

**What Terrorists Need: Expanding and Deepening Blight's/MacNamara's and
Richardson's Approach to International Relations**

By John McFadden

Writers as discerning as Thomas Friedman, the New York Times editorialist, and Louise Richardson, noted terrorism expert and author of “What Terrorists Want,” mention humiliation in their analyses of the causes of terrorism. Richardson even says terrorists’ feeling that we disrespect them helps drive them to desperation, and she recommends listening to their grievances as a basis for affecting them. Similarly, in *Wilson’s Ghost*, international relations expert at Brown University, James Blight, and former Secretary of Defense, Robert MacNamara, recommend “deploying realistic empathy” in international conflicts. These suggestions are beyond the imagination of many Americans, because, as Richardson says, even just listening and trying to understand *feels like* appeasement. This automatic, intense reaction trumps all suggestions to people listening to, much less empathizing with, terrorists.

Social scientists’ and clinicians’ recent insights can help society work through this problematic reaction. Aided by seminal insights from prominent academics and clinicians who study humiliation, I have helped show why understanding feels like appeasement. It is because our impression of terrorists, like our impression of sociopaths, or people diagnosed Antisocial Personality Disorder, is that they lack remorse. Put differently, they have no feeling for their victims. Some brutal people even sneer and laugh at their victims. So these people seem obviously are beyond the reach of reason. There is no humanity in them to appeal to. To propose reasoning with them, therefore, seems not only ridiculous but grossly irresponsible. It seems like an invitation to commit more mayhem.

To many of us who actually know and sometimes help transform sociopaths, this widely believed view of people who do persistent harm no longer seems at all true. This realization leads to promising methods for reaching them and, by extension, almost all harmful people, including terrorists.

James Gilligan, the President of the International Association for Forensic Psychotherapy and former director of the Mental Health Division of the Massachusetts State Department of Corrections, and others have shown that, in fact, the opposite is true. They show in compelling detail that even psychopathic serial killers are teeming with the most intense levels of shame and remorse. Their remorse is not absent. It is hidden. Moreover, all but approximately 10 to 30 percent of incarcerated criminals, the so-called true psychopaths, now seem reachable by the natural antidote to intense humiliation, or *self-disrespect*. They are responsive to profound expressions of respect and caring.

The problem is not that these expressions do not work for many people formerly thought unreachable. The problem is that, as Richardson implies, most people so deeply and intensely believe that terrorists are unreachable that *they* seem impossible to reach. In particular, leaders who command the stages of international affairs seem unreachable. How could anyone convince most people that sociopaths and terrorists actually are human beings responsive to the same things that humanize the rest of us? Researchers in favor of rehabilitation are pessimistic about the power of even the most compelling research to change what seems an almost genetically determined belief in the basically evil nature of people who persistently and severely harm others.

A time-honored technique for changing hearts and minds is worth considering. Perhaps nothing convinces us as well as a personal story corroborated by independently

derived evidence and expert opinion. That technique has been in the forefront of attempts to change hearts and minds about alcoholics and gay and lesbian people, as well as women, children, and racial and ethnic minorities before them. When these groups were widely considered grossly unworthy of respect, obviously respect-worthy members of them successfully challenged stereotypes. Accordingly, I have undertaken a project to demonstrate how ex-parolees success stories can change hearts and minds about criminals, especially when those stories directly challenge the lynchpin view that sociopaths lack remorse and are, therefore, unresponsive to respect and caring.

The videotaped interviews with these ex-criminals and the professionals who treated them make a compelling case that these people were forced by brutal, degrading treatment to ignore and otherwise repress their feelings of remorse and concern. And when they are treated with respect and caring and feel safe, the remorse they unconsciously felt at the time of their misdeeds is volcanic. Some of them have terrorizing flashbacks to unprovoked brutal beatings they administered to strangers “for fun.”

One young man who was amazingly brutal and laughed at his devastated victims was transformed by his counselor’s humanizing reactions to him. When he left the treatment program and committed a few burglaries and then returned, his counselor, who, importantly enough, had also been a criminal, did not lecture or otherwise humiliate him. Rather, he broke down, saying, “Where did I go wrong; help me help you.” This hardened criminal was literally awestruck by this caring, respectful reaction to his misdeeds. He experienced a catharsis. He began crying and later explained that it was the first time in his life that he believed that someone genuinely cared about him. Similar

experiences eventually enabled him to sustain satisfying employment and consistent friendships.

Of course, the above elements of this case story are not, by themselves, compelling. However, thorough exposure to this young man's story and the corroborating evidence provided by the criminal justice system in which he was caught, the staff who helped him, and relatives' and friends' testimony does enable people to seriously consider what formerly had been unthinkable.

Armed with this emerging understanding, it is possible to think of ways to expand and deepen Richardson's and Blight's/MacNamara's approach to international conflict. Richardson suggests listening to terrorists' grievances, and that is a great start. However, there is in her writings no suggestion that this listening could be a basis for offering them profound expressions of respect and caring. Likewise, although MacNamara and Blight do recommend empathy, their conception of empathy is pointedly devoid of any degree of sympathy. Like many psychotherapists, they seem to have in mind that sympathetic resonance is ineffectual at best. However, imagine the ripple effect in the Middle East and throughout Islam if the next president or any of our current prominent leaders began only expressing profound sympathy for the victims of our bombs and our sanctions. Suppose Colin Powell and other retired states people formed a Coalition of the Empathic designed not only to express genuine feeling for victims but also respect, respect for the understandable aspects of the motivations of their sympathizers in terrorist and moderate Middle Eastern groups. I want a group of our leaders to say to the terrorists things like, "Of course you're desperate enough to blow yourself up in the name of the brutalized people of the Middle East; *you wouldn't be human if you didn't at least have those*

impulses.”

This last profoundly respectful comment presents a vital distinction that clinicians know well. *The worry about appeasing and condoning is satisfied by accurately and thoroughly empathizing with a person’s feelings, particularly their motives for being violent.* This is the kind of respect that clinicians who have prevented murders know well. For instance, I once advised a community jail chaplain how to react to a deeply humiliated man who was intending to blow up a department store because a manager in it had slighted him. I advised him to say, “In light of how tormented you feel, it’s no wonder that you want to destroy the manager and everything that represents him.” The chaplain reported that, after hearing these words, this man broke down crying and began seeking further sympathy for his torment. Thereafter, he never again expressed a desire to commit mayhem. The idea here again is to feel for the person’s inner nightmare as understandable motivation to commit harm.

Many commentators become obsessed with the terrorists’ other stated motivations—the triumph of Islam, the party in heaven with 72 virgins, and other grandiose, alienating motives. We should not even comment on them. They are strange distortions of more understandable aspects of their torment. But we have to convincingly show the terrorists and their sympathizers that we are human, that we can relate to their gross humiliation and general suffering. Of course, as in the case of the most damaged psychopaths, no known appeal to the sensitivities of the most damaged terrorists can work. But if we only affect moderates and some prospective recruits, the outreach would be worth the effort. Moreover, until we try to accurately and thoroughly empathize through trial and error, we really do not know how effective we can be and with whom.

Perhaps the most understandable grievance that explains terrorists is one that Bin Laden declares prominently. It is the death during the 1990s of more than 500,000 Iraqi children because of polluted water consequent to our sanction of chlorine. This was a horrible tragedy, but there is a much more enraging fact associated with it. It at least seems that no American official has ever expressed any compelling sympathy for these victims and the families and friends who survived them. When asked about this tragedy, one of our officials in the Clinton Administration offered what seems to be the standard official comment. He replied only defensively, saying that the tragedy was Hussein's fault. This is human relations at its worst. It is horrible enough that the deaths occurred, but as most civilized people say regarding sociopaths, the worst thing is that there is no remorse, no feeling for the victims. It is possible that our almost complete lack of feeling for the hundreds of thousands of victims of American interventions is what makes us seem like monsters and what most animates terrorists' most intense humiliated rage.

What is especially interesting to think about is how these ideas apply to the neo-con policy makers and corporation leaders the Left demonizes. Within the emerging social science view, they also are, of course, human beings rather than purely greedy, power hungry, and otherwise demonic. They too are in the grip of, for one thing, the demonizing view of terrorists; it also motivates their brutal measures. They are not just exploiting our fear of terrorists. They also truly believe their demonizing view of them. Our leaders are only ignorant of a truth that has escaped most of us, not evil. So they too are, at least in this aspect of their motivation, accessible to emerging understanding.

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