

POPULATION, COMPUTERS,
AND CULTURE WARS

In 2002, Osama bin Laden wrote in his "Letter to America": "You are a nation that exploits women like consumer products or advertising tools, calling upon customers to purchase them. You use women to serve passengers, visitors, and strangers to increase your profit margins. You then rant that you support the liberation of women."

As this quote indicates, what al Qaeda is fighting for is a traditional understanding of the family. This is not a minor part of their program: it is at its heart. The traditional family is built around some clearly defined principles. First, the home is the domain of the woman and life outside the house is the purview of the man. Second, sexuality is something confined to the family and the home, and extramarital, extrafamilial sexuality is unacceptable. Women who move outside the home invite extramarital sexuality just by being there. Third, women have as their primary tasks reproduction and nurturing of the next generation. Therefore, intense controls on women are necessary to maintain the integrity of the family and of society. In an interesting way it is all about women, and bin Laden's letter drives this home. What he hates about America is that it promotes a completely different view of women and the family.

Al Qaeda's view is not unique to Osama bin Laden or Islam. The lengths to which that group is prepared to go may be unique, but the issue of women and the family defines most major religions. Traditional Catholicism, fundamentalist Protestantism, Orthodox Judaism, and various branches of Buddhism all take very similar positions. All of these religions are being split internally, as are all societies. In the United States, where we speak of the "culture wars," the battlefield is the family and its definition. All societies are being torn between traditionalists and those who are attempting to redefine the family, women, and sexuality.

This conflict is going to intensify in the twenty-first century, but the traditionalists are fighting a defensive and ultimately losing battle. The reason is that over the past hundred years the very fabric of human life—and particularly the life of women—has been transformed, and with it the structure of the family. What has already happened in Europe, the United States, and Japan is spreading to the rest of the world. These issues will rip many societies apart, but in the end, the transformation of the family can't be stopped.

This is not to say that transformation is inherently a good idea or a bad one. Instead, this trend is unstoppable because the demographic realities of the world are being transformed. The single most important demographic change in the world right now is the dramatic decline everywhere in birth rates. Let me repeat that: the most meaningful statistic in the world is an overall decline in birthrates. Women are having fewer and fewer children every year. That means not only that the population explosion of the last two centuries is coming to an end but also that women are spending much less time bearing and nurturing children, even as their life expectancy has soared.

This seems like a simple fact, and in a way it is, but what I want to show you is the way in which something so mundane can lead to groups like al Qaeda, why there will be more such groups, and why they can't win. It also will illustrate why the European Age, which was built on a perpetually expanding population (whether through conquering other people or having more babies), is being replaced by the American Age—a country in which living with underpopulation has always been the norm. Let's begin with the end of the population explosion.