

Nurturing fanatics

Terrorist groups build on followers' need for self-assurance.

By Wayne Anderson

Story ran on Tuesday, November 06 2001

The number of victims of robbers, highwaymen, rapists, gangsters and other criminals at any period of history is negligible compared to the massive numbers of those cheerfully slain in the name of true religion, just policy or correct ideology.

- Arthur Koestler

How can we begin to understand those who rammed planes into the World Trade Center and killed thousands of innocent people? Our president constantly refers to them as evil people, but that label might hide more than it explains.

Saint or devil?

Osama bin Laden does not see himself as evil. In an interview on the program "Frontline," he said, "They rip us of our wealth and of our resources and of our oil. Our religion is under attack. They kill and murder our brothers. They compromise our honor and our dignity, and dare we utter a single word of protest against the injustice, we are called terrorists."

Contrary to seeing himself as evil, bin Laden believes he is working hand in hand with God. In another interview, this time with John Miller for ABC, he said, "I am one of the servants of Allah, and I obey his orders. Among those is the order to fight for the word of Allah ... and to fight until the Americans are driven out of all the Islamic countries."

He has affirmed that he sees terrorism as an act of vengeance against the United States, "the Great Satan." Bin Laden is a man to whom the murder of thousands is seen as a rational way, supported by Allah, to send his message.

Creating fanatics

Obviously, he couldn't strike without volunteers on the front line who are eager to give up their lives. We must be careful not to get too caught up in seeing the members of al-Qaida as irrational, insane and evil. That thinking can lead to underestimating their danger to us. Bin Laden's followers have their own rationality, and none of them would agree that they are in league with the devil.

What can we say about his followers? Some insight is given in a book written in the 1950s, "The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements" by Eric Hoffer. He said zealots go through an emotional process of renouncing their individuality and finding identity in a violent cause.

Hoffer believed the fanatic is an insecure person who cannot create his own self-assurance and can find it only by becoming passionately attached to what he sees as a holy cause, one for which he would sacrifice his life. This kind of fanaticism leading to suicide is not new: Remember the 900 followers of the Rev Jim Jones at Jonestown, Guyana; the 70 Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas; and the 30 Heaven's Gate members in San Diego? All these people saw themselves as aligned with right, and in most cases, with God. It is just the consequences that are different.

Hoffer wrote, "Dying and killing are easy when they are part of a ritual, ceremonial, dramatic performance or game. There is the need for make-believe in order to face death. It is one of the main tasks of a real leader to mask the grim reality of dying by evoking in his followers the illusion that they are participating in a grandiose spectacle, a solemn, dramatic performance."

Brain-washing is a concept we got from the Chinese during the Korean War. It appears bin Laden is using similar techniques to build al-Qaida. First, when they join, his trainees already are alienated from society, angry and ripe to find new beliefs. They then live in a group with little outside information or influence. Radios, television, newspapers and books are forbidden. Their leaders' paranoid or delusional system is all they encounter. This approach is calculated to cause the trainees to be disconnected from any system we might consider more rational.

Whatever the system of indoctrination, it works. What we have learned about terrorists over the years indicates that they have a high wall of belief that shields them from facts and our reality. There appears to be no way correct information can dent their logic. Because they already know the absolute truth, they are impervious to information that contradicts their beliefs. Even living among us and seeing our way of life was not enough to stop the terrorists of Sept. 11 from carrying out their mission.

Why suicide?

Why commit suicide? It's a low-cost method that guarantees extensive damage. Extensive escape plans aren't needed. In addition, if you get your followers to commit suicide, they won't be questioned afterward and give up valuable information. In the case of al-Qaida, they redefine their actions so it's not suicide, it's martyrdom.

Ariel Merari, a psychologist at the University of Tel Aviv, studied 50 Muslim suicide bombers and found that several types of individuals are willing to sacrifice themselves for a cause. Bin Laden's task isn't to create a readiness to die; that already exists. His recruiters' task is to identify this predisposition and find some way to reinforce it. For some, the promise of paradise is enough; for others, it takes reinforcement of patriotism, hatred of the enemy, a profound sense of victimization or a perceived ability to contribute to the creation of a new world order.

People without meaning in their lives are offered a sense of importance by dedicating themselves to a cause larger than themselves. In their minds, they are turned into good guys, and the rest of us have become the bad guys.

Ramadhan Shalah, secretary general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, has said, “Our enemy possesses the most sophisticated weapons in the world. We have nothing except the weapon of martyrdom. It is easy and costs us only our lives. Human bombs cannot be defeated, not even by nuclear bombs.”