



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND INCONVENIENT TRUTH

BY

JOAN NEUHAUS SCHAAN

FELLOW IN HOMELAND SECURITY AND TERRORISM
JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

DECEMBER 7, 2009

Political Correctness and Inconvenient Truth

THE FOLLOWING OPINION PIECE WAS WRITTEN BY A RESEARCHER, FELLOW OR SCHOLAR. THE RESEARCH AND VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THESE PAPERS ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL RESEARCHER(S), AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY.

© 2009 BY THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY OF RICE UNIVERSITY

THIS MATERIAL MAY BE QUOTED OR REPRODUCED WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION,
PROVIDED APPROPRIATE CREDIT IS GIVEN TO THE AUTHOR AND
THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY.

Political Correctness and Inconvenient Truth

The tragedy of Fort Hood is a tragedy of political correctness. Why? As the saying goes, “when it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck” — and yet when political correctness will not allow “it” to be called a “duck,” a preventable event transpires. Political correctness to some extent makes for a more peaceful society, but at times it is a filter that prevents the truth from being spoken, particularly an inconvenient truth.

Political correctness also has become its own battle line, constraining in the very persons entrusted to protect us from being able to consider or convey information or take action with regard to a suspect. For example, consider the much-maligned term “profiling.” Significant time and energy is expended scientifically studying subgroups of our population for their distinct collection of attributes. While this may be deemed acceptable if determining the market for coffee or the need for social services, it is deemed unacceptable for use in law enforcement, outside perhaps the identification of serial killers.

Political correctness within national security and law enforcement restrains reporting and action, yet thwarting a terrorist event requires reporting and action. Political correctness can affect every stage of attempts to defeat a terrorist activity, from detection, to investigation, to final reporting of conclusions, to necessary action. First, does the person who first detects the suspicious activity or behavior have the conviction and motivation to report it, knowing there could be consequences? Does the recipient of the initial report(s) have the conviction and motivation to investigate the suspicion, knowing allegations of bias will likely be endured? If the suspicions are confirmed, is there the will to formalize the information in a report to be forwarded for further action? If it is forwarded for action, do the decision makers have the conviction and motivation to act based on the facts, rather than upon how the matter could be perceived if it becomes the fodder of “spin?” As many in government service know, attaining the label of being “politically incorrect” can ruin a career quickly.

Given the information to date, Fort Hood shooting suspect and U.S. Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan demonstrated many of the attributes considered “red flags” for ideologically derived violence. Fellow students, co-workers and colleagues voiced concern over his behavior and attitudes. He was found to have maintained contact with an Al Qaeda-associated American

Political Correctness and Inconvenient Truth

extremist leader, Anwar al Awlaki, also known as Anwar Al Aulaqi. In the case of Maj. Hasan, the potential threat was recognized, the information was reported and an investigation ensued. Sometime during the process from investigation to reporting to action, political correctness appears to have hijacked the effort.

The result? On Nov. 5, Hasan entered the Fort Hood deployment facility, reportedly sat quietly for a time, then arose saying “Allahu Akbar,” and allegedly went around the room systematically killing soldiers, while sparing some others. Shortly after the carnage, Awlaki praised Hasan as a hero. Awlaki added on Nov. 9, “The only way a Muslim could Islamically justify serving as a soldier in the U.S. Army is if his intention is to follow in the footsteps of men like Nidal.”¹

In short, there was prior knowledge of the motivation — Hasan disagreed with U.S. military policy on religious grounds and had been in touch with an extremist figure. The means, knowledge and capability came with his military service. Political correctness, inaction and/or denial played a critical role. The price was paid in blood. As a nation we must discern a way to allow the truth to be expressed and dangers to be assessed without the fear of reprisal from “political correctness.”

Security is not and should not be a partisan issue. Security is the primary responsibility of a government to all of its citizens above and beyond all others. Achieving security requires a pragmatic assessment of all relevant matters, without censorship and without bias.

In a country striving for true equality, there should not be separate rules and separate treatment for specific groups. If special provisions are made for special groups, then the society as a whole cannot embrace its diversity, but instead will breed discontent.

¹ Bobby Ghosh, “Was Hasan Inspired by a Radical Imam’s Sermons?,” Time magazine, Nov. 9, 2009. <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1936973,00.html>