

Kill 'Em All Conservatives

Pro-war pundits say: give Muslims liberty or give them death.

By Justin Logan

CONSERVATIVES WHO HAVE aligned themselves with the neocons' Middle East strategy are getting frustrated. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Nation-building and international social work have not traditionally been the stuff of conservative foreign policy. This whole business about democracy and the universal thirst for it seems unnatural. War, after all, is supposed to be about killing your enemies. But in the war currently raging in Iraq, who are we supposed to be killing?

The answer, to the befuddlement of many pro-war conservatives, is almost nobody. Unless we were to level the place entirely, killing is not going to solve our problems in Iraq. As the U.S. military has grown weary of pointing out, there is no military solution to the problems on the ground. But wars are supposed to have military solutions, and the fact that this one does not isn't sitting well with many hawkish conservatives.

National Review's John Derbyshire described his own reasoning for supporting the war and eventual disillusionment with it. Explaining that his initial support for the invasion was "really just punitive," Derbyshire admitted that he doesn't "in fact, give a fig about the Iraqis." But trying to keep two sides apart in a civil war was never part of the deal for hawks like Derbyshire.

The "to hell with them hawks," as Derbyshire's fellow travelers have come to be called, still yearn for this war to become a conservative war—a war of annihilating opposing militaries, of unconditional surrender, of victory and

ticker-tape parades. These conservatives have begun to wonder: why don't we just kill them all?

The first signs of this bloodthirsty ethos emerged during the outrage that most of us suffered after Sept. 11. Ann Coulter explained that we ought not concern ourselves with "locating the exact individuals directly involved in this particular terrorist attack." In fact, she argued, "those responsible include anyone anywhere in the world who smiled in response to the annihilation of patriots." Coulter went on to invoke favorably the carpet-bombing of German cities during World War II.

Most of us felt something similar to Coulter during the immediate period after Sept. 11. But since that time, conservatives have grown frustrated with the complexity of counterinsurgency in the Islamic world. The confusing and ever shifting alliances and tactics coupled with wily opponents like Moqtada al-Sadr have made the conservative commentariat as uncomfortable as the stereotypically stuffy Brit trying to make his way through a chaotic Arab souk. Coulter, hardly sobered by the five years since 9/11, thinks it's time to just bring in the big guns: she told a whooping, supportive audience at Sean Hannity's "Freedom Concert" that we could "carpet-bomb [the Iranians] so they can't build a transistor radio. And then it doesn't matter if they have the nuclear material."

Coulter may be an extreme example, but she isn't alone. Take the February 2005 remarks of Republican Congress-

man Sam Johnson. Playing to a conservative audience, he argued that in the Middle East, "Syria is the problem." And what to do? "I can fly an F-15, put two nukes on 'em, and I'll make one pass. We won't have to worry about Syria anymore." Johnson's statement—which he would later protest was a joke—and his utter lack of evidence for the argument that Syria was the source of our troubles were both alarming, but perhaps still more troubling was the venue: Suncreek United Methodist Church. What would Aquinas—let alone Jesus—say? Something about the sanctity of human life?

Trawling the darker swamps of right-wing talk radio, one can find still more disturbing comments. Michael Savage, who has made a living from notoriety, has remarked in passing that we might "kill 100 million [Muslims], then there'll be 900 million of them. I mean, would you rather die—would you rather us die than them?" For Savage, "smallpox in a blanket ... was nothing compared to what I'd like to see done to these people." Moving more mainstream, Glenn Beck, a CNN host, worried that if "the barbarians" triumph in the Middle East, "we're going to have to nuke the whole place." Bill O'Reilly's geopolitical inclinations led him to conclude that "in a sane world, every country would unite against Iran and blow it off the face of the Earth."

It isn't just talk-radio bomb throwers and cable-news shouting heads, either. Mainstream conservative opinion makers are wondering if we have the steel to slaughter our enemies in sufficient

numbers. Fancying himself the Herman Kahn of the war on terror, John Podhoretz wondered in the pages of the *New York Post* whether “liberal democracies have now evolved to a point where they can no longer wage war effectively because they have achieved a level of humanitarian concern for others that dwarfs any really cold-eyed pursuit of their own national interests.” Podhoretz couldn’t hide his admiration for the willingness of Allied leaders during World War II to “inflict mass casualties on civilians” so that they could “indicate a cold-eyed singleness of purpose that helped break the will and the back of their enemies.” He closed with a dark question: whether the “moral greatness of our civilization ... is endangering the future of our civilization as well.”

Moving from the crude to the sublime, the Hoover Institution’s Shelby Steele found himself wondering why we are losing, given that “no one ... believes that America lacks the raw power to defeat this insurgency if it wants to.” He found a psychological explanation: white guilt. Steele believes that it is the lingering guilt of Western imperialism that prevents us from really taking the gloves off when it comes to brown people: “the white West—like Germany after the Nazi defeat—lives in a kind of secular penitence in which the slightest echo of past sins brings down withering condemnation.”

It would be comforting, but erroneous, to brush off this phenomenon as a fringe subset. It isn’t. Between them, Coulter, Savage, and O’Reilly have sold several million books. They reflect a genuine segment of the conservative base that is increasingly frustrated with the restraint of the Bush administration and the ambiguous nature of the war on terror. Author Michael Massing, remarking on his reporting on right-wing talk radio for the *New York Review of Books*, described his shock at what he heard there:

I was like an anthropologist going out into a foreign land and listening in to those raving right-wing talk shows. It was extraordinary what I learned about how these shows worked, about what they’re saying. You can see how the perceptions of many people in America are molded by them. ... I heard Rush Limbaugh, Laura Ingraham, and Michael Savage say things that made my jaw drop, because of their ugliness, inaccuracy, or extremity.

And one of the ugly ideas that Coulter, Savage, and O’Reilly have been cultivating is the notion that we might just need to attack the Islamic world more viciously and more broadly. In their book *Why Not Kill Them All? The Logic and Prevention of Mass Political Murder*, Daniel Chirot and Clark McCauley describe the four main motives leading to a “kill them all” mentality: convenience, revenge, “simple fear,” and fear of pollution. All of these motives are present to some degree in the purveyors of that mentality today.

In terms of convenience, Chirot and McCauley explain that the aggressors perceive that an “indigenous population is troublesome and cannot be controlled or dispossessed.” At the same time, the population is “militarily weak, so it is killed or expelled.” As for revenge, almost half of all Americans believe that Saddam Hussein was behind the 9/11 attacks.

This perception of an abstract and unitary Islamic enemy has been fueled by the disinformation campaign of neoconservative commentators and the Bush administration. Islamic actors that cause us trouble, we’re told, are part of “Islamic fascism”—which includes a whole host of disparate actors who have in common one thing: Islam. If another attack should occur on U.S. soil, the conflation of the war on terrorism into a clash of civilizations could become all too real.

In terms of simple fear, Chirot and McCauley explain that “nothing stimulates the genocidal impulse as quickly as fear of extermination.” Note that many of the arguments for killing them all are made in the course of explaining that the threat from the Islamic world is existential: it’s us or them. And as for fear of pollution, the authors invoke a “sentiment that a particular group is so polluting that its very presence creates a mortal danger.” All of the four motives appear to some degree in the current climate.

Thankfully, there’s an exceedingly low chance that anything resembling mass political murder would be perpetrated by the United States on the Muslim world. As Chirot and McCauley point out, there are a number of mitigating factors, including international codes of honor and, simply, liberal ideology. The authors marvel nonetheless at just “how easy it is to link hatred of the enemy with an impulse to kill them all—easy even for individuals raised in a developed country with a culture of individual and civil rights.”

To believe ourselves immune to the frustrations of national struggle that have yielded massacres in the past is to take American exceptionalism too far. America incinerated countless innocent Germans and Japanese during World War II, and to the extent we accept the extreme narrative of commentators such as Norman Podhoretz—that we are currently engaged in World War IV—we inflate the nature of the enemy to such staggering heights that we would indeed need to consider such repugnant measures.

Although it is not likely that the “kill them all” impulse will turn into actual policy, it may be used obliquely to rationalize defeat. Donald Rumsfeld has begun to advance the narrative that there is no strategic or material shortcoming in our war policy; rather it is a question of will:

History has shown time and again that if Americans have the patience and the perseverance to see an effort through, no matter how hard or how difficult, that we prevail.

President Bush makes a similar argument, admitting that the endless occupation of Iraq is “straining the psyche of our country.” The emerging narrative is that, if—or, more accurately, when—we lose, it will be a failure not of strategy or vision, but rather a failure of the American people—for giving up too easily. If we only had the steely-eyed bloodlust that war requires, we could have won.

Spencer Ackerman recently described in *The New Republic* how this happened during the Vietnam War, and it is easy enough to see how the lesson could be transferred to the current conflict. Conservatives, in Ackerman’s telling, believed

if only Johnson would allow his generals to prosecute the war with sufficient brutality—mining the Haiphong Harbor, destroying the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and Cambodia—it could be won.

The more the American public came to oppose the war itself, the more the dead-end supporters believed that a desperate, scorched-earth policy could be the only way to snatch victory before the waffling of war opponents sapped the national will.

Either way, in the unlikely event that the Bush administration were to escalate in the Middle East or if the “we should have done more killing” narrative is used to explain defeat there, conservative supporters of the war, led by conservative pundits, are finding themselves wondering quietly—and not so quietly: why not just kill them all? ■

Justin Logan is a foreign-policy analyst at the Cato Institute.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Peter Hoekstra has been receiving information reports from an Iranian exile source in Paris

who is believed to be Fereidoun Mahdavi, a close associate of discredited Iran/Contra fabricator Manucher Ghorbanifar. Hoekstra, who has stated his contempt for the American intelligence community, has been using Vaughn Forest, a Hill staffer who has a reputation for right-wing activism, as a channel to the Ghorbanifar circle. Hoekstra recently made a trip to Paris with Forest to meet the source who has been providing information on Iranian intentions in the nuclear field that CIA and DIA analysts consider to be largely fabricated. Unfortunately, some of these reports have been stovepiped to Vice President Cheney’s office through the Pentagon’s Abe Shulsky, who heads up the Iranian Directorate, an office that replicates the disbanded Office of Special Plans that was previously used as a clearinghouse for fabricated and speculative exile reports on Iraq.

The Ghorbanifar information is also disseminated to the intelligence community from Hoekstra’s House Intelligence Committee. Ghorbanifar and his associates have no access to genuine information about Iran, often just repackaging media reports and propaganda handouts from the Paris-based Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), a Pentagon-protected Iranian exile group that is on the U.S. State Department’s list of terrorist organizations. Ghorbanifar and Mahdavi are also reported to be sources for Pennsylvania Congressman Curt Weldon, who advocates pre-emptive war against Iran. Weldon has written a sensational and factually challenged book on Iran that describes Tehran as the number-one threat to world peace.



The United States government’s intelligence community has prepared a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran,

but the White House has decided that it is not “finished” yet and has decided to postpone any decision on issuing it until after the November elections. NIEs are the government’s documents of record on international issues that confront the United States, and they are supposed to be both impartial and definitive. Vice President Cheney’s office has reportedly objected to many of the conclusions in the draft Iran NIE or, more to the point, to the lack of any conclusions that he would welcome. The draft document indicates that there is no solid intelligence confirming that Iran has a nuclear weapons program, contradicting many recent statements made by the administration. It also states that Iran exercised virtually no control over Hezbollah in the recent fighting in Lebanon and that there is little to no confirmed information supporting the oft cited contention that Iran is arming the militias and insurgents in neighboring Iraq. The report ruefully observes that there are plenty of weapons floating around inside Iraq without any assistance from Iran, though it does note, without hard evidence, that Iran could have provided some bomb-making expertise and possibly sophisticated timers and detonators to the insurgency’s arsenal. For what it’s worth, most U.S. intelligence officers working on Iran believe that Tehran is concealing a weapons program even if the proof is lacking.

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA Officer, is a partner in Cannistraro Associates.