



Cézanne, *Les Baigneurs* (grande planche), color lithograph, third state, circa 1897.

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LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

# WHAT TERRORISTS WANT

*Is there a better way to defeat Al Qaeda?*

BY NICHOLAS LEMANN



*Osama bin Laden's real goal may be to start a civil war—or a series of civil wars.*

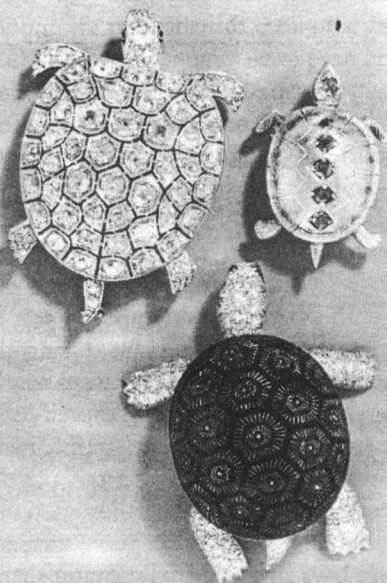
These days, life's small satisfactions seem to mean more than they used to, so I got quite a lot of pleasure from discovering that the Washington office of the RAND Corporation looks just how you'd want it to look—which is to say, very "Mission: Impossible." It's next door to the Pentagon, but in one of those office-and-mall complexes that evoke Orange County, California, more than Arlington, Virginia. I ducked through a set of glass doors between Au Bon Pain and Häagen-Dazs, and proceeded through a series of security checkpoints to the office, which was spotlessly sleek and new, with no stray pieces of paper anywhere.

The director of the Washington office, Bruce Hoffman, who is one of the

leading experts on terrorism, had kindly agreed to meet with me, even though RAND had declared a moratorium on discussing the specifics of the war on terrorism, in part because it was consulting with unspecified government agencies about how the United States should respond to the attacks of September 11th. In Washington, the more you know about what's going on the less you're able to talk about it. So Hoffman and I had a curious conversation. He is a small, dark, friendly, wiry, bearded man with a lot of nervous energy. I would ask a question; he would smile and tilt back in his chair and look upward, as if searching the ceiling for small imperfections, and say, "Let me see if I can answer that by rephrasing

GUY BILLOUT

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something I said in my book"—"Inside Terrorism" (1998)—"or my testimony" (he testified before a House subcommittee in late September). And if that didn't work he'd give me an amiable, apologetic shrug and say, "Sorry, that gets to the line of what I can talk about," or, "I can't go down this road."

The world of terrorism experts is small and has heretofore been somewhat obscure. Hoffman told me that when he was in graduate school in international relations, in the mid-seventies, the standard choice of a field for an ambitious young person was nuclear strategy, or Soviet-American relations, and it's the people who made that choice (rather than choosing terrorist studies) who now, in middle age, sit atop the foreign-policy establishment. They have spent their lives looking down on terrorism experts. "They're sort of mechanics, like theatre ushers or guards at the mall," one former diplomat told me. But now it seems as though Hoffman and company made the right choice.

During the nineteen-nineties, when nobody was paying much attention, the terrorist-studies field was caught up in a fight, which intensified in 1995 after members of the Aum Shinrikyo sect released nerve gas in a Tokyo subway. In one camp were academics, who stuck to the traditional view of terrorists as political actors who use violence to achieve what they can't achieve through traditional means, and who therefore aren't likely to engage in mass, and apparently senseless, killing. "Terrorism has a purpose," Hoffman told me. "Writing it off as mindless and irrational is not useful." In the other camp were former and current government officials, who believed that terrorists were going to begin using weapons of mass destruction, out of sheer rage. The positions of the two camps are neatly conveyed by the two most resonant maxims ever coined by terrorism experts. On the academic side, Brian Michael Jenkins, a RAND colleague of Hoffman's, wrote in the seventies, "Terrorists want a lot of people watching and a lot of people listening and not a lot of people dead." On the government-official side, James

Woolsey, the former head of the C.I.A., argued, "Terrorists don't want a seat at the table, they want to destroy the table and everyone sitting at it."

At conferences, the academics would accuse the officials of scaremongering to justify the establishment of a new government bureaucracy, and the officials would say that the academics were blind to the magnitude of the threat. "Most terrorists possess political objectives," Ehud Sprinzak, dean of the Lauder School of Government at Hebrew University and a member of the academic camp, wrote last year. "Any terrorist who threatens to kill thousands of civilians must know that his chances of political and physical survival are exceedingly slim. The usual suspects, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, groups that so many Americans love to revile—and fear—do not make the list of potential superterrorists. These organizations and their state sponsors may loathe the 'Great Satan,' but they want to survive and prosper politically." That this view turned out to be wrong doesn't mean that the other view was right. It was almost wholly focussed on the danger of chemical, biological, and nuclear attacks, undertaken for no purpose except destruction; it never envisaged the nature of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Bruce Hoffman, to his credit, had begun warning in recent years that a new breed of religious terrorism was emerging that did not appear to play the old low-casualty game. In "Inside Terrorism," he wrote, "For the religious terrorist, violence is first and foremost a sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand or imperative. Terrorism thus assumes a transcendental dimension, and its perpetrators are consequently unconstrained by the political, moral, or practical constraints that may affect other terrorists." Hoffman's crystal ball wasn't flawless. In a book of advice to the incoming Administration that RAND published earlier this year, he wrote, "It is patently clear that the U.S. intelligence community has scored a string of impressive successes over the past couple of years that proves the value and impor-

tance of this singularly vital asset in the struggle against terrorism. Proof of this may be found in the fact that Osama bin Laden and his minions have been consistently stymied for the past 26 months."

We now know what Osama bin Laden is capable of, but the arguments about what terrorists want—which underlie arguments about how to fight them—have not been settled. In "The Wealth of Nations," Adam Smith wrote, "In ancient times the opulent and civilized found it difficult to defend themselves against the poor and barbarous nations. In modern times the poor and barbarous find it difficult to defend themselves against the opulent and civilized." That pretty well expresses the standard academic view of terrorism as a loser's game whose danger to the rest of us is mainly psychological. Hoffman reminded me that, during the entire twentieth century, only a dozen terrorist incidents left more than a hundred people dead, and that during the thirty years preceding September 11th fewer than a thousand Americans had been killed worldwide by terrorists.

Obviously, bin Laden doesn't play by the rules of terrorism as the experts have understood them. But does that mean he has no rules—that he wants only to wreak havoc on a country he can't possibly conquer, because his motivation is psychological rather than strategic? Hoffman's view is that all terrorists have goals, and that it is dangerous to see them only as madmen bent on destruction. In other words, one should not only recognize their capacity for mass murder but also make a serious effort to understand how they think in order to anticipate their next move; we need a new theory of what terrorists want.

One could say that bin Laden's goal is a version of the one he often states publicly: to get the United States to disengage completely from the Middle East, by inducing fear in the general public which turns into pressure on the government. He could, however, have another goal, one that hasn't been worked into the copious public discussion of him: he could be understood as someone who is trying to start a civil

war, or a series of civil wars, in the Middle East.

I am extrapolating this view of bin Laden as a sort of terrorist entrepreneur from the work of a group of political scientists who have been studying civil wars all over the world. Because their subject is not, officially, terrorism (though the insurgent side in most civil wars uses terrorism as a prime technique), they haven't been consulted by the government or appeared on television. But their work points the way to a fresh and useful idea about what bin Laden might be up to.

In this view, bin Laden wants, in the short run, to help his radical Islamist allies start insurgencies, and in the long run he wants these insurgencies to get control of the national governments of as many Muslim countries as possible. He may have already achieved control of one nation, Afghanistan; the picture of the Taliban as a separate entity that merely "harbors" him has begun to seem quite inaccurate. Bin Laden has been providing the

Taliban with an important military unit, Brigade 055; John Parachini, a terrorism expert at the Monterey Institute, suggested last year that "bin Laden and his organization may function like a silent and independent partner in government" with the Taliban. The prospect of bin Laden's gaining effective control of more national governments is an alarming one, because governments (unlike terrorist cells) can collect taxes and raise armies and—in the case of Pakistan, a prime location for a civil war—possess nuclear weapons. The hesitance of most Arab governments to join wholeheartedly in the American effort to bring down bin Laden, even though he is their sworn enemy, can be taken as evidence that they see a link between the way they treat him and the possibility of insurgency in their countries.

Two of the leading theorists of civil war are James Fearon and David Laitin, both of whom are in the political-science department at Stanford. They argue that civil wars ought to be a sub-

ject of special concern because there are so many of them (in 1999, an international organization counted twenty-five ongoing civil wars), and because, compared with the conventional wars of the past half century, they are more violent, generate more civilian casualties, and last much longer.

Fearon and Laitin believe that civil wars get under way because of specific dynamics that don't have much to do with over-all political conditions, ideology, or religious and ethnic disputes. (They do, however, believe that a high level of poverty almost certainly plays a role.) Laitin told me his evidence shows that grievance—for instance, oppression on the basis of ethnicity, religion, language, or political belief—does not necessarily lead to open rebellion against the government, as you'd expect. And when there is a rebellion there is no assurance that solving its stated grievance will cause it to stop. (Two other ambitious international research projects on civil war—one conducted by a team at the World Bank, the other by a C.I.A.-funded State Failure Project at the University of Maryland—have reached similar conclusions.) Fearon and Laitin's explanations of the escalations of civil wars rely on fine-grained examinations of the ways people interact on the ground. "We prefer micro-mechanisms to master narratives," Laitin says.

The mechanism of violent insurgency runs like this: The world is full of terrorist entrepreneurs; Osama bin Laden is merely among the most ambitious. To accomplish their aims, they first have to recruit foot soldiers, who are almost always young men. One recruiting tactic is to stage spectacular acts of aggression that make the insurgency appear to be powerful and exciting. What the entrepreneur wants to have happen next is a big, indiscriminate counterattack, which, in effect, means that his enemy has been put to work as his chief recruiter. This initiates what ETA, the Basque separatist organization in Spain, calls the action-reprisal-action cycle, and the insurgency takes off.

A good example of this dynamic comes from ETA's own history. In 1973,



*"As your attorney, I must strongly advise you against bringing the high heat."*



ETA assassinated Lu s Carrero Blanco, the Spanish premier. Generalissimo Francisco Franco sent in troops hellbent on punishment, and in so doing he set off a lengthy and violent regional civil war. Much the same thing happened in Sri Lanka, where the Tamil Tigers were small-scale terrorists until 1983, when they killed thirteen government soldiers. This set off a series of anti-Tamil pogroms—which in turn had the effect of starting a true civil war, one that is still going on. Bin Laden has added a new wrinkle: take action against, and draw reprisal from, an especially powerful third party; namely, the United States. So far, the Administration has clearly been careful not to take bin Laden's bait—which would mean retaliating in ways that leave lots of innocent people dead.

When I spoke with James Fearon, he observed that this deadly recruitment process may actually create an opportunity for the United States. When recruits are flooding into an unorthodox underground army, there is great potential for developing agents—in this case, young Arab men—who might feed American intelligence information that could disable attacks in advance and make the whole terrorist operation vulnerable. The cell structure of Al Qaeda is meant to limit the potential damage of betrayal (because so few people know everything); but it would be difficult for the organization to grow rapidly and at the same time limit the internal flow of information. In general, a period is probably beginning in which two sides will be intensely competing for the loyalties of people in a series of Middle Eastern countries. Fearon and Laitin and their colleagues argue that in the real world people choose to join not one side of a great clash of civilizations but what looks like the winning team in their village. In Afghanistan, it seems to matter far more that the Taliban is mainly Pashtun and the Northern Alliance mainly Tajik and Uzbek than that the two groups have different religious beliefs or attitudes toward modernity.

**S**tathis Kalyvas and Roger Petersen, both former students of Laitin's who now teach at the University of Chicago and at M.I.T., respectively,

have conducted lengthy firsthand retrospective studies of civil wars, at practically a door-to-door level of detail. Kalyvas worked in Greece, Petersen in Lithuania. They found that people often choose sides on the basis of calculations about their personal chances of survival. These calculations go on at two levels: among young men deciding whether to join the insurgency, and among families deciding whether to place their allegiance with the insurgents or with the government. Insurgencies have to begin with what Petersen calls "zero-threshold actors"—that is, self-dramatizing people who are immune to the logical weighing of risk and reward. Mohamed Atta would seem to be a classic example. But an insurgency can't get off the ground with only zero-threshold actors; it needs to sign up people who assess risk more rationally. If one's aim is to limit an insurgency, Petersen told me, don't go to "the fanatics but the next group they'd go to for recruits, and give them incentives not to join. Change their thresholds."

People in the mold of the September 11th hijackers are a precious resource for an insurgency, because few people are naturally violent. "The reason there is so much violence in civil war is that people don't like to commit violence," Kalyvas told me. He believes that situations in which mass, indiscriminate killing appears to be taking place—like the long-running Islamist insurgency in Algeria—are actually situations where a few committed killers are doing almost all the dirty work. Once somebody becomes a killer, turning back is extremely difficult—this is known as "the tyranny of sunk costs"—and most civil-war violence takes the form of a small number of killers persuading members of the general populace to suggest who their next victims should be. As Kalyvas puts it, "You get a chance to get rid of people you don't like" without having personally to pull the trigger. Nobody informs on his neighbors in this way unless he believes he will be immune from retribution.

Those trying to stop insurgencies might try to identify and eliminate the few actual killers; it would be a mistake to assume that entire popu-

lations have become homicidal. The more useful anti-insurgency tactic is to compete, literally door to door, for people's loyalty (with the coinage of loyalty being willingness to inform on one side or the other). One reason that the entrepreneurs turn to terrorism is that, without the resources of a state, they have to make people believe that terrible things will happen to them if they don't side with the insurgency—that's why local killing can be an effective recruiting technique. One can surmise that many Pashtuns in Afghanistan might turn against the Taliban, which is much better positioned to distribute costs than benefits, if they could feel sure that neither the Taliban nor the Northern Alliance would kill them. The antiterrorist side, because it usually has more resources, has the advantage of being able to offer people rewards (like the American humanitarian-aid project in Afghanistan, if it works) as well as punishments.

Sthatis Kalyvas points out that areas of "fragmented sovereignty" are the ideal places for the outbreak of violence. If the government has total control—or no control—then there's no use in waging a contest for people's loyalty. In one article, Kalyvas reminds us that the worst killing of civilians by other civilians in the American Civil War occurred in Missouri and Kansas, the places that were not firmly on either side. It seems quite clear that Afghanistan today—where, after all, there was a pre existing civil war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance—is such a place. Pakistan, whose instability was obvious before September 11th and has undoubtedly increased since then, would seem to be a likely site for a similar competition.

Social scientists who try to understand people as rational actors constantly calculating and recalculating cost-benefit ratios can come across as bleak and dour in their view of the world. But the work of the students of civil war actually could give rise to optimism about the situation in the Middle East, because it offers an alternative to the idea that the region and its religion are inalterably at odds with the rest of the world. The civil-war schol-





ars reject the idea of a unitary Islam, and also that of a struggle between a good, peaceful Islam and a bad, distorted, violent Islam. Instead, they see all religious beliefs as evolving, with the sacred texts being constantly reinterpreted as conditions change. Kalyvas reminded me, for example, that Europe's Christian Democratic Parties were almost all theocratic and anti-democratic when they were founded, in the nineteenth century, and embraced democracy only because they realized that otherwise they would lose their influence.

Applying these ideas to the current situation would mean obtaining as much specific local information as possible, and then, perhaps through the use of native "subcontractors," convincing people that linking their future to bin Laden is a bad idea. It would have to be a slow, careful, patient process that combined punishment of specific violent people with the offer of rewards for potential allies of the West. None of this would alter the strategy of attempting to disrupt bin Laden's access to money and electronic communications and forestall further attacks. But, for the present, quiet is America's friend; killing, of Americans by bin Laden and of Arab civilians by Amer-

icans, is bin Laden's friend, because it draws ordinary people as well as combat troops to his side.

This might be called the retail approach to fighting terrorism: it is conducted on an almost individual level. But as American life gets more disrupted you increasingly hear calls for a more wholesale approach: the attempt to disable the entire Middle Eastern terrorist apparatus with a series of swift, broad military strokes. Although this side lost the first round of policy debates inside the Administration, its partisans certainly haven't given up.

Their position gets articulated mainly in the truncated form of allusions to the positions of hawkish policymakers—chiefly Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defense—who can't state their case publicly. In order to hear it in full, I went out one morning to a Washington suburb for coffee and bagels with Kenneth Adelman, who was the head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency in the Reagan Administration. Adelman is no longer in government, but he is still very much a member of a cohesive circle of foreign-policy conservatives that formed in the late sixties and early seventies and is still going strong. He is on

the Defense Policy Board, a group of former officials with a generally hawkish cast (it is chaired by Richard Perle, a leading defense conservative). This group has had two days of Pentagon briefings since September 11th, including a long session with the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and Wolfowitz. Adelman and his wife, Carol, have also seen the Cheney and the Rumsfelds socially since September 11th. So although Adelman was speaking for himself, his views were formed in an atmosphere of regular contact with the Administration.

Adelman told me that rather than talk in terms of hawks and doves he preferred to discuss "narrow" and "wide" options. "The narrow end would be, focus on nine-eleven"—the September 11th attacks. "A manhunt for Osama bin Laden and his organization, and, at the outside, the Taliban," he said. "The wide group would say, 'Don't do that. Instead, go after weapons of mass destruction, networks, and countries that house them.' That's more doable than the first option. The chance of finding the man and his top lieutenants is infinitesimal. The argument against the narrow approach is that you'd be bound to be disappointed, and you won't teach the right lesson. The lesson would be, you almost have to knock down the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to get us to go after you."

The Taliban, Adelman predicted, will fall "in a few weeks." What should happen next in Afghanistan? "Do you have to have a government that you put together?" he said. "Most places don't have a government. You don't need to have a government there. My model would be, kick out the existing government, that's fine, and then if the Northern Alliance starts fighting, I don't care. The difference is between a government that supports evil people and a government that's incompetent but isn't doing anything. That's most of the world."

That took care of Afghanistan. What else would Adelman do? "Maybe Sudan and the Bekaa Valley," he said, "but the big enchilada is Iraq. The argument against it would be clear. One, there is no evidence that Iraq was involved in nine-eleven. Two, the coal-

tion won't support us. Three, it seems like Bush's father's legacy—it's not part of the drill, it's a big diversion.

"The other side is, one, if we're going after international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction and states that support both, Iraq comes up three cherries. Two, just because we have no intelligence linking Iraq to nine-eleven doesn't mean it didn't happen. Three, we know Saddam Hussein harbored the mastermind of the bombing of the World Trade Center in '93 and that he tried to assassinate George H. W. Bush in Kuwait the same year. He's much weaker today than he was in '91, when the Gulf War ended, and we learned then that his soldiers don't want to fight for him."

I asked Adelman what he would say to President Bush if he were given the opportunity to sell him personally on the wide option.

"This is a historic moment," he told me (as Bush). "You have a mission. It is almost a divine mission. You have one task in life. That is to wage a global campaign against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Unlike any of your predecessors, including Harry Truman at the beginning of the Cold War, you have no public opposition, no congressional opposition, and meaningless foreign opposition. It is a noble, wonderful mission. Our children's lives will be better for it. You are given the opportunity by tragedy to solve the larger problem. It is virtually impossible to wipe out terrorist groups, but, by God, you can wipe out countries that support terrorism. There are two countries that are not easy picking, but not tough—Afghanistan and Iraq. I have no evidence that Iraq was involved in nine-eleven, but I *feel* it. There is no reason you can't use these ideal conditions to help fulfill your mission."

Adelman had been looking at me intently as he spoke. Now he sank back into the sofa where he was sitting. I was no longer the President and we were no longer in the Oval Office. "That's the argument," he said. ♦

*From the Ouray (Colo.) Plaindealer.*

Last year a bullying program was implemented for grades K-8th. This year the program will be extended into the high school.

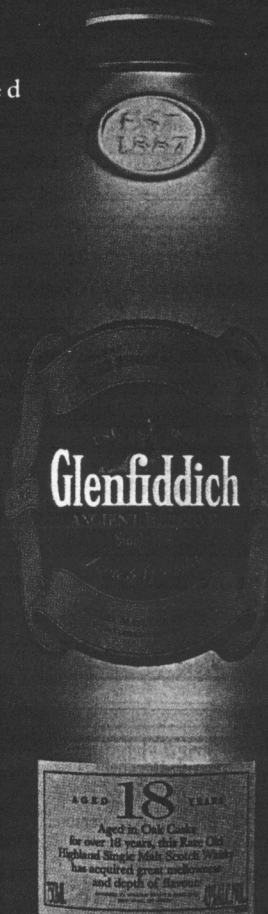
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