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Fear Versus Hope in the Fight Against Terror

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A senior political adviser to John McCain said in an interview with *Fortune* magazine that a new terrorist attack "certainly would be a big advantage to him." He also indicated that the December assassination of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto helped McCain win the Republican primary by highlighting national security concerns. Unfortunately, such observations are probably true, even though McCain's adviser retracted them and McCain denounced them. The politics of fear plays on the tortured emotion of fear itself, which causes the abused child to seek comfort with her abuser.

Fear may be the oldest and strongest emotion in our species. In forbidding forests, fear kept our forebears safe from predators, firing our hearts and brains with every uncertain shadow or noise, even if only leaves were rustling in the wind. "Better safe than sorry" is a good survival strategy. Afraid for nothing, you still live; wrongly unafraid, you die.

But "in politics, what begins in fear usually ends in folly," said the English philosopher poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Still, the politics of fear is a classically effective sales con, like the vacuum cleaner vendor who throws up dirt and convinces you how much you need his product to clean up the dirt. Think about it. More terrorist attacks and heightened fear of terrorism should logically imply failure of the War on Terrorism to cope with terrorism and lead to rejection of that failed policy. Yet here fear has failure triumph.

The politics of hope plays to a less primitive emotion. "Hope is a waking dream," said Aristotle, of things that never were but could be. It is a yearning that the future will be different from what we can reasonably expect today, and that there is more to existence than what we see in the here and now. Religion and science are rooted in hope, whatever else their uses or abuses. So is political imagination: "Men look at the world and see it as it is and ask, why?" mused Robert Kennedy, "I dream about what the world can look like and I ask, why not?"

Around the world you can hear hope knocking on history's door. In polls taken across Europe, and in many other lands, people would overwhelmingly support Barack Obama if given the chance to vote in the American election. In France, for example, parties of the right and left, and immigrants on the margins, invoke his name as their one common inspiration to pull themselves out of a perpetual sense of Crise (crisis). In conversations around the globe I've asked people on the street and some in power, "Why Obama?" The one-word answer that most comes up is "hope."

Hope that fear between peoples will lessen, and that all will be freer to pursue happiness for their families and communities. Of course, many know little about the junior Senator from Illinois, or even where or what Illinois is, but people — especially the young — project their own hopes on him as well as hopes for humanity. They see in him the face of diversity, a growing symbol that is already making it harder for Al Qaeda and associates to promote the demonization of America which drives their viral movement.

At a gathering last month of the World Federation of Scientists Permanent Monitoring Panel on Terrorism, Pakistani Senator Khurshid Ahmad, an Islamic economist and leading intellectual of modern Islamic Revivalism, was speaking to Ramamurti Rajaraman, one of India's great theoretical physicists and secular humanists. "Obama is a ray of hope in an otherwise dismal situation for three reasons: His election would be a blow to racism around the world. He embodies the aspirations of a new generation inside and outside America, which looks towards him as a harbinger of change who may respect the feelings and wishes of people. And he has been outspoken on a number of issues, which at least shows that he is open to dialogue on issues that have been ignored by the present unilateral American leadership."

"Why does the United States get to choose Obama?" Rajaraman retorted, directing a mock scold toward me: "We want him, the world needs him, and we all deserve him more than you do."

"So you think he's the Messiah?" I laughed.

"He is hope," the Indian scientist was more serious now: "Hope is better than fear and despair. This War on Terror only increases the world's despair."

Earlier in December, young people were already talking about Obama in the rowdy neighborhood of Jemaa Mezuak in Tetuan, Morocco. Five of the seven plotters of the 2004 Madrid training bombing who blew themselves up when cornered by police came from Mezuak. As with many other groups in the new wave of jihad seekers, they were soccer buddies who came from the same primary and secondary schools, chatted and traded dreams in the same cafés and barbershops, went looking for opportunity and only found the drug trade. But for these young men, and for many others from Mezuak and similar places throughout North Africa and the Middle East who seek martyrdom in Iraq, jihad against the world's greatest power and its allies turns out to be an empowering adventure that trumps all other feats of daring, and gives their camaraderie a serious cause that transcends criminality, promising their fellowship eternal respect.

Al Qaeda had nothing directly to do with Madrid. As with most forms of violent jihad in the world nowadays, the path to glory and the grave is mostly a self-organizing affair, whether in neighborhoods or chat rooms. Al Qaeda still inspires, but has no command or control over the grassroots, where much of the terrorist action is in the world today.

Would-be martyrs don't go it alone, or because they seethe with hate for others, but for glory and each other. They want to become heroes, one for all and all for one, like young friends everywhere. Only, their role models are different.

"Who is your hero (min huwa batal 'andak)?" I asked the children in Mezuak and in its mirror image, the Principe Alfonso barrio of the nearby Spanish enclave of Ceuta. Number one was Ronaldinho, the Brazilian-born star of the Barcelona soccer team. Osama bin Laden came up number three. Sandwiched between the athlete and the terrorist was "The Terminator." About the Terminator's subsequent career as Governor of California, the children neither knew nor cared. And pushing through at number four? Barack Obama, the new action hero on the block. Could Obama, then, rise to become the Terminator of terrorism and the anti-Osama?

In Washington last year I was briefing White House staffers on similar findings (before Obama came on the scene) when a young woman who worked for the Vice President's office sternly said: "Don't these young people realize that decisions they make are their responsibility, and that if they choose violence against us, we're going to bomb them?"

"Bomb them?" I asked. "In Madrid? In London? In Morocco?" So when I went back to Washington to brief National Security Council and Homeland Security staff earlier this year, I went armed with arguments about support for soccer teams and action heroes, and even brought comic books. I wanted to show that bombing doesn't come close to convincing with the kind of positive messages you can find in a sport team or a commercial action adventure series called "The 99," where young Muslim superheroes dodge bullets and bullies to aggressively "fight for peace" with "multicultural initiatives" and "worldwide relief efforts." And I argued that hopeful but risky adventure beats moderation (another touted cure for terrorism) any day in the world of the young — a world which longs for opportunity and change.

Marc Sageman, a forensic psychiatrist and former CIA case officer who recently wrote about Leaderless Jihad, commented after a previous trip we made together to Tetuan: "A soccer star or Osama bin Laden: this is the dilemma the West is facing. There is a dearth of local role models in Muslim countries and the slums surrounding major European cities. Now, the local heroes to imitate are terrorists."

"So who is your hero," I asked Muhsein, a young man named who works with children in Mezuak. "When I was an adolescent it was John Travolta (an American actor) and Jacques Brel (a French singer), but now I have no heroes. We live in a political world, but political people are not good. Osama Bin Laden is not so good and Colin Powell is not so good. Barack Obama? J'espère bien mais je (ne) crois pas (I do hope but don't believe)."

Rarely do youth today cite « political people » as heroes. In Europe, the only "political" names you'll hear repeated are the warrior "Che Guevara" and the peacemaker "Nelson Mandela," and a few "John Kennedy." But who is there today for global youth?

Barack Obama sports hope, but does it truly have the audacity of Abe Lincoln's dream to turn the next generation of enemies into friends? It won't happen by pushing policy from the top down, but by attracting people to make their way towards one another from the bottom up. Americans understand that Obama makes America attractive, but they wonder about "experience." One thing sure, the experience of his campaign and its success so far are much more in tune with possibilities for competing against the spread of grassroots terrorism than is current U.S. policy. It is by inspiring grassroots action that can snowball across traditional social, political and religious boundaries that the future will be won.

The McCain campaign wants the American people to believe Barack Obama is the terrorists' candidate: "I think it is very clear who Hamas wants to be the next president of the United States ... I think that the people should understand that I will be Hamas' worst nightmare," said John McCain earlier this year. Enough of nightmares already.

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