

Terrorism's Roots Lie in "Rankism"

By Robert Fuller

Acts of terror-and now, no one is exempt- elicit a phased response. First, shock and horror, then pain and grief. Then we seek to neutralize the perpetrators and defend against any recurrence of the crime. Only later do we search for causes.

The search for causes of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon has now begun. Explanations run the gamut from hate, ignorance, evil, poverty, injustice, and racism to America's espousal of democracy and modernity, its Middle-East policy, and allegations that it abuses its preeminent status.

I would like to suggest a more precise cause, one that lies at the root of many of the credible causes of terror. Whether in Colorado (Columbine High School), Oklahoma City, or New York, or in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, or Russia, terrorism results from abrogations of human dignity traceable to the misuse of rank. What does this mean and why does it matter?

Dignity is not negotiable. Insulting the dignity-of an individual, a group, or a nation- provokes indignation, an extreme manifestation of which is terrorism. Dignity is invariably abrogated in the misuse of power. Rank signifies power. Therefore, the cause of indignity is rank misused.

The authority of rank is so commonly misused that some jump to the conclusion that rank itself is the problem and that the solution is simply to do away with it. Such egalitarianism willfully ignores individual differences. Moreover, leadership, as designated by rank, is essential to successful cooperation in a great range of organizations. Faced with an external threat, a society either closes ranks or succumbs.

The trouble is not with rank per se, but with the abuse of rank. When it is earned and used properly, rank is a valid and essential tool of modern life. Authorities-parents, teachers, bosses, leaders, even nations-that use the power of rank in an exemplary way are admired and loved. But those who use their rank to bully, exploit, or oppress, betray a sacred trust and sow seeds of indignity that ripen into resistance and revenge.

Revenge takes the form of vandalism, sabotage, violence, and war. The twentieth century is replete with horrendous examples of the lengths to which individuals and nations will go to restore their pride and dignity. That the victims may be innocent and their suffering undeserved, offers scant protection.

An individual, a group, or a people that has been discarded, disregarded, or disrespected-"dissed" or "nobodyed," in the vernacular-is a source of dangerous instability. Once dignity has been insulted, the injury is either returned (often in magnified form), passed on to someone of lower rank (and therefore more vulnerable), or healed. A feud between two parties trading indignities continues until it escalates into violence or until one of the

parties finds a way to diffuse the tension by protecting the dignity of its antagonist as if it were its own. This means ceasing to exploit the power differential inherent in differences of rank for personal or national aggrandizement.

This remedy works between individuals and races and it can work between cultures and states. In the 1960s, facing ever more violent civil rights protests, we restored peace to the streets by identifying and eliminating the most egregious indignities of racism. By analogy, ending terrorism requires identifying and eliminating the most flagrant indignities traceable to abuses of rank.

It is noteworthy that there is no word analogous to “racism” for the indignities of rank abuse. The word “racism” directed us to the source of the systemic indignities that fueled black anger. By analogy, the word “rankism” can point us to the origin of the indignities that induce those who suffer them to resist, protest, disrupt, and, in extremis, resort to heinous, terrorist acts.

While the terrorists themselves are an extremist minority, they could not exist without the support of sympathizers radicalized by rankism. A generation ago, faced with a grave threat to the nation, we found evil not in the protestors, but in the racism that fueled their outrage. We must, of course, pursue and neutralize known terrorists and defend against recurrences. But to restore civility, we must also address the root cause of terrorism. We must understand and overcome rankism.