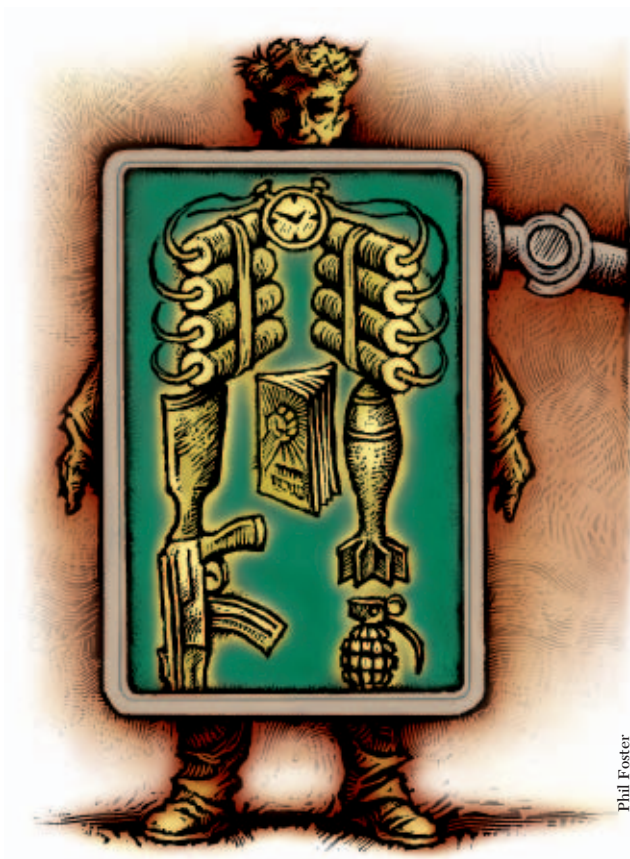


THE ANATOMY OF TERRORISM



Phil Foster

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TERRORISM IS AN INSTRUMENT OR TACTIC — A WEAPON, NOT AN ENEMY. THUS, A “WAR” ON TERRORISM MAKES NO MORE SENSE THAN A “WAR” ON WAR.

By RONALD SPIERS

My former boss, Secretary of State George Shultz, was a pretty unhappy camper whenever anyone repeated the cliché that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” but the thought carries a lot of truth. I once asked him why the French underground, which resorted to assassinations and bombings during World War II, and which was looked on by the Nazis and the Vichy regime as “terrorists” — and by us as freedom fighters — didn’t illustrate the validity of that characterization. He simply insisted that they were “not terrorists.”

As that anecdote illustrates, for many people a terrorist is someone whose objectives you don't agree with — it is not a matter of the instruments they use to advance those objectives. Thus Gavrillo Princip, the Serbian student whose shot at Austria-Hungarian Crown Prince Ferdinand in Sarajevo sparked World War I, was a hero to Serbians, but a “terrorist” to the Austrians. We have many contemporary examples, as well: the Tamil Tigers who use violence against the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka; the Palestinians who want relief from Israeli occupation; the Kashmiris who want self-determination; the Chechens who want independence from Russia; the Basques; and the IRA. Which are they, terrorists or freedom fighters — or both?

To answer that thorny question, we first have to look at other questions. What do we mean by “terrorism”? Is it a new phenomenon, or does it have a history we need to understand? What motivates it? What instruments are best suited to combat it? And what do we make of the president's “war on terrorism”? Is it winnable, and if so, how do we measure defeat or victory? Or is terrorism (as some contend) something that cannot be defeated, but only managed? Finally, is terrorism ever justified — or is all terrorism the same: evil? If there can be “just” wars, are there not cases in which it could be “justified” to resort to weapons of terror if all non-violent paths are closed to those who seek change in an unjust situation?

The definition of terrorism I find most useful

Ambassador Ronald Spiers was a Foreign Service officer from 1955 to 1989, serving as minister in London, ambassador to the Bahamas, Turkey and Pakistan, assistant secretary for political-military affairs and for intelligence and research, and under secretary for management. Following retirement from the Service, he served as U.N. under secretary-general for political affairs from 1989 to 1992. He writes and lectures on foreign affairs and is a fellow of the American Academy of Diplomacy.

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reflects Clausewitz' famous description of war as a method of carrying on politics by other means: terrorism is the use of violence by individuals, groups or nations to intimidate or instill fear for the purpose of advancing a political objective. And like formal warfare, terrorism frequently kills innocent bystanders, either deliberately or inadvertently (think of Nagasaki, Dresden, Lidice).

Terrorism, then, is an instrument, a tactic, a technique. It is a weapon, not an enemy. Thus, in my judgment a “war” on terrorism makes no more sense than a “war” on war. I believe it was unfortunate that President Bush adopted this mantra, however politically useful the idea that we are “at war” may be for other purposes, such as rallying political support by appealing to patriotic feelings or curtailing inconvenient liberties. The president has conflated all forms of terrorism anywhere, whatever their roots, into one undifferentiated ball of wax: do we really want to declare that violently resisting an alien occupation, overthrowing a tyrant, etc. makes you an “enemy” of the United States? How un-Jeffersonian!

Or, to put it another way, the “war on terrorism” is best thought of as a metaphor, like the “wars” on crime or drugs or poverty. Taking the concept literally has led to a lot of confusion and policy errors, chief among them the assumption that military action is the primary tool with which to respond to terrorism.

Compounding the confusion (deliberately or not), the administration persists in representing the conflict in Iraq as a part of the “war on terrorism.” As a result of such overheated rhetoric, millions of Americans continue to believe — despite the president's belated admission to the contrary — that Saddam Hussein had a role in the 9/11 attacks, and that link (along with the claim we were under imminent threat from his weapons of mass destruction) justified our invasion. But in reality, Operation Iraqi Freedom's relationship to terrorism has been, predictably, to increase the appeal of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida organization. Indeed, support for al-Qaida has metastasized to

such an extent that the International Institute for Strategic Studies now estimates that the group's supporters number over 18,000 and that over 100,000 potential fighters have undergone training in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

A "Reverse Crusader"

Accordingly, al-Qaida — estimated to have a presence of some kind in over 60 countries — is the chief threat we need to concentrate on and choose the appropriate weapons to combat. There simply is no alternative to treating it as a continuing and fundamental threat to our security, as the network has demonstrated by a succession of costly blows, culminating in the 9/11 attacks.

Al-Qaida is not a new phenomenon. At least four previous, religiously-inspired movements in history have justified terrorism in God's name — and all have given synonyms for terror to our language: the Zealots, Jews who fought pagan Rome from A.D. 66-70; the Crusaders, who created a swath of destruction in Europe and the Middle East during the 12th century; the Assassins, an Islamic sect that wreaked havoc from the 12th to the 14th centuries; and the Thugs, Hindu sects that terrorized South Asia throughout the 18th century.

Of those precursors, by far the strongest parallel with al-Qaida comes from the Crusaders, who responded to Pope Urban II's 1095 call for a "holy war" to expel the "Infidels" from the "Holy Land." The pope proclaimed that it was a Christian obligation to respond militantly to Islam's influence, which was rapidly spreading following the Turkish victory in the Battle of Manzikert (1071). He even offered absolution from sin and special merit in heaven to those answering the call, and the Crusaders went forward under the banner of "Deus Volt" (God wills it).

The First Crusade reached Jerusalem in 1099 (the only one of the nine Crusades to do so), and led to a bloody massacre in which thousands of inhabitants were indiscriminately killed — Christian, Jew and Muslim alike. Crusader horses were said to be up to their fetlocks in blood and body parts. The Latin Kingdom of

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Jerusalem was established under European rule and lasted until 1187, when a Kurdish general, Saladin, expelled Crusaders from the city. The Crusaders eventually lost their religious focus, and in 1204 they ransacked Constantinople, then a Christian city.

Osama bin Laden seems to me to be a kind of "reverse Crusader," answering a call of

God to expel Western influence from Muslim lands (in 1998 he issued a fatwa that, in effect, declared war on the United States). Indeed, there is a family resemblance among all religious fundamentalists. Whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim or Hindu, they have a lot in common: adherence to scriptural literalism, rejection of pluralism (if we "know" the "truth," dissent serves no function and shouldn't be tolerated), an apocalyptic embrace of violence, a taste for conspiracy theories and the often vicious repression of women. Its members often regard their own lives as expendable and believe "martyrdom" is even to be welcomed.

President Bush insists that the main motivation of al-Qaida and its followers is their hatred of freedom, pure and simple. It would be hard to come up with a shallower assessment — though the administration's blithe assumption that any government that does not unquestioningly and wholeheartedly support the United States in the war on terrorism is "against us" comes a close second.

Still, the administration is correct that al-Qaida's aims, insofar as we can understand them (they have morphed over time), are not ones that we can accommodate. Bin Laden's first declared objective was to force U.S. troops out of Saudi Arabia (their "Holy Land"). He expressed outrage that "infidel" forces were "occupying" Muslim lands and held that the decadent Western culture they brought with them was contaminating Islam. U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia were withdrawn as no longer necessary during the current Iraq war, but that has not diminished al-Qaida's hostility; bin Laden now cites the fact that the same "infidel" troops attacked Iraq, another Muslim nation, and remain there.

The second issue al-Qaida has been explicit about is the U.S. role in the Palestinian problem. Most Muslims and much of the rest of the world share this objection to an American policy seen as one-sidedly favoring Israel.

At the root of bin Laden's implacable hostility, however, is probably his view of the nature of Western culture. He denounces it as secular, impure, materialistic, sex- and money-obsessed and implacably bent on undermining Islam. To him, we represent a new "Jahaliyya" (a time of ignorance before the truth was revealed by God), like the previous ones that Abraham, Jesus and, finally, Mohammed were dispatched by God to overcome. This interpretation allows bin Laden to cast himself as a modern-day successor to those prophetic figures, and he is so viewed by many followers.

For these and other reasons beyond the scope of this essay, I believe that the only way to cope with the al-Qaida threat is to destroy its supporting network, and to avoid policies that gratuitously increase its following.

The Larger Context

To craft policies to accomplish those ends, however, we need to take into account the fact that most of the terrorist problems we face in the Middle East were exacerbated by our responses to two events that took place in 1979. The first was the Iranian revolution and the second, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Both served to rekindle a dormant radical movement in Islam.

The Iranian revolution was largely a reaction to the policies of Shah Pahlevi's secular regime that had had the open-ended support of Washington. In fact, the U.S. had intervened in 1953 to restore the shah to power after an election had installed a government that threatened to nationalize the oil industry. Washington had backed the shah's "White Revolution" unreservedly, selling him whatever weapons he wanted and overloading Iran with American military personnel who brought with them a culture that offended many puri-

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tanical Shiite sensibilities. (The first shot in the revolution was the bombing of a movie house showing American films that religious authorities considered morally offensive.) Then, when Iraq attacked Iran in 1980, the U.S. supported Saddam Hussein because we regarded Tehran, with its strongly anti-Western ideology, as the principal threat.

In Afghanistan, meanwhile, our response to the Soviet invasion was to work with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in supporting the mujahideen by financing and supplying weapons for their resistance. One of the beneficiaries of our support was none other than Osama bin Laden. When the Soviets ultimately withdrew from the country in 1989 our attention wandered, leaving the chaos of "warlordism" that finally brought the Taliban to power to impose a kind of stability of the graveyard. Our policies toward Pakistan soured and exacerbated the problem.

Reacting to these developments, the U.S. gradually built up a larger military presence in the Middle East. This led to increasing culture clashes, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where Wahhabism is particularly strong. Although only a minority of Arab Muslims practice this austere, fundamentalist strain of Islam, we need to understand it to appreciate the nature of our clash with al-Qaida.

Wahhabism took root among the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula in the 1700s in reaction to the growing secularization and decadence of the Ottoman Sultanate. It is, like its Jewish and Christian fundamentalist counterparts, a kind of Puritanism, characterized by the same messianic outlook, the same self-certain dogmatism, the same paranoia of the "true believer" — and the same tendency to idealize the rapid spread of Islamic power and influence in the century after Mohammed's death in 632.

During the Golden Era of Islamic civilization, roughly corresponding to the Middle Ages in Europe, Baghdad and Cordova were centers of world learning and culture, unequalled in the West. Cairo, Tehran and Istanbul were world-class cities compared to London or Paris. Arab scholars (e.g., the physician/philosophers

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Averroes and Avicenna) transmitted to the West the fruits of Arabic mathematics and science (algebra and the concept of “zero” are Arab inventions and the West abandoned the cumbersome Roman numerical system for the Arabic) and a rich body of classical Greek writings that they had translated into Arabic and thus preserved.

But from that zenith of Muslim dominance, Islam suffered a steady succession of attacks and reversals, beginning with the Crusades. Baghdad was destroyed by Hulagu Khan (Genghis’ grandson) in 1258; the Cordova Sultanate fell in 1492; the Muslim advance in the Mediterranean was stopped at Lepanto in 1571 and in Europe at Vienna in 1683; the British put an end to the Mogul Empire in 1858; and the Ottoman Empire collapsed at the end of World War I.

Then came a new era of Western (largely French and British) Christian imperialism beginning during World War I that produced further Arab humiliations like the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the

Balfour Declaration of 1917; the United Nations-sponsored partition plan and the establishment of Israel in Muslim-majority territory in 1947-48; and the Cold War-era increase in Western support of authoritarian and corrupt Arab regimes for the purpose of securing oil supplies, necessitating an expanding military and political presence in the area for the U.S. And fairly or not, it is that prominence that renders us, the predominant symbol of the West, such an effective scapegoat for bin Laden and his supporters.

The Way Ahead

In some respects, we have done fairly well in dealing with al-Qaida since 9/11. Working with other governments, we have destroyed or captured key members of its leadership, uncovered many of its sleeper cells around the world, and disrupted its financing and communications networks by careful intelligence and police work. We have materially improved our defenses at home, although many holes remain and may be

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beyond our ability to close. These, more than main military force, are the instruments we will continue to need. As with an international criminal conspiracy, patience and sustained effort in a variety of areas is key.

At the same time, however, too many of our policies toward the region have had the effect of strengthening the recruiting power of the “true believers” in the Arab “street”:

Iraq. I am still appalled by the naïveté of so many in the current administration who advocated war as a first step in an American-led “democratization” of the Middle East. As Shakespeare wrote in *Henry V*, they have “a heavy reckoning to make.”

I don’t think you can spread democracy by force in areas where little or no sense of civic commonwealth and harmony exists. Democracy can only grow organically, from the inside, where the cultural soil is hospitable and the societal preconditions exist or can be readily developed. These include a modicum of literacy and education, absence of extremes of wealth and poverty, a tradition of respect for and protection of minority rights, acceptance of the rule of law, the balance wheel of a stable middle class, a minimum of ethnic and confessional conflict, etc. The fact that we went into Iraq in the face of overwhelming international opposition and on the basis of exaggerated justifications has only amplified the difficulties arrayed before us.

Yet in my view we now have no alternative to trying to fulfill our obligation toward reconstruction and encouraging political reform in Iraq. Although I believe it is a long shot, it is possible that some form of liberalization in Iraq will eventually take root and its people will ultimately be better off. But whether ridding Iraq of Saddam Hussein and his sons justified the loss of life and maiming of so many Americans and Iraqis, the awesome economic costs, the damage to important international relations, the enhancing of the attractive power of al-Qaida and other terrorists, and the diminishing of the reputation of the United States,

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is doubtful at best. If we could contain the threat of a powerful and nuclear-armed Soviet Union for decades, we could certainly have done so with a weak and debilitated regime in Iraq.

In my view, our focus should have remained on Afghanistan, a difficult enough case on its own, but one where action was more justifiable and the threat unquestionable. We have probably sacrificed our potential for success there by turning to Iraq, which represented no real security threat

to the United States.

Palestine. I am sure nothing would diminish the threat from Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, and improve relations with the billion-plus Muslims around the world, so much as a resolution of the Palestinian problem. This issue has caused intense hostility throughout the Muslim world against the United States, in particular, since 1967. A further damaging setback was President Bush’s recent departure from the traditional U.S. position on Israeli settlements (they are illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention) and the Palestinian “right of return” (most of the world believes they should have a negotiated but limited right of return and/or compensation for the loss of ancestral property since 1948). This has strengthened the perception that we are hopelessly biased toward Israel and cannot be trusted to support an equitable agreement that protects the interest of both parties.

As *The Economist* recently observed, “In just the way that many Americans see no distinction between the terrorism of al-Qaida and the terrorism of the Palestinian intifada, so many Arabs see no distinction between Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and America’s occupation of Iraq. Both are portrayed as similar dramas of Islamic resistance.”

Economic development. We have made many strategic and tactical mistakes in our counterterrorism policy, but the very worst has been our failure to deal with the swamp of poverty and ignorance that spawns

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and sustains terrorism. Shamefully, the United States ranks last among the countries of the developed, democratic world in the percentage of its resources it devotes to international development assistance. We allot less than one-tenth of one percent of our annual GDP to foreign aid, and a lot of this aid goes to one country with a per-capita GNP of over \$17,000: Israel. If we had spent on development assistance the amount we have spent, and will spend, on Iraq, we would be much more effective in our anti-terrorism efforts.

When the gap between rich and poor widens, as it has, and half the world's population lives below the poverty line, anger and alienation are the inevitable by-product. When 30,000 children die daily of diseases readily curable in the West, envy, guilt and desperation are by-products. In the next 15 years a billion people will be added to the world population even as our populations in the West age and contract. A fertile field for

terrorism is being cultivated, and American is doing precious little about it.

Attitude adjustment. Finally, we should be aware that our historic belief in American "exceptionalism" is widely interpreted abroad as arrogance, even among our traditional friends and allies. A lifetime of living and traveling in other countries has led me to the conclusion that on the whole, Americans are no better and no worse than the rest of mankind. The advantages we have — and share with other democracies — are the institutions and rules that help shelter us from the fallen angels of our nature. We must not let these institutions be weakened in order to combat terrorism.

I believe George Washington offered us the best foreign policy advice when he said our aim should be to "raise a standard to which the wise and honest may repair." Then our virtues will speak powerfully for themselves. ■

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