The Baffling Era of Religious Suicide-Massacres

By [James A. Haught](#)

Osama bin Laden achieved a remarkable feat: He mobilized the power of religion to spur devout young men to kill themselves in order to murder defenseless strangers. Grotesquely, the suicide-killers felt they were performing holy acts that would please God and assure them martyr rewards in paradise.

The annals of faith-based killing are long: human sacrifice, the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch-hunts, Reformation wars, drowning of Anabaptists, jihads, pogroms against Jews, China's Taiping Rebellion, Mexico's Cristero War, cult horrors, abortion clinic murders, and many modern ethnic conflicts fueled by "religious tribalism." A new phase was led by bin Laden, who orchestrated the 21st-century phenomenon of Islamic suicide-bombing. Mercifully, his personal chapter ended when Navy Seals stormed his Asian hideout on May 1.

The modern Islamic "cult of death" - the worst menace of current times - baffles most Westerners. Logical minds cannot comprehend why idealistic young men, and a few women, volunteer to sacrifice their lives to slaughter unsuspecting, unarmed folks. It makes no sense. Pundit Anthony Lewis wrote: "There is no way to reason with people who think they will go directly to heaven if they kill Americans." Columnist William Safire said the volunteers do it because their "normal survival instinct is replaced with a pseudo-religious fantasy of a killer's self-martyrdom leading to an eternity in paradise surrounded by adoring virgins." Columnist David Brooks wrote that the bizarre phenomenon is "about massacring people while in a state of spiritual loftiness."

These fanatics lack normal empathy for fellow humans. While in foreign lands or amid dissimilar ethnic groups, they don't see surrounding families as affectionate mothers, fathers and children, but as "infidels" deserving death. If the suicide-killers ever acquire nuclear devices, the unthinkable will be upon humanity.

The raid that ended bin Laden culminated a three-decade saga of "blowback." Inadvertently, the Reagan-Bush White House in the 1980s unwittingly helped ignite the Muslim terror movement that now hurts America. Here's the record:

In the late 1970s, radical reformers seized power in Afghanistan and created a Western-style government that began educating girls. Horrified, Muslim extremists and armed tribes rebelled. One of the rebel leaders was warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an extremist known for throwing acid on unveiled schoolgirls while he was in college.

Such mujahideen (holy warriors) were on the brink of toppling the new Afthan government when the Soviet Union sent its Red Army in 1979 to suppress the uprising. Globally, the Cold War was seething. To damage the Soviets, the Reagan administration secretly sent the CIA to arm, train and pay the rebel tribes to kill Russians. Hekmatyar's group got millions of U.S. dollars.

Meanwhile, ardent young Muslims from many lands rushed to Afghanistan to join the "holy war." One was Osama bin Laden, 17th son of a rich Saudi contractor who had a dozen wives. A pious Wahabbi Muslim, bin Laden used his wealth to recruit and pay fighters.

The combined CIA-zealot resistance worked. The Russians were driven out and Afghanistan's modern government was crushed. Warlords like Hekmatyar took over, but soon fought among each other. Then an Islamic student group, the Taliban, seized control and created a cruel theocracy that stoned women to death and inflicted other extreme Puritanical strictures.

Covertly, bin Laden assembled numerous former Afghan volunteers into a shadowy international network, al-Qaida, dedicated to waging jihad (holy war) against the West. His suicidal operatives helped kill U.S. soldiers in Somalia in 1993, blow up two U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998, and bomb the USS Cole in 2000.

Bin Laden issued a fatwa (sacred edict) calling on "every Muslim who believes in God and hopes for reward to obey God's command to kill the Americans and plunder their possessions wherever he finds them and whenever he can." He was indicted by U.S. authorities and put on the international "most wanted" lists.

Then 19 al-Qaida suicide volunteers perpetrated the historic atrocity of Sept. 11, 2001, when they hijacked airliners and crashed them into U.S. landmarks, killing 3,000 Americans. It was the most horrifying day in the memory of most U.S. residents.

The holy killers left behind a testament they had shared among themselves, saying they were doing it for God: "Know that the gardens of paradise are waiting for you in all their beauty," they assured each other, "and the women of paradise are waiting, calling out, 'Come hither, friend of God.' They have dressed in their most beautiful clothing."

Idiocy. Infantilism. It's sickening to realize that 3,000 unsuspecting Americans died because of this adolescent male fantasy. To believe that

God wants mass murder is lunacy. As famed British biologist Richard Dawkins wrote:

> The 19 men of 9/11 - having washed, perfumed themselves and shaved their whole bodies in preparation for the martyr's paradise - believed they were performing the highest religious duty. By the lights of their religion, they were as good as it is possible to be. They were not poor, downtrodden, oppressed or psychotic; they were well-educated, sane and well-balanced, and, as they thought, supremely good. But they were religious, and that provided all the justification they needed to murder and destroy.

The mastermind of this crackpottery is dead in a hail of Navy Seals gunfire. But the suicide-martyr phenomenon he fostered probably will continue impelling idealistic young men to sacrifice their lives in massacres.

Bin Laden wasn't the sole creator of the Islamic cult of death. His Egyptian partner, Ayman al-Zawahiri, pioneered it in the 1990s. Since then, many far-flung Muslim extremist groups adopted suicide-bombing - often using it on fellow Muslims of opposing sects, or against disapproved Islamic governments. Some researchers list as many as 17,000 Muslim terror attacks since the 9/11 horror, with a total body count beyond 60,000 victims. That's an average of five murder missions per day - so many that news media ignore smaller assaults. The phenomenon has a boundless supply of righteous-feeling volunteers eager to throw away their lives to kill for God and their faith.

As Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg said: "For good people to do evil things, it takes religion."