

Original Message

From: Payton, Robert

Sent: Sunday, October 07, 2001 11:03 AM

Subject: Terrorism as mugging

Two anecdotes: The first is Diane's, one of the current Fellows, who witnessed a shootout on her way home from coffee with me at Starbuck's in Broad Ripple. Seeing a 17-year-old shooting real bullets moved her more to melancholy than fear.

The second is an event that I've written and talked about before: being mugged by three black teenagers in midtown Manhattan, being caught unawares and absentminded, thinking about the theology of John Calvin rather than my surroundings. My reaction was like Diane's: initial fear in my case because I was the target, and melancholy afterwards, because my attackers were teenage kids.

First lesson from Diane's anecdote: Diane is not about to move to a safer and more secure neighborhood. Leaving troubled neighborhoods only makes matters worse. It is a dangerous world but our task is to make it safer, not to enclose ourselves in a protected space. Making troubled communities safer and better is what she intends to do with her life.

Second lesson, this one from my anecdote: I learned later from veteran New Yorkers that my "mugging" was in fact a training session for the three teenagers. If it had been the real thing, my friends told me, we wouldn't be having lunch together because I'd have been killed in that dark passageway. My task was like Diane's: to help to improve the lives of young black teenagers, not to hide from them or arm myself against them.

Osama bin Laden conducts training schools for terrorists who are presumably young men very like the three who scared the wits out of me, or like the young man introducing Diane to the toy pistol sound of real bullets. Mugging and terrorism are skills acquired by training; innocent children can be taught to kill. They are similar skills that can be applied for different purposes: for money or for faith. If for faith, the muggers can be elevated to freedom-fighters, as the terrorists have been in many parts of the Islamic world. We're much better organized and equipped to deal with the people who engage in terrorism and mugging for money than we are to cope with those who do such things for God or country. But the common element of terrorism and mugging is that they are violent acts directed at innocent and defenseless people, a kind of behavior that should always be seen as despicable, never honorable.

On another note: Robert Novak, the proudly mean spirited Republican on "The Capitol Gang" talk show, mentioned conservative friends of his who advocate a Christian holy war against Islam, which they consider to be a warlike and corrupt religion. I suspect their ignorance of Islam matches their ignorance of Christianity. ("Onward, Christian

Soldiers.") In reading about the idea of "jihad," or holy war, in Islam, I discover (and they might be surprised to learn) that it is not only about a war against the enemies of Islam but also about a war with oneself to overcome one's weaknesses and bad habits and past mistakes. That kind of jihad would be therapeutic for mean spirited Republicans, too.

RLP