Letter in Response to Al Quaeda's Fantasy Ideology

Sir, — I found Lee Harris's article interesting and somewhat insightful ("Al Qaeda's Fantasy Ideology," August/September 2002). It has, however, at least four important failings.

First, the author, who claims that we should carefully understand the way others think, hasn't even taken care to understand what Noam Chomsky thinks. Chomsky has said again and again that the attacks can be understood as a response to the U.S. government's actions — Harris got that right. Yet Chomsky has also said, just as often, that the attacks were an evil act inflicted on innocent people. But Harris seems to group Chomsky with those who believe that America "had it coming." When you say people "had it coming," you are saying that those people deserved it. Yet Chomsky has taken pains to say that the people murdered on September 11 did not deserve it. That's what "innocent"means.

Second, I thought early on that the author, having set up the importance of understanding an alien culture in which people think so differently from us, would actually try to understand the radical Islamic culture that he writes about. But he didn't. All he did was assert his view of the culture. He gave us no reason for believing his view. I have no basis for thinking that he has paid particular attention to radical Islam. He may well be right, but no reader could come to that conclusion as a result of reading his article.

Third, after emphasizing the importance of thinking things through carefully, the author claims that George Bush — not generally known for being a careful thinker — had it exactly right about the terrorists' motives within days, if not hours, of the attack. Again, the author might be right, but we simply have to take his view on faith, which, I gather, was something he was trying to persuade us not to do generally.

Fourth, Harris agrees with the critics of George Bush that using the term "evildoers" to describe the terrorists "dehumanizes our enemy." But here

Harris and the critics are wrong, and George Bush is right. Calling someone evil humanizes him. You wouldn't call a bear evil even if the bear killed 3,000 people. When you call someone evil, you are saying that the person has the capacity to make moral decisions and made the wrong one. Only humans are capable of moral decisions. The true dehumanizers are those who refuse to make moral judgments.

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