

If a 'war on rats' that relies solely on killing fails, so will a 'war on terrorism' that aims at killing terrorists without removing the 'garbage' they feed upon

A case history on the killing of rats and terrorists

By Kenneth Janda

Rats and terrorists are similar in key respects: Both are widely despised and feared; both move underground surreptitiously; and both types of vermin can't be exterminated by killing them.

In the case of rats, history proves the futility of killing as a means of eradication. Robert Sullivan's recent book, "Rats," contends that the only way to eliminate rats is to remove their source of food—that is, remove the garbage.

The Bush administration justifiably regards terrorists as rats, and few U.S. citizens object to killing terrorists when they surface. That policy seems fitting, but it is also insufficient.

If a "war on rats" that relies solely on a killing strategy will fail, so will a "war on terrorism" that aims at killing terrorists without removing the "garbage" on which they feed.

What nourishes terrorism? Why do terrorists kill innocent civilians in the U.S., Iraq, Pakistan, Russia, Ireland, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, France, Indonesia, Spain and elsewhere? Looking at the list of disparate countries suggests different answers to the question. Factors that motivated



Illustration by Dean Rohrer

Protestant and Catholic terrorists during the "troubles" in Ireland clearly differ from the sources of terrorism in Israel. President Bush did not help us to understand terrorism by

describing Iraqi terrorists simply as "cold-blooded killers." After a bombing in Baghdad on Oct. 27, 2003, Bush said, "That's all they are. They hate freedom. They love terror."

That view does not explain terrorist acts in Saudi Arabia, which offers few freedoms to hate. And suicide bombers elsewhere probably don't kill themselves for the love of terror. The reasons why terrorists sacrifice themselves differ from Iraq to Israel to Spain. Bush's dismissal of terrorists as freedom-hating terror-lovers may have been a quick response to a gruesome bombing. But in his address to Congress on Sept. 20, 2001, he explained the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attack with similar words: "They hate our freedoms."

Bush's simplistic explanation is misleading but not entirely untrue. Freedom of expression in our mass media allows for excesses of material consumption, violence and nudity. Many Muslims, among others, view our free lifestyle as impious, if not profane.

But a more thorough explanation of the terrorists' motive lies in the United States' international reach and role: its foreign policies and its global economic and military power. We need to look there for the terrorists' nourishment—for the garbage that sustains them.

What aspects of our policies and power cause Muslim terrorists to hate us enough to take their own lives? Reporters

have cited several reasons:

■ Despite upholding democracy as an ideal, Washington supports authoritarian governments (e.g., Saudi Arabia) when it serves its interests.

■ On almost every important conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, the United States sides with Israel.

■ American culture, spread worldwide through mass media, tends to infect and smother other cultures. Even advocating that women everywhere enjoy civil and political rights—such as going to school, driving cars, voting and holding office—infuriates some in traditional societies.

Should we change all our actions to appease terrorists? Of course not. But we should review our policies while seeking to understand the differing bases for terrorism—different even in the Middle East.

Yet our nation is ill-equipped to understand our enemies there. For example, only 22 of 1.8 million graduates of American colleges in 2003 took degrees in Arabic. The New York Times quoted Richard Brecht, a former Air Force cryptographer and director of a language project funded by the Defense Department as saying, "Five billion dollars for an F-22 will not help us in the battle against terrorism. Language that helps us understand why they're trying to harm us will."

How we deal with terrorism should be based on an understanding of the issues that feed terrorists in different circumstances.

We can't solve a rat problem by trying to kill all the rats.

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