

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

# How the terrorists use hate to try to divide us

Suspicion, prejudice, fear and hatred. These are just as much the tools of terrorists as package bombs left on buses and subways or improvised explosive devices planted along roadways. And their target can be anybody.

After news of the London bombings broke, I received, as a cooperating faculty member of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas, an open e-letter titled "A Letter to Mankind." It addressed me as Dear Fellow Human. I hoped it would make an appeal to our better selves. My brief optimism was misplaced.

The e-letter made three simple points: Terrorists kill for ideology. The root of Islamic terrorism is Islam itself. And the proof that Islam promotes violence and terrorist acts is the Quran.

The letter writers identified themselves as "a group of ex-Muslims who have seen the face of evil and have risen to warn the world." They urge Muslims to leave Islam and non-Muslims to abandon political correctness and work to "defeat Islam and stop terrorism." But they gave no advice on how to do this. Fomenting hatred against all practitioners of Islam was their contribution to saving our world.

Receiving this message of hatred — for that is what it is — made me realize how close the terrorists are to winning. Terrorists use fear to polarize us. They reduce the world's many beautiful, but confusing colors to simple black and white. They use dogmatic certainty to cut off communication.

These tactics have been known ever since Thucydides wrote about factional terrorism during the civil war in Corcyra in 427 B.C.E. These tactics are still with us because they work — if we let them work.

We are polarized about the war in Iraq. Most opinion pieces reinforce fixed positions about its connection to our declared war on terrorism and how and how long it should be fought. There is not much we can do. But we can decide personally not to close our minds.

The same day as the London bombings, I read the back of an SUV on Koenig Lane. Alongside a bumper sticker that said "Luvya Dubya" was a peace symbol transformed into a missile inside a circle. Its slogan was "Peace through Superior Fire Power."

This is a satisfying and time-honored way of making peace. Mr. Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" had the same idea of how to bring peace to the Belgian Congo in the 1890's: "Exterminate the Brutes." And Col. Kurtz in Francis Ford Coppola's "Apocalypse Now" scrawled "Drop the Bomb. Exterminate Them All" as his final solution for saving Vietnam from the communists. We went well along toward doing that through conventional bombing in Vietnam. But what clear targets are there for our superior firepower in the counter-terrorist war we are waging in Iraq?

The same day as the London bombings, people opposed to White House policies called me up cursing the terrorists in London for "playing into Bush's hands," strengthening support for military action. There was no period of decent grief for the innocent dead.

A conservative list serve I am on sent out a "patriotic" Marine's ironic apology for American actions abroad. The apology is presented as coming from Lt. Gen. Chuck Pitman. He blames "our own left wing, our media, and our own brainwashed masses," along with "radical professors, CNN, the New York Times and the United Nations" for presenting a distorted view of our history of altruistic military interventions. He declares that the true enemies are Islamic Arabs — notice he does not say Iraqis, nor does he say a terrorist sect of Islamic Arabs. He catalogues Arab atrocities and describes economic, political and social injustice in Arab countries. These are his good reasons for us to continue waging war in a Muslim country that had no connection with the 9/11 terrorists.

A neighbor and Vietnam veteran repeated to me over the Fourth of July weekend a widespread opinion that by taking the war to Iraq, we are keeping terrorists preoccupied and away from the United States and its allies. The same argument was used in the Vietnam era. It was better to fight the communists in Southeast Asia than in Oakland or Pittsburgh.

I wondered then how Viet Cong soldiers wearing sandals cut from old auto tires and carrying pouches of rice, an AK-47 and a precious few rounds of ammunition could swim across the Pacific Ocean.

But now? Terrorists can strike anywhere, no matter what we do with our superior firepower in Islamic countries. And they can make us feel and think exactly what they want us to feel and think. Will we let them?

Palaima teaches war and violence studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

