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Will the Flotilla Attack Be Our “Kent State” Moment?

Israel's attack on the unarmed flotilla last weekend could be a "Kent State moment." When white middle-class students were gunned down on a college campus, it woke up a whole new segment of American society to police killings of minority students. Similarly, while the Israeli military has been killing Arab civilians for years, now that they have attacked European and American peace activists it has created a whole new dynamic.

The offensive by the Congressional Democratic leadership against the Gaza humanitarian aid flotilla has now moved beyond just rhetorical support for the Israeli attack on the unarmed convoy. Rep. Brad Sherman (D-CA), chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee's subcommittee on terrorism, nonproliferation and trade, [has called upon](#) U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder to prosecute U.S. citizens who were involved or on board the flotilla.

Because the Gaza Strip is currently ruled by Hamas, according to the Sherman, any humanitarian aid to the people of that territory is “clearly an effort to give items of value to a terrorist organization,” which is prosecutable under the 1996 Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. Despite the active support of the humanitarian aid effort by a number of pacifist organizations in the United States and Europe, Sherman insists that the organizers of the flotilla have “clear terrorist ties,” dismissing critical analysis of such charges as part of the ideological agenda of “the liberal media.”

Sherman also announced he would be working with the Department of Homeland Security to ensure that the more than 700 non-U.S. citizens who took part in the flotilla would be permanently barred from ever entering the United States. This would include European parliamentarians, Nobel laureates, as well as leading writers, artists, intellectuals, pacifists, and human rights activists, virtually none of whom are in the least bit sympathetic with Hamas or with terrorism.

Given the very real threat of terrorism from Al-Qaeda and other groups against the United States, it is very odd that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other Democratic Party leaders would choose — out of 255 Democrats in the House of Representatives — a paranoid right-winger like Sherman to chair the critically important terrorism subcommittee. Rather than focus on the real threats from Al-Qaeda and other dangerous organizations, it appears that Sherman is putting his energy into going after the motley group of Quaker pacifists, left-wing Jews, and other like-minded activists who boarded the ships attempted to bring medicines, school supplies, toys and other humanitarian aid to children of the Gaza Strip.

Indeed, it raises serious questions about whether the Democratic Party Congressional leadership is really concerned about international terrorism or, like the Bush administration, is attempting to use the threat of terrorism as an excuse to suppress nonviolent dissent against the policies of the U.S. government and its rightist allies.

Organizers and endorsers of the flotilla include such reputable American peace groups as Code Pink, Jewish Voice for Peace, Pax Christi, the American Friends Service Committee, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Resource Center for Nonviolence, War Resisters League, Women in Black and others. Supporters of this nonviolent effort to bring humanitarian aid to the people of the Gaza Strip also include such

Israeli groups such as Yesh G'vul, Coalition of Women for Peace, New Profile, and the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, among others.

Despite this, Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA), insists that these groups are “pro-Hamas people.” Rep. Elliot Engel (D-NY) claims that the organizers of the flotilla have “links to Hamas and reportedly played a role in the attempted Millennium bombing in Los Angeles.” Rep. Ron Klein (D-FL) insists that the real agenda of these peace and human rights organizations is “to bolster the terrorist Hamas government in Gaza.” Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) argues that Israel’s attack on the unarmed flotilla laden with humanitarian supplies part of an effort to “defend herself against terrorism.”

When prominent Democrats — including the head of an influential House subcommittee concerned with national security — begin implying that leading American and Israeli peace groups are linked to terrorism, it is no longer simply an issue of over-heated rhetoric in support of an allied right-wing government, but a McCarthyistic attack on nonviolent dissent. Indeed, it could only be a matter of time before we see Medea Benjamin, Mitchell Plitnick, and other leading nonviolent activists who have supported the flotilla hauled before Sherman’s subcommittee regarding these alleged ties to terrorism.

In many respects, however, Israel’s attack on the unarmed flotilla last weekend could be a “Kent State moment.” At the time of the 1970 shootings, National Guardsmen and police had been killing African-Americans and Hispanics with some regularity for years. When white middle class students were gunned down on a college campus, however, it woke up a whole new segment of American society, goading them into active resistance. Similarly, while the Israeli military has been killing Arab civilians for years, now that they have attacked European and American peace activists — with the support of Congressional leaders — it has created a whole new dynamic, one I witnessed personally this past Friday evening, at the annual dinner of the Resource Center for Nonviolence in Santa Cruz, California.

Roughly 150 people gathered in the fellowship hall of a local Congregational Church this past Friday evening, including prominent liberal members of the city council and county board of supervisors, area clergy (including a local rabbi), professors, small businesspeople and other community leaders. The main speaker was Nomika Zion, founder of kibbutz Migvan in Sderot, Israel, a community which had suffered from relentless bombardment for many months from Qassam rockets fired from the Gaza Strip. Zion — a leader of the Sderot-based peace group Other Voice, which opposed Israel’s war on Gaza — argued that it was the ongoing siege of Gaza which was the biggest threat to the security and called for an end of the Israeli blockade. RCNV staffperson and former Santa Cruz mayor Scott Kennedy then called on the city to come together to organize a boat to send relief supplies to Gaza Strip in an effort to end the siege, adding that he would write Rep. Sherman and Attorney General Holder and dare them to investigate and prosecute the hundreds of people in this coastal community who would support such an effort.

Israel’s rightist government and their allies in the U.S. Congress have clearly miscalculated. By claiming that the hundreds of dedicated peace and human rights activists on board those ships — most of whom in no way support Hamas or any terrorist group — as supporters of terrorism, they are mobilizing what could become a major backlash. It is a particularly bad calculation for the Democratic Party, which is going to need the support of the peace and human rights community — a key constituency of the party’s base — going into the mid-term election this fall. There are already plans for additional ships to try to run the blockade, most of which will have active participation from nonviolent activists here in the United States. We’ll see if Rep. Sherman and other Congressional leaders can stop them.