

Title:

Ur bin Legend

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982

Summary:

In the wrong circumstances, image can indeed be everything. In the case of Osama bin Laden, his image is just possibly a more potent tool than his money. How did this happen? We can only look to the West for answers.

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Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, al-Qaida, terrorism, Muslim fundamentalism, Muslim extremists, war on terror, Cyberiter

Article Body:

I may be repulsed at the deeds orchestrated by Osama bin Laden ...

But I'm even more repulsed at the ineptitude displayed in the attempts to stop him and his cause.

I mean, the guy's a murderous criminal. He's an anti-Muslim, as any credible scholar of the Koran would attest. He's been disowned by his family and disavowed by the country of his birth.

So, why is it so hard to dislodge him as a hero to a significant portion of the Muslim world?

The answer, frankly, is in the policies of those to whom his attacks are directed. The USA and its allies have transformed the perception of Osama bin Laden into that of a modern-day Robin Hood, a rich guy who is a champion of the poor by virtue of his acts against the capitalist infidels who invade their lands and impose a foreign culture upon them. As far as I'm concerned, it takes a band of idiots to offer democracy to a country and not be able to make it palatable, but to date, the Western powers are 0-for-2 in Afghanistan and Iraq, and their mishandling of bin Laden's image is a major reason why.

It seems clear that, until they can defeat Osama bin Laden and his band of thieves, they'll fight an uphill battle. It seems just as clear that this task shouldn't even have been part of the equation. After all, al-Qaeda wasn't the Taliban --- the actual rulers of Afghanistan at the time --- and it certainly

had little or nothing to do with Iraq.

However, every enemy needs a poster boy, and bin Laden was certainly well-positioned to provide one. He was only an uneasy ally with the Taliban and just a distant acquaintance with Saddam Hussain's iron-fisted machine. However, he fit the stereotype of an extreme, culpable Muslim terrorist who stood for all that was evil in the region. That put him in perfect position to be publicized by the Western world's leaders, which in the process, proved the age-old bromide to downtrodden and/or displaced Muslims that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

I highly recommend the recently published book by Peter Bergen, 'The Osama bin Laden I Know: an Oral History of al-Qaeda's Leader.' To defeat an adversary, one must first understand him. This book does an excellent job of not only providing a series of first-hand accounts which illuminate bin Laden's origins and background, but even more importantly, confirming that the publicity heaped upon him by the USA and its allies has only served to solidify bin Laden's legend among his followers and others who are susceptible to his twisted message.

Bergen argues that al-Qaeda was close to becoming an afterthought in the Muslim world prior to the invasion of Iraq. The majority of Muslims were appalled by the wanton murder of innocents on 11 Sep 2001. The al-Qaeda movement was virtually crushed during the American retaliation in Afghanistan, which was really directed against the Taliban government for harboring bin Laden. It could be effectively argued that the al-Qaeda cause had been minimalized to that of an outrageous bunch of anarchists hiding behind a great religion's doctrine.

And then, the Americans tied al-Qaeda to Iraq to further justify their invasion.

My guess is that bin Laden couldn't believe his good fortune. He had no standing in that country until that time. Now, his money and his message sound quite appealing to devout young Iraqi men who have few alternatives in a devastated land that will need years to stabilize. The irony is that these are people who like the American way; they just happen to like it on their terms rather than have it thrust upon them in a context of imposition which leaves them little choice but to obey or rebel.

And therein lies the ultimate irony. At no time has bin Laden or al-Qaeda actually stated their way. We know what they're against, but never raised the question as to what they are for. The concept of 'a fundamentalist Muslim state' is too broad. After all, Iran claims that objective, and they're hardly close friends with al-Qaeda.

Sir Winston Churchill once said, "It's better to remain silent and be thought a

fool than to speak and remove all doubt." I can think of no better policy shift in the battle against al-Qaeda than that. Rather than continue to personify a criminal element, why not begin a campaign to goad bin Laden into listing specifics as to how he would run a perfect world. My guess is that his responses would alienate enough of the Muslim community to the point of his becoming trivialized, and in the process, exposed for the villain he is.

Why are we not demanding to hear his words and then throwing them back in his face? Why are Western leaders trying to associate his name with every Muslim-based transgressor --- eg- the Taliban and Saddam --- with whom they have an issue? Could it be their laziness in spin-mongering or simply their cynical attitude that the Western populace cannot discern the reality of these matters for themselves?

Never-ending cycles of attack and imposition haven't worked yet for the Israelis and Palestinians. Did the Americans and their allies really think it would work elsewhere in that region?

It's unconscionable that Western leaders have turned bin Laden into a legend for the mere fact that it's convenient to put a face to an adversary. Make no mistake, this was their doing. To this day, you've never seen a Muslim authority --- not even the Taliban when they ruled Afghanistan --- ascribe any heroic faith-defending status to him. Bergen's book underscores the reality that Osama bin Laden is nothing more than a soldier of fortune.

It's time for the world to see the difference between a real legend and an urban legend. Bergen's book is further proof that Osama bin Laden is the latter.