

January 6, 2016

To: Interested Colleagues

From: Lloyd Etheredge ¹

Re: Fresh Thinking to Defeat ISIS: The CCC Model and Teenage Males Playing Video Games

This memorandum recommends two additional strategies to defeat ISIS. The ideas are outside of current thinking. They require high-level political judgment and political imagination. Both, especially if used together, should produce better results.

Apply the Successful CCC Model

Research since the 1930s has found that a high level of prolonged unemployment of a nation's male youth [who face what they perceive as incompetent, uncommitted, and uncaring governments] becomes a strong predictor of political instability and recruitment to gangs, ethnic conflict, and to more extreme, angry, and violent political movements, including terrorism. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) is a successful, cost-effective, economic and political alternative that, from 1933-1942, provided jobs and job training, shelter, clothing, and food [and, at the time, a minimal wage of \$30/month, \$25 of which was sent home to families) to more than 3 million unemployed males in the US during the Great Depression. It was politically popular. It created worthwhile work and permanent investments for natural resources, parks, conservation, and other projects in every state. It provided education, skills, role models, and experience for future employment.

Today, this model can be deployed as a highly effective economic and political alternative by the US and its allies, including the governments of the new Saudi-led coalition. New 21st century adaptations could include partnerships with multinational corporations (who might manage the camps and programs) and with NGOs to support their work in public health, including the health of women and children, in UDCS. New online educational resources (e.g., Khan Academy, coursera, edX) could use new technology to enhance the after-hours options for education, certifications, and employment training. Young women can be included.

Calling-Out ISIS: “Adolescent males playing video games.”

ISIS, as President Obama has noted, is not about Islam. It cannot be understood by academic analysis of centuries-old theological arguments that, suddenly and mysteriously, have become persuasive. Instead, it is an admixture of enrollment into powerful, messianic, enemy image dramas – drawing upon the reality-creating power of new technologies - that have a unique attraction to the adolescent male brain.

Psychologists like Carl Jung began to theorize about the appeal of these dramas in the 20th century. Today, observing the global markets for Hollywood action-adventure movies and video games, we can recognize just how universal and captivating these dramas can be for the male youth demographic. Invaders and persecutors – seemingly omnipotent, cold, arrogant, impersonal, immoral, and unitary – usually with “fear and awe” high tech weapons – must be defeated. The challengers are engaged in a messianic battle with their comrades for freedom, safety, virtue, and the future of the world. The best games are addictive and can be played endlessly. They demand skill and create excitement. Testosterone and adrenaline increase. The names of the players change, but the American and Saudi coalitions are the wrong side of a Star Wars/global war drama created by al-Qaeda and, now, by ISIS.

These messianic dramas create special, wider, dangers. However powerful their enemy in reality, players imagine that they will win. Their motivation is unexpectedly high. The enemy is dehumanized and empathy with real-world victims is blocked. Symbolic acts and media events – blowing-up civilians in Paris – build the drama and motivate recruitment. The teenage male brain does not process risk, danger, theories about how to create the future, and reality in the same way as the adult geopolitical brain. As the New York Times columnist Tom Friedman warned about trusting the Cold War idea of rationality and stable nuclear deterrence in the Middle East: for some of the players “mutual assured destruction is an invitation to a party.”

However, psychologists also have discovered new mechanisms, like “framing,” that can change minds. The theological arguments are set aside, and ISIS can be candidly “called out” as

“teenage males playing video games.” Video games are ubiquitous: it is a “re-languaging,” and a truth that potential recruits to ISIS will understand – along with their peer groups. There are grounds for optimism: to adolescent males, specific games are captivating until they aren’t.

Does this strategy replace other strategies? No. Video games and Hollywood dramas require specific designs and rewards. Military defeats, in reality, also erode an uncommonly high level of motivation in these games and potential recruitment.

President Obama, in his last year in office, still has a potential for charismatic leadership with youth in the Islamic world. He is comfortable with the street language of “calling out” people. Perhaps uniquely among world leaders, he can begin to say: **“ISIS isn’t about Islam. It’s about teenage males playing video games. This has to stop.”** Potentially influential leaders in Islam who want the growing violence (with six failed states across the wider region) to stop have a new opening. ISIS cannot readily defend against the strategy. And, with enough repetition, the truth will get through.

Combining Both Strategies

Both new strategies, based on a degree of political imagination and empathy with how the world (and their future) look to adolescent males who are potential ISIS recruits, will gain strength if they are used together. CCC camps have startup costs but they will cost the world less than automatic pilot anti-terror and military solutions, used alone. The (combined) positive message is for governments to move from a future of endless unemployment and apparent indifference to provide a warm welcome to young people. The future will be based on “who enrolls whom.”

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