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The Big City

Fantasies Of Vengeance, Fed by Fury

IN normal times, David Gonzalez would be on the sidewalk of West Broadway selling Andean handicrafts. These days, he is on Canal Street selling American flags, and not merely because the market has changed. Mr. Gonzalez, who was born in Peru 52 years ago, has passionate feelings about terrorism.

"The Shining Path and the other groups killed nearly 25,000 people in Peru," he said. "They'd kill anybody — kids, mothers, old people. They didn't care. Just like the guys who did this."

Were there any lessons to be learned from Peru? Any suggestions on how to deal with the ones menacing New York?

"Find them and kill them," he said. "No court. No trial. Electrocute them."

That was one of the more humane suggestions heard on the streets the past few days. On the Upper West Side, a self-described opponent of capital punishment advocated a parade on Broadway with Osama bin Laden's head on a pike. A neighbor preferred burning him alive. In Midtown, men in business suits were talking about nuking Kabul.

They were emerging from their homes after the most emotionally wrenching week of news since perhaps World War II — and back then Americans were not subjected in their living rooms to round-the-clock images of explosions, funerals, victims and grieving relatives. Back then, Americans did not spend hours looking at snapshots from vacations and weddings of people presumed to be dead. They didn't watch — and watch again — a mother tearfully tell how her children had been asking to make a cellphone call to their father in heaven.

Along with New York's new sense of community came a communal fury. For the first time in memory, the front-page headline of The Village Voice ("The Bastards!") could have run in The New York Post. The New Yorkers fantasizing about revenge were trapped in a classic bind. How do responsible, cautious, middle-class burghers defend themselves against the traditional scourge of civilization — young men willing to risk everything because they have nothing to lose?

Ever since there have been cities, there have been merchants paying for walls to protect their families and homes and businesses against invasions by young men without wives or property. The new strategies contemplated in Washington may kill some terrorists and disrupt their networks. But there seem to be plenty of replacements ready, to judge from the young Palestinian boys who were dancing in the streets after the attack.

Researchers have described the typical suicide bomber in the Middle East as a 22-year-old, uneducated, unmarried man who is promised financial security for his parents and 70 black-eyed virgins for himself in paradise. Last week's attacks took much longer to plan than a simple bombing, and the hijackers were accordingly older and better educated. (One of the leaders was, apparently 33.) Even so, most of the hijackers identified so far seem to have been single men in their 20's. They, unlike the young firefighters who perished, apparently did not leave behind grieving widows and children.

"Unaffiliated young males are the most dangerous sector of the social system virtually everywhere," said Lionel Tiger, an anthropologist at Rutgers University. "The entire cauldron of Mideast radicalism is fueled by a huge bulge of young males who foresee no jobs and hence no possibility of marriage under the prevailing system." In the United Arab Emirates, he noted, so many young men were unable to afford the traditional marital expenses that the government began offering stipends to any man who married a local woman.

DR. TIGER, who coined the term "male bonding," was not surprised that young men recruited in the Middle East would remain loyal to the terrorist cause even after years in Europe and America. "Loyalties to the group marinate and grow, especially for men in foreign countries who feel isolated and come to rely greatly on each other," he said.

The most hideous execution envisioned by New Yorkers is not much of a threat to someone who sees violence as glamorous and death as a ticket to paradise. A better punishment, or at least a better revenge fantasy, might be a life sentence in a prison cell whose walls are covered with the snapshots of weddings and vacations we've been looking at the past week. A terrorist would spend his days not with virgins but with victims.

The prison cell could also have a television playing selected footage from the last week, but not the explosions or the collapsing towers or anything else that looks like a scene from an action movie. The screen would just show the funerals and the grieving friends and the crying families, over and over and over again.

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