

Medieval Message, Modern Delivery

THE ostensible purpose of the recent videos that show the beheadings of two American journalists by Islamic militants is to deter attacks — your missiles on our positions will beget our knives on Western hostages — but the true aim is to spread dread and terror.

The videos deliver in miniature the same chilling message as the footage of the towers falling 13 years ago: Everything has changed, no one is safe and the United States is impotent against true believers. It is a memo from a foe that has everything to gain by goading America into a fight in a faraway land where its enemies are legion. The tactic worked back then.

And while the videos convey barbarism on an elemental level, dismissing them as crude or one-dimensional would be wrong. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, known as ISIS, clearly has a sophisticated production unit, with good cameras, technically proficient operators and editors who have access to all the best tools.

What they made are modern media artifacts being used to medieval ends. The videos serve as both propaganda and time machine, attempting to wipe away centuries of civilization and suggest that the dreamed-of caliphate flourishes and blood is cheap currency.

The real warriors in those videos are the journalists who were killed, James Foley and Steven Sotloff, who were trying to do a terrible, dangerous job when they were grabbed opportunistically in Syria. Innocent people end up tragically caught in the crossfire of war, but the targeting of journalists who provide witness for the rest of us is particularly appalling to people in the news business.

I initially had no interest in seeing the vid-

eos — the beheading of Daniel Pearl, a reporter for The Wall Street Journal, in 2002 is still fresh — but watched the footage of Mr. Sotloff's death after I decided to write about it.

The mastery of medium and message is evident in the careful crafting of the video. (Anybody who doubts the technical ability of ISIS might want to watch a documentary of Falluja that includes some remarkable drone camera work.)

In the Sotloff clip, the enemy, in this case President Obama, is shown through a video effects filter to make his visage in a news conference about ISIS appear distorted and sinister.

An electronic buzz effect signals an interruption — a kidnapping, if you will — of the broadcast before a graceful typographical segue promises “A second message to America.”

We are then in a desert, the horizon carefully situated at the midpoint of a two-camera shoot.

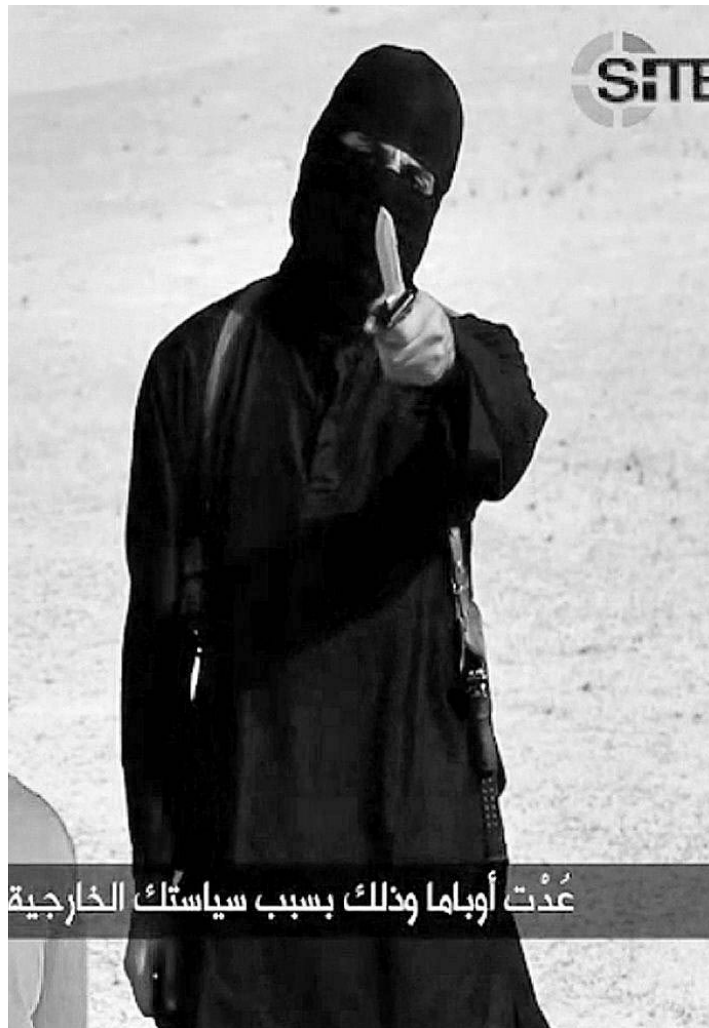
There is thought put into the wardrobe selection; the victim is dressed in an iconic orange jumpsuit — a reference to detainees in American custody — and the killer costumed more as a ninja than a jihadist, all in black and his face obscured, holding a small knife and holster.

The actual murder is performed in the unflinching sunlight of the desert. (I thought more than once of the brutally clear morning of Sept. 11, 2001.) Because sound is difficult to capture on a windy expanse of arid land, the victim is wearing a lapel mike. Mr. Sotloff introduces himself in sober tones and begins to read a scripted statement off what seems to be a teleprompter.

The executioner is cocky and ruthless, seemingly eager to get to the task at hand. When he does attack his bound victim, only the beginning is shown and then there is a fade to black. Once the picture returns, the head of the victim is carefully arranged on the body, all the

A video of a murder shows evidence of careful crafting.

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A frame from the video released by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, of the death of the journalist Steven Sotloff.

violence of the act displayed in a bloody tableau. There is another cutaway, and the next potential victim is shown with a warning that he may be next.

“It is an interesting aesthetic choice not to show the actual beheading,” Alex Gibney, a documentary filmmaker, said. “I can’t be sure, but they seemed to dial it back just enough so that it would get passed around. In a way, it makes it all the more chilling, that it was so carefully stage-managed and edited to achieve the maximum impact.”

The act is shocking regardless of the context. Remember near the end of Season 1 of “Game of Thrones,” when Eddard Stark, a main character, was poised to lose his head? We expected an arrow to come in from stage right to save him, but it did not and the blade fell swiftly. The audacity of the scene was something peo-

ple talked about for weeks afterward, and the show’s unflinching violence has been a core element of its escalating popularity.

And so it is in real life. Video beheadings are a triple death — murder and defilement in a public way — and YouTube becomes the pike on which the severed heads are displayed. The actual butchery of the act is minimized by strategic editing, which suggests that the video is not an attempt at leverage but a carefully produced infomercial about how gangster and merciless ISIS is. It is a kind of global invitation: Come for the jihad and stay for the killing.

Writing in *The New Yorker*, Dexter Filkins did a remarkable job explaining what takes place in the videos.

“For the guys who signed up for ISIS — including, especially, the masked man with the English accent who wielded the knife — killing

is the real point of being there,” he wrote.

Robert Baer, a former C.I.A. officer and the author of the coming book “The Perfect Kill: 21 Laws for Assassins,” has worked extensively in the Middle East and continues to be in touch with many of the factions there. He points out that a lot of the jihadists involved in filmed killings seem to be from the West and suggests that the combination of swagger and brutality reflects the worst of modern youth culture finding traction in the deadly mission of jihad.

“It is very old, going back to the Middle Ages when people were drawn and quartered, a visual lesson to the living of retribution,” he told me in a phone call, “but it also reminds us that they think that they can level the playing field through their commitment, that they are not going away.”

Many people have suggested that those who hosted or passed around the video have blood on their hands by proxy. I wondered what someone in the middle of things would think of the videos’ dissemination. I called my friend and colleague Tim Arango, who is the Baghdad bureau chief for The New York Times and has been reporting in the region for five years.

“I think the more people who watch it, the more people will know what we are up against,” he said from Istanbul, after many months in Iraq.

“I felt like I had to see them for two reasons,” he said. “One, I cover these guys and I need to know what they are saying. And two, if they are targeting American journalists in the region for propaganda uses, you need to be aware of what happened. You don’t want to be the next guy kneeling in the jumpsuit.”

Tim and I are old friends examining and discussing the same thing over Skype despite being a world apart, which is a wonder of the age that we live in. But those frictionless media dynamics carry darker cargo as well. And in the same way that the sheer size of the World Trade Center was used against itself, the modern social media apparatus is now used to menace us.

We don’t want to look, but some of us do and the rest of us talk about it. ISIS seems to understand that the same forces that carried the Ice Bucket Challenge’s message of uplift — the desire to be part of something, to be in the know — can be used to spread fear and terror as well. ■