

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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Drawing a Bead on Terrorism

A Survey of Recent Articles

With America's proclaimed war against terrorism almost one year old, questions still remain about the scope of the conflict and the definition of the enemy—and also, for some, about the “root causes” of the terror visited upon the United States last September 11.

For Noam Chomsky, author of the best-selling *9-11*, and other leftists of “a certain kind,” the search for root causes rapidly turned into yet another opportunity to assail American imperialism, observes writer Benjamin Ross in *Dissent* (Spring 2002). “Overlooking the perpetrators’ frank expressions of a thoroughly medieval worldview, they quickly conclude that terrorism must result from poverty and oppression. . . . Engineering students living in Europe on checks from home must have been the wretched of the earth. Their yearning for theocracy was really a hunger for bread and freedom.”

But Chomsky-esque leftists were hardly the only prominent figures to find empty pocketbooks the underlying problem. “Fight Terrorism by Ending Poverty,” declares the headline over an essay in *New Perspectives Quarterly* (Spring 2002) by James D. Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank. In the same issue there is this from Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, president

of the Philippines: “To eliminate terrorism we must also eliminate poverty.”

Third World poverty may often be a contributing factor in terrorism, but it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause, argues Richard K. Betts, director of the Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University, writing in *Political Science Quarterly* (Spring 2002). Fifteen of the 19 hijackers in the 9/11 attacks, he notes, were from Saudi Arabia, “one of the most affluent of Muslim countries.” The worst anti-American terrorist threats, he says, “grow out of a few regions and are concentrated overwhelmingly in a few religiously motivated groups. . . . Economic development in an area where the political and religious impulses remain unresolved could serve to improve the resource base for terrorism rather than undercut it.”

Donald Kagan, a professor of classics and history at Yale University, observes with alarm that, since 9/11, many academics and intellectuals “have urged us to consider the killers’ anger and resentment, provoked by their poverty in a world dominated by American wealth, by their understandable hatred of American power and influence throughout the world, by their appropriate dismay at the alleged

errors or wickedness of American policies, whether political, economic, military, or environmental.” These thinkers, he argues in the *Intercollegiate Review* (Spring 2002), would in effect turn the attackers into the real victims.

The overwhelming majority of Americans have little difficulty recognizing Osama bin Laden or Al Qaeda and closely allied groups as their mortal enemies, but the larger “terrorism” with which the United States is avowedly at war is not as easy to define.

Terrorism is neither an ideology nor a political program or project but a tactic, observes Robert V. Keeley, former U.S. ambassador to Mauritius, Zimbabwe, and Greece, writing in *Middle East Policy* (Mar. 2002). “Terrorism is the indiscriminate use of violence against—generally the killing of—civilian non-combatants in pursuit of a political aim.” But by that definition, he notes, it would include, for example, the mass bombing of cities by both sides during World War II. Were the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki instances of terrorism? The question sparks heated debate.

The U.S. State Department limits terrorism to acts committed by “subnational groups or clandestine agents,” but that still may be too inclusive. As Betts notes, “most people can think of some ‘good’ political cause” that would turn particular “terrorists” into “freedom fighters.” “Israelis who call the Khobar Towers bombers of 1996 terrorists might reject that characterization for the Irgun, which did the same thing to the King David Hotel in 1946.” Betts himself finesses the difficulty by defining terrorism as “the illegitimate, deliberate killing of civilians for purposes of punishment or coercion,” thus leaving open the possibility that such killing may sometimes be legitimate.

Definitional problems aside, terrorism does have a history, etymological and bloody. The word was coined during France’s Reign of Terror of 1793–94, according to www.terrorismsanswers.com, a website sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations. “Originally, the leaders

of this systematized attempt to weed out ‘traitors’ among the revolutionary ranks praised terror as the best way to defend liberty, but as the French Revolution soured, the word soon took on grim echoes of state violence and guillotines.”

Narodnaya Volya (People’s Will), an antitsarist group in late-19th-century Russia, was an early example of terrorism in a recognizably modern form. The assassination of Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serb extremist in 1914, which helped trigger World War I, stands out as a particularly significant instance of terrorism. Another historical landmark: the first terrorist hijacking of a commercial airplane—in 1968, by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

The real enemy today is not the generalized abstraction “terrorism” but “militant Islam,” argues Norman Podhoretz, editor at large of *Commentary* (Feb. 2002). He envisions the United States, having overturned the Taliban in Afghanistan, now moving on “to topple five or six or seven more tyrannies in the Islamic world,” including Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq and Yasir Arafat’s Palestinian Authority. The Islamic countries, as well as the rest of the world, would be better off, and eventually “the long-delayed reform and modernization of Islam” might occur.

But in *Ethics & International Affairs* (2002: No. 1), Richard Falk, a prominent dove during the Vietnam War who backed the U.S. war in Afghanistan, argues against suspending “normal inhibitions on the use of force and respect for territorial sovereignty” in post-Afghanistan operations. Continuing efforts to identify and destroy Al Qaeda cells and allied political organizations, says Falk, who is a visiting professor in the global studies program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, should be limited to “the nonmilitary domains of intelligence operations, cooperative law enforcement, diplomatic leverage, and financial interdiction.” Extending the war to Iraq, Falk warns, would “awaken suspicions in the Islamic world that an intercivilizational war was under way despite the reassurances of American leaders to the contrary.”