Understanding Suicide Terror

Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism. By Robert Pape. New York: Random House, 2005. 352p. $25.95 cloth, $14.95 paper.

Making Sense of Suicide Missions. Edited by Diego Gambetta. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 392p. $45.00 cloth, $25.00 paper.

Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror. By Mia Bloom. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 280p. $24.95.

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For obvious reasons, in the past few years the topic of "suicide bombing," and "suicide terror" more generally, has attracted great public interest. The phenomenon presents itself as a "security challenge," as a uniquely contentious form of collective action, and as an example of an apparent ideological absolutism that borders on fanaticism. At a more basic level, suicide terror poses a challenge to deeply ingrained and widely shared beliefs about the value of human life. What would motivate individuals not simply to kill but to purposefully end their own lives in the name of a cause? How might such activity be understood politically, and engaged politically? Such questions have assumed prominence in much public discussion in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. At least in part as a response to this development, a number of recent books by political scientists have taken up these questions, with a particular focus on the question of motivation and strategic action. Robert Pape's *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (2005), Diego Gambetta's *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (2005), and Mia Bloom's *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (2005) all seek, in Gambetta's phrase, to make sense of suicide terror. These books demonstrate the relevance of political science to practical concerns. They also demonstrate the way in which certain kinds of "rational choice" explanations have become prevalent in political science.

Perspectives on Politics is dedicated to providing a forum for broad and synthetic discussions of key issues confronting political science as a form of political understanding. These books offer a unique opportunity for a range of scholars and writers to reflect on the meaning of suicide terror and the meaning of political science. The authors that follow have been chosen because of their prominence and because of the diversity of scholarly perspectives they bring to bear on the topic. They were each asked to write a critical commentary on the books in question, and the broader theme of suicide terror. They were asked to consider the following issues: What is the relationship among suicide terror, other forms of terror, and forms of violent resistance more generally? To what extent is suicide terror a "religious" phenomenon, and to what extent do its possible religious dimensions call for humanistic and distinctively "interpretive" methods of analysis? In what ways is suicide terror amenable to rational analysis, and in what ways does it push to the limit conceptions of rationality? Finally, what are the strengths, and limits, of political science in confronting the phenomenon of suicide terrorism?

We hope that this forum will foster new forms of scholarly understanding and synergy, and at the same time open up new and fruitful opportunities for communication, as well as mutual learning, between the world of academic political science and the broader world of political commentary and practice.

DOI: 10.1017/S1537592707070120

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592707210126 Published online by Cambridge University Press