The Fantasy War

by: Ronald L. Dart

The war on terror is never far from our thoughts these days. The latest round of bombings and arrests in London have given us all a lot to think about. The problem is it's not at all clear to me that everyone is thinking straight on this. You know, there are people who see things earlier than others. Winston Churchill was one of these people. Churchill saw Hitler and the Nazis for what they really were and the danger they represented, far ahead of anyone else. I think one of the reasons was that he was willing to call evil by its name. He wasn't a native pessimist, he was just a realist. He was painted by the Nazi propaganda machine as a warmonger and some Britons basically agreed with them. But he was right when nearly everyone else was wrong. Now it's not that other people didn't see the same things that he saw. They were just not willing to admit what they saw. In his book "The Gathering Storm," Winston is kind to those who did not see things his way. Being a rather generous statesman, he recognized how easily well-intentioned people could miss the signs that clearly revealed to him where Hitler was going and what ought to be done about it. There were two things, I think, that kept the British from seeing it. One was the terrible experience of the Great War, which no one wanted to repeat. And the other was an excess of nice. The British are truly a civilized people and they just didn't want to believe that anyone could be as duplicitous as was Hitler. They assumed that Hitler was a statesman; that he was just another Prime Minister, President, ruler of a country, like Neville Chamberlain was. But, they paid for that, dearly.

It's not easy to explain why visionaries like Churchill see what is coming. In a way it's easier to understand why the vast bulk of the British population did not. Lee Harris, writing in the August 2002 edition of Policy Review, offered some valuable insight. He observed that "know your enemy is well worn maxim, but one that is easier to say than to do." And the reasons are fairly obvious. "If you are my enemy," he said, "it's unlikely that I will go very much out of my way to learn to see things from your point of view. Then, when you add the profound differences; cultural, religious, psychological, between the West and the Arab world, well really it would be a marvel if we did know our enemy." Harris went on to say, "When confronted by a culturally exotic enemy, our first instinct is to understand such conduct in terms that are familiar to us. Terms that makes sense to us in the light of our own fund of experience. We assume that if our enemy is doing a thing, it must be for reasons that are comprehensible in terms of our universe."

And, that's pretty much what we have done in response to 9/11 and some are still doing in the wake of the more recent attacks in Britain. For us, we called 9/11 our Pearl

Harbor. An act of war, and since that day we have responded accordingly. But what if that's not the best way to go? What if this is something entirely different from Pearl Harbor? And was, at the time, something other than an act of war, at least of war, like we traditionally understand it. What might that be, you ask? Well, first of all, I fully agree with the President that we are at war. But it's a war totally unlike any we have ever fought before. And for different reasons, reasons which are totally unfamiliar to us. Well, if it's pointless for us to try to understand this conduct in terms familiar to us, where do we look to understand it? Lee Harris pointed out some things I hadn't considered. He said, "The common identification of 9/11 as an act of war arises from a deeper unquestioned assumption. An act of violence on the magnitude of 9/11 can only have been intended to further some kind of political objective. What this political objective might be, or whether it's worthwhile, these are all secondary considerations. But, surely, people do not commit such acts unless they are trying to achieve some kind of recognizably political purpose."

And this was the thing that drove us all crazy after 9/11. What on earth was the political purpose of such a terrible, destructive event? For me, not long after the event, the most logical explanation was that Osama Bin Laden was trying to become the first Caliph of the Islamic religion in several hundred years. A Caliph is the ruler over all Muslims, everywhere. Now this is impossible, of course. The Arab people have never been united at any point in their history except under the force of arms.

Never mind the impossibility of this fantasy; it was real enough to Osama for him to do the things that he did. And right here, we touch on the theory that Harris is advancing. He advanced a theory about 9/11 that was completely foreign to most people at the time. Let me see if I can tackle the underlying theme of the view he's asking us to consider. Harris coins a new descriptive phrase, *Fantasy Ideology*. It forms the title of the piece in question. He said, "It's a common human weakness to wish to make more of our contribution to the world than the world is prepared to acknowledge. And it's our fantasy world that allows us to fill this gap. But normally, for most of us at least, this fantasy world stays relatively hidden. Indeed, a common criterion of our mental health is the extent to which we are able to keep our fantasies firmly under our watchful control. In other words, we know the difference between our imagination and reality. And we never lose track of that, even though we fill in the gaps of the world's failure to recognize our worth by fantasy." Harris defines a fantasy ideology as, "political and ideological symbols used, not for political purposes, but entirely for the benefit of furthering a specific personal, or collective, fantasy."

He went on to say, "For people who engage in this kind of behavior, the people upon whom the outrage is perpetrated are nothing but stage props in the fantasy." And as I read that, I recalled an instance, not that far back in the past. Do you remember the case of the teenage American boy who was found guilty of vandalism in Singapore and was caned for his trouble? Do you remember what his crime was? He took cans of spray paint and went around spray painting messages on people's expensive cars. Now why did he do that? Was there any gain to it? No. Did it make a political statement? No. Well then, why did he do it? Possibly because, like too many teenage vandals, he may have been acting out a private

fantasy; see what a bad boy I can be? There was no gain to him. There was terrible frustration on the part of people who got their cars sprayed. It was a total loss with no gain for anyone, but what could his fantasy possible have been? Well, the kid was the son of well-to-do parents, perhaps he fantasized that he could have some kind of power over others to affect them or their property. One thing's for sure, it wasn't about the cars or their owners, it was about him and how doing that act of vandalism made him feel. Well, I think caning was an altogether appropriate punishment for him in those circumstances because that should make him feel bad for at least a little period of time.

Now, applying this to the terrorists, Harris argues that the Islamic terrorists don't care whether we are persuaded or not. Nothing matters to them, except their fantasy of themselves. He said, "The power of the fantasists is entirely traceable to the fact that, for him, the other is always an object and never a subject." A subject, after all, has a will of his own, his own desires, and his own agenda. But an object, well, we don't care, we just act on this object. In some cases, the object is people. Now, there are two classic examples from history that are cited here.

There are two classic examples in history, concerning Lee Harris' theory. They are, Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. Now the war that we had to fight because of these thugs was very real. It was not a fantasy in and of itself, but it had to be fought because of the fantasies that these men brought on the world scene. Both of them had fantasies of greatness, Mussolini had a fantasy of the revival of the Roman Empire. Hitler had a fantasy of the creation of a thousand year Reich under the super race of Nordic people. Now, here is another thing that we must own up to if we're going to understand this. The fantasy in each of these cases became collective. In other words, a fantasy of the group, perhaps even of the nation, who bought into the fantasy of the leader. Now, here is another important thing to understand, as Lee Harris puts it. "This theme of reviving ancient glory is an important key to understanding *Fantasy Ideology*. For I suggest that fantasy ideologies tend to be the domain of those groups that history has passed by or rejected. Groups that feel they are under attack from forces which, while more powerful, perhaps, than they are, are nonetheless inferior in terms of true virtue."

Now, you know, it doesn't take a lot of imagination to see this pattern in much of the Muslim world. The world has passed them by. The world has rejected them and they feel that while these other places are more powerful, that we are inferior to them in terms of true virtue. Now, about Italy and Mussolini. When you get a chance, take out your atlas and take a look at Italy and then take a look at Ethiopia. What possible political or economic gain was there to Italy in conquering Ethiopia? Nothing noticeable; the Ethiopians were, in fact, merely a stage prop in the Romans' fantasy of glory. Harris said, "The purpose of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia was to prove to the Italians themselves that they were conquers."

Now, you can see easily in this kind of situation there's no point in Ethiopia attempting to negotiate. There was nothing they could have offered, there were no deals they

could have made because what Italy needed was to conquer a country to play out their fantasy of being a conquering empire. Ethiopia was a stage prop, they were an object. They were not a subject with thoughts and desires of their own, who cares what the Ethiopians want? The whole thing was about the Italians. Following on, Harris concluded this. He said, "The terror attack of 9/11 was not designed to make us alter our policy. It was crafted for its affect on the terrorists themselves. It was a spectacular piece of theater. The targets were chosen by Al Qaeda, not through military calculation in contrast, for example, to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, but, entirely because they stood as symbols of American power universally recognized on the Arab street. They were gigantic props in a grandiose spectacle in which the collective fantasy of radical Islam was brought vividly to life. And, you know, I have an awful time arguing with that. It seems fairly clear that these targets were not military. And I remember at the time, wondering why on earth they didn't follow through? They could have really given us some misery if they had hit a couple of refineries, if they had blown up some bridges, they interfered with our communications, but they didn't do anything more than that. The answer, they were looking for symbols.

I think I did a program some time after 9/11 asking what many other people were asking at the time, why do they hate us? I'm now coming to believe that that's a pointless question. We are merely stage props in the fantasy world of Arab glory and it has nothing to do with whether they like us or hate us or want to hurt us; we are objects of their fantasies. As I work my way through Harris' rather long, but very worthwhile article, I found myself wondering where I would find people like these in the Bible. Now, there are those who disagree with Harris' assessment and it's fair to question it. His article was helpful to me because it brought something to mind that I had mostly overlooked or forgotten.

There are two Psalms that speak of a singular category of people, they are back to back. They are people with a mindset exactly like that that we have been talking about. The first of these is the tenth Psalm. It begins, *"Why do you stand for an awful Lord? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? The wicked in his pride does persecute the poor."* Now, when you stop and think about this for a moment, there's a huge question to be answered there. What is the motive of this category of persons the Psalmist calls the wicked? Well, it's not financial gain. These are poor people they are persecuting. It can't be political power because the poor have no power. The answer, it's clear enough, it isn't done because of the poor it is done purely for the effect it has on the doer. It helps him overcome a sense of powerlessness. Why does he persecute the poor? Because he can. If he tried it with the rich and powerful he'd be taking a much greater risk. And I wonder, in fact, if Osama has occasionally wondered if he overplayed his hand. He did not really, you know, expect the Trade Towers to actually fall, they were just going to plow into them and kill a few people and go on. But it played into his fantasy that God then brought the towers down after they had done their part in the evil deed. Later, in the same Psalm, verse 8, *"He, that is the wicked, sits in the lurking places of the village. In the secret places does he murder the innocent. His eyes are secretly set against the poor. He lies in and waits secretly as a lion in his den; he lies in wait to catch the poor. He then catches the poor when he draws them into his net."* Now, this has been a technique of terror from the start. Murder the innocent. And I

was kind of stunned to realize this, that it really doesn't matter so much, who they kill. It's just that blood must be shed. It's an apt description of what evil men are doing in Iraq right now. They like to kill soldiers well enough, but they kill far more innocent civilians, including children. Why? Because they can. Because it's easier. It has nothing to do with their political objectives. It has solely to do with the shedding of blood, of murdering the innocent. You know, this has been the object of Palestinian terrorism for a very long time. And it doesn't seem to matter who gets killed as long as blood gets shed. It's something like an ancient blood feud. Negotiation is pointless because in their fantasy, the Palestinians see Israel driven into the sea and destroyed. What do they want? They want the Jews to die. It's as simple as that.

Now, the next Psalm has not departed from the theme. Psalm 11, verse 5, *"The Lord tries the righteous, but the wicked. And him that loves violence His soul hates. Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and a horrible tempest it shall be the portion of their cup. For the righteous Lord loves righteousness; his countenances behold the upright."* Now you know, this raining of fires, snares, fire and brimstone and the horrible tempest sounds a lot like the fire bombing of Dresden in World War II. The firestorms that developed there were staggering in their intensity and the damage that they've done to the lives that they took were enormous. The same thing happened in the firebombing of Tokyo where the houses were made out of paper, cardboard, and dry wood. I mean, that place went up like a tinderbox. It sucked people into the vortex of firestorms. Then there's Hiroshima and then there's Nagasaki. You know, wickedness is like an incurable virus. You can't negotiate with it. You have to eradicate it. There are several Psalms that speak of the wicked; their motivation and their end. But there's one more in particular that I want to call to your attention.

The Psalm is Number 92, verse 5, *"How great are your works, O Lord, your thoughts are very deep. A senseless man has no knowledge nor does a stupid man understand this. That when the wicked sprout up like grass and all who did iniquity flourished it was only that they might be destroyed forevermore."* Now, Christian people have a hard time coming to terms with this. We would prefer to convert the wicked, to turn them around, to heal them, to make productive human beings out of them. But you know, the Bible does not hold out any hope of that. In the Bible, the only solution offered for the wicked is total destruction; even children? Regrettably, sometimes, yes. And that forces me to another Psalm that makes me consider something that I don't really much want to face and you probably don't either. It's the 58th Psalm, *"Do you indeed speak righteousness, o congregation? Do you judge uprightly, o you sons of men? Yea, in heart you work wickedness. You weigh the violence of your hands in the Earth. The wicked are estranged from the womb. They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies."* Now, again, that's hard to deal with. So early, so immediate, so far back, now, I don't know, maybe the Psalmist is speaking figuratively. He's making one thing very clear. That right from the beginning of the decisions that a child makes. The wicked are making wicked decisions. And this is the only way to understand some of the terrible events in the Old Testament.

Now, when we weigh all of this in the balances, it's clear. That when we fight against the wicked, we fight against an enemy who has no strategic purpose in anything he does. Whose actions have significance, only in terms of his own *fantasy ideology.* Harris brought out one more interesting idea. He said this, "In the initial aftermath of 9/11, President Bush continually spoke of Al Qaeda, not as terrorists, but as evil doers. A term for which he was widely derided by those who found it offensively simple minded and childish. Evil doers, after all, are characters out of fairy tales, not real life." But, Harris went on, whether by instinct or by cunning, "Bush struck exactly the right note. The evil doer of the fairy tale, after all, is not motivated in his conduct by his wish to change the way other people act. Other people exist in his eyes only as an opportunity to do evil."

But, Harris goes astray right here. Because Bush did not borrow that term from fairy tales. By now, I would think that everyone understands that Bush reads the Bible nearly every day of his life. And in that Bible, in these Psalms, he comes across the word evildoers again and again. He even finds it in the New Testament, in 1 Peter Chapter 2, verse 13. Where Peter writes, *"Submit yourself to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake whether to the King as supreme or to governors, as sent to them that are sent, by God for the punishment of evildoers. And for the praise of them that do well."* So, even here, in the New Testament, we recognize that the ordinances of government are for the purpose of the punishment of who? Evildoers. Now the President read the Bible and he knew there is a category of people who can be called evildoers, or the wicked. I've heard people say, for example, that pedophiles are incurable. If they're a pedophile they'll always be a pedophile. If so, then they are in the category, Biblically speaking, of evildoers who should be destroyed. Serial killers, are they fantasists? Do they have a fantasy of themselves and their power over other people? Don't doubt it for a minute. "Rather than interpreting 9/11 as if it were a traditional act of war," Harris said, "Bush instinctively saw it for what it was, the acting out of a demented fantasy."

There is one advantage to looking at these people as evildoers. Combat with evildoers is not your war in the traditional sense. You don't make treaties with evildoers. You don't try to adjust your conduct to make them like you. You do not try to see the world from the evildoer's point of view. You do not try to appease them or persuade them or reason with them. Well, what do you do? Well Harris suggests, "You try, on the contrary, to outwit them, to vanquish them, to kill them. You behave with them in the same manner you would deal with a fatal epidemic. You try to wipe it out. Once we understand this," he said, "many of our current perplexities will find themselves resolved. They are pseudo-issues like debates over the legitimacy of racial profiling which everybody talks so much about these days. Forget about it. Does anyone in his right mind," Harris asks, "object to screening somebody entering this country for signs of the plague, or quarantining those who have contracted it? Or closely monitoring precisely those populations that are most at risk? No. It is a war, but it is a war against a disease, a plague. There is no solution but to defeat it. To wipe it out, like smallpox and polio. There's no question that in the last century the *fantasy ideologies* of Mussolini and Hitler killed millions and millions of innocent men, women and children. It was a plague."