# Wartime scripts: Making the weak appear to be the aggressor

by James M. Wall in the July 11, 2006 issue

On the night of June 10, two men from Saudi Arabia and one from Yemen fashioned makeshift ropes from knotted bed sheets, then hanged themselves in their Guantánamo Bay prison cells. Rear Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the prison, reported the deaths and commented: “They are smart, they are creative, they are committed. They have no regard for life, neither ours nor their own. I believe this was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us.”

The three men accused of asymmetrical warfare were Mani Shaman Turki al-Habardi al-Utaybi and Yasser Talal al-Zahrani, from Saudi Arabia, and Ali Abdullah Ahmed from Yemen. Although they were never charged after being apprehended, they were still described as terrorists in a struggle between the powerful and the weak.

“Asymmetrical warfare” is a term the U.S. and antiterrorist specialists use to describe an unequal conflict. From the perspective of the strong side in asymmetrical warfare, suicide, normally understood as the response of people trapped in a desperate situation, becomes a tactic of proscribed warfare.

Colleen Graffy, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for public diplomacy, says these three men were not desperate; they were tacticians. She told the BBC: “They don’t value their own lives, and they certainly don’t value ours; they use suicide bombings as a tactic. Taking their own lives was not necessary, but it certainly is a good PR move.”

But in the view of Anthony Alessandrini, an English professor at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, the qualities that Admiral Harris assigns to the dead men amount to “a perverse compliment being paid by the torturer to the tortured.”

If Harris's phrase "they have no regard for life" sounds familiar, it is because it is used in scripts for all our wars. In the current struggle, the term resonates with a public that is still stunned by September 11. Revenge is a strong emotion, especially when directed against people who are "not like us" in religion, race or culture.

Paul Fussell, author of *Wartime*: *Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, writes about revenge in that war: "For most Americans, the war was about revenge against the Japanese, and the reason the European part had to be finished first was so that maximum attention could be devoted to the real business, the absolute torment and destruction of the Japanese."

Tom Engelhardt, author of *The End of Victory Culture*, says:

> The war against the Nazis was being organized as a screen narrative of "liberation" of former allies like the French or even of enemies like the Italians. . . . In the Pacific, however, against an enemy who fought a give-no-quarter war, refused to surrender, and lacked individuality, there would be no Japanese to liberate. The on-screen war there focused instead on exalting sacrificial American deaths in preparation for an exterminatory victory.

When an enemy "lacks individuality," we are more easily persuaded not to empathize with such people—they have no humanity. This same script is being used again in our asymmetrical war against terror, and it is propelled, once again, by the news media.

Admiral Harris and Secretary Graffy could not describe the Guantánamo suicides as ideological and inhuman if they did not have complete compliance from the media, starting with the *New York Times*. In the online publication *Counterpunch*, Alessandrini points to that newspaper's headline for the suicide story: "Prisoners' Ruse Is Suspected at Guantánamo."

Alessandrini observes that the *Times* article emphasizes the prisoners' "ruse" and makes that the focus of inquiry—"not the circumstances that drove three men to their deaths, but the question of how, given the fact that one of the elements of their confinement was constant monitoring by their captors, these men could have managed their 'ruse.'"

In civilized discourse, suicide is understood as an act of desperation by someone trapped in conditions, whether real or imagined, so extreme that death is seen as the only available option. In asymmetrical warfare, the stronger party twists the script to describe the weak as aggressors.

In the 1940 movie *Northwest Passage*, colonial American Major Robert Rogers (Spencer Tracy) leads his soldiers against the Abenaki Indians and their French allies. The year is 1759. The major prepares his troops to attack an Abenaki village: “We’re under orders to wipe out this town, so see that you do it. Kill every fighting Indian, kill ’em quick and kill ’em dead . . . fire the village.”

Teenage boys who saw that film in 1940 were soon fighting in World War II. They had been conditioned to “fire the village.” Now grandchildren of those teenage boys are told that the prisoners they hold at Guantánamo Bay “have no regard for life, neither ours nor their own.” The enemy is subhuman. The script is the same.