

(Rare) COMMON SENSE

Terrorism: a clearer look from both sides of the line

First of all, I'm talking about *true* terrorism, not those situations when one group's terrorist is another's *freedom fighter*, where the accuser &/or the accused may or may not actually qualify for the term. Let's face it—oppressive authorities are quick to apply the label to any & all who use force to oppose them. The term itself is less commonly applied to the authorities themselves, even when they meet all the criteria. Official terrorism by those in control of state power tends to be called “abuse of power,” “police brutality,” or even “anti-terrorist action.”

My collegiate dictionary from the 1960s defines *terrorism* very briefly as “use of force to demoralize, intimidate & subjugate as a political weapon or policy.” There is no distinction made concerning whether the force or violence is conducted as a method of governing or on behalf of resistance to the government. Not surprisingly, as a government institution, the FBI (& criminal codes) define it almost exclusively in terms of violent acts against civilian populations carried out to influence government policy, or in retaliation for same, i.e., always anti-government.

International bodies have usually floundered in trying to arrive at a consensus definition. The result is over 100 different definitions and a widespread view that the label is highly subjective. Despite the looseness & inconsistency of its application, however, the key elements are not complicated, but almost always involve violent acts that harm civilians & spread fear in the general public. The United Nations General Assembly defines it as: “Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public,” i.e., intense fear, going on to call it “unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them.”

The conventional rationalizations terrorist groups usually invoke to ‘justify’ such methods include being necessary as the only avenue open to them in response to an oppressive government with asymmetrical power, retaliation for the injustices committed by a violent government against them & “their people,” and the claim that civilian non-combatants are only paying the price for tolerating such a government & enabling its policies. The groups claim that by accepting such a government and allowing its oppressive policies, the victimized civilians simply experience “the chickens coming home to roost.”

The affected civilians may be considered “innocent” in conventional terms, having little, if any, influence over the policies cited as reason for the retaliation. Terrorists and their organizations nevertheless generally assign guilt by association to the population at large, simply by virtue of being part of the body so governed. The terrorist acts are designed to shock, stun, generate revulsion and, the perpetrators claim, wake the ordinary people up to what is going on, carried out in their name. In fact, the “ordinary people” are given little, if any, consideration.

The actual lives affected are meaningless to the terrorist groups in comparison to the all-important causes they claim to promote. When the victims include individuals who support the same causes or oppose the same policies as the terrorist group itself, they are dismissed as collateral damage, unfortunate sacrifices for the greater good. The real message is the lack of meaning personal lives have to the group, especially the lives of the victims, but often also those of the perpetrators—sometimes willing sacrifices to the all-consuming cause.

There is no way to avoid an honest acknowledgement of the fact that some causes may (at least arguably) “deserve” such commitment, e.g., in the face of genocidal policies tacitly approved by a civilian population. Even in the case of Nazi atrocities, however, most violent resistance was carried out not against innocent civilians (many of whom could qualify as victims themselves), but against the instruments of the state forces responsible. These state forces often committed further atrocities specifically in retaliation, e.g., ten (or a hundred) civilians rounded up & shot for every Nazi officer.

By an opposite logic, it’s hard to make a compelling argument against actions that sacrifice a few innocent lives in order to save many more, but this is not at all the kind of violence against civilian populations that has become so widespread in this century—with bombs in mosques, churches, markets, cafes, busses, airplanes, even schools. Where are lives actually saved?

To be totally fair, I suppose that Quadaffi’s Libyan security operatives might have believed that by blowing up a passenger jet over Scotland in retaliation for American attacks that had killed women & children in Quadaffi’s household, they had introduced a disincentive against future raids of a similar nature, an added cost American planners might be forced to include in their calculations. Indeed, retaliation is a tricky business, a two-edged sword that inevitably cuts in more than one direction.

On the one hand, there is no reasonable justification for the hundreds of lives snuffed out in an instant over Lockerby. On the other hand, the Libyans may have gained additional leverage in subsequent strategic planning. The blade of the dilemma has a sharp edge. If the connection is too blatant, the action could provoke the every response it set out to dissuade; if the connection is too hidden, the action becomes gratuitous.

From a strategic perspective, retaliation more or less “in kind” can’t be taken off the table, or totally discredited as a means of promoting favored outcomes. It has a well-established basis in both human nature & strategic logic. There is simply no denying the fact that consideration of the cost of consequences, including retaliation, may inhibit many otherwise harmful actions. Some people & groups may only be restrained by a clear sense of the resulting punishment. Increasing the perceived probability that no retaliation with cost blow-back will be forthcoming must correspondingly increase the likelihood & frequency of the actions in question.

This is well illustrated in Axelrod’s “Prisoner Dilemma” tournaments, where a strategy’s willingness to retaliate in kind can provide a powerful incentive for partners to cooperate. On the other hand, in the real world, retaliation may also promote further retaliation rather than subsequent cooperation! Each side’s retaliation becomes further provocation for the other side’s retaliation—a classically vicious cycle, reflected in the old say, “An eye for an eye for an eye for an eye, and soon everyone is blind.” In the Axelrod tournament, the most successful strategy (start by cooperating & then do in each new round what the partner did the round before) contains both willingness to retaliate & ability to move on in a more cooperative direction.

According to Lawrence Kohlberg’s description of the stages in the development of moral reasoning, we all go through a stage in which actions may be determined by consideration of the reward-punishment probabilities, nor is necessarily left behind when developing other criteria in decisions-making. We see it in operation time & time again in calculations of national policy, where decision-makers are expected to strive toward maximizing the national interest.

More highly developed criteria may be “justified” on the same basis—as in the longer term interest. We forego a maximum maximum in order to avoid backlash & lower lows.

It's a foundation stone of *realpolitik* that failure to retaliate for a violation invites more & greater violations. The calculations become more complex as subsequent responses to a retaliation are factored in. A third party is often necessary to negotiate with & for two parties otherwise caught in the endless cycle for domestic as well as bilateral reasons. (A party viewed as too soft in response to suffering caused by an adversary may be in danger from it sown people.) However enlightened it may be in some circumstances, “turning the other cheek” is not the predominate form for responding—whether by individuals or nations.

As terrible as the historical record shows it to have been, “response in kind” is the more generally accepted custom. This includes “attack our cities, civilians, etc., & we'll attack yours,” escalating to a scarcely imaginable scale in WW II, and then taking a further step for strategists with the cold-war's MAD—Mutually Assured Destruction. The idea is to dissuade destruction by making would-be destroyers relatively sure of their own destruction, or you could say, it's purpose is to promote sanity by making the costs of insanity clear. Its weakness include the fact that the argument is least clear & compelling to those not sane enough to appreciate their own insanity, as well as the vulnerability of human systems to error, unforeseen causes of failure, miscalculation, & misinterpretation. It could easily have led to large-scale nuclear exchange on more than one occasion, most notably during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The discussion takes on strange characteristics at such a scale, so that there no longer seems to be “a civilian population of non-combatants.” Citizens of London, Dresden, Shanghai, Tokyo or Nagasaki are “all-in,” like it or not. Wars are won on the home-front, after all. The Nagasaki school children, church goers, and subsistence farm family just out of town end up being painted with the same brush as the internment camp commandant, the brainwashed suicide soldier, and the hard-line imperialist war-profiteer. Use of weapons of mass destruction on the population indiscriminately put all in the same boat—as hard liners on both sides demand.

There is a strange split personality about what might be called “collective guilt.” On the one hand, as indicated, wars like WW II may indeed be fought by entire societies. On the other, military units make a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and a thousand Nagasaki Christians who happen to be praying for peace at ground zero pay the price a few years downstream. (Nagasaki had a long tradition of religious tolerance.) A culture of intentional brutality rears its head on the Bataan “death march” and those with sensitive respect for all living creatures experience enemy terror from the air.

There is something particularly irrational in using an injustice, however real, as a “reason” for committing the same injustice or worse against those who had no hand in the first. The insanity of it may be lost or hidden by conflating the collective identity into an amorphous “you,” then claiming “you” killed innocent children who belonged to my people, so we'll kill innocent children who belong to yours. Then innocents pay the price on both sides for the acts of the guilty on both sides, an ultimate perversion of justice.

Just look at it more clearly. “Some bad people killed people who didn't deserve it, so we will kill some people who don't deserve it to get even.” That's a very odd even when looked at clearly. All it does it spread injustice and suffering. Okay, so each side gets to prove that the other is vulnerable & feels pain—& what's more perverse, learns to find pleasure in causing that pain.

The urge for revenge, to get back at those who hurt us, to see the guilty get their comeuppance, may go deep in the human psyche. It takes on a dark character, however, when this comes at the expense of those who weren't responsible. Sometimes it may mainly serve the interests of those who were., empowering the hard-liners & reinforcing their arguments. When used against populations that include terrorist groups, It often creates far more terrorists than it eliminates.

There is no better way to rally a population behind its most militant leaders & policies than by killing some its innocents—which is why some actions aren't carried out by those blamed, but by provocateurs who provide a cover of retaliatory justification for already planned attacks. The erstwhile victims don't have to be that innocent either. It's not unheard of in political campaigns for a candidate's backers to launch a sleazy attack on their own candidate as a way of smearing the rival assumed to be to blame.

An unexploded bomb found in an apartment building near Moscow contained recognizable KGB elements. Others that had actually gone off, with tragic loss of life, near the same time, were more or less successfully blamed on Chechin separatists, justifying actions to Vladimir Putin's political advantage. Western state security agencies have had their share of dirty tricks, sometimes with loss of life, as the "Cointelpro" revelations about infiltrations of organizations in the 1970s made clear. The very act of "infiltration," whether by professional deceivers or recruited informants, involves a duplicity, the attempt to seem other than what one is.

When one does something blameworthy ostensibly on behalf of the infiltrated group, the blame falls on that group. More often, the infiltrator is primarily a conduit of information, passing information about the group's plans & activities along to superiors. You can easily see how ambiguous such a position inevitably becomes, however. Where are the actions, advice, & reasoning expressed actually in that group's interest, and how much serving the adversary?

With enough deception to go around, questions of responsibility can get quite subtle or complicated. I recently saw the first of a three part Frontline series on tracking those responsible for the Lockerby bombing. The only person convicted for the crime was the low-level functionary who helped put the suitcase with bomb onto the plane. He served eight years & was released "on compassionate grounds," returning to a hero's welcome in Libya. Film of the greeting party showed many of those involved, including at the highest level of the state security apparatus.

Family members of many of the victims were far from pleased with either the release or the lack of accountability for the masterminds & higher-level managers. For at least some of the perpetrators, the action had not been about human beings at all, but just more moves in the Great Game of covert state operations. Nevertheless, human beings *were* involved, and the families (with real human beings as members, including the film-maker, whose brother had been killed in the bombing) wanted that recognized. They felt that one member of the conspiracy in prison was better than none, even if not at the higher planning level. The celebratory reunion of the operational "team" rubbed them the wrong way.

Most would find quite enough guilt to go around. No one seems to know for sure how much the "baggage handler" knew about what he was helping get on the plane. It's likely all had a pretty good idea of what they were doing. Nor does his guilt disappear from being a mere functionary following orders. Most will agree that he's still responsible for his actions—though the situation becomes far more murky if we put the functionary in a nuclear-armed missile silo, following legitimate orders & protocol when turning the key....