

Why al Qaida may be unstoppable

I DID the fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation studying the Rainbow Family of Living Light, an anarchist utopian cultural movement that creates spontaneous temporary cities deep within national forests in the United States and around the world. I later wrote a book about them, "People of the Rainbow: A Nomadic Utopia" (Univ. of Tennessee Press). In many ways they are the antithesis of al Qaida. The Rainbows have a stated ideology of nonviolent conflict resolution and a strong commitment to a nonhierarchical participatory democracy in the anarchist tradition.

Their egalitarianism espouses gender equality and a tolerance for and celebration of all religious traditions ranging from paganism to Christianity and Buddhism. They are the opposite of al Qaida, which basks in notions of hierarchical theocracy while espousing strategies of extreme violence.

From an organizational standpoint, however, al Qaida is quite similar to the nonviolent Rainbows. First of all, both are utopian movements. So were the Nazis, who murdered 12 million Jews, Romanis, gays, communists, handicapped people and so on. So were the Puritans who slaughtered their Indian neighbors. And so were Columbus' men who effected genocide against Caribbean Tainos.

The Rainbow utopia, like its historic predecessors such as the Shakers, the Oneida Community, the Paris Commune and countless other well-known attempts at creating the perfect society, strives to create what many of us see as a better world. Most earthly

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manifestations of hell, however, were also born out of the utopian spirit as individual groups forced their often exclusionary visions on other peoples. Utopianism, at its most negative extreme, gives birth to genocide, as eugenicists strive to create societies in their ethnic image. Hitler's "master race" was one such utopian vision.

Al Qaida's vision is more benign than that of the Nazis. They aren't striving for global domination. They simply want the west to stop attempting to westernize Islam. They want us out of what they see as their holy land. In essence, their utopian vision has clashed with that of George W. Bush and the Project for a New American Century – neo-conservative Americans who want to extend US style "democracy," military might and consumer culture into the heart of Islamic territory.

While al Qaida's vision might be considered benign, however, their tactics certainly aren't. Their use of violence and terror against civilian populations, coupled with the inevitability of their procurement of discarded and unaccounted for cold war nuclear weaponry, threatens carnage of Hiroshimic proportions.

To understand why al Qaida is unstoppable, we need to understand the peaceful Rainbows, and why they are also unstoppable. The Rainbows began gathering in American national forests in 1972. The United States Forest Service immediately began trying to thwart the Rainbow Family, writing regulations outlawing the gatherings, and deploying hundreds of law enforcement officers to blockade, arrest and otherwise harass the Rainbows. To this end the U.S. government has impounded drinking water systems and sanitary latrine equipment, creating dangerous conditions that, according to the Centers for Disease Control, eventually sickened thousands of Rainbows. They blockaded roads, stopping food and medicine deliveries from reaching the gatherings. They arrested key Rainbow volunteers and threatened thousands of others with random arrests. The list goes on, but still the gatherings continued to grow despite this harassment.

The U.S. government could not stop the gathering specifically because the Rainbows are anarchists. There is no central organization to thwart. There are no assets to seize and no organization to sue. There is no radio station to take off the air or newspaper to burn. There are no leaders to co-opt, corrupt, threaten or jail. All there is, is a shared ideology, in this case of an egalitarian anarcho-democracy committed to modeling a nonviolent nonhierarchical world without leaders. And there is the ethos that there will be a Rainbow Gathering and that nothing will stop it.

U.S. government attempts to thwart the gatherings have only resulted in the Rainbows growing stronger in the face of persistent persecution. Rainbow lure admonishes the Family to "ignore all rumors of cancellation." Hence, when the Forest Service telephoned thousands of Rainbows in 1988 to tell them that there would be no gathering in Texas

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that year, it just reinforced the knowledge that there would be a Rainbow gathering in Texas. Rainbows communicate by what they term, "rumor," in effect predating the Internet with a decentralized communication web utilizing a host of nontraditional media ranging from food co-op bulletin boards and phone trees to verbal rumors and graffiti.

As long as Rainbows believe in world peace, they will continue to gather, having survived the Reagan era, the widespread violent repression of protests that grew during the Clinton presidency, and now, continue to prosper despite John Ashcroft and George W. Bush. Ultimately they survive because they are a movement and not an organization.

This is the same reason al Qaida is unstoppable. There is no al Qaida, per se. It is not an organization. It's a movement. Their ideological rubric unites disparate cells, brought together by one common utopian goal – an Islamic homeland free of western domination or interference.

As a nonentity, al Qaida has employed anarchist organizational strategies. But they certainly aren't anarchists themselves. Theoretical anarchy is about creating a participatory democracy inclusive of all voices. Contrary to mediated myths, these movements are also usually nonviolent. Al Qaida, by contrast, seems to be about creating theocracy, a la Jerry Fallwall, complete with an ethnocentric imposition of a misogynist and homophobic culture. Despite their non-anarchistic goals, however, al Qaida seems quite comfortable at employing anarchist strategy in reaching those goals

As a movement, al Qaida is reactionary. They react to what their adherents see as provocation, growing with each such event. Hence, the neo-conservative Bush administration has proven to be al Qaida's greatest ally, publicly perpetuating a regular stream of outrages against the Islamic world. Images of bombed out Iraqi and Afghani homes, like stories of rape and torture from Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and other U.S.-run detention centers, does more to strengthen al Qaida than any charismatic leader ever could. The Bush administration validates al Qaida grievances on a daily basis.

Speaking in Buffalo, New York, recently, the Indian novelist and political commentator, Arundhati Roy, credited George W. Bush with laying the mechanics of empire bare for the world to see. The neo-conservatives have posted their utopian agenda on the web for public view (see Project for a New American Century website). With neo-cons such as Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Dick Cheney now running the Bush White House, America's formerly denied empire building has become transparent, lending credibility to those who call us imperialists.

Despite U.S. government repression of the press and the deaths of 30 journalists in Iraq, the brutality of that occupation has continued to dominate the media outside of the United States. Eighteen months after George W. Bush declared Iraq "liberated," the

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civilian death toll continues to mount, hitting a new daily high this month. With each new bombing, with each gruesome story, with each new death, the outraged reaction to America continues to grow. And support for al Qaida's ideology, if not their tactics, grows as well.

In Iraq, the resistance has evolved to now include representatives from most of that country's disparate ethnic groups – people whom for generations focused their anger at each other. By engaging in a prolonged and brutal occupation, the Bush administration has succeeded where all Iraqi leaders have historically failed – in uniting Iraq's diverse population. Again, this plays into al Qaida's hands, as they now draw support from beyond their Shiite base, reaching out to a global Islam united in their outrage against America.

Terrorist movements flounder without popular support for their ideological goals. Historically, enduring terrorist movements have gleaned onto popular political struggles where violent governments block change or redress of grievances by nonviolent means. The failure of a civil political system feeds fringe elements calling for violence. The more popular the repressed cause is, and the more violent their repression, the more the general population grows tolerant of violent resistance. Eventually a space emerges where terrorists can take refuge.

Like their neo-conservative American nemesis, al Qaida is prepared to deploy violence without regard for consequences. Like the religious conservatives in the U.S., their fundamentalism tells them that God is on their side and that their battle is righteous. The difference is, they are battling for control of their own traditional territory. They have no stated goals for imposing their culture on the west. If they did, they would lose the support that their ideology, if not their tactics, enjoys in the Muslim world. The neo-cons, on the other hand, make no qualms about battling for hegemonic control of the entire world – with Islam providing the greatest resistance to this utopian dream.

In essence, as long as we have an American government under the control of violent radicals with dreams of building a global empire, al Qaida will remain a growing threat to American security. History has shown that no empire has ever successfully been able to sustain global dominance. Control over America's historically unprecedented military superiority gives the simpletons in the Bush administration the misguided belief that empire is attainable. What they don't realize is that our shrinking and increasingly interconnected global community makes us more vulnerable than any empire in history (both to the ravages of terrorism and the effects of global economic backlashes). The greatest physical threat to us comes from the very weapons systems that we pioneered and created – weapons that never had any real use in warfare, but have always provided a dark cloud of terror over the earth.

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The age of empire is over. Only when we give up on empire will the al Qaidas of the world lose their ideological imperative for survival. It's important that we don't see adopting a justice-based foreign policy as giving in to terrorists. To the contrary – terrorists are reactionary. Hence, they are ultimately under our control. Adopting a more equitable foreign policy will ultimately render them benign. It's also the only way we can render any meaningful control over anti-American terrorists.

In the end, peace, nonviolence and global justice will be our strongest weapons against terrorism. Let's hope it doesn't take generations of carnage for our governments to figure this out.

This column is adopted from a speech presented at Cornell University on September 14th.