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Violence in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

Dedria Bryfonski, Book Editor

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The War on Terror Is Described as a Battle Between Good and Evil

David R. Mandel

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In the following viewpoint, David R. Mandel argues that leaders on both sides of the war on terror have enlisted support by characterizing the conflict as a clash between the forces of good and evil. He sees the role of instigator as an important one in unleashing collective violence. Calling for a guerrilla war against Western infidels, Osama bin Laden is the major militant Islamic instigator of terrorism against the West. According to Mandel, former president George W. Bush also vilified the enemy, repeatedly referring to good versus evil when discussing the war against terror. Such categorical thinking, on both sides, can lead to further violence, Mandel contends.

The September 11[, 2001,] terrorist attacks against the United States and the response of the United States and its allies point to the need to critically examine the role of instigators of collective violence. The growing conflict between the United States and its allies and Islamic militant groups has been framed by both sides as a struggle against the forces of evil by the forces of good. These overly simplistic construals of "the other side as evil" and "our side as just" have contributed to an escalation of international violence and threaten us with the possibility of a long-term conflict. In this article, I

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examine the current conflict from a social psychological perspective. I begin by considering the distinction between instigators and perpetrators of collective violence, which has received little scholarly attention until now. I examine briefly how Osama bin Laden, as a key instigator of terrorism over the last decade, has used religious nationalism to rally support for his cause. Finally, I examine how the leaders of both sides—bin Laden and [now former] President George W. Bush—have used the notion of “good versus evil” to frame the present conflict and why such labeling may be effective in rallying support for violent solutions.

Instigators Have Significant Influence

Collective violence is usually described as having three types of agents—perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. Most social psychological research on the topic of evil has tended to focus on how people become socialized into a system of violence and come to function as perpetrators. I have argued recently, however, that a fourth type of agent—the *instigator*—is in dire need of scholarly attention. The function of instigators is not to carry out the acts of violence themselves but to tune and transmit the messages that will effectively motivate others to cause harm and to provide perpetrators with the requisite resources for accomplishing their tasks.

Compared with perpetrators, instigators tend to have greater social influence and a wider range of power. Whereas perpetrators may have access to weaponry or other forms of low-grade power the power of instigators often derives from control of wealth (medium-grade power) and information (high-grade power), which usually provides the requisite conditions for control of weaponry. Indeed, the power that the perpetrators derive in a system of collective violence is usually granted directly or indirectly by the instigating elite, who also have the power to disable perpetrators if they so choose and even redefine them as the enemy, thus rendering them potential victims.

An important feature of instigators is that they act as *catalyst* of collective violence, often by conveying a vision for a better life or by identifying a perceived source of threat in times of social unrest. . . .

Given their special role in catalyzing social change, instigators tend to be perceived as agents that are less interchangeable than perpetrators. Hence, counter-factual replays of history that undo wars, genocides, or terrorist acts by negating preceding human actions may be more likely to focus on a single instigator than a multitude of perpetrators. For example, the chance that the Holocaust would have been averted if any one of its perpetrators had not existed appears to be dramatically lower than if Hitler had not existed. Put differently, the social influence of instigators and perpetrators is strongly asymmetric: Instigators shape the thinking and guide the behavior of perpetrators, but perpetrators have relatively little influence on the motives or plans of instigators.

At present [2002], the main instigator of terrorism by Islamic militants is Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden is believed to be linked to the September 11 attacks and the current military attacks in Afghanistan are aimed at destroying his terrorist network, al-Qaida ("the base"), which funds and trains terrorists. On February 23, 1998, bin Laden and his associates, under the banner of the World Islamic Front, issued a statement that accused the United States and its allies of crimes against God and Muslims: "All these crimes and sins committed by the Americans are a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger [the prophet Muhammad], and Muslims." The statement—apparently sanctioned by God—calls for a holy war (jihad) against the United States and its allies:

On that basis, and in compliance with God's order, we issue the following fatwa [religious decree] to all Muslims: The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it. . . .

gators is that they act as *catalysts*—by conveying a vision for a perceived source of threat in

analyzing social change, instigators that are less interchangeable—counter-factual replays of historical or terrorist acts by negating them—be more likely to focus on a single perpetrator. For example, the 9/11 attacks would have been averted had bin Laden not existed. Put differently, the distinction between instigators and perpetrators is blurred. Instigators shape the thinking and guide the actions of perpetrators, but not the other way around. Perpetrators have relatively little influence on the plans of instigators.

bin Laden is an instigator of terrorism by Islam. Bin Laden is believed to have planned the 9/11 attacks and the current military campaign in Afghanistan aimed at destroying his terrorist organization, which funds and trains terrorists. Bin Laden and his associates, under the leadership of the Islamic Front, issued a statement in 2001 that listed the crimes and sins committed by the United States in its declaration of war on God, his messenger [Muhammad], and Muslims. The statement called for a holy war against the United States and its allies:

In accordance with God's order, we issue a decree to all Muslims: The duty for every Muslim who can fight is to fight against the United States and their allies—civilians and soldiers—whenever they find it. . . .

We—with God's help—call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it. We also call on Muslim ulema [community], leaders, youths, and soldiers to launch the raid on Satan's U.S. troops and the devil's supporters allying with them, and to displace those who are behind them so that they may learn a lesson.

That bin Laden envisions himself as an instigator of collective violence was made clear in a *Time* interview on December 23, 1998. When asked whether he was responsible for the bomb attacks on two American embassies in Africa, bin Laden stated in his reply, "Our job is to instigate and, by grace of God, we did that, and certain people responded to this instigation."

According to bin Laden, "hostility toward America is a religious duty, and we hope to be rewarded for it by God." The reframing of calls for violence as "duties" or "moral obligations" is a popular technique of instigators to legitimize collective violence. By linking the perpetration of terrorism to a religious duty, bin Laden uses God as the ultimate authority. In effect, bin Laden has claimed that if you fail to try to kill Americans, you have failed in your duty to God. Such messages can instill powerful feelings of moral obligation to an ideal or cause. . . .

Instigators Propagate Nationalism

Like other instigators of collective violence, bin Laden has garnered support by using nationalism—in this case, religious nationalism—to incite hatred against a "common enemy." On the one hand, nationalism creates an egotistic sense of in-group cohesion by emphasizing the shared greatness of a people. According to bin Laden, only Muslims—indeed only Muslims that follow his call to violence—are worthy in God's eyes. The message conveyed is that only compliant Muslims are worthy of moral treatment. . . .



Exiled al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan talks during a television interview in April 1998. AP Images.

On the other hand, nationalism can exacerbate feelings of threat by pointing to the nation's precariousness, feelings of hatred by pointing to those deemed responsible for its hard-



Bin Laden talks during a television interview.

Bin Laden can exacerbate feelings of
 his nation's precariousness, feelings of
 being blamed responsible for its hard-

ships and failures, and feelings of insult due to the belief that one's nation has not received the respect it deserves. . . .

The Nazi image of a German master race threatened by an international Jewish plague illustrates the point. For bin Laden, the U.S. military presence on Islamic holy land is an act of U.S. "Crusader" aggression. He has repeatedly mentioned the importance of destroying the myth of the American superpower. For instance, in the aforementioned *Time* interview, bin Laden stated, "I am confident that Muslims will be able to end the legend of the so-called superpower that is America."

Nationalism plays upon a fundamental aspect of human social cognition: the tendency to categorize individuals into groups. Even when the basis of social categorization is trivial, people tend to discriminate in favor of ingroup members and against outgroup members. Nationalism is particularly effective at creating a strong sense of *us* versus *them* because nations (unlike states) tend to be defined in terms of features that are of high personal and social importance, such as ethnicity, race, religion, ideology, and language. Consequently, the nation may be perceived, and may in fact behave, not merely as an aggregate but as a cohesive *entity*.

In bin Laden's case, the ingroup is "the Islamic nation or God's children" (i.e., Muslims) and the outgroup, "God's enemies" (i.e., non-Muslims, but especially Jews and powerful Christians, like the Americans). In his August 23, 1996, "Declaration of War Against the Americans Who Occupy the Land of the Two Holy Mosques," bin Laden called for "a guerilla war, where the sons of the nation, and not the military forces, take part in it." Bin Laden's use of language is also aimed at dehumanizing the citizens of the United States and its allied countries by labeling them as "infidels" or "devil's supporters." This use of labeling is reminiscent of Hitler's labeling of Jews as vermin, bacilli, and "kikes." . . . The response by the Bush administration has also tended to vilify the other side, albeit with more qualification than bin Laden has been willing to grant.

Vilification and Attribution of Evil

The escalation of the conflict triggered by the September 11 attacks—the “war on terrorism,” as it is being called—owes much to the attribution of evil by both sides. The Bush administration has repeatedly couched the present conflict as one between the forces of good and evil, much as bin Laden has done. For instance, in his address to the nation on September 11, Bush repeatedly referred to evil: “Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror,” “Today, our nation saw evil,” “The search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts.” In the same address, Bush quoted Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.” The day after the terrorist attacks, Bush stated, “This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail.” On September 26, in another press release, Bush reiterated, “We must never forget this will be a long struggle, that there are evil people in the world who hate America. And we won’t relent.” At present, then, the leaders of both sides of this conflict have presented it in simplistic terms as a “struggle of good versus evil.” This totalistic portrayal, emphasizing an “us” and “them,” can heighten social identification and out-group derogation and steer people toward supporting an escalation of violence. . . .

Attributions of evil are a natural response to intentional attack, especially when it is construed as unprovoked. But citizens and leaders alike ought to be cognizant of the behavioral effects that such construals may have. We are in the midst of an international conflict that has the potential to escalate, and we need to be on guard against vilification, totalistic thinking, and hubristic responses that prompt further violence at the same time that we guard ourselves against terrorism, because both pose a real threat to our security and chances for prosperity.