

When the rabbits get a gun

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truthout.org | September 15, 2004

This is the comforting fiction: Osama bin Laden is a monster who sprang whole from the fetid mire. He had no childhood, no influences, no education, no experiences to form his view of the world. He did not exist, and then he did, a vessel into which the universe poured the essence of evil. It is a simple, straightforward story of a man who hates freedom and kills for the pure joy of feeling innocent blood drip from his fingers.

This is the fairy tale by which children are put to bed at night. As frightening and terrifying as bin Laden may be, it is a comfort to imagine him as having been chiseled from the dust. The fiction of his existence, absent of detail, makes him unique, a singular entity not to be replicated. Osama bin Laden becomes truly scary only when the actual context of his life is made clear, where he is from, what he has seen, and why those things motivated him to do what he does.

Osama bin Laden becomes truly scary when the realization comes that he is not unique, not singular, not an invention of the universe. He becomes truly scary when the realization comes that there are millions of people who have seen what he has seen, who feel what he feels, and why. He becomes truly scary when the realization comes that he is a creation of the last fifty years of American foreign and economic policy, and that he has an army behind him created by the same influences. Simply, Osama bin Laden becomes truly scary when the realization comes that he can be, and has been, and continues to be, replicated.

Osama bin Laden, after being educated at Oxford University, learned how to kill effectively while working as an agent of American Cold War policy in Afghanistan. He was a helpful American ally throughout the 1980s as a ruthless and wealthy warrior against the Soviet Union. It was the desire of the American government to deliver to the Soviets their own Vietnam, to arrange a hopeless military situation which would demoralize the Soviet military and bleed that nation dry.

Osama bin Laden played the part of the Viet Cong, and he was good at it. With the help of the American government, he was able to create an army of true believers in Afghanistan.

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Our government believed that if one bin Laden was good, a hundred would be better, and a thousand better again, in the fight against the Soviets. So strong was this group America helped to create that it became known as 'The Base.' Translated into the local dialect, 'The Base' is known as al Qaeda.

Osama bin Laden learned something else besides the art of killing while he was working as an ally of the United States. He learned that given enough time, enough money, enough violence, enough perseverance, and enough fellow warriors, a superpower can be brought to its knees and erased from the book of history.

Bin Laden was at the center of one of the most important events of the 20th century: The fall of the Soviet Union. Political pundits like to credit Reagan and the senior Bush for the collapse of that regime, but out in front of them, in the mountains of Afghanistan, was Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda, the sharp end of our sword, who did their job very well. Today, the United States faces this group and its leader, armed with their well-learned and America-taught lessons: How to kill massively and how to annihilate a superpower.

Osama bin Laden learned a few other things before he became the monster under our collective bed. When Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein began to make his move against Kuwait, bin Laden was outraged. Hussein was a despised name on the lips of bin Laden and his followers; here was an unbelieving heretic who spoke the words of Allah, a self-styled Socialist who pretended piety, a ruthless dictator who killed every Islamic fundamentalist he could get his hands on.

Osama bin Laden went to King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, home of the holiest sites of Islam. The royal family was not to be found anywhere on bin Laden's list of friends at the time. A shrewd observer of local politics, bin Laden knew that the Saudi government enjoyed having the Palestinians living in squalor, bereft of homeland and hope, because it distracted the fundamentalists within Saudi Arabia from focusing on the inequities within their own country. With the crooking of a single oil-rich finger, the Saudi royals could solve the Palestinian problem. Their refusal to do so fed bin Laden's rage, for in his mind, they were aiding and abetting what he saw as an intolerable Israeli apartheid.

Bin Laden asked Fahd to help him resurrect the army that fought with him against the Soviets so that he could fight Saddam Hussein. Here again is an irony of the times: As in the 1980s, Osama bin Laden was spoiling for a fight against an enemy of the United States - for his own purposes, to be sure, but it is difficult to avoid a shake of the head when considering all of the recent rhetoric about a Saddam/Osama alliance

. Fahd turned bin Laden down, and allowed the American military to set up bases in Saudi Arabia for use in what became known as Operation Desert Storm. According to the version of Islam practiced by bin Laden, it is rank heresy to allow soldiers from an infidel

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army to occupy the land of Mecca and Medina. Bin Laden learned from this that regimes in the Middle East which claim fealty to Islam, but which in fact act at the behest of the United States, were not to be trusted. The royal family of Saudi Arabia joined the list of bin Laden's enemies, along with the United States, Saddam Hussein, and Israel.

It was Israel, proxy of the United States, which taught Osama bin Laden what could be considered the final, irrevocable lesson of his life. In April of 1996, Israel began a military action against Beirut and southern Lebanon called Operation Grapes of Wrath. "It is quite obvious," wrote Israeli writer Israel Shahak at the time, "that the first and most important Israeli aim to be established in the 'Grapes of Wrath' is to establish its sovereignty over Lebanon - to be exercised in a comparable manner to its control over the Gaza Strip."

On April 13, an ambulance driver named Abbas Jiha was rushing patients to a hospital in Sidon. Civilians caught in the crossfire of 'Grapes of Wrath' begged him to take them to Sidon, and so he squeezed his wife, his four children and ten others into his ambulance. An Israeli helicopter targeted his ambulance and fired two missiles. The ambulance was blasted sixty feet into the air, and Jiha was thrown clear. When he made it back to the remains of his rig, he found his nine year old daughter, his wife, and four others dead within the flaming wreckage.

On April 18, the small village of Qana was flooded with some 800 refugees from the fighting who were seeking protection from UN forces there. At about two in the afternoon, the village came under bombardment by Israeli 'proximity shells' - antipersonnel weapons which explode several meters above the ground and shower anyone below with razor-sharp shrapnel. The result was a massacre, a blood-drenched scene of shredded humanity.

Robert Fisk, the most decorated and reputable journalist in Britain, was there. "It was a massacre," he wrote. "Israel's slaughter of civilians in this 10-day offensive - 206 by last night - has been so cavalier, so ferocious, that not a Lebanese will forgive this massacre. There had been the ambulance attacked on Saturday, the sisters killed in Yohmor the day before, the 2-year-old girl decapitated by an Israeli missile four days ago. And earlier yesterday, the Israelis had slaughtered a family of 12 - the youngest was a four-day-old baby - when Israeli helicopter pilots fired missiles into their home."

These stories barely made a dent in the American press in 1996, but were widely reported at length by both European and Middle Eastern media outlets. Photographs of headless babies and slaughtered civilians reached far and wide, inflaming a region already filled with rage against Israel and America. From this time on, Osama bin Laden used Qana as a rallying cry against what he called the Israeli-United States alliance. The rest, as they say, is history.

Osama bin Laden is a damned murderer of innocents, with thousands of notches in his

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belt. His actions are indefensible by any measure. Yet to dismiss him as something other than the creation of his experiences, to categorize him as some unique freak whose motivations are beyond comprehension, is to deny the most important dilemma that faces our world. Monsters are not born. They are made.

On Sunday, September 12, 2004, a large crowd of Iraqi civilians came under fire from U.S. attack helicopters on Haifa Street in Baghdad. An American Bradley Fighting Vehicle had been attacked and destroyed by 'insurgents' fighting the ongoing occupation of their country, and the civilians - after more than a year of deprivation and violence which came on the heels of a decade of deprivation and violence - were dancing on top of and beside the vehicle. 13 of them were killed and dozens more wounded. A reporter from the UK Guardian named Ghaith Abdul-Ahad was there, and was wounded in the attack.

"One of the three men piled together," wrote Abdul-Ahad, "raised his head and looked around the empty streets with a look of astonishment on his face. He then looked at the boy in front of him, turned to the back and looked at the horizon again. Then he slowly started moving his head to the ground, rested his head on his arms and stretched his hands towards something that he could see. It was the guy who had been beating his chest earlier, trying to help his brother. He wanted help but no one helped. He was just there dying in front of me. Time didn't exist. The streets were empty and silent and the men lay there dying together. He slid down to the ground, and after five minutes was flat on the street."

The survivors of this attack, like the survivors of Qana, were probably not terrorists before the fire came raining down. It is a safe bet they are now, after seeing what they have seen, willing to trade their lives to see Americans die. They have seen the massacre of civilians, and so believe that civilians are fair game in this dirtiest of wars. They are monsters now, not born, but made.

The story of the 20th century Middle East is one of American action. We created Saddam Hussein, and then twice attacked him, leaving nearly two million civilians dead in the process. We created the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and bent our policies towards defending that house of cards and its precious oil. We created the Shah of Iran, then lost him, and propped up Hussein to checkmate our failure. We created Israel, a nation that has become our front line against the hostilities we manufactured in the region through our relentless military and economic meddling, and supported them militarily and financially as they committed acts of barbarism. We have paid great lip service to the plight of the Palestinians, but have always deferred to Israel.

More recently, we invaded Iraq on the pretext of destroying weapons of mass destruction which, according to recent comments by Secretary of State Powell, do not actually exist. We accused Saddam Hussein of collaborating with bin Laden, and of being involved in 9/11,

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despite the fact that bin Laden has wanted Hussein dead for years. We killed over 10,000 Iraqi civilians. We raped and tortured Iraqi men, women and children in the dungeons of Abu Ghraib. All of our poor history in the region has been distilled into that one nation, a place that now manufactures bin Laden allies by the truckload.

We created Osama bin Laden. We taught him to kill, we showed him how to destroy a superpower, and we gave him a face-first lesson in American interventionism in his back yard. Whatever predispositions towards violence and murder existed in him when he was born became honed, refined and perfected as he watched our government storm the policies, rulers and innocent people of the Middle East like so many rabbits. We have created millions more like him.

We are learning now that the game isn't much fun when the rabbits get a gun.