

Horror as an Instrument of War

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A young Orthodox rabbi of my acquaintance denounced Jews who exult in the mutual slaughter of Muslims from the pulpit on the Jewish New Year. He is of course correct: no-one should take pleasure in the death of noncombatants. One can, of course, be glad that one's enemies are fighting each other; former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir famously quipped about the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, "I want them both to win."

Our problem, though, is quite different: Since 9/11 I have argued that the strategic plan of Islamist terrorism is to poison the Western soul with horror, by setting in motion atrocities too grim for the Western mind to bear. There is very good reason to believe that they are succeeding. Judging by the proliferation of the horror genre in popular entertainment, we are succumbing to horror by stages, as I contended in a [2009 essay for First Things](#). It is the "Black Breath" from Mordor that Tolkien described in *The Lord of the Rings*.

This is not simply the brutality of the pagan world employed by the Romans with their mass crucifixions as much as it was by Muslim conquerors of the Middle Ages: it is a refined and exquisite sense of horror learned by modern Muslims from the Nazis, whose example inspired the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the Ba'ath Party. Strictly speaking, the Muslim Brotherhood is nothing more than the Arab-language wing of National Socialism, and movements like ISIS a more radical version of the same thing, something like Ernst Röhm's Sturmabteilung.

We have seen this throughout, and most recently in Gaza, where Hamas used every means possible to maximize its own civilian casualties in order to horrify the world. Whatever the circumstances, one should not rejoice in the death of civilians, but it is necessary to harden our hearts against an enemy who detects weakness in our delicate sense of humanity. Because we underestimated the nature of the enemy we confront, we have no means to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe on a frightful scale. We face an apocalyptic enemy, with a lot to be apocalyptic about.

On the next page are extracts from an essay I published about this in October 2011. The conclusions have not changed, except for one: Evil will oft evil mars, to quote Tolkien again. The Sunni-Shi'ite war could prove to be the grave of radical Islam if the West takes the appropriate measures. We must remember, though, that the target of radical Islam is not territory or power in the conventional sense, but the vulnerable Western soul. In this respect we should be afraid—very afraid.

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[Sir John Keegan is wrong: radical Islam could win](#)

By Spengler

"In this war of civilizations, the West will prevail," argues the distinguished historian Sir John Keegan, the Defense Editor of the Daily Telegraph, in a commentary on October 8. Why is he so sure? If Sir John were in command on the Western side, I would be inclined to bet on a different outcome.

Sir John references Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory and adds:

"Westerners fight face to face, in stand-up battle, and go on until one side or the other gives in. They choose the crudest weapons available, and use them with appalling violence, but observe what, to non-Westerners may well seem curious rules of honour. Orientals, by contrast, shrink from pitched battle, which they often deride as a sort of game, preferring ambush, surprise, treachery and deceit as the best way to overcome an enemy."

Although the nomadic raid lost out to Western resistance over the centuries, Keegan writes, "On September 11, 2001 it returned in an absolutely traditional form. Arabs, appearing suddenly out of empty space like their desert raider ancestors, assaulted the heartlands of Western power, in a terrifying surprise raid and did appalling damage."

Readers who reproached me for using the word "racism" to qualify Washington's orientation toward the Islamic world should read Keegan's essay carefully. Here we have the upright Westerner against the underhanded Oriental. Kipling (who wrote vividly about the sneakiness of the British in the Great Game) would blush.

It's all completely, totally, revoltingly wrong. The West confronts not a throwback to medieval Islam, but a Westernized version of Islam transformed into a totalitarian political ideology. Although it draws upon Islamic sources and overlaps with some strains of Muslim belief, the ideology of Al-Qaeda has greater kinship with Nazism, another synthetic pagan religion, than with traditional Islam.

Like Nazism, it is a deadly threat. Remember that Hitler very nearly won. If Hitler (to cite one among many examples) had not declared war on the United States after Pearl Harbor but instead offered himself as a mediator between Washington and Tokyo, would the US have declared war on Germany? And in the absence of US involvement in Europe, would Hitler have lost? Or if Hitler had thrown the British into the sea at Dunkirk rather than holding back his tanks? Or if Hitler had enlisted the Ukrainians and Balts as allies rather than butchering them? Like the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, Al-Qaeda might win, and by the same methods.

Keegan dwells on a strained analogy of tactics and ignores a fundamental difference in objectives. No traditional society destroyed for the pleasure of destruction; at least none of which we have had reports. The Islamic conquerors of the past raided for identifiable goals. They wished to rule new territories and bring new peoples under their sway. Whether greed or missionary zeal drove them on, let historians argue. The West ultimately drove back these incursions and broke the back of Islamic power.

Al-Qaeda wants no territory, no conversions, no loot, no slaves. It wishes to destroy the West and happily will sacrifice millions of Muslim lives in order to do so. Indeed, the mass sacrifice of Muslim lives may lie at the heart of its battle plan. It has more in common with the Dostoyevsky of *The Possessed* or the Wagner of *Die Goetterdaemmerung* than with the Muslim conquerors of the Middle Ages.

Evil for its own sake becomes imaginable only when the Christian civilization of the West abandons Christianity and stares into the abyss of its own destruction. Before Dostoyevsky, Ibsen, and Wagner presented the relevant profiles, Western literature had the matter in its pure form, in the character of Mephisto in Goethe's *Faust*. "I am a part of that part which in the beginning was everything," he tells Faust. "A part of darkness that gave birth to light; the proud light, that now contests Mother Night's old rank and space." Al-Qaeda is the darkness that covets the position of light and wishes only to destroy. "I am the spirit that always negates," Mephisto offers, "and rightly so, because everything that comes to be is worthy of its own destruction." Unlike the Western adherents of Nietzsche, who cried, "God is dead, and everything is permitted!", the Islamist radicals have invented a God who permits everything.

Sir John should read carefully Fouad Ajami's profile "Nowhere man" of terrorist Mohammed Atta in the New York Times of October 7. "In more recent years, younger Egyptians gave up on the place, came to dream of fulfillment – economic, personal, political – in foreign lands. Mohammed Atta, who left for Germany in 1993, was part of that migration, of that rupturing of things on the banks of the Nile. Religion came to Atta unexpectedly, in Hamburg, where he had gone for a graduate degree in urban planning. ... The modern world unsettled Atta. He exalted the traditional, but it could no longer give him a home. He drifted in 'infidel' lands but could never be fully at ease. He led an itinerant life. The magnetic power of the American imperium had fallen across his country. He arrived here with a presumption, and a claim. We had intruded into his world; he would shatter the peace of ours. The glamorized world couldn't be fully had; it might as well be humbled and taken down," wrote the professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University.

"It must have been easy work for the recruiters who gave Atta a sense of mission, a way of doing penance for the liberties he had taken in the West, and the material means to live the plotter's life. A hybrid kind has been forged across that seam between the civilization of Islam and the more emancipated culture of the West. Behold the children, the issue, of this encounter as they flail about and rail against the world in no-man's-land," concludes Ajami.

Mohammed Atta, to Ajami's expert eye, is the direct descendant of Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, the impoverished student from an Old Believer family adrift in St Petersburg, who kills for the sake of doing evil.

The grand vulnerability of the Western mind is horror. The Nazis understood this and pursued a policy "des Schreckens" (to cause horror) and "Entsetzens" (terror, literally: dislodgement). Horror was not merely an instrument of war in the traditional sense, but a form of Wagnerian theater, or psychological warfare on the grand scale. Hitler's tactical advantage lay in his capacity to be more horrible than his opponents could imagine. The most horrible thing of all is that he well might have succeeded if not for his own megalomaniac propensity to overreach.

America, as Osama bin Laden taunted this week, lost in Vietnam. But it was not military setbacks, but the horrific images of Vietnamese civilians burned by napalm, that lost the war. America's experience in the war is enshrined in popular culture in the film *Apocalypse Now*, modeled after Joseph Conrad's story, *The Heart of Darkness*. The Belgian trading company official, Paul Kurtz, sinks into bestiality and dies with these words: "The horror! The horror!" It was a dreadful film, but a clever reference. At the close of World War I, T S Eliot subtitled his epitaph for Western civilization, *The Waste Land*, with a quote from the Conrad story: "Mr Kurtz, he dead."

From America's moral collapse in the face of the horror of Vietnam, there arose a repudiation of classical Western culture unlike anything seen previously in the English-speaking world. The West nearly threw up its hands in the face of the challenge from the Soviet Union in the late 1970s.

Getting down to tactics, how can Al-Qaeda overcome the West with horror? Let us suppose that some state or state agency over which Al-Qaeda wields influence possesses a weapon of mass destruction, with sufficient potency to cause a very large number of deaths in a Western country. If it deploys that weapon and causes a very large number of casualties, the West may have no choice but to bombard the offending country with nuclear weapons and destroy its capacity to make war. Given that Al-Qaeda has tendrils deep in numerous governments, even a nuclear bombardment of one rogue state might not diminish its capacities. The West would be left with the horrific fact of mass destruction of civilians combined with continued insecurity.

Time is on the side of Al-Qaeda. Sir John's strategic advice is dangerously wrong. He wrote on October 8 that "President Bush in his speech to his nation and to the Western world yesterday, promised a traditional Western response. He warned that there would be 'a relentless accumulation of success'. Relentlessness, as opposed to surprise and sensation, is the Western way of warfare. It is deeply injurious to the Oriental style and rhetoric of war-making."

On the contrary, the West should think of itself as the underdog, fighting against the clock, and seize the tactical initiative. It should act unpredictably, with the objective of confusing and disrupting an enemy who until now has chosen his targets at leisure. Rather than batter Afghanistan, whence any terrorist worth his Cemtex departed long ago, the West should act unexpectedly and without mercy against states which allow Al-Qaeda. There is no need to go into details here. Doing so now offers at least the chance of gaining the respect of the Islamic world. Failing to do so makes probable a gradual accumulation of failures. It means that the war will be Al-Qaeda's to lose.

We were lucky with Hitler. We may not be so lucky again.

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