

Understanding and Dealing with Terrorism.

By William R. Polk

The very word “terrorism” strikes dread in Europeans and Americans today. To us, it means ghastly, almost unthinkable acts of violence against defenseless and innocent people by evil or psychopathic outlaws. It is thought of as the cancer of the political system, a force almost too awful to be discussed. Yet, like cancer, it needs to be fully understood if we are ever to be able to cope with it. Otherwise, the very actions taken against it may prove to be more detrimental than terrorism itself to our societies, our legal systems and our way of life.

As we have learned in medicine, we must both make a distinction between symptoms and causes and also not fall into the trap of lumping together quite different things, even when they share a common name. Precision in identification and understanding is the first step in any “cure.” So is it in politics. What works in one situation may prove disastrous in another.

So in this and following articles, I will seek, first, precisely to define the various forms of political violence and then offer approaches to dealing with them. These are not easy tasks, but the dangers are real and present so I beg the reader’s close attention. I begin with “state terrorism.” Then I take up in the second article “individual terrorism” and move in the third article to “group terrorism.” In the fourth article I deal with the most common stimulus to terrorism, the quest for self determination. In the fifth I show what can be done about it and, finally, in the sixth article I focus on *al-Qaida* and its clones that are now spreading throughout Asia and coming to Europe.

First, a note of clarification. The reader will find that I treat terrorism and guerrilla war as essentially the same genre or phenomenon. We might think of terrorism as the tactic or action of groups numbering up to a few dozens and guerrilla war of groups numbering up to the thousands, but the one fades into the other depending on the opposition it encounters and the opportunities it finds.

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The word “terrorism” first appeared in general use shortly after the French Revolution. Then it was applied not to a shadowy conspiracy of outlaws but to the policy the French government employed to intimidate its real or imagined opponents: “The Terror” which lasted from March 1793 to July 1794.

The French did not, of course, invent state terrorism. In Rome, rulers occasionally decreed a “proscription,” -- that is, a state edict marking named citizens as outlaws who could be killed on sight without legal process. The most famous Roman victim was the great orator and statesman, Cicero, who was struggling to maintain the republican form of government against the forces moving toward dictatorship. At the order of the ruling triumvirate, Cicero, along with hundreds of others, was hunted down and murdered.

More recently, purges in the Soviet Union during the 1930s were state terrorism. Conjuring up enemies everywhere he looked, Stalin attacked “the wrecking, sabotage, and espionage activities of the Japanese-German-Trotskyist agents.” In the course of the massive sweep of Russian society, millions of people were imprisoned or murdered. Families were torn apart; trying to protect themselves, neighbors denounced one another to the secret police; and even those not directly touched lived in dread of a knock on the door at midnight. No one was safe. No credentials of loyalty were sufficient; in fact, such qualifications were themselves often taken as proof of some sinister, hidden affiliation with plotters.

At roughly the same time, Germany also fell victim to state terrorism. After he had been democratically elected, Hitler used terror like a paring knife to peel off and destroy group after group of potential opponents. At first, the churches welcomed the Nazi government. They thought “positive Christianity” linked with Nazism would rid Germany of “disruptive elements” and affirm “the ethical and moral feeling of the Germanic race.”

But, having used the churches against others, Hitler also cast them aside. One of the leading Protestant churchmen, the Reverend Martin Niemöller, who had served with distinction in

the German Navy in the First World War, described how this coalition affected him: “When the Nazis took away the Communists,” he wrote, “I was silent; after all, I was no communist. Then, when they put the Social-Democrats in prison, I was silent; after all, I was no Social-Democrat. When they took away the trade-unionists, I did not protest; after all, I was no trade-unionist. [And so on.] When they took me away [in 1937], there was nobody left to protest.”

Similarly in China during the frenzy of the “Red Guards” movement and in Cambodia during the period of “Stone Age Communism,” Mao and Pol Pot used state terrorism to overawe, suppress or annihilate group after group.

History offers many other examples of this form of political terrorism. What they all show is that in each case, the ruling group sought to destroy as completely as possible all those it regarded as rivals, heretics or real or potential enemies.

Closely related to this form of state terrorism is another of the ugly features of 20th century history, “ethnic cleansing.” Instead of concentrating on political opposition or presumed conspiracies among their fellow citizens, some governments have focused hatred on “extraneous” minorities who were differentiated by religion, language or ethnicity: Turks against Armenians, Greeks and Turks against one another, Russians, Germans and others against the Jews, Serbs against Bosnians, Hindus and Muslims against one another, Muslim Sudanese against the Christian or pagan Nuer, Azande and Nuba; Hutus against Tutsis; and on and on around the world. In each of these violent suppressions, what a person thought, even how he acted, made no difference. It was who he was that condemned him.

Historians often describe government-controlled state terrorism as a “process” or even as a massive descent into a sort of insanity and observe that it stops only when it has “run its course.” That is, when those in charge fear that it is harming their interests or when new figures come to the fore and wish to differentiate themselves from their predecessors. This happened in France when the Jacobins were overthrown, in Russia when Khrushchev came to power and wanted to show that he was not a Stalinist, and in China when the Communist leadership

overturned the “Gang of Five” and the Red Guards. Then, recognizing not only the lunacy of the policy but its cost to the health of the state, many of those whose hands were dipped in blood themselves became “reformers.” Many of the previous oppressors fell to executioners’ bullets.

While suppressing state terrorism is difficult for fellow citizens, it is much more difficult for foreigners. They have rarely accomplished it peacefully. Britain and America overthrew the Nazi regime in a long, bitter and costly war and then had virtually to rebuild Germany. So great is the expense in lives and treasure in the use of such enormous force that governments have usually tried to find other means. Often they simply equivocated, hoping that the ugliness of the criminal regime would “run its course.” That is usually the first reaction. It was with Nazism. Then, a second means is often attempted; the most common has been boycott.

Boycott has usually not proven effective for several reasons. If the offending government is cohesive and determined, it can turn boycott to its advantage. Stalin won some support from the Russian people by directing their anger against “the capitalist powers encircling the motherland.” Boycott also harms the innocent. Health and aid agencies pointed to the terrible cost to the old, pregnant women and children as food and medicine fell short during the 1990s in Iraq. Third, under a dictatorship, the impact of the sanctions can simply be shifted to the general population while the ruling elite, those responsible for the criminal actions, continue to share what resources there are. And, finally, rulers can use the foreigners’ attempts against them to justify cracking down even harder on internal enemies. This is what, for example, Zimbabwe’s leader, Robert Mugabe, has done to incite his followers against whites and tribal groups he singles out as enemies.

Moreover, almost any country, no matter how poor, and any government, no matter how tyrannical, can enlist foreign supporters. American and other businessmen found Nazi Germany, Baathist Iraq and most other dictatorships good customers and traded profitably with them as long and as richly as they could.

It is for these reasons that, over the last century or so, states have joined together in leagues or created international institutions to diffuse responsibility and minimize hostility when they seek to bring tyrants to heel. Such organizations are often cumbersome, usually ineffective but as a rule less resented and considered more justifiable than the actions of a single state. The Congress of Vienna in 1815 may be said to have begun the process; the League of Nations carried it on after the First World War; and today we are heirs to the series of steps that during the Second World War created the United Nations. Now Europe has led the way, and others are following, to create “neighborhood” associations like the European Union to police their members and to offer them incentives for good behavior.

The Bush administration has deprecated this “multilateralism.” He has reasonably pointed out that it is difficult to achieve and often unsuccessful. But, as his “unilateralist” approach to Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrates cost and ineffectualism of action by a single state, even he has begun to embrace multilateralism. At first the Bush administration sought merely a façade – the “coalition of the willing” – but it is now finding that it needs the very organization it so denigrate until a few weeks ago, the United Nations.

The United Nations, as the press almost daily reminds us, is an imperfect organization. If Voltaire were still alive, he would probably describe it in terms similar to those he used to describe the Holy Roman Empire -- ‘neither united nor nations nor an organization.’ It is the way it is because its members wanted it to be weak. First it was the Soviet Union that insisted on the veto against the wishes of Britain and America. But, ironically, it is America which has most used the veto to block action. And, so far at least, few nation-states have been unwilling to strengthen the world organization. The Bush administration, in particular, is still reluctant to support treaties designed to halt violence, excessive armaments or an international criminal court that might focus on those truly responsible rather than their general populations.

Unless or until those with the *power* develop the *will* to promote shared concepts of civil liberties and human rights, embodied in international treaties and backed up by effective legal

institutions, and affording the United Nations with military and police power, we can expect little progress toward a more humane and decent world.

Absent an effective United Nations, single states or regional coalitions will remain the only “police force” there is. Using that police force is proving and will prove dangerous, costly and ineffective. State terrorism is not just a relic of times past; it is a major force in the world today. Overcoming it in will be one of the great tasks of the 21st century.

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