

Essays on Terrorism

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The following three essays discuss the causes and cures for terrorism. They were written at particular points in time and include references to specific events, but the principles they describe are timeless, I believe. "How to Defeat Terrorism" was written in May 2004, at a time when the U.S. occupation of Iraq could see no light at either end of the tunnel. "Identifying Terrorists as a Diagnosis Problem" was written in December 2002 as a critique of the proposed "Total Information Awareness" program. It has been lightly edited to remove references to TIA, since many people have forgotten it. "The Seeds of War (a parable)" was written shortly after 9/11.

In all three essays, I highlight tempting courses of action that not only won't work but which would make things much worse. Do you remember learning to ride a two-wheeled bicycle? First you learn to steer, to turn the bike in the direction you want to go. Then, you learn what to do when the bike starts to lean over. Since you want to go back upright, there is an irresistible temptation to steer towards where you want to be. Do this, and you're flat on the ground in an instant. The hard part about learning to ride a bike is learning to do just the opposite: to steer into the lean. Then, the bike picks itself right up and you can stay balanced. Your first instinct is exactly wrong. You have to learn to overcome that instinct and do the opposite in order to ride a bike. It's much the same with fighting terrorism.

How to Defeat Terrorism

Terrorism is a tactic used by a small set of extremists to fight against an overwhelmingly powerful opponent while surrounded by a large population that mostly just wants peace and quiet.

Terrorism can be defeated. To do this, first we need to understand how terrorists are kept away in the best case, then how terrorists can fight against this mechanism, and finally what works and what doesn't work to foil those aims.

The Thin Blue Line

Although terrorists are not merely criminals, it is helpful to think about what keeps criminals under control in our society. Ask any police officer: it is not the police and the courts who keep criminals at bay. It is the society as a whole. It is the ordinary people who call the police when they hear a problem starting. It is the ordinary people who trust the police and cooperate with them to bring criminals to justice. The "thin blue line" only works when it is backed up by the vast majority of ordinary people.

This, by the way, is why police brutality is so damaging to law and order in our society. If ordinary people lose trust in the police, they won't call and they won't cooperate. If they fear that calling the police to quiet down a loud party could result in their neighbors' kids being shot dead, they won't call. And they also won't cooperate in more serious cases. Without community backup, the "thin blue line" starts to feel very thin indeed. And criminals become bolder.

Likewise with terrorists. Terrorists are defeated when the large majority of the community feels that they can trust the local authorities to maintain law and order and work for the common good. Then, ordinary people will turn the terrorists in to the authorities when, or even before, they strike.

The Unabomber was an insane but highly intelligent man living alone in the woods, writing a manifesto, and killing and maiming people with mail bombs. After his manifesto was published, he was turned in to the FBI by his brother, who recognized the writing and made the correct but agonizing decision to be loyal to society over blood. We can only wish that a relative or neighbor of Timothy McVeigh had been in a position to make a similar decision before he struck in Oklahoma City.

In even the best, most civilized, law-abiding society one can imagine, there will be small numbers of extremists tempted by terrorist tactics. Ideally, the vast majority of people will see them as marginal nut-cases and will report them to trusted authorities if they show signs of turning extreme ideas into dangerous action. Terrorist acts can never be totally eliminated, but a cohesive community that trusts its authorities can defeat a continuing terrorist movement.

One Man's Terrorist Is Another Man's Freedom-Fighter

But what if the society is not civilized? What if the authorities are hated and feared rather than trusted? Then, the true terrorist can always find support and hiding places among sympathizers who are not willing to become terrorists themselves but are not willing to support the authorities either.

The terrorists' best strategy is to drive a wedge between the people and the authorities. Then, the "thin blue line" becomes thinner and weaker. The ordinary people, or at least some of them, protect and support those they see as fighting for freedom, religious faith, patriotism, or some other deep value, against overwhelming odds.

The biggest danger to the terrorist is the trust the people have in the authorities. As that trust is weakened or destroyed, the terrorists gain strength and freedom of action. Their primary goal must be to eliminate the trust between the people and the authorities.

How can they act most effectively to eliminate that trust? Here is where the meaning of terrorist violence is often misunderstood. The classic terrorist act is to blow up some innocent victims, but the actual destruction is not the goal, in a military sense. There is a symbolic goal of showing that the more-powerful enemy can be touched and deeply harmed, but even that is not the real goal.

The real goal is to provoke massive retaliation. The tiny group of terrorists who actually committed the act may escape entirely, may take casualties, or may even be entirely destroyed, but the larger terrorist movement feeds on the retaliation. The important thing (from the terrorists' perspective) is for the massive retaliation to harm many people in the general population, even among their own supporters.

The point is to incite the authorities to act in a way that erodes the people's trust in them. The people lose trust; the terrorists are seen as freedom-fighters; and they gain support, cover, strength, and freedom of action.

From the terrorists' perspective, the more horrible the original strike, the better, since it will provoke a more drastic retaliation. And the more horrible the retaliation, the better, since it will destroy the people's trust in the authorities and strengthen the terrorists. From the terrorists' perspective, the actual damage to their own people is a benefit, not a cost, of terrorist action.

Those Who Do Not Learn from History Are Condemned to Repeat It

Sadly, case studies of this strange dynamic are easy to come by, once you realize what to look for.

Israel-Palestine

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a textbook case. There is no military benefit to a suicide bomber killing people at a cafe, a wedding, or on a bus. The benefit to Hamas comes from the massive retaliation, killing the innocent along with the guilty, bulldozing homes and farms, and creating major economic hardship for the large masses of Palestinians who would gladly live in peace with Israel. Israel pegs the price of peace to stopping the terrorists, which ordinary Palestinians have no way of doing. And the immediate impact of the retaliation is to solidify hatred against the Israelis. (We're long past the point of talking about "trust" here.)

So, Hamas has reached the successful point of being able to provoke the Israeli Army to act to build up its strength among the Palestinians. The vicious cycle in that region is that hardliners in Israel use precisely the same method. When Israeli extremists create new settlements in Palestinian territory or commit terrorist acts against ordinary Palestinians, they provoke the strongest retaliation the Palestinians are capable of, which is more suicide bombers to slaughter innocents among the ordinary people of Israel. This eliminates any trust in the Palestinian authorities (small *n*) and solidifies hatred against Palestine. This elegant pair of mutually reinforcing feedback cycles strengthens terrorism on both sides and makes the chances for peace remote.

Iraq

Now let's think about Iraq. Terrorists strike U.S. troops, provoking retaliation. The retaliation almost certainly involves collateral damage, eroding trust in Americans and inflaming hatred. By now, this cycle should look familiar.

The terrorists' goal is the erosion of trust in the U.S. authorities and our attempt to rebuild Iraq, even more than physical destruction. It's hard to imagine Al Qaeda coming up with something more effective than the pictures from Abu Ghraib prison for destroying the trust of the ordinary Iraqi people in the civil authority of the U.S. troops.

Because this abuse does such direct strategic damage to our mission in Iraq, the soldiers directly involved must be punished, of course, but so should the entire chain of command. Since our overall mission explicitly requires winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people, it is military professional malpractice to fail to anticipate the pressures on the front-line troops and put discipline in place to prevent such abuse. This abuse is due to more than "a few bad apples," but even if it were only that, a military commander is responsible for knowing that a few soldiers may be "bad apples" and having controls in place to prevent them from acting out.

The decapitation of Nick Berg was a miscalculation on the terrorists' part. (They aren't all geniuses either, of course!) Ordinary Iraqis were revolted and offended by having this crime done in their name. Furthermore, the decapitation took attention away from the Abu Ghraib pictures, which were doing real damage to the U.S. cause. We could still save their cookies by some sort of massive retaliation, but the responsible authorities seem to be handling this in a more controlled way. Finding and prosecuting the specific individuals involved and their accomplices would strengthen the U.S. position significantly.

There are signs that not all the news from Iraq is bad. First, there is measurable progress in restoring the Iraqi infrastructure and providing water, sewers, electricity, oil pipelines, local government, and eventually jobs. [This is where the real war is fought. The soldiers are mostly there to keep the bad guys from interfering with the engineers and their work.] Second, the ordinary people of Najf have demonstrated against the religious extremists and in favor of the moderates and of course in favor of peace and quiet.

9/11

This view of terrorists, retaliation, and trust also helps us understand the terrible events of 9/11 and who has profited from the aftermath.

The destruction of the World Trade Center and the murder of 3,000 people was a horrifying act that devastated the victims' families and shook the economy for a while. The symbolic impact on the United States and its effect on our national confidence was massive, but from a military perspective, the blow was not significant. Compare it with the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, which crippled the Pacific fleet as we entered a war with Japan.

Osama bin Laden's purpose for the 9/11 attack was (and is) to provoke massive retaliation from the United States against Islam. He hoped that our retaliation would finally unite Islam against the United States as a common enemy and that his vision for a fundamentalist pan-Islamic state would sweep away all the more moderate governments in the region, as well as movements toward a pluralistic culture.

In the final chapter of his book *Against All Enemies*, Richard Clarke gives an excellent description of the conflict we should have pursued after 9/11 and contrasts it with the wars we actually did pursue. The invasion of Iraq is not only a distraction from more important goals but a provocation that is making Osama bin Laden's dream come true.

The purpose of the original attack was to provoke our retaliation, which would affect primarily the ordinary Islamic people, destroying what trust they had for the United States, and making them more willing to give aid and comfort to the terrorists among them. To a surprising extent, we have fallen right into Osama bin Laden's trap. The future of the world depends on finding our way out.

How to Win the War on Terrorism

When terrorists are isolated criminals, viewed with suspicion by the vast majority of the general public, and reported to the authorities when they turn violent, then the war on terrorism has been won.

What weapons will it take to win this war? Just as the Maginot Line in France was impotent against Nazi *blitzkrieg* at the beginning of World War II, purely military tactics and strategy will fail against the terrorists and will even be exploited to their advantage. It appears to me that our current professional military leaders generally understand this point, while our hawkish civilian leaders without military experience generally do not.

It's tempting to think that a war against terrorism can be won by killing all the terrorists. In the real world, this naive plan doesn't work. A serious attempt to find and kill all the terrorists also sweeps up many ordinary people, and some of them and their relatives become new terrorists, creating more terrorists than were destroyed. The harder the authorities pursue this strategy, the more it looks like genocide, and the more effectively they recruit new terrorists.

The "weapon" we need is the trust and cooperation of the general population of the country where the terrorists are based. As we have seen, terrorists understand this and use fiendishly clever strategies for eroding this trust and fomenting resentment and hatred. (Incidentally, most terrorists are not clever enough to invent this. But they read about strategy and tactics in the writings of Mao Tze Tung and Ho Chi Minh, who were. Fortunately, these same sources are required reading for our professional military leaders.)

The "simple" strategy for defeating terrorism is as follows:

- Avoid getting killed by them; make clear that overwhelming power is available, but avoid using it.
- Gain the trust and cooperation of the general population.
- Refute the terrorists' lies; demonstrate truth and openness to criticism.
- Create, publicize, enforce, and obey a simple "Bill of Rights"; demonstrate even-handedness in local disputes.
- Demonstrate justice, even when treated unjustly; avoid massive retaliation, even when taking casualties.
- Visibly work for economic justice for the oppressed.

The people will turn the terrorists in for trial and prosecution.

Obviously, implementing this strategy is far from simple. There are trade-offs between the actions required to avoid getting killed and the ones needed to gain trust. Since gaining trust is building the "weapon" that wins the war, however, it takes priority, and one can't be absolutely safe. Whether you call it nation-building or peace-making, it's a dangerous line of work, actively opposed by unfriendly people.

Avoid Getting Killed

Aside from the obvious personal motivation to stay alive, the strategic reason to prevent terrorist attacks is to foil their attempt to provoke massive retaliation. Impotence is the worst-case outcome for a terrorist, not death. We need good enough intelligence to detect and prevent terrorist acts, but this cannot take absolute priority since it trades off against being a free and trustworthy society. Therefore, some attacks will occur, and there will be casualties.

It is important for both the terrorists and the general population to understand clearly that terrorist acts cannot possibly defeat our forces militarily. Failing to attend to this point led to disastrous errors by Reagan in Beirut and Clinton in Somalia. Currently in Iraq, terrorists can reasonably conclude that the United States will leave under sufficient pressure. They may or may not be correct, but their ability to draw that conclusion is dangerous to us in itself.

The hardest part about a war on terrorism comes when a terrorist attack succeeds. The whole point of the attack is to do something horrific to provoke massive retaliation. The right response must be measured, deliberate, and appropriate. President Bush's speech on September 20, 2001, was a brilliant example of the correct response to a successful terrorist attack. (Sadly, he did not stay that particular course, as he and his administration demonstrated their obsession with Iraq.)

Gain Trust and Cooperation

A measured, deliberate, and appropriate response gains the trust and the cooperation of the people.

To do this, we must be trustworthy. It also means that the training of our troops for this kind of war must be very different from past wars. Our soldiers must be more than warriors who kill people and destroy things. They must also serve as community police, and even as social workers and political advisors. News reports from Iraq make it clear that our soldiers are vividly aware of this dual role, and they are vividly aware of the fact that they are well-trained and equipped as warriors but not as community police.

Above, I've outlined some of the specific methods for building trust and cooperation from the people.

- Refute the terrorists' lies; demonstrate truth and openness to criticism.
- Create, publicize, enforce, and obey a simple "Bill of Rights"; demonstrate even-handedness in local disputes.
- Demonstrate justice, even when treated unjustly; avoid massive retaliation, even when taking casualties.
- Visibly work for economic justice for the oppressed.

There are surely many other effective methods to be identified, improved, evaluated, and applied.

The People Will Turn in the Terrorists

If the people trust the authorities and respect the efforts taken to make their lives secure and safe, they will turn in suspected terrorists, knowing that they will receive fair trials. The Unabomber's brother turned him in because he was willing to trust the government's pledge not to seek the death penalty.

Terrorists are not merely criminals. Their extremist ideological motivation makes them far more dangerous than even large organized criminal gangs. Even so, to win against terrorism, in the end they must be treated as ordinary criminals. They must be tried and punished, with full legal rights and protections, not for their

extremist beliefs, but for their terrorist actions that disrupt the safe conduct of society for ordinary citizens.

The Unabomber sits in federal prison for his bombs that killed and maimed. Timothy McVeigh was executed for murder many times over. Their public trials and the public safeguarding of their rights were not out of soft-heartedness or compassion for criminals. They are public ceremonies, reaffirming the value of law and order in our society. They both represent and cultivate the trust that the people have in their government.

That trust is the weapon that defeats terrorism. They cannot stand against it. We must not throw it away.

What Should We Do?

If we understand which weapons actually work against terrorists and if we understand how terrorists try to destroy our weapons, we can see what we need to do and what we need to avoid doing. We can see why the Abu Ghraib prison photos are so damaging to us.

Traditional war is not easy or certain. And the new ways are not easy or certain either. The “simple” strategy above for defeating terrorism requires great knowledge, cleverness, and wisdom to put into action.

War requires discipline. War requires sacrifice. War requires restraint at certain times and carefully planned action at others. A war against terrorism is unlike the major wars of the past. If we try to fight like we fought wars in the past, we will lose, and we won’t understand how or why. We need to learn how to fight with new weapons.

The alternative is a world of perpetual conflict between opposing groups of extremists, locked in a deadly embrace in which each side confirms the beliefs of the other and helps in recruiting more extremists. The ordinary people in the middle, who just want peace and law and order, are repeatedly savaged to cultivate more recruits for one side or the other.

This is indeed a “clash of civilizations” but not between Islam and the West. The clash is between extremists of all kinds on the one side and the forces of pluralism, tolerance, peace, and law and order on the other.

Identifying Terrorists as a Diagnosis Problem

Consider the problem of identifying terrorists as a problem in diagnosis.

Out of a large population, you want to diagnose the very few cases of a rare disease called “terrorism.” Your diagnostic tests are automated data-mining methods, supervised and checked by humans. (The analogy is sending blood or tissue samples to a laboratory.)

This type of diagnostic problem, screening a large population to look for a rare disease, has some very counter-intuitive properties.

Suppose the tests are highly accurate and specific:

- 99.9% of the time, examining a terrorist, the test says “terrorist.”
- 99.9% of the time, examining an innocent civilian, the test says “innocent.”

Terrorists are rare: let’s say, 250 out of 250 million people in the United States.

- When the tests are applied to the terrorists, they will be detected 99.9% of the time, which means that almost certainly 249 will be detected, and with only a 25% chance of missing the last one. Great!
- However, out of the remaining 249,999,750 innocent civilians, 99.9% accuracy means 0.1% error, which means that 250,000 of them will be incorrectly labeled “terrorist.” Uh, oh! (These are called “false positives.”)

The law enforcement problem is now that we have 250,250 people who have been labeled as “terrorist” by our diagnostic tests. Only about 1 in 1,000 of them is actually a terrorist.

If we were mining for gold, we would say that the ore has been considerably enriched, since 1 in 1,000 is better than 1 in 1,000,000. There’s still a long way to go, though, before finding a nugget.

But we are talking about people’s lives, freedom, and livelihoods here. The consequences to an innocent person of being incorrectly labeled a “terrorist” (or even “suspected terrorist”) can be very large.

Suppose, out of the innocent people incorrectly labeled “terrorist,” 1 in 1,000 is sufficiently traumatized by the experience so that they, or a relative, actually *becomes* a terrorist. (This is analogous to catching polio from the polio vaccine: extremely rare, and impossible with killed-virus vaccine, but a real phenomenon.)

In this case, even after catching all 250 original terrorists, 250 new ones have been created by the screening process!

The numbers I’ve used give a break-even scenario, but 99.9% accuracy and specificity is unrealistically high. More realistic numbers make the problem worse. Nobody knows what fraction of people traumatized as innocent victims of a government process are seriously radicalized. One in 1,000 is an uninformed guess, but the number could be significantly higher.

A mass screening process like this is very likely to have costs that are much higher than the benefits, even restricting the costs to “number of free terrorists” as I have done here. Adding costs in dollars and the suffering of innocents just makes it harder to reach the break-even level.

Ask your neighborhood epidemiologist to confirm this analysis. It is applied routinely to public health policy and applies no less to seeking out terrorists.

There are alternative ways to detect and defend against terrorists. Mass screening for something very rare is seriously questionable in terms of costs and benefits, exactly because the true positives can be completely swamped by the false positives.

The Seeds of War (A Parable)

I offer a parable to illustrate the seeds of war.

The point of this is *not* to say that the West is somehow responsible for terrorism. Obviously, the terrorists are responsible, and they must be brought to justice; however, we need to understand the mechanisms in place that feed terrorism and that would be invoked by certain types of retaliation. It makes no sense to act without understanding the context.

The purpose of this parable is to provide intuition about one such mechanism.

*Written 10/2/2001 in the aftermath of September 11.
Think about the aftermaths of Afghanistan and Iraq, too.
To fight terrorism, you must know where it comes from.*

Imagine that you and your family live in a really bad neighborhood. You struggle every day to make ends meet. You try to keep your children safe from the criminals who live in your area. You work hard to teach your children to be good people, and to live right, even though they are surrounded by examples of people who get rich through immorality and crime. You go to church with your neighbors and try to support each other in the same struggle, since the odds against each of you are overwhelming, but together you may have a slightly better chance.

You watch TV, and you see rich people in the suburbs who have everything you ever wanted, who worry about crabgrass in the lawn instead of gunfire in the street. You work two jobs at minimum wage, hating the fact that your children are home alone, while the people on TV complain about the high cost of gas for the SUV to take the kids to soccer games. You and the members of your church tell each other and try to believe that different people have different lots in life, and each follows his or her own path to salvation. Meanwhile, on TV, you hear the people in the suburbs complaining about how all the people in your neighborhood are criminals and lazy and should be run out of town. You try hard to remember that they don't understand and to forgive them.

Then, one day, a really terrible crime is committed by a gang from your neighborhood. A bomb goes off in the suburbs, and many innocent people are killed.

You are shocked, and your heart goes out to the families who are suffering. A few of your meaner-hearted neighbors say that they are glad that the suburbs now know what it's like. You shut them up, telling them to have compassion for anyone who suffers. A few particularly foolish kids dance in the street and show up on the evening news. Your church holds a prayer service for the victims of the bomb.

The police barricade the streets around your neighborhood and won't let any of you out, though a few sneak past. On TV, you hear some of the rich people in the suburbs say they want to bomb your entire neighborhood to kill the whole gang. If that also kills innocent people like you and your family, well, that's too bad, they say.

How do you feel? What do you do?

Now, suppose the police actually do bomb your neighborhood. The bombs kill your parents, your wife, your daughters, and your sons. In your family, the only survivors are you and your youngest son.

How do you feel? What do you do?

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