

# MORAL DIMENSIONS OF TERRORISM

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*In recent years, the growing impact of terrorism on the Western world has generated intense controversy. The moral dilemmas posed for democratic governments by this form of political violence are complex and unique. Jeffrey Scheuer explores these dilemmas and proposes that the solutions provided by policymakers, so far, have been neither adequate nor consistent. He concludes that responsible coverage by the media could affect considerably the public's perception of terrorism, and, consequently, its very source.*

## INTRODUCTION

The spread of terrorism over the past twenty years has caused growing concern among Western nations and their allies. Over that same period, terrorism has evolved from an occasional irritant into a seemingly chronic and salient international problem. It is not hard to see why terrorism is one of the few issues that transcend the partisan bounds of normal political discourse; as normally used, the term identifies a species of political violence so heinous as to lie virtually beyond moral debate. Yet, ironically, terrorism poses a variety of intractable moral problems for the democratic nations that are its most frequent targets; these problems of concerting practice and principle concern theorists, political analysts, and policymakers alike.

Most of these problems may be subsumed within four categories. To begin with, despite the core of semantic and moral consensus, the term *terrorism* is both general and elastic. Its very definition, therefore, remains open to debate, at least marginally. The complex question of how to distinguish between terrorism and other types of political violence (e.g., between *terrorists* and *freedom-fighters*) has implications that are not merely conceptual or semantic. The second and third categories of problems concern the appropriate tactical response to specific terrorist crises, and the more general strategic response to terrorism.

Finally, the difficult question of the role of the news media in international terrorism begs examination. At each level, terrorism poses painful choices for target governments, not just political choices between competing interests, but basic, high-stake moral decisions in which human lives and long-term national interest weigh in the balance.

## DEFINING TERRORISM

The US State Department defines terrorism as:

. . . premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine state agents, usually intended to influence an audience.<sup>1</sup>

In its most obvious and recognizable form, terrorism is simple enough to define. It is a species of violence that is generally politically inspired, small-scale, directed against random innocent persons (although arguably it may include violence against governmental or other selected targets), and designed to get the attention of a much wider audience, thereby advancing the terrorists' political goals.

Commonly included under this rubric are bombings, assassinations, kidnappings, hijackings, hostage seizures, and similar forms of deadly political theater. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of such violence is that the immediate toll in human life or property is merely instrumental to the terrorists' primary objective: the impact on the target government and/or its citizens. That impact can assume several forms: political extortion through specific demands (ransom, release of alleged political prisoners, publication of a political manifesto, etc.); media exposure, drawing public attention to the terrorists' cause and agenda; the propagation of a general climate of fear; the embarrassment to governments of appearing impotent in the face of a vastly inferior but nettlesome adversary; and at times, the dividend of baiting governments into overreacting and becoming (or appearing) oppressive.<sup>2</sup>

Most recent incidents of non-state terrorism conform to a remarkably consistent pattern. Terrorist groups tend to be well organized but politically weak. Indeed, despite their ability to embarrass governments and affect public opinion, they are usually (virtually by definition) acting in desperation. Terrorism is the resort to premeditated violence by marginal groups unable or unwilling to advance their cause by nonviolent democratic means. Because it is the violence of weak against strong, terrorism necessarily relies on the element of surprise. Thus, most terrorist acts are sudden shocks — bombings, killings, seizures — which are very difficult for even a major power to prevent or respond to directly.

Most terrorism is politically motivated, and while the putative cause may be just (e.g., the liberation or autonomy of an oppressed group), the means employed are normally inconsistent with any just vision or humane agenda. Thus, while terrorists may be rational and even brilliant tacticians, their

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1. United States Department of State, Office of the Ambassador-at-Large for Counter-Terrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1985* (Washington: Government Printing Office, October 1986), inside cover.

2. While another defining feature of terrorism is that it is carried out by very small independent groups, often numbering just a few people, larger groups also engage in terrorist-type violence. Moreover, to confine the present discussion to non-state actors is by no means to minimize the importance or gravity of state violence. The latter, while differing in scope, locus, or purpose, often resembles non-state terrorism both in its methods and its savagery. On the contrary, precisely because state terrorism has such broad moral and political ramifications, it deserves separate consideration.

actions are frequently counterproductive to their cause. Indeed, it is a basic paradox of terrorism that it nearly always achieves its immediate tactical goals — violence, destruction, media attention, public reaction, political fall-out — but hardly ever achieves its ultimate aims. (A rare counterexample might be the success of the Stern Gang and the Irgun, terrorist groups at least by broad definition, in driving the British out of Palestine in the 1940s.) More often, terrorism merely alienates its audience and prompts governments to crack down. Yet, even while failing to achieve its goals of destabilizing a government or winning public sympathy for a liberation, separatist, or revolutionary movement, the attempt costs human lives and property, and poses hard political and moral choices for government officials. In the short run, terrorism nearly always succeeds. In the long run it nearly always fails, but even in failure it exacts its toll.

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Deliberate bloodshed is usually tragic and often immoral, or at least morally questionable. It certainly represents the most serious act a human being can perform.

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Despite the apparent clarity of this strict definition, the exact nature and scope of terrorism remains a matter of debate. Since every incident of human violence is unique, no single, precise set of properties defines terrorism. Rather, a family of defining characteristics, including scale, method, target, and purpose, tends to frame an understanding of the term. Particular incidents may share some of these features and not others, and may share them in different degrees. Thus, while some incidents or actors can be identified readily as terrorist, others will provoke debate.

Another reason for dispute is the pejorative connotation of the term *terrorism* in its implication of moral censure.<sup>3</sup> This is partly due to the wide variety of political ends to which terrorism provides an alleged means. It is polemically convenient to label as *terrorism* any nonconventional warfare that one happens to oppose, thereby condemning it semantically to the spectrum of illicit killing that extends from murder to genocide, without the nuisance of reasoned argument.

The definition of terrorism is also problematic because clear moral distinctions between ethical and unethical conduct prove more difficult within the domain of violence than within most other theaters of human conduct. De-

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3. Walter Laqueur has maintained that terrorism embraces some morally justified acts. One compelling reason for this is the functional similarity to terrorism of many morally legitimate forms of violence (such as tyrannicide). The problem with such a definition is that it renders the term morally neutral, and thus necessitates important qualifications when using it (*The Age of Terrorism* [Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1987], 149).

liberate bloodshed is usually tragic and often immoral, or at least morally questionable. It certainly represents the most serious act a human being can perform. In a political or military context, however, bloodshed is rife with ambiguity, uncertainty, and accident — all of which are inimical to clear moral reckoning. Armed struggle notoriously resists formal reasoning and strict comparisons across time and space. Here, as much as anywhere in human affairs, tactics are erratic, circumstances are relevant, and motives and consequences are often obscure.

In some contexts, moreover, ends must be weighed along with means. A violent act aimed at destabilizing a democratic government is not comparable to one aimed at an oppressive regime. A bomb planted by a drug kingpin in the car of a magistrate or journalist, for example, cannot be judged in the same way as a bomb intended for a genocidal tyrant, as in the plot against Hitler. The outward form of an episode of political violence is not always its moral signature.

In other words, while all terrorism is political violence, not all political violence (even on a small scale) can be considered terrorism in the strict pejorative sense. Depending on the nature of the act, the target, and the cause, conventional terrorism acquires different meaning and status as, by degrees, it shades into conventional high-intensity or guerrilla warfare, particularly warfare against oppressive regimes. Insurgents, separatists, resistance groups (such as those which opposed the Nazis), *freedom-fighters* and the like may resemble classical terrorists in their reliance on small-scale violence, surprise, and selective targeting; but in other respects their actions must be considered as forced alternatives to conventional warfare.

Therefore, while it is useful and important to distinguish between terrorism and other forms of armed struggle, that distinction cannot rest on tactics alone. Methods acceptable against certain targets become unacceptable against others. The choice of target is itself a moral consideration. Yet a valid, if broad, moral baseline exists: the obviously reprehensible feature of most of the violence that comprises the core or conventional sense of *terrorism* is the targeting of innocent persons. This distinction provides the only clear boundary for a morally forceful, but politically neutral, definition of the term.

No definition, of course, will satisfy everyone, and this particular one, like any other, has a semantic cost. The strict definition, which confines terrorism to violence against noncombatants, does not encompass all forms of political violence, or even all heinous forms. It does not embrace every evil or dissolve every ambiguity surrounding irregular warfare. Nevertheless, it does invoke a clear and very important moral distinction by isolating a class of violence that is widely recognized as morally indefensible. It does not determine *a priori* who is a terrorist and who is a freedom fighter, but those terms are no longer mutually exclusive nor jointly exhaustive.

Vast gray areas remain and must be tolerated because moral judgment itself cannot always be unequivocal. Clearly, a need persists for one or more intermediate categories and terms to identify acts of political violence directed against governments that are neither fully democratic nor viciously oppressive, government agents or officials, persons of ambiguous status or identity, prop-

erty, or any of these targets in such a manner that it indirectly puts innocent persons at risk. Nonetheless, adherence to the strict definition provides us with a morally and descriptively useful term. Saying that most political violence is morally ambiguous may not satisfy our thirst for judgment, but it is more intellectually honest.

The question of definition has important policy implications, for example, in determining whether an alleged terrorist should be granted asylum or extradited to the country of origin. The United States boasts a long tradition of granting asylum to would-be revolutionaries and deposed leaders alike.

The Reagan administration, however, sought to broaden the definition of terrorism — and consequently narrow that of legitimate armed conflict — in order to include guerrilla groups to which it was opposed politically and ideologically. Critics such as Christopher Pyle, a constitutional lawyer, accused the Reagan administration of using a “slanted definition of terrorism” that includes attacks on particular military targets (such as Irish Republican Army attacks against British troops in Northern Ireland and strikes by the Palestine Liberation Organization against Israeli forces on the West Bank) but not others, such as the *contras*’ war against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.<sup>4</sup> As Pyle has observed:

If the shooting of a soldier from ambush automatically withdraws the umbrella of the political crimes defense, then the minutemen of Lexington and Concord qualified as terrorists. So also do the *contras* and every other guerrilla force in history.<sup>5</sup>

It remains to be seen whether President Bush will pursue a more even policy.

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Meanwhile, support has grown within the legal community for an approach corresponding to the definition proposed here, through the use of international war crimes conventions to deny political asylum only to those “terrorists” who attack noncombatants or prisoners of war, or, to those who use torture. The requesting country’s capacity to render due process may also provide an indirect and political reflection of the legitimacy of extra-legal violence.

Warfare of any kind is the palpable antithesis of — and alternative to — peaceful democratic change. Whatever the cause, armed conflict invariably

4. Christopher Pyle, “Defining Terrorism,” *Foreign Policy* 64 (Fall 1986): 71-72.

5. *Ibid.*

involves moral compromise. Regular soldiers, security and police forces, and guerrillas all commit atrocities, often on a far greater scale than those of small terrorist bands. At the same time, it is a tragic paradox that democratic ends and human rights cannot always be achieved by democratic means. Otherwise, pacifism would have a far wider following among peace-loving people. Hence, to establish a moral quarantine around the notion of terrorism and to exploit its restrictive and pejorative connotations do not suffice in order to differentiate it according to the methods, purpose, or scale of operation. One must resort instead to the narrower humanitarian standard. Beyond the compass of that strict definition of terrorism, the methods and aims of other forms of political violence remain subject to moral scrutiny and judgment. Although it is not the only moral distinction among types of violence — or even, necessarily, the most important — the term *terrorism* usefully isolates and condemns violence against innocent persons for a larger political purpose.

#### RESPONDING TO TERROR: HOSTAGE CRISES AND DIRE CASES

Unlike bombings or assassinations, terrorist acts involving the seizure of hostages (such as aircraft hijackings) create an ongoing situational problem for target governments. Superficially, such episodes resemble domestic hostage crises where a criminal seizes bystanders to negotiate his way to safety. The domestic stalemate, however, is fundamentally different and easier to resolve. Domestic criminals normally take hostages out of desperation when interrupted by police while committing an illegal act, and not as part of a premeditated plan to achieve political goals. As such, they are unprepared for a long siege, lack an ideological motive or agenda, and have less to lose by surrendering to authorities. Indeed, self-interest dictates that they do so. Accordingly, police have been relatively successful in resolving domestic hostage crises.

As Western leaders have learned in recent years, terrorist hostage seizures are more complicated. Compassion, justice, and political considerations alike prompt political leaders to seek the release of hostages at almost any cost, including negotiating with the terrorists, with the implied willingness to make at least some concessions. President Reagan maintained that his overtures to Iran, which eventually resulted in the scandal that severely tarnished his presidency, were motivated by sympathy for the American hostages in Lebanon and their families. Jimmy Carter was all but paralyzed by his inability to secure the release of the hostages held in Teheran. However, while dealing with terrorists may free innocent hostages, it also makes governments look weak, destroys the credibility of tough pronouncements, and, worst of all, rewards terrorism, thereby inviting future incidents.

Policymakers thus face painful dilemmas. They must try to save as many hostages as possible, while minimizing political embarrassment and the indeterminate risk to other innocent lives in the future. Although they are under great pressure to act decisively to break the deadlock, rescue by force may not be the most prudent course. They are moved by compassion, but it may not be their best guide. Needless to say, such dilemmas arise in highly

volatile situations, characterized by great uncertainty and the imminent threat of violence. Nevertheless, certain general moral and political considerations place them in a broader perspective.

The typical hostage crisis creates a basic moral conflict for governments. This dilemma is reflected in the tension between two great ethical traditions in Western thought: the immutability of individual rights (represented mainly by Kant), and utilitarianism (derived from Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill<sup>6</sup>) which stresses results and the collective good over the rights of the individual.

Kant argued that people should never be treated as means, only as ends. The individual stands at the center of this system: dignified, autonomous, and endowed both with rights and duties vis-à-vis others. In its bold formality, analytic subtlety, and virtual equation of rectitude and rationality, Kantian ethics captures certain essential features of the moral enterprise: equality, reciprocity, universality and humanism.

Utilitarianism is also rooted in a liberal impulse, not that of European Enlightenment, but of early Victorian England in the throes of the Industrial Revolution. In direct contrast to the Kantian focus on individual rights and interests, utilitarianism seeks to maximize the consequential benefits of moral decisions for society as a whole, based on the idea of the greatest good for the greatest number. While intuitively appealing, utilitarianism has never succeeded in quantifying and weighing moral values and outcomes. No obvious method exists of measuring the "greatest good," reconciling competing values, or weighing the intensity of satisfaction against the number of people satisfied, as the utilitarian theory commands. Today the doctrine is largely discredited, and for good reason: in most problems of situational ethics, the "felicific calculus" that utilitarianism requires eludes real calculation and, even if calculable, would be a dubious moral yardstick. Indeed, it is notoriously easy to formulate cases in which it yields preposterous results.

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Nevertheless, it is no accident that utilitarianism has retained a modest following, at least among moral philosophers. The notion of seeing ethical problems in terms of a balance between negative and positive outcomes, and thereby computing the aggregate interests of society, seems compelling on its face. In one sense, the differences between Kant and Mill reflect a tension endemic to all moral discourse, between the good of the individual and the

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6. John Stuart Mill published *Utilitarianism* in 1863, after having challenged the basic tenet of Utilitarianism in his autobiography.

good of the wider group or of society at large. In fact, despite the flaws of utilitarian moral theory and the virtues of Kantian ethics, a curious reversal occurs when one considers what might be called *dire cases*: situations where the issue is not merely competing rights and interests, but human life itself, often on a terrifying scale. Whereas in ordinary situational ethics different interests may be weighed and competing claims heard, in dire cases the range of possible outcomes is severely limited, and none satisfies the Kantian precepts. Such cases include the classic lifeboat problem, in which some must die for others to survive.

Dire cases represent a kind of warp in moral theory. Unlike interests, claims, or rights, human lives — the ultimate tokens of moral worth — cannot be redivided or redistributed. There is no just way of deciding that one life is worthier than another. All one can do is try to save as many innocent lives as possible. What dire-case reasoning suggests is not that one *must* sacrifice lives, but that, depending on the case, it may be the best thing to do.

Not surprisingly, dire cases abound in wartime. A striking example was Winston Churchill's decision not to evacuate Coventry during World War II, despite foreknowledge of a German air raid. Churchill made the decision in order to protect the so-called Ultra secret: that the Allies had obtained a prototype of the Nazis' Enigma encrypting machine, and were deciphering virtually all the important messages of the German High Command. Disclosure of that secret would have cost an enormous strategic advantage, many lives, and perhaps the war itself.

On a smaller scale, terrorist hostage seizures constitute a quintessential dire case. If making concessions to terrorists saves a finite number of lives at the cost of putting an indefinite number of others at future risk, sacrificing some lives may be reasonable in the short run. Thus, when it comes to respecting the moral worth of individuals (or distinguishing between terrorists and *freedom-fighters*), we are Kantians; but when it comes to saving the most lives, which is what governments must try to do, we must be more like utilitarians. Kantian principles are not invalidated by dire cases; they simply cannot be applied. Likewise, while the utilitarians may never have envisioned dire cases, it is precisely — and possibly only — in such tragic and extreme circumstances (in which reasoning is necessarily reduced to crude arithmetic) that utilitarianism commends itself to the moral conscience.

The crisis manager faced with a hostage episode has no obvious solution to this dilemma. However, some mitigating ethical considerations apply.

First of all, what is morally right is limited to what is possible. Any response to an immediate terrorist threat is constrained by limits on time, knowledge, and resources, as well as by diplomatic, economic, and military considerations. The response is inherently reactive and essentially one of containment, an attempt to avert twin disasters: the killing of innocent people, and political blackmail.

In addition, the search for an appropriate response is not in principle a political problem. Terrorism is a form of illicit aggression that any democratic nation must oppose. No one disputes that it must be thwarted; rather, it is

a question of means as opposed to ends. In pluralistic societies, few important issues genuinely transcend the ideological spectrum. Even questions of defense and national security generate ideological debate about means and resources. A broad consensus forms only when democratic institutions are themselves on the ramparts, and not just some feature or function of the welfare state. Terrorism ranks among those offenses about which there can be tactical, but not basic ethical, disagreement. In this respect, if no other, it is morally unproblematic.

A third mitigating factor, from an immediate tactical standpoint, is that the choice is rarely a simply dyadic one of either acceding to terrorist demands or launching a military rescue mission, at least not until intermediate strategies have been exhausted. Experience suggests that rather than look for a swift solution, governments should play for time, both to prepare other diplomatic and military options and to soften the terrorists' resolve. Officials should attempt to ascertain who the terrorists are, what they want, whom they are holding, and how flexible or manipulable they may be. Unfortunately, governments can consult no simple recipe for solving hostage crises. In general, however, the longer the stand-off, the greater the likelihood of a successful resolution.

It is the stated policy of the United States Government not to negotiate with terrorists. A crucial distinction must be drawn, however, between talking and negotiating, one that is often lost in public debate. Governments always must be willing to communicate; only in the most extreme circumstances can concessions be contemplated. In sending arms to Iran to effect the release of hostages within Iran's sphere of influence, the Reagan administration laid waste its hard-line anti-terrorist policy.

Political analysts, in fact, distinguish four general options available to governments when their citizens are held hostage: the use of force, negotiation, immediate concessions and delay. Most experts agree that the extremes of force and concessions are less desirable than the other two. Concessions set a dangerous precedent, and military rescue, while certain to break the stalemate, involves almost certain bloodshed.

Much of the debate about responding to terrorism is between the hard-line view (never make concessions) and the so-called flexible response position. The harder the line a government takes against concessions, the higher the rewards of success, but also the greater the risks of failure, should it result in the killing of hostages or should the government later be forced to back down. When the stakes are extremely high (e.g., a large number of hostages, hostages who are national leaders, or when the terrorists begin killing hostages) governments must either rescue or capitulate. If a military rescue seems too dangerous, most governments have found it expedient to pursue a tiered policy including an official hard line, a degree of flexibility in crisis situations (particularly vis-à-vis such minor concessions as food and other necessities), and substantive concessions only as a last resort. Whether rescue or stonewalling is more dangerous is impossible to predict in the abstract. In kidnappings of individuals, such as that of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro, rescue becomes virtually impossible.

A hard line, in sum, is easier to proclaim but more difficult to execute. As one writer has put it,

. . . in the long run, 'no ransom' is likely to be proven a most effective policy against hostage seizures. However, in the short run, the implementation of the policy and the establishment of its credibility might be exceedingly costly.<sup>7</sup>

In hostage crises democratic governments also function under severe political and psychological constraints. It is easier for a leader to appear compassionate than to seem calculating. Yet, as the experiences of both President Carter and President Reagan suggest, a political and emotional investment in individual hostages and their families may be detrimental to deterrence and other national interests. Similarly, it is politically easier to pursue a course that endangers military personnel than one that endangers civilians, even when (as in the 1975 Mayaguez incident) the equation in terms of military casualties becomes costly. Whereas presidents must consider long-range consequences, public opinion tends to focus on the short term, and is less likely to accept civilian casualties, even as a dire-case solution that might arguably save more lives in the long run.

Thus, as recent hostage crises have demonstrated, American presidents can and have become helpless giants. Congress, the public and the media place great pressure upon the president to act, even when swift action may not be the most prudent course. That such pressures have caused great personal stress for these leaders, possibly even impairing their performance, is not surprising. Ironically, far fewer lives are generally at stake in hostage takings than in other types of international crises. Yet, unlike abstract casualties, hostages are real, identified individuals in mortal danger, and it is therefore understandable — though arguably misguided — for a political leader to make their rescue not just a high priority but the overriding one.

#### THE STRATEGIC RESPONSE: PREVENTION AND DETERRENCE

Certain routine preventive measures can provide a limited shield against terrorism, to minimize its frequency and impact. These include travel advisories, reduction of diplomatic missions in volatile regions, enhanced security at key airports and embassies, greater protection for likely targets of kidnapping or assassination attempts, and tighter controls at border crossings. Strategic deterrence also requires vigorous prosecution of terrorists, improved international cooperation in the exchange of information, lookout lists, enforcement of extradition treaties, and diplomatic and economic sanctions against countries that harbor or sponsor terrorists. Even these obvious prophylactic measures often have been impeded by political and bureaucratic obstacles, and philosophical and ideological differences about the definition of terrorism.

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7. N. Friedman, "Hostage Negotiations: Dilemmas About Policy," in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, eds. L.Z. Freedman and Y. Alexander (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1983), 18.

Direct, preemptive measures aimed at disabling terrorists *before* they strike are in theory more potent than passive measures, but in practice far more difficult to execute. In fact, only one counterterrorist measure potentially can destroy terrorist organizations: infiltration. Infiltration effectively crippled the Red Brigades in Italy and the Baader-Meinhof group in West Germany in the 1970s, but given the size and character of most terrorist rings, infiltration is as difficult as it is effective.

Military action, whether preemptive or in reprisal, is in most cases both tactically and morally questionable. Large-scale force rarely succeeds against terrorists. To pinpoint appropriate targets such as bases, armories, or training camps is notoriously difficult; military operations on foreign soil involve an array of political, diplomatic, and logistical obstacles. Moreover, even in response to the most heinous aggression, the use of force incurs the likelihood of collateral harm to innocent persons. Even the most carefully planned surgical raid on a known terrorist stronghold can result in the deaths of noncombatants.

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The military option, therefore, raises moral issues endemic to all general warfare, including the question of how many innocents may be sacrificed justifiably, without their informed consent, toward a presumably worthy and life-preserving end. Essentially the same question, albeit on a much larger scale, was raised by the total warfare of World War II with the nuclear annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the firebombing of Tokyo, Dresden, and Hamburg, as well as the Axis raids on London, Coventry, Warsaw, Kiev, Rotterdam, Shanghai, and other cities.

In such cases, resort to utilitarian reasoning is both necessary and inherently problematic. The nature and scale of human conflict in the modern age do not allow us the luxury of protecting all lives or interests. In genuinely dire cases, calculations aimed at minimizing the loss of life are clearly preferable to calculations of brute self-interest. However, uncertainties, complexities, and extenuating circumstances will thwart any simple numerical assumption about alternative outcomes.

Hence, no absolute precepts exist to inform dire cases. Each must be considered separately in light of available facts. Governments cannot opt out of such dilemmas simply by refusing to pursue any course that results in innocent deaths (often no such course exists) or by simply transferring responsibility for those outcomes to the terrorists. Within the domain of choices they face, governments must assume responsibility for choosing to bargain, hold fast, or attack. The lesson of Coventry is that an option entailing innocent deaths is justified if it is believed that on a final balance it will save innocent

lives. With terrorism, however, the risks differ with each episode and the ultimate costs are not always apparent.

In contemplating a military response to terrorism, policymakers face the classic question of to what extent a democratic state can compromise its norms and principles in the short run in order to advance them in the long run. Moreover, that question takes a particularly ironic twist: democratic citizens are accustomed to tolerating warfare — especially conventional, high-intensity hostilities — under certain circumstances and for certain ends, using essentially a utilitarian justification. Military force is sometimes necessary to protect democratic values and/or human life, even though some innocent people may be harmed.

However, from a moral standpoint, it is not obvious that a *surgical* raid, such as the April 1986 strike against Libya, is superior to the much more contained and precise violence of an attack on one or more key terrorists. For a democratic regime with a professed regard for human life, dispatching commandos to kill terrorists may be more practical, and even more justifiable (however politically difficult or morally repugnant at first glance) than bombing their camps and families.

Assassination (to use the term of opprobrium) is rightly abhorrent to democratic sensibilities, and is most often a policy of tyrants. Yet conventional warfare, the very antithesis of democratic change on a much broader scale, is often accepted as a tragic necessity.

If we can distinguish just from unjust warfare, we must also distinguish just from unjust assassination, or risk hypocrisy. In fact, what is meant by *assassination* here is selective targetting by commandos or non-uniformed soldiers, usually involving little if any collateral harm. In dire cases, the absolutes disappear, and the question becomes not whether this tactic is justified or not, but *when* it is justified. How does one differentiate between Hitler and Idi Amin, or Qaddafi and Abu Nidal?

Finally, in framing a counterterrorist strategy, again one can take a degree of comfort from broader parameters of the problem, which, if nothing else, offer a less desperate perspective. One is that terrorism presents in some sense a structural problem endemic to modern society, and remains, as such, ultimately ineradicable. Democratic states, which are committed to the rule of law and whose citizens habitually travel around the world, can no more eliminate terrorism once and for all than they can eliminate domestic crime. There is no final or universal remedy for terrorism; it can only be contained. Even a state such as Israel, which stands ready to allocate substantial resources to combat the threat and prepared to deploy anti-terrorist commandos, cannot put an end to political violence.

#### RESTRAINING THE MESSENGER: TERRORISM AND THE MEDIA

In the view of most experts, the overall importance and impact of terrorism in world affairs has been overstated.<sup>8</sup> Governments may be embarrassed or

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8. These include leading analysts of terrorism. See Gary Sick, "Terrorism: Its Political Uses and Abuses," *SAIS*

frustrated by terrorist incidents and their leaders politically damaged. However, small-scale terrorism is almost never destabilizing. No democratic government has been toppled by it, and the number of innocent people killed in terrorist incidents in the past twenty years, though by no means negligible, is comparatively small. On an annual basis, more Americans die from bee stings than from terrorist attacks.<sup>9</sup>

The perception that terrorism is a major international problem to be dealt with at the highest levels of state is a self-fulfilling prophecy; terrorism is fueled by high estimates of its importance. The emergence of that perception, along with the wave of terrorist incidents in recent decades, raises the final question of the role and responsibilities of the news media.

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Given its inherently sensational character on both a personal and political level, terrorism inevitably commands the close attention of the news media and of television in particular. Indeed, terrorist acts are often designed expressly for that purpose. Hostage crises are especially mediagenic, with simmering tension likely at any moment to erupt into violence. The mortal drama of terrorist incidents rivals that of commercial television. As such, the relationship between terrorists and the media presents an awkward symbiosis of mutual exploitation.

As the surrogates of an informed public, news organizations have both the right and the responsibility to make independent news judgments and report events of public interest and concern, including terrorist incidents. Moreover, in hostage crises the media may perform an indirect public service as conduits of valuable information to the government's leaders. Journalists can sometimes gain access, ask questions, and elicit information that negotiators cannot. In such situations the networks are often the first source, if not the only one, of important information. As one analyst has remarked, "The CIA cannot get a camera in front of a hijacked plane parked on the tarmac of Beirut Airport, but ABC can."<sup>10</sup>

Yet, however scrupulously the media may pursue truth, accuracy, and balance, as information brokers, editors and producers inevitably seek to maximize commercial values as well. This can affect how they select, interpret, package, and even influence the news. While such secondary effects of news-

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*Review* 7, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1987): 11-26; Laqueur, 311; and Jeffrey Simon, "Misunderstanding Terrorism," *Foreign Policy* 67 (Summer 1987): 104-120.

9. George F. Will, cited by Sick, 21.

10. Sick, 24.

gathering occur in many areas of reporting, terrorism, because of its volatility, is an archetypal case.

These effects may complicate the battle against terrorism in several ways. The publicity that journalists have the power to provide is often critical to the terrorist enterprise. Similarly, the way in which information is presented can affect profoundly both the public perception and the outcome of a crisis in progress. The news media are not passive and objective observers. In a social equivalent of the Heisenberg principle, the observer alters the object, and the consequent public perception defines the problem. Hence, the media are to some extent accountable for the impact their coverage has on terrorists, their victims, and the corresponding public attitudes.

Media critics further cite the so-called contagion effect: extensive coverage, in a similar fashion as government concessions, encourages further terrorism. To prove this claim is impossible but, as with the argument for saving lives in the future, that does not render it implausible. Certainly, modern terrorism relies on the electronic media for public exposure and political impact and could not exist without satellite transmission of TV news.

As noted earlier, intensive press coverage also adds to the stress of political leaders in times of crisis. Whereas media focus on a stalemate tends to generate pressure for decisive action, emphasis on hostages and their anguished families can create a potentially contrary pressure to preserve life at all costs. Presidents Carter and Reagan, swayed by their compassion for hostages, remained Kantians to the end, even though the crises they faced may have called for more utilitarian decisions.

Conscientious news executives and managers therefore must weigh various non-journalistic considerations in deciding how to cover hostage incidents and terrorism in general. Foremost among these is the possibility of endangering hostages' lives or interfering with a negotiation process through injudicious disclosure. Such a result might occur through the passing of information to terrorists, provoking them to violence, influencing their attitudes, or otherwise complicating efforts to resolve a crisis. In October 1977, for example, the pilot of a hijacked Lufthansa jetliner was executed by his captors following news reports that he had been in radio communication with authorities. Conversely, the six American employees of the US embassy in Teheran who were hidden by Canadians were able to escape because news organizations that knew of their whereabouts did not report it.

Second, and more generally, terrorism must not be allowed to influence the form, content, or integrity of the news. Such manipulation is, to some degree, inevitable. However, media compliance with specific demands for attention, for the publication of political statements, and above all, for news organizations to relinquish editorial control serves neither the public's need to know nor its interest in defeating terrorism.

A third and related consideration, mentioned above, relates to proportion. Intensive media coverage of international terrorism in recent years has contributed to a public perception that has exaggerated its actual significance in the flow of human events. In April 1986, at the time of the American attack

on Libya, a New York Times/CBS poll revealed that the American public regarded terrorism as the number one problem facing the country. This came on the heels of a series of sensational terrorist incidents the previous summer and fall, including the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in Beirut in July 1985, the seizure of the cruise ship Achille Lauro and murder of passenger Leon Klinghoffer, and the airport massacres in Rome and Vienna. At the same time, the Reagan administration had launched an extensive (and successful) media campaign to dramatize the threat of terrorism. By the summer of 1986, a national mood bordering on hysteria led to a precipitous decline in the number of American tourists travelling to Europe.

The alternative to unrestricted, promiscuous coverage of terrorism need not and cannot be censorship, self-imposed or otherwise. Particular situations may warrant certain governmental limits on newsgathering (e.g., restricting media access to crisis sites in order to safeguard the negotiation process) just as protecting any other delicate negotiations or national secrets is in the public interest. For the most part, however, judicious awareness of the media's multiple roles and functions must come from within.

Information is precious, but life is sacred. In a democratic culture, both the government and the media must ultimately serve the public interest. Various individual rights, including the right to privacy, the rights of the accused, the rights of individuals to safe passage, and the collective right to national security share problematic moral boundaries with the crucial right to be informed. When such interests are at stake, the fact that a particular event is interesting, shocking, or even politically significant does not mean that the failure to publish or broadcast immediately an account of it compromises a news organization. Journalistic restraint may be in everyone's best interest particularly when lives are in danger, or when indiscriminate or live coverage may inflate the events' importance in the public mind and make their recurrence even more likely. Although thoughtful journalists must weigh such extraneous concerns against full and prompt disclosure in many areas of reporting, these dilemmas are never more salient than in the coverage of terrorism.

### CONCLUSIONS

Terrorism is a serious international problem that is unlikely to disappear. Its moral and practical dimensions have been seriously misunderstood and prove particularly vexing because, in its diversity, terrorism resists systematic analysis at every level: definitional, analytic, moral, tactical and strategic. Much can be said about terrorism as a form of violence on each of these levels, but the episodic outbreaks of savagery behind the generalities are unique and various. Definitions of terrorism are often either overly broad or politically shaded, or both. Public perceptions of it are askew. Terrorism is not adaptable to the framework of individual rights, and the very heinousness of terrorist acts tends to overshadow the moral dilemmas they impose on their targets, which include governments, citizens and news organizations.

For the news media, through which the problem is defined and debated, the ultimate challenge is to serve the public interest, and not that of terrorists, governments, commercial sponsors, or perceived public tastes. This challenge requires a measure of restraint both in particular crises and in defining the issue in general. The public perception of terrorism as a leading threat to world peace and stability must be corrected. Similarly, governments must recognize that terrorism is a problem of limited dimensions, and one that cannot be resolved once and for all simply by finding the right tactics or being sufficiently tough. Hostage crises should be dealt with at the subcabinet level, and not by a visibly immobilized chief of state. Government should not distort the problem by crudely politicizing the term *terrorism*, as did the Reagan administration.

A systematic approach must deal with terrorism on all levels. In defining and conceptualizing terrorism, it is not enough to consider means — or ends — alone. Both must be assessed in order to isolate a subcategory of political violence around which there can be broad semantic and normative agreement. In framing a counterterrorist policy, officials cannot simply bow to the rhetoric of the left and attend to the root causes of discontent, nor bow to that of the right and treat the symptoms with military power. Combatting so variegated and idiosyncratic a phenomenon requires flexibility and a range of diplomatic, economic, and military options. The latter include low-intensity commando warfare, which has hitherto been regarded in the United States as incompatible with democratic principles.

In framing the practical problem of terrorism, moreover, we must not lose sight of its essentially moral character as a challenge to minimize loss of human life. At the same time, we must also consider interests other than the lives in immediate danger, including the need to maintain national credibility and deter further terrorism, which threatens lives in an ominous but indeterminate way. In dire cases, this choice requires a willingness to resort to utilitarian reasoning in place of the more immediately satisfying absolutes of Kantian individualism.

In perspective, international terrorist episodes over the past two decades have presented a persistent annoyance to democratic states. Compared to other threats to human life and liberty, these incidents have proved thus far to be a minor problem. In the words of one leading expert on the subject, Walter Laqueur, terrorism is a "side-show."<sup>11</sup> However, the moral issues raised by these sudden, violent challenges to democratic order are profound and, like terrorism itself, enduring. Should the nightmare scenario ever take place, in which terrorists genuinely threaten world order through the use of more potent weapons (e.g., chemical, biological, or nuclear), decision makers will have little time to think them through.

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11. Laqueur, 98.