

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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The Wrong War

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

WARS have typically been fought against proper nouns (Germany, say) for the good reason that proper nouns can surrender and promise not to do it again. Wars against common nouns (poverty, crime, drugs) have been less successful. Such opponents never give up. The war on terrorism, unfortunately, falls into the second category. Victory is possible only if the United States confines itself to fighting individual terrorists rather than the tactic of terrorism itself. Yet defining who is a terrorist is more complicated than it might seem -- and even if it were not, choosing one's enemies on the basis of their tactics alone has little to recommend it.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that a terrorist is someone who "attempts to further his views by a system of coercive intimidation. . . . The term now usually refers to a member of a clandestine or expatriate organization aiming to coerce an established government by acts of violence against it or its subjects." This definition is fine as far as it goes, but in practice the use of the term is more problematic. The dictionary's citations describe the following "terrorists" or groups involved in "terrorism": the Russian government of Tsar Alexander III, the French Resistance during World War II, the Zionist Irgun in Palestine, the Kenyan "Mau Mau" independence movement, the African National Congress (ANC), Irish nationalists, and Greek Cypriots. At least some of these groups are widely admired, and it is telling that the citations referring to the Greek Cypriots and the ANC raise questions as to whether the "terrorist" label was properly applied. Like beauty, it would seem, terrorism is in the eye of the beholder.

Terrorists, it is usually agreed, are defined not by their goals but by how they elect to pursue them. If terrorism is never to be countenanced, terrorists must employ some means that no end can justify. But how exactly are unjustifiable means to be identified?

One school favors a legal approach. Both domestic and international law concede to the state a monopoly on organized violence. A simple definition of a terrorist might therefore be a nonstate actor employing violence for political ends. Yet by this logic, the violence Saddam Hussein inflicts on his own people is not terrorism, whereas that inflicted by his domestic opponents in case of a revolt would be -- hardly a satisfactory start.

Another school highlights the fear that terrorism seeks to instill. This is the original use of the word "terror" in a political context. It entered the language during the later stages of the French Revolution, when Edmund Burke called the Jacobins "terrorists" for their enthusiastic resort to the guillotine. The Jacobins agreed: they had decided to secure their hold on power (with the best intentions, of course) by terrorizing the populace.

By this logic, terrorists are people who aim to get their way by frightening opponents into submission. But consider the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima: it was less a military mission than a warning -- the most dramatic "submit, or else" in recorded history. Consider, too, General William Tecumseh Sherman's "march to the sea" 80 years earlier, which was specifically intended to cow the civilians of the Confederacy. The sad fact is that the use of force for political ends, whether in the context of a declared war or otherwise, is inextricably bound up with terror. The object is not to kill every opponent but merely to do away with a sufficiently large number that those who remain fear carrying on more than they fear giving up. Inducing terror is not necessarily terrorism.

A third school looks at tactics, arguing that certain methods are just plain wrong and should not be employed. Status quo powers, heavily invested in the old way of doing things, often view tactical innovation as immoral. Thus, the French knights thought Henry V's use of the longbow at Agincourt despicable, and the Japanese samurai felt much the same about gunpowder. In the nineteenth century, the British Royal Navy angrily rejected the submarine, and at the end of World War II, Germany's v-1 and v-2

missiles were widely regarded as "terror weapons." The general embrace of successful innovations over time, however, undercuts such usage.

Unconventional military methods are commonly proscribed, usually by those able to rely on conventional military power. The civilian resistance movements against Hitler's Germany, for example, operated outside of the accepted rules of war, and the Germans certainly thought of them as terrorists. Yet today we view these resistance fighters as heroes, and rightly so. Wearing uniforms used to be thought a good test of who was a terrorist, but too many admirable people -- the Afghans who opposed the Soviets, for example -- have now fought without them. Suicide attacks are generally frowned on, but all military heroes are willing to die. The fact that most combatants cling to the hope that they will somehow survive tells us more about human psychology than about the relationship between heroes, terrorists, and suicide.

Some behavior does seem hard to excuse: killing prisoners, for example. And yet Henry V killed his prisoners before the Battle of Agincourt, and Shakespeare lionized him all the same. The problem with cataloguing the behaviors unique to those we wish to single out as terrorists is that such a list would necessarily be short and would leave outside its bounds a great deal that smacks of terrorism. Al Qaeda, a terrorist organization if ever there was one, has not killed large numbers of prisoners, whereas U.S. allies in the Northern Alliance have.

WHAT PRICE HONOR?

WHAT ABOUT TARGETS, then? Are terrorists those who deliberately set out to kill civilians? This inquiry raises the politically incorrect question of what is wrong with killing civilians. Civilians are not always mere bystanders and are crucial to any war effort. U.S. military power is based on America's economic success. This relationship holds for any halfway modern economy and provides the justification for attacking industrial targets in a war -- whether in Hamburg half a century ago, or in Belgrade more recently. The United States, furthermore, is a democracy; its citizens help decide how its military power is used. Are they truly innocent?

Return, though, to conventional wisdom and accept that killing civilians is wrong. It does happen, nevertheless. Serbs under Slobodan Milosevic and Iraqis under Saddam Hussein, some of whom must have had a better claim on the word "innocent" than the citizens of democratic America, have been killed in recent years by American bombs. The pilots who dropped those bombs, however, are not terrorists in any meaningful sense of the word.

Still, drawing the line can be difficult. Are civilian deaths defensible if they are known to be a likely consequence of violent action -- unwanted, certainly, but eminently predictable? How hard does a principled warrior have to try to avoid killing civilians, and does everyone have to try equally hard? At least part of the answer surely lies in assessing the costs of a scrupulous attempt to avoid civilian casualties. In Kosovo, the United States was willing to invest billions of dollars in advanced weaponry and tolerate delays in accomplishing its objective in order to reduce civilian casualties. Washington drew the line, however, at hazarding the lives of U.S. pilots by ordering low-level attacks. This policy was not especially immoral. The problem with using it as a model, however, is that no other power on earth has the resources to act in a like manner. Must everyone without access to the latest technologies require their pilots to run risks that the Pentagon deems unacceptable in order to fight honorably? This hardly seems a reasonable proposition.

And consider the case of those opposing a government so ruthless and powerful that any attack on its armed forces is tantamount to suicide. Can we say that in such a situation no armed struggle against the regime is legitimate, since the opposition would have to employ force against civilian targets and would certainly kill the innocent? The sad truth is that for many people -- some of them decent -- a scrupulously honorable struggle is an unaffordable luxury. Recognizing this reality, most of us will not pass moral judgment on any combatants without also considering the ends they pursue.

Fighters with a halfway decent cause may be forgiven much. Fighters with a noble objective and no alternatives may perhaps be forgiven everything. It is hard to think of any means, for example, that would have been unacceptable if used by the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. The members of the Irgun from 1946 -- 48, however, faced a much less dire situation and had more choices available. Their actions can be judged with this context in mind. Today's Israeli government can surely be held to a still higher standard.

How much moral latitude should be allowed is an issue about which reasonable people can differ. The argument, however, will generally center not merely on the morality of the tactics themselves but on the justice of the cause and the nature of the alternatives available. Few statues are built in remembrance of people who fought honorably for a rotten cause; most celebrate those who made moral compromises for a good one. Ends and means are hopelessly conflated.

TERROR FIRMA

TO UNTANGLE THE KNOT, it is useful to think of a graph with the morality of means running along one axis and the morality of ends running along the other. Asking where different pairs of belligerents would be located on that graph is an

instructive exercise.

Mohandas Gandhi's Quit India movement and the ANC in apartheid South Africa, for example, had comparable objectives -- noble ones, it is usually agreed today. On means, though, a clear difference emerges. The ANC had a military wing that acted outside the generally accepted laws of war, whereas the Quit India movement did not. Some might feel that this gives the latter a distinct moral edge. Yet the ANC had few alternatives, since passive resistance would not have impressed the Afrikaners. And Gandhi himself ultimately admitted that he did not believe nonviolence would have worked against any imperial power other than the United Kingdom (an epitaph of which the Raj should be proud). Should not the difference between the situations affect our moral judgments?

Starting in October 1952, the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya was directed against British rule and European land ownership. The movement was confined to the Kikuyu tribe, then about 20 percent of the colony's population of five million. The purpose was, quite literally, to terrorize the white settlers into leaving. Some 100 of the settlers were killed, many in grisly fashion. By the end of the ensuing struggle, 11,000 rebels and 2,000 soldiers in British uniform (most of them African enlisted men) were dead. Today the Mau Mau's anti-colonial efforts seem noble, although with a troubling caveat: 80 percent of the local population did not join in. Surely the level of popular support a cause enjoys must affect its legitimacy. If a majority is willing to be patient or to accept a compromise but a small splinter group is not, how can persistent violence by that group be legitimate?

A modern analogue to the Mau Mau situation can be found in Northern Ireland. Many people believe that the Provisional IRA (the main republican paramilitary organization, often referred to as simply the Irish Republican Army, or IRA), with its widespread support among local Catholics, is on balance pursuing a legitimate goal -- that of a united Ireland -- even if it has used questionable means to do so. By approving the Sinn Fein party president's signing of the Good Friday agreement, which provided for an elected Northern Ireland Assembly and for the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, it chose to compromise. The Real IRA and Continuity IRA, in contrast, are splinter groups with little popular support that continue to pursue the original goal and violently oppose any deal short of a united Ireland. Their struggle is clearly less legitimate, because the majority of Ulster's Catholics have declined to embrace it.

Looking at means rather than ends, however, the Mau Mau are on weaker ground. The British had already demonstrated in India that they were willing to leave their colonial possessions without the threat of violence, and some progress had already been made in bringing Africans into the colonial government. Alternatives to terror were available; Mau Mau leader Jomo Kenyatta was no Gandhi. And the British army, although it was fighting for a less defensible cause, generally behaved well. Some might therefore, on balance, detect a moral equivalence between the two sides in Kenya.

Usually a correlation exists between the morality of ends and means. People who pursue noble goals tend to be scrupulous about how they achieve them, whereas unscrupulous people and rotten causes often go together. This fact generally makes it possible to have a sensible discussion about political morality without distinguishing clearly between the acceptability of means and ends. The case of terrorism, however, is often an exception and can force us to make difficult moral judgments -- weighing the relative merits, for example, of those who pursue a noble end through questionable or downright horrendous means and those who pursue a dubious aim with great integrity.

WHY WE FIGHT

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION'S war against terrorism is destined to be morally unsatisfying because, if the phrase is taken at face value, it flies in the face of the multifaceted way most people really think about right and wrong. Framing U.S. foreign policy around the proposition that terrorism can be defined and must be opposed, moreover, may well run counter to American national interests. Around the world, the United States now finds itself caught between the policies it needs to adopt and the language it is using to describe them.

In their conflict with the Palestinians, for example, the Israelis claim the moral high ground by pointing to the means their opponents employ, notably suicide bombings. This is all that matters, they say; nothing else can even be discussed. The Palestinians, in contrast, focus on ends. Israel, they argue, is intent on continuing its occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Opposing this occupation is legitimate, in their eyes, and the huge disparities in strength leave them no alternative to terrorism. Despite the absolutism on each side, both dimensions of the conflict clearly exist and have a certain moral validity. Unless the Israelis and the Palestinians begin to recognize this fact, they will never engage each other, and progress toward a resolution of the conflict will not take place. Yet the concept of a war on terrorism privileges the Israeli view, thus creating a gap between Bush administration statements and the inevitable realities of Mideast diplomacy.

A few thousand miles to the east, the future governance of Kashmir is a legitimate topic for debate. It may be possible to stifle the Kashmiri insurgent organizations that the Indian government stigmatizes as terrorists, but they will not stay in check for long absent a political settlement. And if the United States lends its weight to the attempt to squash the insurgents, it will become a de facto party to the dispute and may well contribute to destabilizing the Pakistani government -- something Washington has been rightly striving to avoid.

Among the prisoners captured during the military operations in Afghanistan are a number of Uighur separatists who want to hive off predominantly Muslim Xinjiang from the rest of China. Beijing considers them terrorists and wants them sent back -- back, that is, to certain death. The Bush administration will probably do nothing of the kind, nor should it, but in the process it will leave itself open to the charge of applying its new doctrine selectively.

In Uzbekistan, America's new ally President Islam Karimov extended his term earlier this year in yet another crooked election. He is grooming his son for succession and does not care for opposition, often locking up his opponents and torturing them. His enemies, he says, are terrorists. Some are, but many are not, and the United States is caught in a jam. And then there are the Russians in Chechnya, the Indonesians in Aceh -- the line stretches on, as it always will.

In each of these cases, the United States has to make complex decisions about which parties to support, which to oppose, and which to leave alone. In practice, those decisions will be based on judgments about America's interests, the justice of the causes in question, and how the various parties have behaved -- in that order. Making the third and least important of these factors the sole criterion for decision would be absurd, yet that is what the rhetoric of the war on terrorism demands. The Bush administration's continued embrace of that language, therefore, will lead to disappointments, charges of hypocrisy, and unnecessary ill will around the globe.

It is necessary to be equally clear about the U.S. reaction to the September 11 attacks. American anger does not stem from the fact that it was terrorism. Americans would be just as furious if the carnage had been inflicted by the Afghan air force instead of a shadowy sub-national group. And their outrage does not relate solely to the death of civilians. If it did, greater distinction would be made between the attacks on the World Trade Center and on the Pentagon, and certainly between both of these and the October 2000 attack on the U.S.S. *Cole* in Yemen. No, what matters is quite simple: America was attacked and Americans were killed. The details of how it happened are horrifying but relatively unimportant.

This means that rather than proclaiming itself to be engaged in a necessarily nebulous war on terrorism, the United States should instead accept that it is dealing with a less grandiose and more specific question of national security. Its challenge is to protect itself in the future while demonstrating that attacks on Americans will be met with an implacable response. The government must show that it will brook no opposition in extirpating those responsible and anyone who helps them. If the country's enemies wish to surrender, they can have a fair trial. If not, they will be killed.

To accomplish its objectives, the United States will need the active help of some countries and the passive acquiescence of others. Such cooperation will not come from goodwill alone, nor will it emerge in response to peremptory commands. It will generally have to be purchased, in the usual coin of international politics. In other words, just as America is not about to give a blanket endorsement of how the Chinese, Russians, Indians, Israelis, and others handle their local "terrorist" problems, so the rest of the world is not about to do the same for America. Acknowledging this fact frankly would be useful; it would stave off a great deal of hypocrisy, confusion, and resentment while focusing attention on the real bargains that need to be cut.

Americans now realize that they have enemies and must deal with them seriously. The "moral clarity" in the rhetoric of the "war on terrorism" is more apparent than real. It takes a one-dimensional view of a multidimensional problem, and the sooner that rhetoric is retired the better. Interests first, ends second, means third -- this is how America thinks. It should be how it talks as well.

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GRAPHIC: Pictures 1 and 2, One of these is not like the other: Jomo Kenyatta and Mohandas Gandhi; Picture 1, GETTY; Picture 2, CORBIS-BETTMANN

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