

Poverty, Global Trade Justice, and the Roots of Terrorism

By [John Perkins](#)

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Navy Seal snipers rescued an American cargo ship captain unharmed and killed three Somali pirates in a daring operation in the Indian Ocean on Sunday, ending a five-day standoff between United States naval forces and a small band of brigands in a covered orange lifeboat off the Horn of Africa.

The New York Times published that article in April 2009. The very words “pirates,” “daring operation,” “standoff,” and “brigands” were typical of the U.S. media; they made it sound as though white-hated cowboys had ridden to the rescue of a town besieged by Billy the Kid and his gang. Having lived in that part of the world as an economic hit man, I knew there was another side to what had happened. I wondered why no one was asking about the causes of piracy.

I recalled my visits with the Bugi people when I was sent to the Indonesian island of Sulawesi in the early 1970s. The Bugi had been infamous pirates since the time of the East India companies in the 1600s and 1700s. Their ferocity inspired returning European sailors to discipline their disobedient children with threats that “the bugiman will get you.” In the 1970s, we feared that they would attack our oil tankers as they passed through the vital Strait of Malacca.

I sat with one of their elders on the Sulawesi shore one afternoon. We watched his people build a sailing galleon, known as *aprahu*, much as they had for centuries. Like a gigantic beached whale, it was high and dry, propped upright by rows of gnarled stakes that resembled roots sprouting from its hull. Dozens of men hustled about it, working with adzes, hatchets, and hand drills. I expressed the concerns of my government to him, intimating that we would retaliate if the oil lanes were threatened.

The “terrorists” I have found in Andean caves and desert villages are people whose families were forced off their farms by oil companies, hydroelectric dams, or “free trade” agreements, whose children are starving, and who want nothing more than to return to their families with food, seeds, and deeds to lands they can cultivate.

The old man glared at me. “We were not pirates in the old days,” he said, his bushy white hair bobbing indignantly. “We only fought to defend our lands against Europeans who came to steal our spices. If we attack your ships today, it is because they take the trade away from us; your ‘stink ships’ foul our waters with oil, destroying our fish and starving our

children.” Then he shrugged. “Now, we’re at a loss.” His smile was disarming. “How can a handful of people in wooden sailing ships fight off America’s submarines, airplanes, bombs, and missiles?”

A few days after the rescue, the *Times* ran an editorial entitled “Fighting Piracy in Somalia” that concluded:

Yet left to its own devices, Somalia can only become more noxious, spreading violence to its East African neighbors, breeding more extremism and making shipping through the Gulf of Aden ever more dangerous and costly. Various approaches are being discussed, such as working through Somalia’s powerful clans to reconstitute first local and then regional and national institutions. These must be urgently explored.

Nowhere did the *Times*-or any of the other media outlets that I read, heard, or saw-attempt to analyze the roots of the problem in Somalia. Debates abounded about whether to arm ships’ crews and send more Navy vessels to the region. There was that vague reference to reconstituting regional and national institutions, but what exactly did the author mean by that? Institutions that would truly help, like free hospitals, schools, and soup kitchens? Or local militias, prisons, and Gestapo-style police forces?

The pirates were fishermen whose livelihoods had been destroyed. They were fathers whose children were hungry. Ending piracy would require helping them live sustainable, dignified lives. Could journalists not understand this? Had none of them visited the slums of Mogadishu?

Finally, NPR’s *Morning Edition* on May 6 aired a report from Gwen Thompkins; she interviewed a pirate who went by the name Abshir Abdullahi Abdi. “We understand what we’re doing is wrong,” Abdi explained. “But hunger is more important than any other thing.”

Thompkins commented, “Fishing villages in the area have been devastated by illegal trawlers and waste dumping from industrialized nations. Coral reefs are reportedly dead. Lobster and tuna have vanished. Malnutrition is high.”

You might think we would have learned from Vietnam, Iraq, the “Black Hawk down” incident in Somalia back in 1993, and other such forays, that military responses seldom discourage insurgencies. In fact, they often do the opposite; foreign intervention is likely to infuriate local populations, motivate them to support the rebels, and result in an escalation of resistance activities. That was the way it happened during the American Revolution, Latin America’s wars for independence from Spain, and in colonial Africa, Indochina, Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, and so many other places.

Blaming pirates and other desperate people for our problems is a distraction we cannot afford if we truly want to find a solution to the crises confronting us. These incidents are symptoms of [our failed economic model](#). They are to our society the equivalent of a heart attack to an individual. We send in Navy Seals to rescue the hostages, as we would hire doctors to perform a coronary artery bypass. But it is essential to admit that both are reactions to an underlying problem. The patient needs to address the reasons his or her heart failed in the first place, such as smoking, diet, and lack of exercise. The same is true for piracy and all forms of terrorism.

Our children’s futures are interlocked with the futures of children born in the fishing villages

of Somalia, the mountains of Burma (Myanmar), and the jungles of Colombia. When we forget that fact, when we see those children as remote, as somehow disconnected from our lives, as merely the offspring of pirates, guerrillas, or drug runners, we point the gun at our own progeny as well as at the desperate fathers and mothers in lands that seem so far away but in reality are our next door neighbors.

Every time I read about the actions we take to protect ourselves from so-called terrorists, I have to wonder at the narrow-mindedness of our strategy. Although I have met such people in Bolivia, Ecuador, Egypt, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iran, and Nicaragua, I have never met one who wanted to take up a gun. I know there are crazed men and women who kill because they cannot stop themselves, serial killers, and mass-murderers. I am certain that members of Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other such groups are driven by fanaticism, but such extremists are able to recruit sizable numbers of followers only from populations that feel oppressed or destitute. The “terrorists” I have found in Andean caves and desert villages are people whose families were forced off their farms by oil companies, hydroelectric dams, or “free trade” agreements, whose children are starving, and who want nothing more than to return to their families with food, seeds, and deeds to lands they can cultivate.

In Mexico, many of the guerrillas and narcotraffickers once owned farms where they grew corn. They lost their livelihoods when the [North American Free Trade Agreement \(NAFTA\)](#) gave subsidized U.S. producers an unfair price advantage. Here is how the Organic Consumers Organization, a nonprofit that represents more than 850,000 members, subscribers, and volunteers, describes it:

Since NAFTA came into effect on January 1, 1994, U.S. corn exports to Mexico have almost doubled to some 6 million metric tons in 2002. NAFTA eliminated quotas limiting corn imports . . . but allowed U.S. subsidy programs to remain in place—promoting dumping of corn into Mexico by U.S. agribusiness at below the cost of production. . . . The price paid to farmers in Mexico for corn fell by over 70 percent. . .

The passage above exposes the dark side of “free trade” policies. U.S. presidents and our Congress have implemented regulations that prohibited other countries from imposing tariffs on U.S. goods or subsidizing locally grown produce that might compete with our agribusinesses while permitting us to maintain our own import barriers and subsidies, thus giving U.S. corporations an unfair advantage. [“Free trade” is a euphemism](#); it prohibits others from enjoying the benefits offered to the multinationals. It does not, however, regulate against the pollution that is melting glaciers, the land grabs, and the sweatshops.

Father Miguel d’Escoto Brockmann, a Nicaraguan priest who ministered to Sandinista guerrillas and is now president of the U.N. General Assembly, has a firsthand appreciation for such euphemisms and the power of words used to sway public perceptions. “Terrorism is not really an ‘ism,’ ” he told me. “There’s no connection between the Sandinistas who fought the Contras and Al Qaeda, or between Colombia’s FARC and fishermen turned pirates in Africa and Asia. Yet they are all called ‘terrorists.’ That’s just a convenient way for your government to convince the world that there is another enemy ‘ism’ out there, like communism used to be. It diverts attention from the very real problems.”

Our narrow-minded attitudes and the policies that result from them foment violence, rebellions, and wars. In the long run, almost no one benefits from attacking the people we label as “terrorists.” With one glaring exception: the corporatocracy.

Those who own and run the companies that build ships, missiles, and armored vehicles; make guns, uniforms, and bulletproof vests; distribute food, soft drinks, and ammunition; provide insurance, medicines, and toilet paper; construct ports, airstrips, and housing; and reconstruct devastated villages, factories, schools, and hospitals—they, and only they, are the big winners.

The rest of us are hoodwinked by that one, loaded word: *terrorist*.

The [current economic collapse has awakened us](#) to the importance of regulating and reigning in the people who control the businesses that benefit from the misuse of words like terrorism and who perpetrate other scams. We recognize today that white-collared executives are not a special, incorruptible breed. Like the rest of us, they require rules. Yet it is not enough for us to reestablish regulations that separate investment banks from commercial banks and insurance companies, reinstate anti-usury laws, and impose guidelines to ensure that consumers are not burdened by credit they cannot afford. We cannot simply return to solutions that worked before. Only by adopting new strategies that promote [global environmental and social responsibility](#) will we safeguard the future.

John Perkins adapted this excerpt of [Hoodwinked: An Economic Hitman Reveals Why the World Financial Markets Imploded—and What We Need to Do to Remake Them](#) for [YES! Magazine](#), a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. John is also the author of [Confessions of an Economic Hit Man](#), [The World is as You Dream It: Shamanic Teachings from the Amazon and Andes](#), and [Spirit of the Shuar](#).

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