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Osama bin Laden's Gauntlet

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Osama bin Laden's latest videotape magnifies a moral dilemma at the heart of U.S. foreign policy: Do you or don't you negotiate with terrorists?

Each side has powerful arguments. Each agrees that terrorism is morally repugnant and must be dealt with firmly and immediately. But how? Do you talk with them, or destroy them?

Those favoring destruction argue that discussion only emboldens terrorists to ramp up their criminality. They point out that negotiation puts self-appointed groups on an equal footing with the nations they are attacking. That way, they say, terrorists get a wider forum for their propaganda through news coverage, raising their esteem among followers and strengthening their support. So terrorists must simply be hunted down and killed.

Those calling for negotiation argue for the health and safety of those who, kidnapped by terrorists, then become objects for ransom. They believe that successful negotiations may help dampen future attacks on innocent people. Finally, they observe that terrorism is a system designed to send messages from the formerly unheard, who in desperation launch attention-getting attacks to make their grievances known. So negotiations reduce desperation, quell violence, and give terrorists something to live for rather than something to die for.

Osama bin Laden, grasping this dilemma, uses his latest videotape to nudge us toward negotiation. Having realized that publicity is the oxygen of terrorism (as Margaret Thatcher put it), bin Laden knows that if he wants to continue playing in the terrorist game, he must continue finding ways to be heard. So he's using global media networks -- the most powerful manifestations of globalization in the world -- to fight the very globalization he despises. With the lifeline of al Jazeera, the Arabic language television producer based in Qatar, he's guaranteed a global airing whenever he makes a few minutes of video. Without such publicity, he risks receding into history as a cartoon character rather than a real person -- losing not only his ability to shape world affairs but his authority over his protectors, who might betray him whenever he shows weakness. He seems to know, in other words, that global publicity is not simply an option. It's essential to his survival.

The timing of this latest release also suggests a careful public relations strategy. Not only did the tape appear on the eve of the presidential election, but it also got released on a Friday afternoon -- just in time for the evening news, but without much time for news programs to feature responses from the campaigns or analysis from the commentators. Result: During the period that most viewers heard about this story, stations had little to show except the tape itself, played over and over without rebuttal. Releasing it on a Friday also ensured that, with viewers paying less attention to news over a weekend, bin Laden's version of the story remained in many people's heads for several days before they got back to their Monday morning routines.

In the segments so far made public, the tape is relatively free from the language of Islam or the apocalyptic vision of doom. Like earlier tapes, it contains threats. But those can be averted, bin Laden says, by countries that take the right steps. And unlike earlier tapes that were long on ideological rant and short on invitations to communicate, this one suggests he's now listening for a response. Is he trying to follow in the footsteps of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, and Libyan leader Mohammar Qaddafi, who each morphed from terrorist into politician, abandoned murder for negotiation, and won grudging forgiveness from some world leaders?

If bin Laden is seeking a similar transfiguration, he's misread the parallelism. For all their murderous pasts, Arafat, Mugabe, and Qaddafi didn't kill thousands of Americans on U.S. soil. So bin Laden's remarks, although clearly aimed at a U.S. audience, seem unlikely to shift the argument from the "destroy" to the "negotiate" side of the debate. If he wanted to help oust President George Bush, he may have done the opposite. His visage alone may swing votes away from Sen. John Kerry, who (say the polls) is running behind Bush on issues of national security.

But the most intriguing question is this: Did bin Laden have no choice but to thrust himself into the political arena? For people who, like him, want to change the world, the lure of the global media is irresistibly seductive. If he really wants change, he may already be fretting at the narrowness of his current confines (wherever they are) and at the invisibility of everything but his stereotype. If he wants to talk rather than fight, will he be able to resist the temptation to become entangled in the negotiations? Will he be tempted to let the media draw him out into the open -- where he could be dispatched by unforgiving Western governments or done in by subordinates who wanted him to fight rather than talk?

The dilemma of terrorism, in other words, is not simply for the West to debate. Bin Laden himself seems to be getting pulled into it. As he throws down the gauntlet for the West, he may in fact be throwing it down for himself. His challenge: how to call for negotiations without falling for the siren song of the media.