'Blood & Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism,' by Michael Burleigh

Terror -- It's about crime, not ideals

Sunday, March 15, 2009
By Glenn C. Altschuler

Bullit Marquez/Associated Press

The family of beheaded Filipino hostage, Primitivo Falcasantos, grieve after identifying his body in Isabela, the capital of the island province of Basilan in the southern Philippines.

Although he had trained to be an airline pilot in Karachi, Pakistan, Abdul Murad told his friend Ramzi Yousef that he'd really enjoy killing Americans:

"You can kill them by ... gas. You can kill them by gun. You can kill them by knife. You can kill them by explosion. There are many kinds."

Murad recommended shooting down Air Force One with Stinger Missiles. And flying a light aircraft packed with explosives into CIA headquarters or the Pentagon, a suggestion Yousef passed along to his uncle, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the architect of 9/11.

In his new book, Michael Burleigh, an independent scholar, provides chilling details about the lives and actions of hundreds of men and women like Murad, and an operational anatomy of dozens of modern terrorist

http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/09074/955176-44.stm
A self-proclaimed "conservative realist," Burleigh has no patience with anyone who "harbors a sneaking admiration" for people who use violence to effect change.

The milieu of terrorists, he emphasizes, is often criminal, clinically psychotic, morally squalid and soaked in a media-obsessed zeal.

Political and religious ideology acts like a detonator that lets this "pre-existing chemical mix to explode."

Feted by left-wing academics, lawyers, and novelists, the Baader-Meinhof Gang, despite druggy discussions about revolution, was really interested in "power, seeing the police scuttle away, and getting the coppery scent of blood," he writes.

In the Philippines, Abu Sayyaf terrorists were "rapists and murderers who adopted Islamism as an ancillary pose." With a black hip-hop do-rag, wraparound sunglasses, bolo knife and earrings, leader Aldam Tilao sang Beatle songs as he lopped off the heads of two men who annoyed him.

Burleigh's focus on individual deviance runs the risk of ignoring grievances, real and perceived, that spawn terrorists. If all terrorists were psychopaths, he acknowledges, "there would be no demonstrable ebb and flow to the violence, or shifts in how it was used vis-a-vis other forms of political activity."

Many Irish terrorists, to cite but one example, had direct personal experience with injustice or witnessed it.

In the Muslim world, criminals gain sympathy and support by "cloaking their activities" in what Burleigh calls a self-serving myth -- that since the Middle Ages, their people have been the victims of "Crusader-Zionist" oppression.

His assessments are well worth considering. By using the phrase "war on terror," he maintains, the United States "inadvertently lifted groups of criminals onto another moral plane where civilized societies also have rules."

Efforts to keep detainees out of the hands of lawyers, moreover, were a public relations disaster.

Support for democracy in the Middle East, Burleigh believes, should follow, rather than precede, support for a more liberal civil society, with clinics, hospitals, schools and job opportunities more attractive than the institutions provided by Islamists.

While understanding that Muslim fundamentalism is "no more inherently menacing" than its Christian or Jewish equivalents, the West should encourage moderate forms of Muslim orthodoxy.
Apart from the desire to spread chaos, Burleigh reminds us, jihadists have no vision for the future, and history is filled with examples of causes that fed violent passions, only to dissipate and disappear.

Nonetheless, "these things take time. The Cold War lasted from 1947 to 1989. On that calendar, we are in the equivalent of 1953."

"BLOOD & RAGE: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF TERRORISM"

By Michael Burleigh

HarperCollins ($29.95)

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

First published on March 15, 2009 at 12:00 am