

Visions of sacrifice: The terrorists' point of view

by [Scott Appleby](#) in the [October 17, 2001](#) issue

It's remarkable that the media and government found the five-page letter from Mohamed Atta to his fellow hijackers remarkable. Attorney General John Ashcroft called the document's prayers and exhortations to martyrdom "a disturbing and shocking view into the mind-set of these terrorists." "Chilling," "eerie" and "haunting," said Bob Woodward. Like other major news organizations, ABC led its September 28 news show with the story, portraying the letter as a minor revelation, a confirmation that the U.S. faces an unconventional war against an irrational enemy. Muslim extremists seem actually to believe in God, pray to him, and even invoke his assistance.

Has anyone been paying attention? One glance in the direction of world events beyond our borders since, say, the Shi'ite revolution in Iran 23 years ago would have prepared the arbiters of public opinion to anticipate the possibility that Muslim youth would be willing, even eager, to sacrifice their lives in support of a cause they judge to be sacred. Did we somehow overlook the televised images of Iranian women sending their young sons across land-mined fields to certain death in the protracted war against Iraq? Have we forgotten the 241 U.S. Marines killed in October 1983 at the hands of faceless Shi'ite "self-martyrs" who drove explosive-laden trucks into their barracks? Did we assume that the suicide bombers of Hamas and Islamic Jihad of Palestine were an aberration—or, worse, a problem for the Israelis and the Middle East alone?

Perhaps we became innured to the Ayatollah Khomeini's frequent condemnations of "the Great Satan-America, the cause of all our catastrophes and the source of all malice"? Did we miss the significance of the reports that Iranian Shi'ites and Sudanese Sunnis had put aside longstanding grievances to collaborate in preparing for "global jihad"?

Muslim extremists have made no secret of their intentions, nor have they shrunk from placing on full view their terror-legitimizing interpretations of Islamic law. Decades ago, Islamist clerics such as Shaykh Omar Abdel Rahman, the Egyptian mullah convicted of conspiracy in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, and Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, the spiritual guide of Lebanon's Hizbullah, were already validating suicide and self-martyrdom, strictly forbidden by Islamic law, by reinterpreting such deeds as sacred acts of jihad (holy war). If the "self-martyr" intended to have "a political impact on an enemy whom it is impossible to fight by conventional means, then his sacrifice can be part of a jihad," Fadlallah told an interviewer in 1985. "Such an undertaking differs little from that of a soldier who fights and knows that in the end he will be killed."

A long line of Sunni and Shi'ite religious scholars justified such rulings by arguing that "the oppressed nations," lacking the technology and destructive weapons possessed by America and Europe, "must thus fight with special means of their own." "We recognize the right of nations to use every unconventional method to fight these aggressor nations, and do not regard what oppressed Muslims of the world do with primitive and unconventional means to confront aggressor powers as terrorism," proclaimed Fadlallah. "We view this as religiously lawful warfare against the world's imperialist and domineering powers" (quoted by Martin Kramer in "The Oracle of Hizbullah: Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah," in *Spokesmen for the Despised Fundamentalist Leaders of the Middle East*, edited by R. Scott Appleby (University of Chicago Press)).

In light of the extremists' sustained campaign to "send a message" to the distracted West, the startled reaction to "Atta's letter" suggests some difficult answers to the question posed frequently in the aftermath of September 11: Why do they hate us?

They hate us, their treatises and demagogues have long proclaimed, because we appear to them spiritually lukewarm, religiously flaccid. They hate us for casting off orthodox Christianity, as they believe Americans did in the 1960s, in favor of the kind of nationalistic, materialistic, state-dependent, liberalized, compromising—and, they would add, emasculated—approach to religion which they despise in their own co-religionists. They hate us for caricaturing their zeal as pathological and unorthodox, even while we support corrupt and antidemocratic regimes that suppress political Islam. (One wonders whether Fadlallah, Rahman or Osama bin Laden is amused or enraged when President Bush and Attorney General John Ashcroft declare what is and what is not "true Islam.")

They hate us, most of all, for ignoring them and for underestimating the power of their faith. And faith it is, however twisted, distorted, un-Islamic and sinful we deem its expression.