



An Unfair Fight?

[Clifford D. May](#)

Colaboraciones n° 845

March 14, 2006

In a conventional war, if one side has tanks, fighter jets, submarines and similar weapons, while the other side does not, who wins? The answer is obvious.

In an unconventional war, if one side has suicide bombers, license to kidnap, torture and violate the laws of war while the other side must refrain from deploying such weapons and abide by all the rules, who wins? The answer, I'm afraid, may be equally obvious.

The United States is now engaged in what is called an "asymmetrical war," a conflict in which the two sides fight in different ways and using different weapons.

The 9/11/01 attacks were a textbook example of asymmetrical warfare. A terrorist organization hijacked passenger planes and used them to cause more deaths on Ame-

rican soil than any foreign enemy had ever before inflicted. But this was not the first such assault the U.S. suffered. In 1979, America's embassy in Tehran was seized and its diplomats held hostage. The Militant Islamist revolutionaries responsible bet, correctly, that the U.S. would not strike back in a similar fashion or even in a resolute manner.

Four years later, Iranian mullahs arranged for Hezbollah, a terrorist group they controlled, to suicide-bomb the U.S. Marines barrack in Beirut - confident again that the U.S. would not use such tactics against them or find in its arsenal any weapons with which to effectively punish them.

The suicide bombings now taking place in Iraq also are asymmetrical warfare. These frequent mass murders not only frighten and intima-

te, they also demonstrate the inability of Iraqi authorities and their American supporters to protect the innocent. The more dramatic and lethal the bombings, the more they undermine confidence in the possibility of establishing an Iraqi government that would serve the people rather than be the people's master.

Asymmetrical warfare would be less effective if suicide-bombing women and children, decapitating aid workers and using civilians as shields evoked widespread public outrage and revulsion, if it brought shame and disrespect upon those who committed such acts and on the causes they claim to champion. But, on the contrary, the trend has been to legitimize the tactics used against the West and indulge those employing them. Mass murdering civilians, torching churches and even mosques do not spark major protests anywhere. Nor has there been serious action in response from the United Nations, the international courts and prominent human rights organizations.

By contrast, what are alleged to be American violations of international laws are a constant source of media controversy and public protest. The publication in a Danish newspaper of cartoons caricaturing the Prophet Mohammed set off riots in a half a dozen world capitals, as well as death threats against the cartoonists and those who dare publish them.

Many Western news organizations - the Reuters wire service is just one example -- decline to be judgmental about those who set out to slaughter

civilians. Instead, they assert, "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

The extent to which elite Western opinion has internalized such views was prominently on display at last weekend's Academy Awards presentation. Nominated as best foreign film was "Paradise Now" -- a movie that explicitly justifies suicide-bombings.

Nominated, too, was "Syriana," which lays the blame for the global conflict now underway not with the Militant Islamist movement but with the American government and American corporations. Also nominated was "Munich," which argues for a moral equivalence between terrorists and those who battle them.

All this is happening at a time when there is a very real possibility of chemical, biological or even nuclear weapons coming into the possession of militants who believe, as al-Qaeda in Iraq commander Abu Musab al-Zarqawi put it, that "Killing the infidels is our religion, slaughtering them is our religion, until they convert to Islam or pay us tribute."

There is no deterring such fanatics. To die while fighting Islam's enemies, they believe, will ensure them "paradise now" - to borrow the phrase used by Hany Abu-Assad, the filmmaker celebrated by Hollywood's aristocrats.

"A democracy must often fight with one hand tied behind its back," wrote Israeli Supreme Court President Aharon Barak, "as not all

means are acceptable to it, and not all practices employed by its enemies are open before it.”

both hands tied behind their backs, the likelihood that they will prevail can not be high.

That's right of course. But if at some point democracies must fight with

[Clifford D. May](#), a former New York Times foreign correspondent, is the president of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies a policy institute focusing on terrorism.



<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/>