**TRYING TO DEFINE TERRORISM**

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| Mr. Keeley served as ambassador to Mauritius, Zimbabwe and Greece and was president of the Middle East Institute from 1990 to 1995. The following is the text of his remarks to the Center for International Policy in Washington on November 29, 2001.  |

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My assigned topic is "Trying to Define Terrorism." It might be regarded as unwholesome and perhaps indeed unpatriotic to take up such a subject while we are engaged in a "war against terrorism," but as it appears that that war is likely to be extensive as well as prolonged, with no discernible limits in space or time, it seems even more important than ever that we try to understand just what this phenomenon is that we are waging war against. For some people it may be upsetting at this juncture to try to examine the problem dispassionately, that is, objectively. But emotional reactions can lead to very bad decisions. We need definitions that go beyond slogans such as "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," and "Terrorism, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder." True as these formulations may be, they risk getting us bogged down in a semantic quagmire. It doesn't help either when some in the media, like Reuters and CNN, decide to avoid use of the term "terrorist" in order not to be judgmental!

In an op-ed piece published in The Washington Post on October 5, the columnist Michael Kinsley, editor of Slate internet magazine, argued that trying to define terrorism is impossible and in some cases (for example, Osama bin Laden) is actually absurd, though it is, as he said, a problem. He called media avoidance of use of the term "terrorist" an exercise in moral relativism. He noted that the Justice Department's draft anti-terrorism bill defined terrorism to include "injury to government property" and "computer trespass," much too broad coverage in his view. And one congressman complained that the bill could define terrorism to include bombing an abortion clinic, a definition that would not strike many other people as unreasonable. President Bush has made the goal of his war to be victory over terrorism of "global reach," a presumably practical rather than a moral limitation, Kinsley pointed out. But such a victory, he wrote, is unlikely for "terrorism is like a chronic disease that can be controlled and suppressed, but not cured."

Kinsley's piece made some other worthy points. A major problem is how to have a definition that you apply consistently. This was a major industry in our government in the 1980s, when a definition was badly needed to explain why we were supporting a guerrilla movement against the government of Nicaragua and doing the opposite in El Salvador. Can "terrorism" mean acts of violence in support of political goals except when committed by a government? "This sounds deeply cynical, but makes a lot of sense," Kinsley wrote. But how about "state-sponsored terrorism"?

This leads to a "hopeless conceptual muddle if non-government is the key to defining terrorism." Perhaps one could use "tactics aimed at civilian non-combatants rather than professional soldiers." All of these definitions are flawed or inadequate, Kinsley argued, because "they leave out people you wish to include, and they include people you don't think deserve the term `terrorist."' The most accurate definition, he concluded, may be the famous statement about defining "obscenity" offered by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who said he couldn't define obscenity, but "I know it when I see it." This, however, would rob the term "terrorism" of its moral power, as well as its propaganda value.

Earlier this month my friend John Whitbeck sent me an email in which he argued that the word "terrorism" is "so subjective as to be devoid of all meaning but, at the same time, extremely dangerous because people tend to believe that it does have meaning and use and abuse [the term] by infusing it with whatever they hate as a way of avoiding rational thought and discussion and excusing their own outrageous behavior. The best way to win the `war on terrorism' would be through an international treaty banning use of the word."

So let us try to be rational. The first point to be made is that terrorism is not an ideology. Nor is it a political program or a project. It is a tactic, a tactic used to achieve certain aims. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Terrorism and freedom fighting are two quite different things. Terrorism is the indiscriminate use of violence against - generally the killing of - civilian non-combatants in pursuit of a political aim. Freedom fighting is a program or a project, such as the national or ethnic liberation of a territory, or the overthrow of a regime deemed to be oppressive, as in a civil war. Freedom fighters may or may not use terrorism, though they often do.

There is a rare and special category in the history of terrorism that is indeed revolutionary, but also anarchistic or nihilistic rather than programmatic (for example, the Nechayev variety - named after one of its principal perpetrators -- used in nineteenth century czarist Russia to assassinate people), whose purpose was simply destructiveness against hated objects with little hope of effecting any political change, with no positive program at all, simply to harm and disrupt the state and the society as much as possible. The idea was to destroy order and peace, to attack the regime, but with no possibility of replacing the existing social order and governance with anything deemed better, but rather to replace order with anarchy. This species of anarchistic terrorism exists in a contemporary setting as well, the best known, to me at least, being in Greece, where anarchist terrorists known as November 17 have succeeded in assassinating 23 prominent individuals over the past 26 years, including 4 American officials, creating a certain amount of mayhem but with absolutely no hope of making any changes in the regime or its policies. Japan, among other countries, has also experienced this kind of terrorism.

We need to make a further distinction based on who uses the tactic of terrorism. In the context of a war that is not between nation states, it is used either by revolutionary insurgents attacking an existing regime or by that regime to protect itself from being overthrown. Terrorism is also used in nation-state wars, for example in the wholesale and indiscriminate bombings of civilians living in cities - a tactic used by both sides in World War II - culminating in the atom bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a deliberate and successful attempt to end the war quickly by threatening the extinction of populations. How

acute the problem of definitions is becomes manifest when anyone who tries to explain these atom bombings as acts of state terrorism in wartime is pilloried as anti-American if not worse.

There are a few things that are new about contemporary terrorism, but there is much that isn't. Allow me to harken back 31 years, to November 1970, when I took a seminar in modern warfare taught by the late Professor Klaus Knorr at the Woodrow Wilson School of Princeton University. Each student had to research, prepare and present a term paper on an assigned topic. Mine had the fancy academic title of "Approaches to a Theory of Terrorism as a Mode of Revolutionary or Counter-Revolutionary Warfare." There was a dearth of scholarly literature about terrorism at that time. I gathered everything available in the Princeton library system, and it was all listed on a one-page bibliography. The paper began by listing 42 countries that had experienced terrorism since World War II. I would like to summarize some of the findings in that paper, which began by trying to define terrorism and not succeeding any better than I will today. I will skip over all the examples and just try to state the major principles. At that time most of the conflicts in which terrorism had played a role were either civil or anti-colonial struggles.

The most useful definition I found was this one: "a symbolic act designed to influence political behavior by extranormal means, entailing the use or threat of violence." This is useful because it stresses the symbolic nature of the act, the political (rather than military) nature of the goal, and the extralegal nature of the means. In a civil context, the incumbents use enforcement terror, while the insurgents use agitational terror. It cannot be stressed too much that on the insurgent side, terrorism is the tactic of the weak. For them, terrorism is highly efficient. By attacking symbols of the state using very limited resources they can dramatize the state's vulnerability and the ability of the terrorists to disrupt and partially destroy the state at some of its vital centers. The psychological aim is to strike fear among the attacked population. Thus the most effective means are indiscriminate attacks against civilians, which can break down confidence in the state's ability to provide security.

Much of the earlier literature was in French and grew out of research into the use of terrorism in the Algerian liberation struggle. In that case, and others like it, the targets were not "innocent civilians" from the point of view of the Algerian freedom fighters, but hated colons -colonists, who were all deemed guilty of resisting the independence struggle. The point here is that the victims of terrorism may be perceived as "innocent" by themselves and their compatriots, but quite otherwise by the terrorists attacking them. On the matter of the terrorist using that tactic out of weakness, here is one example: following his arrest, the FLN chief in Algiers was quoted as follows, "I had my bombs planted in the city because I didn't have the aircraft to transport them. But they caused fewer victims than the artillery and air bombardments of our mountain villages. I'm in a war; you cannot blame me."

From a position of weakness, terrorism is extremely economical of resources. Insurgency is cheap, counter-insurgency costly. "Merely by making anonymous phone calls warning of bombs planted in luggage, the insurgents can disrupt civilian airline schedules and scare away tourists." To jump ahead for a moment to Osama bin Laden, compare the assets and resources available to the United States with his assets and resources. The disparity is enormous, as has just been demonstrated. So why did Osama employ terrorism? Because, given the paucity of his resources when compared with those of his target, that was his best option, and perhaps his only option. He attacked us out of weakness, not strength. The goal is to alter dramatically the power equation in the terrorist's favor.

A primary aim of terrorism is advertising and publicity for the terrorists' cause, whatever it might be. This is very effective in countries such as the United States with its free, open and highly developed media. A secondary aim is to weaken morale on the attacked side and to build up morale on the attacking side. Terrorist acts display resolve and daring among adherents of the terrorists' cause, despite being viewed as cowardly by those on the targeted side. In some cases terrorism is at least partially intended to provoke reprisals, for when a regime defending itself against terrorists ends up killing innocent bystanders, sympathy can bring recruits to the side of the terrorists. Making the defense against terrorism very costly for the governing regime, especially in anti-colonial struggles, can cause the incumbents to abandon the fight and allow the insurgents to win. There are many examples: in British experience alone we have Ireland, Palestine, Malaya, Cyprus, Kenya and others.

I do not have time to get into terrorism used by the incumbent side to protect itself, but it has been used extensively, usually ineffectively, and often in self-defeating ways. The greatest advantage held by a government being attacked by terrorists is that it practices the rule of law and has as its primary purpose the protection of the security of its citizens and the preservation of public order and a peaceful society. The most effective tactic against terrorist groups, proven by much evidence and history, is to penetrate them with agents in order to obtain intelligence about their membership, their aims, their tactics and their plans. This is not impossible to do if the terrorist organization is bent on recruiting new adherents in order to expand its membership, influence and power, but it can be costly and dangerous in terms of human lives.

To move to the contemporary scene briefly: What is unchanged about the terrorism we have recently experienced, and what is new about it? We are still dealing with weak terrorists acting to change the power equation dramatically. September 11 was a perfect illustration of changing the odds. In the end Osama bin Laden may well lose his life, and his organization may be substantially diminished, though it is unlikely to be completely destroyed. But look at what he accompushed, especially after comparing the assets that he commands with what the United States commands. The terrorist acts themselves were utterly horrible and tragic, directed against innocent civilians who became the principal victims, but Osama succeeded in getting us to start a war. By using 19 fanatics, a relatively small amount of money, and some clever planning and tactics, he killed some 3,000 civilians who were related to perhaps 100,000 other people, displayed our vulnerability in myriad ways, damaged our economy, boosted unemployment nationwide, disrupted the world's premier financial center, sowed fear among much of our populace, made himself the number-one international terrorist, and caused us to change a great many things in the way we live our lives. People are afraid to travel on airplanes, even though the odds against ever being on a hijacked airliner are in the range of at least a million to one. Some people are now afraid to travel at all.

And he has done this by bringing major terrorism to our own soil. That is what is very new. Terrorism in the form of mass murder of Americans, however, is nothing new. It has been going on in the Middle East for many years. There was the bombing of our embassy in Beirut in 1983 and the bombing of our Marine barracks in Beirut in 1982 that caused President Reagan to pull U.S. forces out of Lebanon, no doubt the objective the terrorists had in mind. There was the Khobar barracks bombing in Saudi Arabia, the objective of which was to drive our armed forces out of that country, Osama's prime aim. Then there was the attack on the USS Cole in Aden harbor last year, again an attack on the presence of our armed forces in the Arab world. U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were chosen as targets for truck bombings because they were easy targets, easier than attacking us on our own soil. But those embassies were symbols and elements of our presence abroad and of our power throughout the world; many Americans were killed as well as many more Kenyans and Tanzanians. Some of these later attacks were apparently the work of Osama and his group.

Regarding the East African embassy bombings, then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright indelicately stated (as quoted in The Washington Post), "This is hard to say, and I haven't found a way to say it that doesn't sound crass, but it is the truth that those [attacks before September 11] were happening overseas, and while there were Americans who died, there were not thousands, and it did not happen on U.S. soil." So much for the views of the former boss of our diplomats who risk their lives while serving abroad. The earlier victims were government employees and our military personnel. Presumably they are supposed to expect to be attacked by terrorists. What we have had now is attacks on American civilians on American soil by foreign terrorists for the first time. What is new is a change of geography and a change of victims, and both have been shocking to our people.

Osama's primary objective is to drive our armed forces out of the Arab world, particularly Saudi Arabia, and to end our political and financial support of Arab regimes he would like to bring down, such as those of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Osama is not the first to target a state supporting his enemies on that state's home territory. The IRA, while operating mostly in Northern Ireland, has attacked the British in London, for example, and the Chechens have attacked the Russians in Moscow, both locales far from the territory being contested. Another specialty of Osama is the use of fanatical suicide bombers, though he has not been unique in that practice. It has been used by Palestinians in Israel, as well as by terrorists in India, Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

This brings me briefly to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Osama is a latecomer to the Palestinian cause; he added that to his objectives because he knows that it resonates well and widely in the Arab and Muslim worlds. And that conflict brings to mind another point. Governments of various kinds in various places fighting dissident and rebellious movements or groups have learned to label their opponents "terrorists." They know that it is a term of opprobrium that cancels any legitimacy these groups might have, whereas these groups may simply be trying to liberate themselves from an oppressive and often foreign regime. Calling them "terrorists" is supposed to bring sympathetic support from other governments and people not involved in the conflict, for by definition a "terrorist" is an evil person who does not value human life at all, and is indiscriminate in choosing his targets. In popular opinion a suicide bomber is not only evil but also a fanatic, and thus somehow deranged or less than human.

I don't think I need to cite examples, but a recent one is the Russians labeling as "terrorists" the Chechens fighting for an independent Chechnya. It is almost amusing to hear the two sides now fighting over Afghanistan labeling each other "terrorists." So now everyone is a terrorist. If that is so, Kinsley is right that it is impossible to define "terrorism."

I would like to make one final point, which will no doubt sound unpleasant to some. Prime Minister Sharon has been quoted as saying that he cannot make peace with Yasser Arafat because Arafat is a terrorist, the chief terrorist on the Palestinian side. Well, Israel elects its leaders democratically, and for a country under siege it may not be surprising that three of its chosen leaders during the past half century have been retired army generals. But what are we to conclude from the fact that two of Israel's leaders, two of its prime ministers, Yitzhak Shamir and Menachem Begin, are viewed by one side as former terrorists and by the other as freedom fighters?

I recently read a chronology of "Violence in the Holy Land" for the period March 1, 1947 to May 15, 1948, based on material published in The Middle East Journal at the time. It is a truly amazing compilation, cataloguing violence that was at least as bad, if not worse, than what has been experienced recently. During one 40-- day period (November 30, 1947 to January 10, 1948) 1,974 people were killed or injured. The killed included 295 Arabs, 262 Jews, and 30 British, an average of 15 people per day.

One of the most reprehensible acts of violence occurred after the period covered by that chronology. It occurred on September 17, 1948, well after the independence of Israel, so it could not be justified as part of the struggle by freedom fighters to create and establish a state for the Jewish people. It was the assassination of Count Folke Bernadotte, the U.N. mediator for Palestine, the man assigned to bring peace to the area. There is no doubt that this act was carried out by extremists with a background of terrorist credentials.

But the Middle East is not our best example. Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment for terrorism. He spent 27 years in prison. He was repeatedly offered his freedom if he would order the ANC liberation movement to renounce violence. He refused, saying if the South African government would renounce violence against his people, he would reciprocate. He was eventually released and was elected president of South Africa. One man's terrorist is another man's ... what?