S. has incurred opposition from both the right and the left. Most of these concerns have been over [the threats to freedom](#) posed by these strategies. But there are other, equally important, reasons to be concerned. Though it is not yet fully apparent, I believe that very similar strategies are also being deployed today in efforts to control racial minorities in the U.S.

Superpower's Ironic Vulnerability

U.S. political leaders should have learned what al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden learned from the [Soviet war in Afghanistan](#) during the 1980s. Big superpowers have a very difficult time stopping and containing guerilla and terrorist movements, especially on their home turf and in rugged terrain. The Soviets learned it the hard way by suffering defeat at the hands of tribal and rebel opposition in their disastrous nine-year war in Afghanistan. The U.S. should have learned it too since it helped to defeat the Soviets by arming the rebels, including Osama Bin Laden. The Bush administration compounded the problem.

Osama explained how easy it was for al Qaeda to use the 9/11 attack to "provoke" the Bush "administration and to drag it [to us]" to fight a "war of attrition" and ["to make America bleed profusely."](#) Thus, the evidence suggests very strongly that the attack of 9/11 was launched as part of al Qaeda's plan to lure the U.S. to fight a major war in the Middle East against terrorists. They believed that such a war would give al Qaeda an advantage, weaken the U.S., and eventually cause the U.S. to collapse because the war would be too costly, in blood and treasure, to the U.S. They were not far wrong.

Similar field-leveling conditions now exist in the U.S. with regards to border security. The boundary with Mexico has always been porous, but more so since the creation of NAFTA. The North American Free Trade Agreement opened up the borders between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada beginning in 1994. But it did so primarily for goods and capital. That policy, however, [severely disrupted Mexico's economy](#). The result is that Mexicans and other Central Americans uprooted from the countryside by new foreign investments and the collapse of the peasant economy have had few options but to try their luck in the U.S. The addition of the drug trade and its concomitant violence simply accelerated the [forced migration process](#).

These efforts to close the borders, however, have produced no real results. Only the 2008 economic recession in the U.S. put any dent in the flow of people across the border. That [migration has proven as impossible to contain](#) as the terrorist uprising in Iraq and Afghanistan. And the solutions have, as a result, become very similar. Militarizing the border, new surveillance technologies, electrified fences, and physical barriers have all been deployed along the Mexican border. They have not contained the migration but they have caused death and hardship to many migrants. But, perhaps, the biggest similarity is in the use of [detention facilities](#) to remove migrants from society while the government decides what to do with them.

Like the thousands of "[unlawful enemy combatants](#)" held hostage in U.S. bases like Guantanamo, these "illegal aliens" are [mostly Latino](#), not criminals, and held hostage in numerous federal detention facilities all around the country without judicial processing, often for years. Recent reports indicate that these migrants have also been subject to torture. Large numbers of migrants have often been placed in [solitary confinement for weeks and months at a time](#). As a result, between 2003 and 2012, [110 migrants died](#) while held in U.S. detention centers.

In Iraq, the U.S. government resorted to private corporate security forces, not subject to legal and government oversight, to provide security, services, as well as to protect high value locations and individuals. One of the [biggest beneficiaries of these government contracts was Dick Cheney's Halliburton](#) and subsidiary corporations. These companies fed at the federal government trough with inflated contracts, performed poorly, and were found to be largely [rotting from corruption](#) on the inside.

The U.S. has similarly "outsourced" the detention of undocumented Latinos and others to private contractors. These private corporations enter into agreements with local and state governments who provide the prison space. The local community usually enters into these agreements seeking to remedy local economic problems. They see these prisons as an opportunity to make "[money for nothing](#)." But the reality is that the [corporation has little financial risk](#) and usually makes enormous profits from the ill-equipped and badly maintained immigrant detention facilities they operate.

Hard to Control the Insurgents

Clearly, racial and ethnic minorities do not pose any serious threat to destroy or weaken the U.S. the way radical [Islamic insurgents or terrorists](#) do. But one major similarity includes the fact that the U.S. could not control the Iraq insurgency with brute force. Brute force actually fueled the insurgency. Similarly, stronger border enforcement did not end the migration of Latinos across those borders. In fact, the U.S. continues to fuel that migration by disrupting the economies and the politics of Latin American nations as well as by [demanding the cheap and disposable labor](#) those Latinos provide to [American industries](#).

There are some additional contemporary political and economic realities in the U.S. that create a potential for future radicalization and a threat to the perceived sense of security among some sectors of this society. Many economists have argued that the current economic reality appears to be a permanent rather than a typical cyclical downturn. This has made the [growing](#)

[economic inequality](#) and persistent poverty in the U.S. also seem permanent and hard to eradicate. This potential for a revolt fueled by both growing inequality and [racism](#) has encouraged many urban police forces to develop harsh, desperate, and paranoid policies for policing minority communities.

Whether or not economic decline produces unrest is, perhaps, not as important as the belief that it will. Many policy experts have been predicting just that for a number of years. Harvard economist Kenneth Rogoff, for instance, predicted that sooner or later there would be serious ["social unrest from the income disparities in the U.S."](#) *Newsweek* reported that, in response to the economic decline and inequality, Americans were beginning to show not just ["sadness and frustration, but also an inchoate rage."](#) Even Moody, the financial corporation, made global predictions that ["future tax rises and spending cuts could trigger social unrest in a range of countries from the developing to the developed world."](#) And the U.S. War College issued [a policy paper in 2008](#) warning that the emerging "unforeseen economic collapse," could lead to "domestic resistance" and the "loss of functioning political and legal order" producing "widespread civil violence."

Thus, rising inequality in the U.S., continued [forced migration](#) from Latin America, fear of minority unrest in the U.S., as well as the need by U.S. police forces to justify their budgets in a time of cutbacks have all created a ramped up effort to try to contain minority communities in the U.S. with radical new military technologies. That these efforts, like those against insurgents in Iraq, will ultimately prove fruitless also seems to be understood to some extent. Witness the crass title of one *Economist* article on this issue. In September of 2011, *The Economist* titled an article on drug related violence and migration in Mexico as ["Herding Cockroaches."](#)

Focus on Pre-emption Rather than Justice

We appear to be in the midst of a structural economic adjustment that will likely mean an even greater and permanent decline in middle class jobs and incomes. This can only [make matters worse for African American and Latino communities](#) that are already disproportionately locked into the bottom rungs of this society and who expect to be denied any real upward movement.

The persistence of the prison-industrial complex means that police forces around the country are motivated to continue to churn out arrests and prisoners to satisfy economic and political needs of non-minority communities. Thus, witness the widespread use of "stop and frisk" methods of policing that research shows results in the arrest of a very [small number of offenders](#). In recent courtroom testimony, one policeman testified that the New York City police ["were expected to issue 20 summons and make one arrest per month."](#) The presumption of guilt and the use of pre-fabricated arrest policies harassed and essentially paint minority communities as criminal.

Police commissioners and mayors, like those in New York City, suggest that these pre-emptive tactics are what [continue to keep their cities relatively crime free](#). They are not, apparently, aware of the bitter irony of their claims. New York City had the [lowest murder rate in thirty years!](#) No one knows quite why crime has dropped since it has also gone down in other cities where NYPD policies are not followed. But at a time of dramatic declines in crime, the NYPD is ramping up the use of more intrusive and murderous police strategies.

Thus, the NYPD continues to use suspect and unconstitutional policies like [stop and frisk](#) as well as [biometric screening](#). Stop and frisk policies often produces fractious confrontations with innocent young African American and Latino young men and women as well as unnecessary police shootings. The criminalization of entire communities is exactly what the Iraqi people suffered at the hands of U.S. soldiers during the war.

Examples of this criminalization abound. New York City police have turned to stalking minority "troubled youths" on Facebook. They began to use face-recognition technology in 2012 to pre-empt crime. They are [following young African American and Latino youth](#) on Facebook and on the streets *before* they become offenders. The police spend countless hours "[daily monitoring the teenagers' chatter - alert for talk of fights, party plans and criminal activities.](#)"

The New York City police have also introduced a system with live video feeds and a huge database. They hope to be able to determine when "too many people congregate" so that the police can dispersed and intimidate them "[simply by the risk of being identified - before dissent can coalesce.](#)" Minority youth are also subject to police attention in the public schools, which have long been criminalized.

As investigative journalist Annette Fuentes argued, heightened security in these schools has come despite the fact that "[school violence is not exploding.](#)" The presence of police in schools along with weapons detectors and surveillance cameras do but one thing - [deliver more minority youth to the prison](#) industrial complex. And because minority communities are so highly criminalized and militarized, private corporations have been the main beneficiaries, [profiting greatly](#) by supplying the technologies placed in the schools and communities.

The [shooting last week in Flatbush](#) in Brooklyn, New York of a young African American teenager and the resulting riot demonstrated two main things. **One** is that the police are increasingly threatened by communities that they fear and don't understand. Like in Iraq, they will shoot first and ask questions later. **Second** is that these minority communities see themselves as an occupied people. They distrust and fear the police. And some like that teenager are maybe [willing to take a stand and resist](#) even against overwhelming odds.

It's true that there have been no recent significant civil rights or social justice movements that spring from racial or ethnic minority communities. However, the [Occupy Wall Street Movement](#) as well as sporadic protest to police brutality around the country not only raise the concern of government authorities, but accelerate the use of Iraq war techniques and technologies. So, while the civil unrest remains just a potential right now, police and other authorities are gearing up for that potential by turning to the containment strategies learned in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those strategies are spilling into as well as being tested and utilized in minority communities.

Some of the newest products of the wars, like [biometric screening](#), are just now being introduced into urban policing. But there is already some use in [border security](#), which would impact greatly on Latinos. The police departments around the nation see such criminalization and technology strategies as practical attempts to contain crime and to justify the size of their budgets. The

New York City Police Department, for example, has [6,000 fewer officers](#) today than in 2001.

Some may argue that these developments in urban policing are simply the evolution of criminal justice technology. It may even just represent the tapping of a new market by venture capitalists. Some financial experts estimate that ["the worldwide drone market could grow to \\$90 billion in the next decade."](#) These things are all true. But they don't change the fact that there are deep parallels between the "war on terrorism" and the war on minority communities.

Now some will say that all of this is mere coincidence and they would be right, but only partially. Admittedly, no one can point to a big conspiracy behind these developments. What we do know is that the Iraq and Afghan wars have introduced new strategies and policies for handling threats to U.S. security. And now, these new methods and policies are flowing into the U.S. for political and financial reasons. As Latinos, we have to be aware of how these flows are directly impacting on Latino and other minority communities around the country.

***José R. Sánchez, Ph.D.** is a political scientist whose research focuses on Puerto Rican and Latino policy issues and politics. He is a full professor at the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University, where he chairs the Urban Studies Department. He is a co-author of [The Iraq Papers](#), the author of [Boricua Power](#), and Board Chair/co-founder of the [National Institute for Latino Policy \(NILP\)](#). Sánchez is the Guest Editor of the forthcoming special issue, "[Latino Power Resurrection](#)," of the journal Camino Real published by the Instituto Universitario de Investigación en Estudios Norteamericanos Benjamin Franklin of the Universidad de Alcalá in Spain (Instituto Franklin - UAH). He can be reached at jose.sanchez@liu.edu.*