



Terrorism, Sacrifice and Life Everlasting: Uncommon Insights for President Barack Obama

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Dealing with terrorism will be at the very top of our new president's agenda. Here it is important that he understand something odd. The core basis of *Jihadist* terror has little if anything to do with strategy and tactics. Rather, it is "normally" an expression of religious sacrifice.

The links between sacrifice and politics have a long history. President Obama should look first to ancient Greece. Plutarch's *Sayings of Spartan Mothers* reveals the female parent as one who rears her sons for civic sacrifice. This mother was always relieved to learn that a son had died "in a manner worthy of his self, his country and his ancestors". Indeed, those Spartan sons who failed to live up to this standard of sacrifice were reviled.

One woman, whose son had been the sole survivor of a disastrous military engagement, killed him with a tile. It was the correct punishment for his apparent cowardice. The eighteenth-century philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, citing to Plutarch, described a certain citizen-mother as follows:

A Spartan woman had five sons in the army and was awaiting news of the battle. A Helot (slave) arrives trembling; she asks him for the news. "Your five sons were killed." "Base slave, did I ask you that?" The slave responds: "We won the victory." The mother runs to the temple and gives thanks to the gods.

Why recount these tales from ancient Sparta about sacrifice? What have they to do with current threats of terrorism against the United States? Why should they matter to President Barack Obama?

History speaks volumes. The roots of *Jihadist* terror originate, in part, from cultures that embrace similar views of sacrifice. In these cultures, however, the true purpose of sacrifice goes far beyond civic necessity. Here, sacrificial practice is a determinably sacred expression

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of *religion*. In these cultures, sacrifice derives from a desperately hoped-for conquest of personal death. **Above all, with such practice, the *Jihadist* terrorist hopes to realize an otherwise unattainable promise of *immortality*.**

The *Jihadist* terrorist insistently claims to “love death”, but this is a lie. Paradoxically, he ecstatically kills himself and innocent others only to ensure that he will live forever. The so-called “death” that he expects to suffer in “suicide” is merely a momentary inconvenience on every martyr’s fiery path to life everlasting.

“Martyrdom” operations have always been associated with *Jihad*. After all, unequivocal and celebratory invocations for such killing can be found in the Qur’an(9:111), and, even more explicitly, in the canonical *hadith*.

For President Obama, the survival implications of this doctrinal fusion of religion and violence warrant very careful study. Convinced that *Shahada* (“Death for Allah”) violence against the United States will lead to *martyrdom*, the Islamist terrorist can never be deterred by ordinary threats of reprisal and retaliation. Falling outside the usual boundaries of “rationality”, *Jihadist* terrorism should compel us to seek very different and more purposeful measures of dissuasion. *This means that to keep America safe, President Obama will have to look well beyond orthodox military and political solutions to terrorism.*

It still appears to most observers that *Jihadist* terrorists are unafraid of death. But nothing could be further from the truth. It is precisely their unique and overwhelming *terror of death* that leads these killers to “suicide”. Ironically, because dying in the act of killing “infidels” and “apostates” is presumed to buy freedom from the penalty of death, these terrorists aim to conquer mortality by “killing themselves”.

While America’s terrorist enemies often calculate in this way, our political leaders calculate in another. In the fashion of so many of its *Islamist* enemies, America still imagines, for itself, life everlasting. But unlike these enemies, America does not see itself achieving immortality, individually or collectively, by mass killing of “others”. Rather, we generally see our national survival as the logical product of both mainstream diplomacy and traditional military power.

America and its terrorist enemies have decidedly different orientations to “peace”. This stark asymmetry puts the United States at a foreseeable disadvantage. While America’s enemies manifest their “positive” expectations for immortality, individual and collective, by the intended and doctrinal slaughter of “heathen”, our leaders have thus far remained blithely unaware of these enemies’ murderous decisional calculus.

America’s new president now faces a real and expanding threat of unconventional war and unconventional terrorism. Faced with adversaries who are not only willing to die, but who also seek their own “deaths” - because this *sacrificial* death is presumed to yield personal immortality – Mr. Obama should quickly understand the critical limits of ordinary warfare, national homeland defense and deterrence.

The danger to America lies at two discrete but interrelated levels. First, it exists at the level of the individual *Jihadist* enemy who chooses “martyrdom” through a path of terrorism. Second, it exists at the level of states, the individual “self-sacrificers” in macrocosm, which may someday soon choose *collective* self-sacrifice through their frenzied initiation of chemical, biological or nuclear war against the United States. Significantly such a war might not be fought for traditional military purposes, but for “liquidation” of “infidels”. To be sure, any such choice would represent the unholy of marriages between aggressive war and genocide, two clearly codified crimes under international law.

The root problem here is *Jihadist* death fear and the consequent compulsion to sacrifice certain despised “others”. This compulsion, in turn, stems from a widespread and doctrinal belief that killing *unbelievers*, and also being killed by *unbelievers*, is *the* path toward immortality. Terrorist unwillingness to accept personal death leads, then, to the killing of others to escape this death. The ironies are staggering, but the connections persist. *For President Barack Obama, they must be examined immediately and with great care.*

For so many of our terrorist enemies, both individuals and states, killing Americans offers an optimal immunization against death. The death fear of the enemy “ego” is lessened by the killing, the sacrifice, of the *infidel*. This generic idea has been captured by Ernest Becker’s paraphrase of Elias Canetti: “Each organism raises its head over a field of corpses, smiles into the sun, and declares life good.”

The *Jihadist* enemies of America do not intend to do evil. Rather, they commit to the killing of Americans and other “infidels” with conviction and purity of heart. Perversely sanctified killers, these enemies will gleefully generate an incessant search for “profane” victims. Though mired in blood, this search will be tranquil and self-assured, born of the presumption that its warrior perpetrators are neither infamous nor shameful, but *sacrificial* and *sacred*.

President Obama; please take heed.