

REREADING TERRORISM AS GLOBAL WARFARE

Excerpts from a talk by Caleb Carr at Bard in New York,
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In 1996, I published an article in the *World Policy Journal* called “Terrorism as Warfare: The Lessons of Military History.” I put forward the idea that terrorism was not a criminal problem, but a military one. As long as we continued to treat it as we were treating the drug trade or smuggling in general, we were not going to solve it. We were dealing with soldiers who were part of supranational armies dedicated to a cause. They considered themselves to be at war with us, so if we did not address the problem as such, and address it at the military level, then we would continue to make a very foolish error, which would end up eventually with some kind of cataclysmic attack on the United States.

In looking at terrorism as a military tradition, I discovered that terrorism was not a modern fringe political or military activity, but a central military activity; one that has existed as long as warfare itself. By defining it as a military tradition, as the deliberate targeting of civilians for political purposes, it became a maneuver that dated back to Ancient Rome. Rome is the best example of a direct parallel to our own behavior as an empire that deliberately employed acknowledged policies of waging war against civilians for political purposes.

Here we get to the only other cogent definition of terrorism that I have ever heard, and which happens to come from the other side of the spectrum. Terrorism is somehow the “warfare of the weak,” or as some call it, the force equalizer of the weak. The problem with that definition is that it excludes the idea that great powers and empires can also employ terrorism. If it’s the force equalizer of the weak, how could empires from the Roman to the American have employed anything that could be called terrorism?

Rome was not only an empire that was willing to employ deliberate forms of warfare against civilians—what were called punitive wars and destructive wars—but also an

empire that was willing to take warriors from enemy states and employ them for their own purposes, and then somehow think that those agents would magically disappear once they had served their function. One example was the case of Arminius in the first century, who was used by the Romans to quell one of their uprisings, and then later caused an uprising in his own native province of Germany. This is a very strong parallel to the case of Osama bin Laden and our nurturing of people like him in Afghanistan in the 1980s. When the CIA disappeared from Afghanistan, we expected these guys to disappear as well, which of course they did not. We left them there with the weapons we had supplied.

Several other patterns consistently followed through the medieval period, particularly during the Crusades. Both sides were equally willing to wage war against civilians not only for purposes of external policy, but also for purposes of internal politics. Both were faced with highly divisive, violent internal factions, which they quelled by pointing them in another direction: at each other. This parallels events of the 20th century. During the First World War, a method used by the Great Powers in dealing with common internal problems was to turn them outward against the enemy, in a war that was never rationally explained in terms of international politics.

Beginnings of Modern Terrorist Warfare

We began to see what is called specifically “terrorism” during the French Revolution. A revolutionary group using the entire force of its society turned that force outward, and used its own civilians to fight the civilians of other countries. The French Revolution also gave birth to “Total War,” a more all-encompassing method than the warfare that had

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come before it. Involved was not only the national industrial capacity and the military, but the civilian capacity to support war and to become therefore the targets of war.

This continued through the western Imperial Period, when developed and developing nations were willing to attack civilian populations from both sides. The idea that armies should professionalize and stop targeting civilians began in 18th-century Europe. Once Europeans left Europe, and conquered countries in which any notions of limitations and progress were alien, they fell immediately back into their old ways.

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In the American Civil War, people like to think what really broke the back of the South was the killing of so many civilians and the destruction of civilian property. Even Sherman himself in his private correspondence acknowledged that only 20 percent of what he did in the South was actually of any military significance. The other 80 percent was purely gratuitous destruction—vengeance. He created an enormous amount of bitterness among the Southern population, reflected in the creation of homegrown terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan.

In the Second World War, the German Air force deliberately targeted civilians in the London Blitz. Yet as soon as the British could attack, they formulated a policy of the strategic bombing of German civilian areas. But we now know that German industrial

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capacity and the age ranges of men enlisting in the German army actually rose in direct proportion to how many civilians were attacked and how often and how severely. So the campaign of targeting civilians made the job of winning for the allied armies harder.

Civilians as Military Targets

The targeting of civilians over the last 30 years has become far more common. In every case, whatever the short-term advantage, in the long run it worked to the detriment of whichever side adopted it most quickly and most severely. No one denies that in Vietnam there were many campaigns which specifically targeted civilian areas, or targeted areas that may have contained military units, but that certainly everyone knew at the time were going to end up with massive numbers of civilian deaths.

That policy could have been attempted in reverse. The United States is not a very hard country for terrorists to penetrate. Infiltrating agents into the United States to commit large-scale acts of terrorism was a policy available to Ho Chi Minh and General Giap, his military right-hand man. They rejected it in favor of psychologically affecting their enemy. Ho Chi Minh believed the spirit of the American people would be broken if enough American soldiers were sent home in body bags. Terrorism does not work, but

that does not mean that weak nations are left with no alternatives: they can target military forces even if they are going to lose, because this physical loss can bring psychological victory.

Palestinian Strategies

At the beginning of the Intifada movement there was a deliberate attempt to target Israeli military units—not civilians—by sending young men out with slings and rocks to fight military units, which led to a spike in public opinion in favor of the Palestinians. Although they were taking an enormous amount of casualties and there was no way they could win by fighting the Israeli army with rocks, they *could* win the public relations war. Unfortunately, they didn't win it fast enough for the tastes of their various leaders, and they fell back on the policy of trying to terrorize Israeli civilians.

During the American Revolution, our conduct in the field got us a strong European ally. A lot of commanders on the colonial side wanted to conduct a purely terrorist war, but because we were willing to fight Britain formally, the public relations game was won for us in much of continental Europe. There is a strategy that is open to the weak nations of the world in fighting the strong, but it initially demands a lot of casualties. We are fortunate that our own leaders during the revolution were willing to make that sacrifice. The Palestinians are less fortunate because they are led by people who are not willing to stand by that ideal.

Failures of the CIA

The Clinton administration blindly threw a lot of bombs or cruise missiles into areas where we thought terrorists were hiding out, but we rarely had investigators on the ground. We ended up hitting a lot of the wrong places and creating a lot more terrorism.

I predicted that we would need to attack Afghanistan. It seemed obvious at that point that we were going to have to have a military response; it was just a question of what kind. Our response in Afghanistan has demonstrated an effort on the part of the Secretary of Defense to put men on the ground early, to be in touch with the local population and to try to discriminate among our targets. We do not have an embittered Afghanistan; we have in fact a country that is fairly happy to have us there.

I also felt that beyond that, we would be ready after 3,000 civilian deaths in our own country to start talking about what had gone wrong, not just with the policies of countries like Afghanistan, but what had gone wrong in this country that led us to this atrocity, specifically within the intelligence community. I did make some specific proposals within my recent book, *The Lessons of Terror*, most controversially calling for the abolition of the CIA, based on its record generally since 1947, as an institution that has missed every major development in world affairs. That turned out to be controversial in a way that I was completely unprepared for: I thought the CIA's record not only spoke for itself overall, but its record in terms of 9/11, in terms of having ignored really common intelligence that was available to those of us that have no particular connections, was glaringly obvious.

We were getting messages from other countries that said that Al Qaeda was obsessed with the World Trade Center, and was working on turning airplanes into missiles. We had a warning three weeks before the attacks came that something was being planned for inside the United States. I consider it madness that we shouldn't finally call the CIA to the carpet and say, "How can you keep missing these things?"

There is so much intelligence redundancy in this country, so many other agencies that do a better job of research and analysis. Covert operations, as we saw at the beginning of the Afghan War, are done so much better by military special forces, which are actually answerable to a chain of command, unlike the CIA. The CIA has the power to essentially order murder strikes on its own authority, as we saw in the regrettable case of the "tall man" recently killed in Afghanistan, about whom, after it was reported that he wasn't Osama bin Laden, everybody seems to have stopped talking. He seems to have been a scrap metal dealer, who was unfortunate enough to have been tall, but the CIA was convinced

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that he was bin Laden, and pulled the trigger on him without anyone in Washington being the wiser for it. They were only informed afterward.

Secretary Rumsfeld has been willing to take a new look at how we conduct war. What we are not going to do is look at what factors in this country led to that regrettable situation that caused the conflict that resulted in 9/11. And there are a battery of other things proceeding from there, which I have discovered since my book was published, that we are not yet willing to look at.

How has this unwillingness to look at things impacted the way war is now changing? We've started to hear rhetoric and see actions, not just military, but diplomatic, which indicate that this war is starting to take a turn that is not altogether comforting. From the President (and some of his other advisers) we are starting to hear a new idea of what this war is all about. Originally it was supposed to be a war on terror, a war on terrorists, a war

on countries that harbor terrorists. None of this I have a problem with. In 1996, I said we are eventually going to have to attack countries that harbor terrorists, because they are essentially terrorist auxiliaries.

I'm worried about recent talk of spreading this conflict, not only into areas that are known and demonstrable terrorist training grounds, but to places that might be, or places that have only a tangential connection, or a rhetorical connection to it, or even an illogical connection to terrorism. We see in a geopolitical way that we may have other reasons for wanting to spread the war to those areas, into places like the former Soviet Republic of Georgia. There seems to be a high degree of risk in generalizing this war in that way, in the same sense that the British made a mistake in the First World War of allowing their war aims to become far too broad. Initially the British claimed the war's aim was the liberation of Holland and Belgium, and it turned into the conquest of Germany, which led to all kinds of problems down the line. There's no reason for us to do that. If we're going to fight a war on terrorism, as we have to, we need to stay specific. We need to stay limited, we need to stay focused, and we need to stay progressive in our methods. We cannot become generalized, either in our aims, in terms of where we're willing to go and whom we're willing to fight, or in terms of our methods, and that's crucial.

One thing we saw come into play in the first part of the Afghan campaign was not only limitation of war aims, but also limitation of war methods. When we start to hear talk about the effective use of tactical nuclear weapons, and the adjustment of tactical nuclear weapons, as we've started to hear from our president, we should become very, very worried, especially since he's not talking about the use of those weapons just in places we know to be training centers for terrorist groups.

Perhaps the central lesson is really one not of a limitation of effectiveness, but a limitation of methods and goals. In fact, I would argue that it's only by the limitation of these methods and goals that we can achieve the kinds of results that we have achieved in Afghanistan—not by bombing the guts out of the country the way much of the Pentagon wanted us to, and not by having the kind of blind rolling thunder campaigns that we had in Vietnam. We did it by risking the lives of our special forces early on, by coordinating with the locals, finding out what the real chances of winning a campaign in Afghanistan were, whom we should be allied with, and who was a legitimate target and who wasn't. Of course there have been civilian deaths and I would never say that there haven't been. Collateral damage, and it is exactly that, is a constant fact of the war. But there is a difference between the deliberate targeting of civilians and collateral damage.

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