

For decades Westerners and Israelis have fretted about the specter of Saladin, hovering over the turbulence of the Middle East. To the Arab world, Saladin is the preeminent hero of history, for it was this great and generous leader of the twelfth century who crushed the Crusader kingdom, in all its power and splendor, and defeated the Third Crusade of Richard the Lionheart. The western nightmare was that another wise and uncompromising Arab giant might come along one day to unite the Arab world in a concerted effort and throw the European occupiers out.

Over the years many Arab leaders have reached for the mantle of Saladin. In the 1950s Gamul Abdul Nasser came the closest to reestablishing a semblance of Saladin's vast empire of the late 1100s by reuniting Egypt and Syria into a United Arab Republic. In his many confrontations with the West Saddam Hussein made much of the fact that he was born in the same town, Takreet, as Saladin, (though Saddam does not emphasize Saladin birthright as a Kurd.) Even Yasser Arafat, no giant of history certainly, was greeted back in Gaza after the collapse of the Camp David discussions a year and a half ago as the Palestinian Saladin.

For much of the Arab world the Third Crusade has become a metaphor for the current situation. On the streets of East Jerusalem and Damascus Saladin lives as a vibrant, modern figure. His monumental equestrian statue graces the entrance to the main souq of Damascus. One can often hear the argument that like the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem in the twelfth century, the state of Israel is an unnatural circumstance. While it took the Arab world 80 years to defeat the Crusader kingdom, Israel is barely fifty years old, Arab intellectuals point out. This long view of time and of history is central to Arab ideology. In the east, it seems, they are always waiting for the new Saladin.

When, on September 16, President George W. Bush proclaimed his "crusade" against terrorism, somewhere, in some rocky cave in southeastern Afghanistan, Osama ben Laden

must have cheered. For a Western crusade against Arab people and against Islam is exactly what Ben Laden fantasizes that he can foment. Far more intensely than Western peoples, the Arabs remember that all the Western crusades of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were dismal failures, except for the First Crusade which captured Jerusalem and resulted in such a massacre of Muslims by Christians that it is remembered vividly and reviled passionately in the Islamic world even today.

To Ben Laden, as he stated it this week, this is a struggle between the "camp of belief and the camp of disbelief." By his terrorist acts he imagines he can inspire another great mobilization of Western power where, as 800 years ago, the West will be pitted against the East, Islam against Christianity, believer in one God against trinitarian infidel. With the issue framed in such medieval terms, he sees the Western defeat as inevitable. If he can inspire that, his grandest vision will be realized. He will be the new Saladin. Fortunately, President Bush has not used the word, crusade, since September 16. But Ben Laden uses it in every statement.

"We ask God to make us defeat the infidels and the oppressors and to crush the new Jewish-Christian crusader campaign," he said two weeks ago.

But Osama ben Laden is no Saladin. As it is gradually registering in the West, the real parallel to him in medieval history is Rashid al Din, called the Old Man in the Mountain, who headed a small, terrifying group called the Assassins. The Assassins were a cult, an aberration, a sacrilege upon Islam, and were disavowed and ridiculed, even as they were feared, by the main body of Islam. The Old Man in the Mountain perfected the use of political murder, gave it a new name and a new resonance. He terrorized the leaders of the Levant including Saladin himself whom Sinan's followers twice tried to assassinate. He too had his "sleepers" and his suicidal, doting followers. But for his distortions of Islamic teachings, especially arrogating to himself divine powers, he was isolated, and when the Old Man died, his movement dried up.

Ben Laden, therefore, needs to be viewed as a cult, an assassin, an aberration, a defiler of Islamic teachings and a misuser of the word, Jihad. Unfortunately, the American record of

3

dealing with violent, messianic, suicidal cults is a sorry one, and now that we are dealing with a violent cult, within the larger cult of the Taliban, it is more important than ever that we do not allow history to repeat itself.

In the uniquely American disasters of the mass suicide in Jonestown in 1978 and the Branch Davidian disaster of 1993 in Waco, Texas, the authorities were faced with religious offshoots, lead by megalomaniacal leaders, capable of terrible violence, and bent on securing for themselves a place in hisotry. Both the Reverend Jim Jones and the Rev. David Koresh were worshipped by doting, devout, and dedicated followers who felt themsedlves to be persecuted by the world (even though they were involved in cruel and illegal activities.) and primed for mass suicide.

There is no more dangerous mix than perverted religion, convinced of the nobility of its cause and the righteousness of its beliefs (no matter how wrong-headed they may be.)

In both Jonestwon and Waco, it was overreaction and confonation that lead to the most terrible of consequences. In the case of Jonestown, a grandstanding congressman from California, Leo Ryan, forced his way into the Jonestwon encampment, and handed Jones the pretext he coveted to call for his gruesome "white night." In their isolation in the jungle, every bit as isolated as Afghanistan, Jones could pain the picture of the full force of American might about to descend upon their "noble experiment" and lay out his case for martyrdom. The result was the mass suicide of 1000 Americans.

The Waco disaster is even more apt. In that case, a new administration and in particular a green attorney general, Janet Reno, lost patience with David Koresh when the cult leader had proclaimed that he need time to translate the Seven Seals of the Book of Revelation. Koresh had promised that he would come out with his benighted (and abused) followers when he was finished. Reno should have posted a lonely guard and waited him hout. But she could not wait and forced the issue. The result was the image of the government tank approaching the compound, and beginning to claw its way through the flimsy walls of the building, only to see it burst into obscene flame.

Reno had forgotten about Jonestown. The very images of Waco infuriated one Timothy McVeigh who two years later gave us the worst terrorist act on American soil...until September 11.

What Jim Jones, David Koresh, and Osama Ben Laden share is their sense of grandiosity and righteousness. All three imaged that they could change the course of history single-handedly. When we allow the issue to be defined as Ben Laden versus the great United States, the construction plays perfectly into the hands of the messianic cult leader.

Bush may have dispensed with the word, crusade, but he is still talking about a long war against terrorism. The news is that the American military effort may soon be extended beyond the boundaries of Afghanistan.

But as the conflict is widened, and as it becomes protracted, the chances of falling prey to Ben Laden's grand vision became greater and greater. The tenuous coalition with Arab and Islamic nations against Ben Laden can not stand a protracted conflict against an Islamic country that is already in the Stone Age. And even our closest allies in Europe will not remain comfortable for long with the process of overusing American might against cavedwellers. As time moves on, we are in danger of creating more Mohammad Attas and Timothy McVeighs than we eliminate.

This is a situation that calls for the most surgical of operations, proportionate to the scourge of a relatively small number of well motivated international criminals. Ben Laden and Al Qaeda should be treated not like a cancer that will take years to cure, but as a boil that infects Islam and the world and that must be cut out quickly and cleanly. The difficulties of catching and killing a wily outcast and his perverse associates in a far away place becomes clearer and clearer, the President's language will see more downgradings....to a campaign, to a police action, and finally, in most likelihood, to an assassination.