

Chomsky, N. (March 2003). Wars of terror. *New Political Science*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 113 – 127.

It is widely argued that the September 11 terrorist attacks have changed the world dramatically, that nothing will be the same as the world enters into a new and frightening “age of terror”—the title of a collection of academic essays by Yale University scholars and others, which regards the anthrax attack as even more ominous.¹

It had been recognized for some time that with new technology, the industrial powers would probably lose their virtual monopoly of violence, retaining only an enormous preponderance. Well before 9/11, technical studies had concluded that “a well-planned operation to smuggle WMD into the United States would have at least a 90 percent probability of success—much higher than ICBM delivery even in the absence of [National Missile Defense].” That has become “America’s Achilles Heel,” a study with that title concluded several years ago. Surely the dangers were evident after the 1993 attempt to blow up the World Trade Center, which came close to succeeding along with much more ambitious plans, and might have killed tens of thousands of people with better planning, the WTC building engineers reported.²

On September 11, the threats were realized: with “wickedness and awesome cruelty,” to recall Robert Fisk’s memorable words, capturing the world reaction of shock and horror, and sympathy for the innocent victims. For the first time in modern history, Europe and its offshoots were subjected, on home soil, to atrocities of the kind that are all too familiar elsewhere. The history should be unnecessary to review, and though the West may choose to disregard it, the victims do not. The sharp break in the traditional pattern surely qualifies 9/11 as an historic event, and the repercussions are sure to be significant. The consequences will, of course, be determined substantially by policy choices made within the United States. In this case, the target of the terrorist attack is not Cuba or Lebanon or Chechnya or a long list of others, but a state with an awesome potential for shaping the future. Any sensible attempt to assess the likely consequences will naturally begin with an investigation of US power, how it has been exercised, particularly in the very recent past, and how it is interpreted within the political culture.

At this point there are two choices: we can approach these questions with the rational standards we apply to others, or we can dismiss the historical and contemporary record on some grounds or other.

One familiar device is miraculous conversion: true, there have been flaws in the past, but they have now been overcome so we can forget those boring and now-irrelevant topics and march on to a bright future. This useful doctrine of “change of course” has been invoked frequently over the years, in ways that are instructive when we look closely. To take a current example, a few months ago Bill Clinton attended the independence day celebration of the world’s newest country, East Timor. He informed the press that “I don’t believe America and any of the other countries were sufficiently sensitive in the beginning ... and for a long time before 1999, going way back to the ‘70s, to the suffering of the people of East Timor,” but “when it became obvious to me what was really going on ... I tried to make sure we had the right policy.”

We can identify the timing of the conversion with some precision. Clearly, it was after September 8, 1999, when the Secretary of Defense reiterated the official position that “it is the responsibility of the Government of Indonesia, and we don’t want to take that responsibility away from them.” They had fulfilled their responsibility by killing hundreds of thousands of people with firm US and British support since the 1970s, then thousands more in the early months of 1999, finally destroying most of the country and driving out the population when they voted the wrong way in the August 30 referendum—fulfilling not only their responsibilities but also their promises, as Washington and London surely had known well before.

The US “never tried to sanction or support the oppression of the East Timorese,” Clinton explained, referring to the 25 years of crucial military and diplomatic support for Indonesian atrocities, continuing through the last paroxysm of fury in September. But we should not “look backward,” he advised, because America did finally become sensitive to the “oppression”:

sometime between September 8 and September 11, when, under severe domestic and international pressure, Clinton informed the Indonesian generals that the game is over and they quickly withdrew, allowing an Australian-led UN peacekeeping force to enter unopposed.

The course of events revealed with great clarity how some of the worst crimes of the late 20th century could have been ended very easily, simply by withdrawing crucial participation. That is hardly the only case, and Clinton was not alone in his interpretation of what scholarship now depicts as another inspiring achievement of the new era of humanitarianism.³

There is a new and highly regarded literary genre inquiring into the cultural defects that keep us from responding properly to the crimes of others.

An interesting question no doubt, though by any reasonable standards it ranks well below a different one: why do we and our allies persist in our own substantial crimes, either directly or through crucial support for murderous clients? That remains unasked, and if raised at the margins, arouses shivers of horror.

Another familiar way to evade rational standards is to dismiss the historical record as merely “the abuse of reality,” not “reality itself,” which is “the unachieved national purpose.” In this version of the traditional “city on a hill” conception, formulated by the founder of realist IR theory, America has a “transcendent purpose,” “the establishment of equality in freedom,” and American politics is designed to achieve this “national purpose,” however flawed it may be in execution. In a current version, published shortly before 9/11 by a prominent scholar, there is a guiding principle that “defines the parameters within which the policy debate occurs,” a spectrum that excludes only “tattered remnants” on the right and left and is “so authoritative as to be virtually immune to challenge.” The principle is that America is an “historical vanguard.” “History has a discernible direction and destination. Uniquely among all the nations of the world, the United States comprehends and manifests history’s purpose.” It follows that US “hegemony” is the realization of history’s purpose and its application is therefore for the common good, a truism that renders empirical evaluation irrelevant.⁴

That stance too has a distinguished pedigree. A century before Rumsfeld and Cheney, Woodrow Wilson called for conquest of the Philippines because “Our interest must march forward, altruists though we are; other nations must see to it that they stand off, and do not seek to stay us.” And he was borrowing from admired sources, among them John Stuart Mill in a remarkable essay.⁵ That is one choice. The other is to understand “reality” as reality, and to ask whether its unpleasant features are “flaws” in the pursuit of history’s purpose or have more mundane causes, as in the case of every other power system of past and present. If we adopt that stance, joining the tattered remnants outside the authoritative spectrum, we will be led to conclude, I think, that policy choices are likely to remain within a framework that is well entrenched, enhanced perhaps in important ways but not fundamentally changed: much as after the collapse of the USSR, I believe. There are a number of reasons to anticipate essential continuity, among them the stability of the basic institutions in which policy decisions are rooted, but also narrower ones that merit some attention.

The “war on terror” re-declared on 9/11 had been declared 20 years earlier, with much the same rhetoric and many of the same people in high-level positions.⁶ The Reagan administration came into office announcing that a primary concern of US foreign policy would be a “war on terror,” particularly state-supported international terrorism, the most virulent form of the plague spread by “depraved opponents of civilization itself” in “a return to barbarism in the modern age,” in the words of the Administration moderate George Shultz. The war to eradicate the plague was to focus on two regions where it was raging with unusual virulence: Central America and West Asia/North Africa. Shultz was particularly exercised by the “cancer, right here in our land mass,” which was openly renewing the goals of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, he informed Congress. The President declared a national emergency, renewed annually, because “the policies and actions of the Government of Nicaragua constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.” Explaining the bombing of Libya, Reagan announced that the mad dog Qaddafi was sending arms and advisers to Nicaragua “to bring his war home to the United States,” part of the campaign “to expel America from the world,” Reagan lamented. Scholarship has explored still deeper roots for that ambitious enterprise. One prominent academic terrorologist finds

that contemporary terrorism can be traced to South Vietnam, where “the effectiveness of Vietcong terror against the American Goliath armed with modern technology kindled hopes that the Western heartland was vulnerable too.”⁷

More ominous still, by the 1980s, was the swamp from which the plague was spreading. It was drained just in time by the US army, which helped to “defeat liberation theology,” the School of the Americas now proclaims with pride.⁸ In the second locus of the war, the threat was no less dreadful: Mideast / Mediterranean terror was selected as the peak story of the year in 1985 in the annual AP poll of editors, and ranked high in others. As the worst year of terror ended, Reagan and Israeli Prime Minister Peres condemned “the evil scourge of terrorism” in a news conference in Washington. A few days before Peres had sent his bombers to Tunis, where they killed 75 people on no credible pretext, a mission expedited by Washington and praised by Secretary of State Shultz, though he chose silence after the Security Council condemned the attack as an “act of armed aggression” (US abstaining). That was only one of the contenders for the prize of major terrorist atrocity in the peak year of terror. A second was a car-bomb outside a mosque in Beirut that killed 80 people and wounded 250 others, timed to explode as people were leaving, killing mostly women and girls, traced back to the CIA and British intelligence. The third contender is Peres’s Iron Fist operations in southern Lebanon, fought against “terrorist villagers,” the high command explained, “reaching new depths of calculated brutality and arbitrary murder” according to a Western diplomat familiar with the area, a judgment amply supported by direct coverage.

Scholarship too recognizes 1985 to be a peak year of Middle East terrorism, but does not cite these events: rather, two terrorist atrocities in which a single person was murdered, in each case an American.⁹ But the victims do not so easily forget.

Shultz demanded resort to violence to destroy “the evil scourge of terrorism,” particularly in Central America. He bitterly condemned advocates of “utopian, legalistic means like outside mediation, the United Nations, and the World Court, while ignoring the power element of the equation.” His administration succumbed to no such weaknesses, and should be praised for its foresight by sober scholars who now explain that international law and institutions of world order must be swept aside by the enlightened hegemon, in a new era of dedication to human rights.

In both regions of primary concern, the commanders of the “war on terror” compiled a record of “state-supported international terrorism” that vastly exceeded anything that could be attributed to their targets. And that hardly exhausts the record. During the Reagan years Washington’s South African ally had primary responsibility for over 1.5 million dead and \$60 billion in damage in neighboring countries, while the administration found ways to evade congressional sanctions and substantially increase trade. A UNICEF study estimated the death toll of infants and young children at 850,000, 150,000 in the single year 1988, reversing gains of the early post-independence years primarily by the weapon of “mass terrorism.” That is putting aside South Africa’s practices within, where it was defending civilization against the onslaughts of the ANC, one of the “more notorious terrorist groups,” according to a 1988 Pentagon report.¹⁰

For such reasons the US and Israel voted alone against an 1987 UN resolution condemning terrorism in the strongest terms and calling on all nations to combat the plague, passed 153–2, Honduras abstaining. The two opponents identified the offending passage: it recognized “the right to self-determination, freedom, and independence, as derived from the Charter of the United Nations, of people forcibly deprived of that right ... , particularly peoples under colonial and racist regimes and foreign occupation”—understood to refer to South Africa and the Israeli-occupied territories, therefore unacceptable.

The base for US operations in Central America was Honduras, where the US Ambassador during the worst years of terror was John Negroponte, who is now in charge of the diplomatic component of the new phase of the “war on terror” at the UN. Reagan’s special envoy to the Middle East was Donald Rumsfeld, who now presides over its military component, as well as the new wars that have been announced.

Rumsfeld is joined by others who were prominent figures in the Reagan administration. Their thinking and goals have not changed, and although they may represent an extreme position on the policy spectrum, it is worth bearing in mind that they are by no means isolated. There is

considerable continuity of doctrine, assumptions, and actions, persisting for many years until today. Careful investigation of this very recent history should be a particularly high priority for those who hold that “global security” requires “a respected and legitimate law-enforcer,” in Brzezinski’s words. He is referring of course to the sole power capable of undertaking this critical role: “the idealistic new world bent on ending inhumanity,” as the world’s leading newspaper describes it, dedicated to “principles and values” rather than crass and narrow ends, mobilizing its reluctant allies to join it in a new epoch of moral rectitude.¹¹

The concept “respected and legitimate law-enforcer” is an important one. The term “legitimate” begs the question, so we can drop it. Perhaps some question arises about the respect for law of the chosen “law-enforcer,” and about its reputation outside of narrow elite circles. But such questions aside, the concept again reflects the emerging doctrine that we must discard the efforts of the past century to construct an international order in which the powerful are not free to resort to violence at will. Instead, we must institute a new principle—which is in fact a venerable principle: the self-anointed “enlightened states” will serve as global enforcers, no impolite questions asked.

The scrupulous avoidance of the events of the recent past is easy to understand, given what inquiry will quickly reveal. That includes not only the terrorist crimes of the 1980s and what came before, but also those of the 1990s, right to the present. A comparison of leading beneficiaries of US military assistance and the record of state terror should shame honest people, and would, if it were not so effectively removed from the public eye. It suffices to look at the two countries that have been vying for leadership in this competition: Turkey and Colombia. As a personal aside I happened to visit both recently, including scenes of some of the worst crimes of the 1990s, adding some vivid personal experience to what is horrifying enough in the printed record. I am putting aside Israel and Egypt, a separate category.

To repeat the obvious, we basically have two choices. Either history is bunk, including current history, and we can march forward with confidence that the global enforcer will drive evil from the world much as the President’s speech writers declare, plagiarizing ancient epics and children’s tales. Or we can subject the doctrines of the proclaimed grand new era to scrutiny, drawing rational conclusions, perhaps gaining some sense of the emerging reality. If there is a third way, I do not see it.

The wars that are contemplated in the renewed “war on terror” are to go on for a long time. “There’s no telling how many wars it will take to secure freedom in the homeland,” the President announced. That’s fair enough. Potential threats are virtually limitless, everywhere, even at home, as the anthrax attack illustrates. We should also be able to appreciate recent comments on the matter by the 1996–2000 head of Israel’s General Security Service (Shabak), Ami Ayalon. He observed realistically that “those who want victory” against terror without addressing underlying grievances “want an unending war.” He was speaking of Israel–Palestine, where the only “solution of the problem of terrorism [is] to offer an honorable solution to the Palestinians respecting their right to self-determination.” So former head of Israeli military intelligence Yehoshaphat Harkabi, also a leading Arabist, observed 20 years ago, at a time when Israel still retained its immunity from retaliation from within the occupied territories to its harsh and brutal practices there.¹²

The observations generalize in obvious ways. In serious scholarship, at least, it is recognized that “Unless the social, political, and economic conditions that spawned Al Qaeda and other associated groups are addressed, the United States and its allies in Western Europe and elsewhere will continue to be targeted by Islamist terrorists.”¹³

In proclaiming the right of attack against perceived potential threats, the President is once again echoing the principles of the first phase of the “war on terror.” The Reagan–Shultz doctrine held that the UN Charter entitles the US to resort to force in “self-defense against future attack.” That interpretation of Article 51 was offered in justification of the bombing of Libya, eliciting praise from commentators who were impressed by the reliance “on a legal argument that violence against the perpetrators of repeated violence is justified as an act of self-defense”; I am quoting New York Times legal specialist Anthony Lewis.

The doctrine was amplified by the Bush 1 administration, which justified the invasion of Panama, vetoing two Security Council resolutions, on the grounds that Article 51 “provides for the

use of armed force to defend a country, to defend our interests and our people,” and entitles the US to invade another country to prevent its “territory from being used as a base for smuggling drugs into the United States.” In the light of that expansive interpretation of the Charter, it is not surprising that James Baker suggested a few days ago that Washington could now appeal to Article 51 to authorize conquest and occupation of Iraq, because Iraq may someday threaten the US with WMD, or threaten others while the US stands helplessly by.¹⁴

Quite apart from the plain meaning of the Charter, the argument offered by Baker’s State Department in 1989 was not too convincing on other grounds. Operation Just Cause reinstated in power the white elite of bankers and businessmen, many suspected of narcotrafficking and money laundering, who soon lived up to their reputation; drug trafficking “may have doubled” and money laundering “flourished” in the months after the invasion, the GAO reported, while USAID found that narcotics use in Panama had gone up by 400%, reaching the highest level in Latin America. All without eliciting notable concern, except in Latin America, and Panama itself, where the invasion was harshly condemned.¹⁵

Clinton’s Strategic Command also advocated “preemptive response,” with nuclear weapons if deemed appropriate.¹⁶ Clinton himself forged some new paths in implementing the doctrine, though his major contributions to international terrorism lie elsewhere.

The doctrine of preemptive strike has much earlier origins, even in words. Forty years ago Dean Acheson informed the American Society of International Law that legal issues do not arise in the case of a US response to a “challenge [to its] power, position, and prestige.” He was referring to Washington’s response to what it regarded as Cuba’s “successful defiance” of the United States. That included Cuba’s resistance to the Bay of Pigs invasion, but also much more serious crimes. When Kennedy ordered his staff to subject Cubans to the “terrors of the earth” until Castro is eliminated, his planners advised that “The very existence of his regime ... represents a successful defiance of the US, a negation of our whole hemispheric policy of almost a century and a half,” based on the principle of subordination to US will. Worse yet, Castro’s regime was providing an “example and general stimulus” that might “encourage agitation and radical change” in other parts of Latin America, where “social and economic conditions ... invite opposition to ruling authority” and susceptibility to “the Castro idea of taking matters into one’s own hands.” These are grave dangers, Kennedy planners recognized, when “The distribution of land and other forms of national wealth greatly favors the propertied classes ... [and] The poor and underprivileged, stimulated by the example of the Cuban revolution, are now demanding opportunities for a decent living.” These threats were only compounded by successful resistance to invasion, an intolerable threat to credibility, warranting the “terrors of the earth” and destructive economic warfare to excise that earlier “cancer.”¹⁷

Cuba’s crimes became still more immense when it served as the instrument of Russia’s crusade to dominate the world in 1975, Washington proclaimed. “If Soviet neocolonialism succeeds” in Angola, UN Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan thundered, “the world will not be the same in the aftermath. Europe’s oil routes will be under Soviet control as will the strategic South Atlantic, with the next target on the Kremlin’s list being Brazil.” Washington’s fury was caused by another Cuban act of “successful defiance.” When a US-backed South African invasion was coming close to conquering newly independent Angola, Cuba sent troops on its own initiative, scarcely even notifying Russia, and beat back the invaders. In the major scholarly study, Piero Gleijeses observes that “Kissinger did his best to smash the one movement that represented any hope for the future of Angola,” the MPLA. And though the MPLA “bears a grave responsibility for its country’s plight” in later years, it was “the relentless hostility of the United States [that] forced it into an unhealthy dependence on the Soviet bloc and encouraged South Africa to launch devastating military raids in the 1980s.”¹⁸ These further crimes of Cuba could not be forgiven; those years saw some of the worst terrorist attacks against Cuba, with no slight US role. After any pretense of a Soviet threat collapsed in 1989, the US tightened its stranglehold on Cuba on new pretexts, notably the alleged role in terrorism of the prime target of US-based terrorism for 40 years. The level of fanaticism is illustrated by minor incidents. For example, as we meet, a visa is being withheld for a young Cuban woman artist who was offered an art fellowship, apparently because

Cuba has been declared a “terrorist state” by Colin Powell’s State Department.¹⁹ It should be unnecessary to review how the “terrors of the earth” were unleashed against Cuba since 1962, “no laughing matter,” Jorge Dominguez points out with considerable understatement, discussing newly-released documents.²⁰ Of particular interest, and contemporary import, are the internal perceptions of the planners. Dominguez observes that “Only once in these nearly thousand pages of documentation did a U.S. official raise something that resembled a faint moral objection to U.S.-government sponsored terrorism”: a member of the NSC staff suggested that it might lead to some Russian reaction; furthermore, raids that are “haphazard and kill innocents ... might mean a bad press in some friendly countries.” Scholarship on terrorism rarely goes even that far.

Little new ground is broken when one has to turn to House Majority leader Dick Armey to find a voice in the mainstream questioning “an unprovoked attack against Iraq” not on grounds of cost to us, but because it “would violate international law” and “would not be consistent with what we have been or what we should be as a nation.”²¹

What we or others “have been” is a separate story.

Much more should be said about continuity and its institutional roots. But let’s turn instead to some of the immediate questions posed by the crimes of 9/11:

- (1) Who is responsible?
- (2) What are the reasons?
- (3) What is the proper reaction?
- (4) What are the longer-term consequences?

As for (1), it was assumed, plausibly, that the guilty parties were bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network. No one knows more about them than the CIA, which, together with US allies, recruited radical Islamists from many countries and organized them into a military and terrorist force that Reagan anointed “the moral equivalent of the founding fathers,” joining Jonas Savimbi and similar dignitaries in that Pantheon.²² The goal was not to help Afghans resist Russian aggression, which would have been a legitimate objective, but rather normal reasons of state, with grim consequences for Afghans when the moral equivalents finally took control.

US intelligence has surely been following the exploits of these networks closely ever since they assassinated President Sadat of Egypt 20 years ago, and more intensively since their failed terrorist efforts in New York in 1993. Nevertheless, despite what must be the most intensive international intelligence investigation in history, evidence about the perpetrators of 9/11 has been elusive. Eight months after the bombing, FBI director Robert Mueller could only inform a Senate Committee that US intelligence now “believes” the plot was hatched in Afghanistan, though planned and implemented elsewhere.²³ And well after the source of the anthrax attack was localized to government weapons laboratories, it has still not been identified. These are indications of how hard it may be to counter acts of terror targeting the rich and powerful in the future. Nevertheless, despite the thin evidence, the initial conclusion about 9/11 is presumably correct.

Turning to (2), scholarship is virtually unanimous in taking the terrorists at their word, which matches their deeds for the past 20 years: their goal, in their terms, is to drive the infidels from Muslim lands, to overthrow the corrupt governments they impose and sustain, and to institute an extremist version of Islam. They despise the Russians, but ceased their terrorist attacks against Russia based in Afghanistan—which were quite serious—when Russia withdrew. And “the call to wage war against America was made [when it sent] tens of thousands of its troops to the land of the two Holy Mosques over and above ... its support of the oppressive, corrupt and tyrannical regime that is in control,” so bin Laden announced well before 9/11.

More significant, at least for those who hope to reduce the likelihood of further crimes of a similar nature, are the background conditions from which the terrorist organizations arose, and that

provide a reservoir of sympathetic understanding for at least parts of their message, even among those who despise and fear them. In George Bush's plaintive phrase, "why do they hate us?"

The question is wrongly put: they do not "hate us," but rather policies of the US government, something quite different. If the question is properly formulated, however, answers to it are not hard to find. Forty-four years ago President Eisenhower and his staff discussed what he called the "campaign of hatred against us" in the Arab world, "not by the governments but by the people." The basic reason, the NSC advised, is the recognition that the US supports corrupt and brutal governments and is "opposing political or economic progress," in order "to protect its interest in Near East oil." The Wall Street Journal and others found much the same when they investigated attitudes of wealthy Westernized Muslims after 9/11, feelings now exacerbated by US policies with regard to Israel–Palestine and Iraq.²⁴

These are attitudes of people who like Americans and admire much about the United States, including its freedoms. What they hate is official policies that deny them the freedoms to which they too aspire.

Many commentators prefer a more comforting answer: their anger is rooted in resentment of our freedom and democracy, their cultural failings tracing back many centuries, their inability to take part in the form of "globalization" in which they happily participate, and other such deficiencies. More comforting, perhaps, but not too wise.

These issues are very much alive. Just in the past few weeks, Asia correspondent Ahmed Rashid reported that in Pakistan, "there is growing anger that U.S. support is allowing [Musharraf's] military regime to delay the promise of democracy." And a well-known Egyptian academic told the BBC that Arab and Islamic people were opposed to the US because it has "supported every possible anti-democratic government in the Arab–Islamic world ... When we hear American officials speaking of freedom, democracy and such values, they make terms like these sound obscene." An Egyptian writer added that "Living in a country with an atrocious human rights record that also happens to be strategically vital to US interests is an illuminating lesson in moral hypocrisy and political double standards." Terrorism, he said, is "a reaction to the injustice in the region's domestic politics, inflicted in large part by the US." The director of the terrorism program at the Council of Foreign Relations agreed that "Backing repressive regimes like Egypt and Saudi Arabia is certainly a leading cause of anti-Americanism in the Arab world," but warned that "in both cases the likely alternatives are even nastier."

There is a long and illuminating history of the problems in supporting democratic forms while ensuring that they will lead to preferred outcomes, not just in this region. And it doesn't win many friends.²⁵

What about proper reaction, question (3)? Answers are doubtless contentious, but at least the reaction should meet the most elementary moral standards: specifically, if an action is right for us, it is right for others; and if wrong for others, it is wrong for us. Those who reject that standard can be ignored in any discussion of appropriateness of action, of right or wrong. One might ask what remains of the flood of commentary on proper reaction—thoughts about "just war," for example—if this simple criterion is adopted.

Suppose we adopt the criterion, thus entering the arena of moral discourse. We can then ask, for example, how Cuba has been entitled to react after "the terrors of the earth" were unleashed against it 40 years ago. Or Nicaragua, after Washington rejected the orders of the World Court and Security Council to terminate its "unlawful use of force," choosing instead to escalate its terrorist war and issue the first official orders to its forces to attack undefended civilian "soft targets," leaving tens of thousands dead and the country ruined perhaps beyond recovery. No one believes that Cuba or Nicaragua had the right to set off bombs in Washington or New York or to kill US political leaders or send them to prison camps. And it is all too easy to add far more severe cases in those years, and others to the present.

Accordingly, those who accept elementary moral standards have some work to do to show that the US and Britain were justified in bombing Afghans in order to compel them to turn over people who the US suspected of criminal atrocities, the official war aim announced by the President as the bombing began. Or that the enforcers were justified in informing Afghans that they would be

bombed until they brought about “regime change,” the war aim announced several weeks later, as the war was approaching its end.

The same moral standard holds of more nuanced proposals about an appropriate response to terrorist atrocities. Military historian Michael Howard advocated “a police operation conducted under the auspices of the United Nations ... against a criminal conspiracy whose members should be hunted down and brought before an international court, where they would receive a fair trial and, if found guilty, be awarded an appropriate sentence.”²⁶ That seems reasonable, though we may ask what the reaction would be to the suggestion that the proposal should be applied universally. That is unthinkable, and if the suggestion were to be made, it would elicit outrage and horror.

Similar questions arise with regard to the doctrine of “preemptive strike” against suspected threats, not new, though its bold assertion is novel. There is no doubt about the address. The standard of universality, therefore, would appear to justify Iraqi preemptive terror against the US. Of course, the conclusion is outlandish. The burden of proof again lies on those who advocate or tolerate the selective version that grants the right to those powerful enough to exercise it. And the burden is not light, as is always true when the threat or use of violence is advocated or tolerated.

There is, of course, an easy counter to such elementary observations: WE are good, and THEY are evil. That doctrine trumps virtually any argument. Analysis of commentary and much of scholarship reveals that its roots commonly lie in that crucial principle, which is not argued but asserted. None of this, of course, is an invention of contemporary power centers and the dominant intellectual culture, but it is, nevertheless, instructive to observe the means employed to protect the doctrine from the heretical challenge that seeks to confront it with the factual record, including such intriguing notions as “moral equivalence,” “moral relativism,” “anti-Americanism,” and others.

One useful barrier against heresy, already mentioned, is the principle that questions about the state’s resort to violence simply do not arise among sane people. That is a common refrain in the current debate over the modalities of the invasion of Iraq. To select an example at the liberal end of the spectrum, New York Times columnist Bill Keller remarks that “the last time America dispatched soldiers in the cause of ‘regime change,’ less than a year ago in Afghanistan, the opposition was mostly limited to the people who are reflexively against the American use of power,” either timid supporters or “isolationists, the doctrinaire left and the soft-headed types Christopher Hitchens described as people who, ‘discovering a viper in the bed of their child, would place the first call to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals’.” To borrow the words of a noted predecessor, “We went to war, not because we wanted to, but because humanity demanded it”; President McKinley in this case, as he ordered his armies to “carry the burden, whatever it may be, in the interest of civilization, humanity, and liberty” in the Philippines.²⁷

Let’s ignore the fact that “regime change” was not “the cause” in Afghanistan—rather, an afterthought late in the game—and look more closely at the lunatic fringe. We have some information about them. In late September 2001, the Gallup organization surveyed international opinion on the announced US bombing. The lead question was whether, “once the identity of the terrorists is known, should the American government launch a military attack on the country or countries where the terrorists are based or should the American government seek to extradite the terrorists to stand trial?” As we recently learned, eight months later identity of the terrorists was only surmised, and the countries where they were based are presumed to be Germany, the UAE, and elsewhere, but let’s ignore that too. The poll revealed that opinion strongly favored judicial over military action, in Europe overwhelmingly. The only exceptions were India and Israel, where Afghanistan was a surrogate for something quite different. Follow-up questions reveal that support for the military attack that was actually carried out was very slight.

Support for military action was least in Latin America, the region that has the most experience with US intervention. It ranged from 2% in Mexico to 11% in Colombia and Venezuela, where 85% preferred extradition and trial; whether that was feasible is known only to ideologues. The sole exception was Panama, where only 80% preferred judicial means and 16% advocated military attack; and even there, correspondents recalled the death of perhaps thousands of poor people (Western crimes, therefore unexamined) in the course of Operation Just Cause, undertaken to

kidnap a disobedient thug who was sentenced to life imprisonment in Florida for crimes mostly committed while he was on the CIA payroll. One remarked “how much alike [the victims of 9/11] are to the boys and girls, to those who are unable to be born that December 20 [1989] that they imposed on us in Chorrillo; how much alike they seem to the mothers, the grandfathers and the little old grandmothers, all of them also innocent and anonymous deaths, whose terror was called Just Cause and the terrorist called liberator.”²⁸

I suspect that the director of Human Rights Watch Africa (1993–1995), now a Professor of Law at Emory University, may have spoken for many others around the world when he addressed the International Council on Human Rights Policy in Geneva in January 2002, saying that “I am unable to appreciate any moral, political or legal difference between this jihad by the United States against those it deems to be its enemies and the jihad by Islamic groups against those they deem to be their enemies.”²⁹

What about Afghan opinion? Here information is scanty, but not entirely lacking. In late October, 1000 Afghan leaders gathered in Peshawar, some exiles, some coming from within Afghanistan, all committed to overthrowing the Taliban regime. It was “a rare display of unity among tribal elders, Islamic scholars, fractious politicians, and former guerrilla commanders,” the press reported. They unanimously “urged the US to stop the air raids,” appealed to the international media to call for an end to the “bombing of innocent people,” and “demanded an end to the US bombing of Afghanistan.” They urged that other means be adopted to overthrow the hated Taliban regime, a goal they believed could be achieved without further death and destruction.

A similar message was conveyed by Afghan opposition leader Abdul Haq, who was highly regarded in Washington, and received special praise as a martyr during the Loya Jirga, his memory bringing tears to the eyes of President Hamid Karzai. Just before he entered Afghanistan, apparently without US support, and was then captured and killed, he condemned the bombing and criticized the US for refusing to support efforts of his and of others “to create a revolt within the Taliban.” The bombing was “a big setback for these efforts,” he said, outlining his efforts and calling on the US to assist them with funding and other support instead of undermining them with bombs. The US, he said, “is trying to show its muscle, score a victory and scare everyone in the world. They don’t care about the suffering of the Afghans or how many people we will lose.” The prominent women’s organization RAWA, which received some belated recognition in the course of the war, also bitterly condemned the bombing.

In short, the lunatic fringe of “soft-headed types who are reflexively against the American use of power” was not insubstantial as the bombing was undertaken and proceeded. But since virtually no word of any of this was published in the US, we can continue to comfort ourselves that “humanity demanded” the bombing.³⁰

There is, obviously, a great deal more to say about all of these topics, but let us turn briefly to question (4).

In the longer term, I suspect that the crimes of 9/11 will accelerate tendencies that were already underway: the Bush doctrine on preemption is an illustration. As was predicted at once, governments throughout the world seized upon 9/11 as a “window of opportunity” to institute or escalate harsh and repressive programs. Russia eagerly joined the “coalition against terror,” expecting to receive tacit authorization for its shocking atrocities in Chechnya, and was not disappointed. China happily joined for similar reasons. Turkey was the first country to offer troops for the new phase of the US “war on terror,” in gratitude, as the Prime Minister explained, for the US contribution to Turkey’s campaign against its miserably-repressed Kurdish population, waged with extreme savagery and relying crucially on a huge flow of US arms, peaking in 1997; in that single year arms transfers exceeded the entire post-war period combined up to the onset of the counterinsurgency campaign. Turkey is highly praised for these achievements and was rewarded by grant of authority to protect Kabul from terror, funded by the same superpower that provided the means for its recent acts of state terror, including some of the major atrocities of the grisly 1990s. Israel recognized that it would be able to crush Palestinians even more brutally, with even firmer US support. And so on throughout much of the world.

Many governments, including the US, instituted measures to discipline the domestic population and to carry forward unpopular measures under the guise of “combating terror,” exploiting the atmosphere of fear and the demand for “patriotism”—which in practice means: “You shut up and I’ll pursue my own agenda relentlessly.” The Bush administration used the opportunity to advance its assault against most of the population, and future generations, serving the narrow corporate interests that dominate the administration to an extent even beyond the norm.

One major outcome is that the US, for the first time, has major military bases in Central Asia. These help to position US corporate interests favorably in the current “great game” to control the resources of the region, but also to complete the encirclement of the world’s major energy resources, in the Gulf region. The US base system targeting the Gulf extends from the Pacific to the Azores, but the closest reliable base before the Afghan war was Diego Garcia. Now that situation is much improved, and forceful intervention should be facilitated.

The Bush administration also exploited the new phase of the “war on terror” to expand its overwhelming military advantages over the rest of the world, and to move on to other methods to ensure global dominance. Government thinking was clarified by high officials when Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia visited the US in April to urge the administration to pay more attention to the reaction in the Arab world to its strong support for Israeli terror and repression. He was told, in effect, that the US did not care what he or other Arabs think. A high official explained that “if he thought we were strong in Desert Storm, we’re 10 times as strong today. This was to give him some idea what Afghanistan demonstrated about our capabilities.” A senior defense analyst gave a simple gloss: others will “respect us for our toughness and won’t mess with us.” That stand has many precedents too, but in the post-9/11 world it gains new force. It is reasonable to speculate that such consequences were one goal of the bombing of Afghanistan: to warn the world of what the “legitimate enforcer” can do if someone steps out of line. The bombing of Serbia was undertaken for similar reasons: to “ensure NATO’s credibility,” as Blair and Clinton explained—not referring to the credibility of Norway or Italy. That is a common theme of statecraft. And with some reason, as history amply reveals. Without continuing, the basic issues of international society seem to me to remain much as they were, but 9/11 surely has induced changes, in some cases, with significant and not very attractive implications.

Endnotes

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