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El Gringo

A BLOGGER WITH THE SOUL OF CALVIN COOLIDGE

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2006

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The Curse of *Freakonomics*. In every modern Intro to Econ textbook there are sidebars or pullout boxes with a title along the lines of "The Economic Way of Thinking." [These apply economic analysis to offbeat topics](#) like the market for a spouse or "Why do many bars charge for water but give pretzels away for free?" The point of these asides was to show undergrads that economics is not some musty old science, but rather relevant and exciting.

Now they are the trendy path to tenure and bestsellerdom.

Today's example is provided by [Austan Goolsbee in his contribution to the *NY Times*' "Economic Scene" column](#). The study he mentions by Efraim Benmelech and Claude Berrebi finds that more intelligent and educated workers are more productive. But...get this! The "workers" in the study are actually suicide bombers, and "production" is measured by the number of human beings killed. (When applied to suicide bombers, "intelligent" is obviously a relative term.)


So while boring old economists might try to address problems such as what policies best help poor countries develop or if Social Security will cause the nation to go bankrupt, freak-economists help Commander Jihadi determine the optimal allocation of his fanatical nutcase bombers. A more interesting paper would show why bloodthirsty revolutionary movements always seem to be made up of intellectuals rather than real downtrodden proles.

Goolsbee's column shows that whatever economists are gaining in hip relevance, they still have a long way to go as prose stylists. No matter who the writer, and this includes professionals such as Postrel, the contributions to column tends to follow the same formula.

1. Introduction by mention of relevant topic:

THE fifth anniversary of 9/11 passed with a great deal of hand-wringing over all the people who want to kill Americans. Especially worrisome is the apparent rise of terrorists whose origins seem far from fanatical.

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2. Followed by the paper I read this week:
- In their new study, “Attack Assignments in Terror Organizations and the Productivity of Suicide Bombers,” two economists, Efraim Benmelech of [Harvard University](#) and Claude Berrebi of the RAND Corporation, set out to analyze the productivity of terrorists in the same way they might analyze the auto industry. But they defined the “success” of terrorists by their ability to kill.
3. And winding up with an ironic zinger:
- And sadly, it seems that educated and intelligent terrorists are better at doing that than uneducated, fundamentalist lunatics. Oh, that it weren't so. Like the old advertisement said, a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

POSTED BY ROBERT