The Price of Modernity: Technology and Terror

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Terrorism has many forms and is here to stay. The dangers from terrorism are part of the price we pay for living in a world with modern communication networks and mass-murder technology available to small groups. Frequently, it is difficult to define a terrorist as distinguishable from a patriot, a disgruntled minority, a religious fanatic, a tribal supporter, an anarchist, and, a political opportunist, or even a criminal or psychotic.

Of the dozens of definitions for terrorism today, one that follows from the United Nations’ definition reads:

*Terrorism is any violent action intended to cause death, serious bodily harm, or severe economic hardship to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating or compelling a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act.*

Again, the group may purport to be fighting for a nationalist cause, a religious cause, an independence movement, international unity, or many other reasons. It is important to remember that one individual’s terrorist group may be regarded as a group of freedom fighters by someone else.

In a world connected by the Internet, modern democracies have to re-examine the basic liberties and democratic rights they seek to defend, and they must adjust their socio-psychological views considerably. Public demagogues have access to a new and more powerful instant misinformation industry that is growing increasingly adept at the techniques of manipulating public fear and anger. Without the defense of our freedoms, any advice concerning the specifics of defense against terrorism has little hope for success.

The “counterterrorism and spread democracy” enterprises have been a boon to the Bush administration. They have served as the stick and the carrot. Any red-blooded American with a heart will support our troops in a war against terror and a war for democratic freedom. The disconnect between the jingoistic rhetoric and reality has rarely been bigger. We created a civil war in Iraq: we helped make it safe for terrorists, and now we continue to do so.

The United States’ policy of invading Iraq unilaterally instead of inspecting (even using military force to do so) under the United Nations mandate both damaged our international reputation and created far more terrorism than it destroyed. However evil of a dictator Saddam Hussein was, he was anti-Al Qaeda and essentially secular. The United States managed to create its own terrorist threat in Iraq.

Many politicians mouth phrases such as, “We are here until we achieve victory, establish true democracy, and eliminate the terrorist threat.” They have treated these three points with the lack of insight and understanding of a petulant child, a simpleton, or a populist manipulative scoundrel willing to play on the fears and misinformation of the population.
The concept of victory against the terrorists has never been defined. We are a third party interfering in a civil war where the definition of terrorist depends on who is shooting at us today. Under the pose of standing up for democracy, this administration has attempted to weaken our own Constitution.

George W. Bush has been the best ally that Osama bin Laden ever had. Without his help the life expectancy of an Al Qaeda operative in Iraq would have been of the order of a few months. Not content with his aid to bin Laden, he has also been able to show considerable aid to the Iranian theocratic administration, both in helping them keep down the essentially pro-American and pro-modernizing middle classes, while opening up possibilities for Iranian influence in Iraq that were unthinkable under Sadaam Hussein.

Not content with these achievements, the Bush Administration has skillfully misanalyzed the problems and dangers of the Kurdish-Turkish relationship, failing to learn anything from history and jeopardizing our relationship with a much needed ally in the Middle East.

Under the guise of our support for the democratic forces of the world, the United States has managed to support a Saudi Arabian regime that encompasses a blend of a medieval kingdom with a playboy sector. This is the artificial country created by the British and French—with the blessings of the Allies after World War I—that has not merely supplied a major number of the active terrorists on September 11, 2001, but has been the home of the Wahabi sect of religious fanatics whose actions do damage to one of the world’s great religions.

In the administration’s zeal to bring democracy to the world, the regime of General Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan has been bolstered, while it shows little sensitivity to the considerably different problems of controlling the tribal areas on the Pakistan—Afghanistan border and the internal problems confronting Pakistan as a whole.

Planning, organization, and logistics are handmaidens to clear political thought, resolve, and morale; unfortunately they are not substitutes. All the monetary resources in the world cannot replace a determined focus devoted to a clear political objective.

The rhetoric declaring that “we will root out every terrorist, everywhere” detracts from establishing the requisite political environment. This type of speech combined with the liberal use of ill-defined slogans such as “victory,” flag-wrapping orations on bringing democracy to the developing world, and sermons on protecting the “homeland” from terror attacks trade on fear.

From a political point of view, it is easier to incite emotion than it is to carry out an effective anti-terrorist program. The goals of hunting down every individual terrorist and achieving “victory” over all terrorism provide neither a realistic nor cost-effective strategy. Their advocacy makes for good, simplistic, populist, political speeches but can easily provoke public fears while providing terrorist groups the publicity on which they thrive.

We must accept a realistic level of terrorist casualties in much the same way as we accept automobile casualties: they are unpleasant facts of modern life in which the cost to the public in terms of both individual freedom and public resources, of the further reduction of casualties becomes too high.

When viewing the daily newspapers, the average American could believe that there exist currently (at least) two types of ideological war: one, a new Jihad which calls for conversion, taxation, or death of the infidels (taxation is already satisfied in the form of oil revenues), and the other is the United States’ crusade to bring democracy to all countries in the world. Depending upon one’s viewpoint, either of these goals could appear admirable.
A more prosaic view is that the ordinary citizen is interested in neither. An individual in any society would like to be able to walk down the street without fear of being shot or having one’s home or place of work demolished by car bombs, suicide bombers, or other devices of terror.

A modicum of political and economic analysis shows that even if a zero level of terrorism were feasible, the political price in terms of erosion of civil liberties and economic cost is so high that our society should not be willing to pay it.

I suggest the appropriate goals for the United States are:

Educate the country on the understanding of the existence of a socially and economically acceptable level of terrorism using analogies with other forms of death.

Address the problems of national systems defense. Identify and improve the protection of vulnerable systems in our society, such as our energy, financial, health and food delivery systems that are targets for major disruptions. Plan to limit the expected damage to a socially and economically acceptable level and to aim for realistic public awareness and acceptance of these defense needs at the level of acceptance of the need for a fire department.

Concentrate on an efficient and morale-building post-attack recovery from any terrorist activity.

The existence of new and dangerous forms of terrorism is a permanent fact of the one world of global communication and lethality of small groups. Al Qaeda is merely one of the many armed dissident groups we face. Victory against terror is a slogan for the cynical or the demagogue to mislead the public. Victory, in fact, means reasonable identification of the many different terrorist groups and balanced activity both in attacking their numbers and being prepared to recover with speed and high morale from the damage that they will do. It also means helping others to foster law and institutions that set the stage for more open societies.