

[Discuss this Article](#)

What is Terrorism? and can it ever be ethical?

Surprisingly the answer to the second question is "Yes" but we need to work up to that more slowly.

Let's begin with the Dialogue of the Daft:

The UN Debate on Terrorism which culminated in a banal Security Council resolution, on Wednesday 14 September 2005 - a date which will surely sink without a trace in the annals of intelligent statesmanship - proposed by our own glorious leader Mr Anthony Blair. The Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1624 to "prohibit by law incitement to commit a terrorist act or acts" and to "deny safe haven" to anyone even suspected of incitement.

Unfortunately, they failed to agree on what constituted the terrorism, the incitement of which the world is now committed to prevent!

Frankly, if a novelist wrote such a plot, the editor would reject it as childishly implausible.

The following day, I was listening to the news in the car on the way home and heard the tail end of an interview with what I think was an Israeli spokesman. He was asked how the world could co-ordinate its attack on Terrorism if it couldn't even agree what it was. He replied "It doesn't matter how we define it, so long as we're all committed to fighting it" or something of that ilk. This is an example of what I am starting to call the "*Philosophy Gap*" (which will become another essay in due course). It illustrates an approach to intellectual problems which does its best not to involve the intellect. In this particular case, there is a simple, obvious and uncomfortable truth. The world cannot agree its definition of Terrorism. Nevertheless, we're apparently all committed to combating incitement to it, whatever it is.

That this is philosophically absurd is probably obvious even to non philosophers. It is not remotely conceivable that the reasonably intelligent men (mostly) who were present at that UN debate remain unaware of this absurdity. But, like the emperor's clothes, this embarrassing fact is politely ignored - even when direct and pertinent questions are asked about it.

This isn't just golden material for satirists. It is very dangerous and will lead to further unnecessary deaths and repression. One of the consequences of this international incompetence is that it leaves "Terrorism" firmly in the mind of the beholder:

As Human Rights Watch [noted](#):

"...the resolution's sponsors have made it easy for abusive governments to invoke the resolution to target peaceful political opponents, impose censorship and close mosques, churches and schools."

and

"Instead, the proposed resolution uses vague and overbroad language in calling on states to "prevent" incitement and to "counter" incitement that is "motivated by extremism and intolerance" or that is "subvert[ing] educational, cultural, and religious institutions."

Indeed, much of what I am saying on my own web site clearly falls within such a definition of "incitement" if not the actual terrorism. I am certainly opposed to most religious institutions and governments and I'm trying my damndest to subvert them all. True, I don't advocate violence. Indeed I generally oppose it. But I don't have an ethical problem, for example, with unlimited direct action up to and including the complete shut down of a nation's economy and the peaceful seizure of strategic infrastructure in order to remove the political obstacles of existing governments. As we will see - that probably fits the current American definition of terrorism if not my own country's.

Moving on...

According to the BBC, a "high level panel", presumably of UN Civil Servants, proposed [this failed definition](#) (of Terrorism):

"Any action, in addition to actions already specified by the existing conventions on aspects of terrorism, the Geneva Conventions and Security Council resolution 1566 (2004), that is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organisation to do or to abstain from doing any act."

The Beeb helpfully reminds us that:

(The Geneva Conventions now outlaws attacks aimed only at civilians and Security Council Resolution 1566 passed last year condemned "all acts of terrorism irrespective of their motivation".)

Subsequently, the negotiators charged with polishing up the definition in preparation for the

60th anniversary UN celebrations chose to add wording which made it clear that such an action *"cannot be justified on any grounds and constitutes an act of terrorism"*. which, frankly, doesn't seem to me to add anything of substance but, like them, I'm happy to have it included if it helps.

However, as the Beeb points out:

This definition would cover actions of both governments and terrorist organisations but still leaves room for interpretation. For example, governments could declare they were not intimidating a population but seeking wrong-doers. Terrorists could argue that civilians are soldiers out of uniform.

[MIFT](#) have a much better argument than that, as we shall see below. In any case, the definition, ambiguous and flexible as it was:

...went too far for some. They thought that some acts of violence could be justified. Islamic countries wanted a reference to the right of peoples to resist occupation. This would cover, for example, acts carried out by Palestinian resistance groups. This in turn was seen by some Western states as an attempt to justify terrorism. In the end, no definition was agreed though terrorism "in all its forms" is condemned.

(You do realise, don't you, that we paid good money for those people to be in New York?)

Terrorism, terrorism, terrorism...

There are few words in human discourse which carry such emotional baggage, few words which have such a widely disagreed definition and few words which have been so deliberately abused.

My main philosophical objection to the use of the word "terrorist" is that is most often used as a substitute for the more straightforward word "enemy". In addition, it is almost always used as a demonising word in a grossly manipulative and dishonest way in order to suppress dissent, to slur potential legitimate opponents and to deter attempts at really understanding the cause of whatever conflict has produced the "terrorism".

It is this basic compulsion to be dishonest which is the real reason the world cannot agree a definition of terrorism. For example, the Egyptian foreign Minister - Ahmed Aboul Gheit - interviewed by BBC Newsnight 14 Sept 2005, offered a relatively straightforward definition

"Terrorism is when you act against innocent civilians in any way... Killing civilians is a terrorist thing which has to be condemned"

Who can possibly disagree with that?

The Americans, for a start. They've killed between 30 and 100 thousand innocent civilians so far, in response to the attack on 9-11 which killed 3 thousand of their own citizens. They can't possibly accept a definition that broad. It makes them the world's biggest terrorists. Yes, I know that's exactly what many people do argue, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. Right now we're debating definitions. It's hardly surprising that the world's last empire doesn't want to agree a definition which puts it in the dock - perhaps literally.

However, on the Radio 4 Today programme on 16 September 2005, Prime Minister Blair may have come to their rescue, when confronted with the definition problem he was unequivocal and added just one important word

*Terrorism is the killing of innocent civilians **deliberately**. (exerpt on mp3 - 160k)*

This allows the Americans to defend themselves against charges of terrorism on the grounds that they didn't *deliberately* kill thousands of civilians. I suspect that's largely true.

But what does a senior American have to say about, for example, the right of people to resist "Occupation"? The aforementioned Newsnight program also interviewed Ambassador Peter Galbraith, the US representative at the Centre for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation. He conceded the legitimacy of such resistance but concluded:

*"What is not legitimate is to go out and kill civilians intentionally, **or to take on military targets knowing that you're going to be killing a large number of innocent civilians**" (emphasis added)*

That was what United States Ambassador, Peter Galbraith, said, out loud, on BBC Television. I've recorded it (sound only) and I've put the [clip here](#) (mp3) so you can hear it for yourself.

Anyone spot a problem with this position?

How did the 30-100 thousand innocent civilians killed by the US since 9-11 come to die then Peter?

I'm assuming (unlike the conspiracy theorists) that the vast majority of the killings were not intentional. They occurred as a direct result of attacks on known or suspected military targets

which just happened to be in the middle of heavily populated civilian areas. Is it the American position that they *didn't know* that their attacks would result in those civilian deaths?

That implausible claim might have been acceptable for the first few attacks, while they were still learning the lesson, or just trying to kid themselves, or us, that their laser and satellite guided weapons - or their human target selectors - never made mistakes, but the error must have become clear to them even more quickly than it did to the rest of the watching world.

Thereafter, attacks against military targets in civilian areas were clearly committed with both the knowledge that civilian deaths were inevitable and with reckless disregard for that knowledge. There is no other interpretation possible which does not insult the intelligence. Consequently, Ambassador Galbraith has confirmed, at the very least, that the Americans have caused tens of thousands of illegitimate deaths.

But at least they can hold their head up high and argue that the deaths they caused were not the result of State sponsored Terrorism. Why not? Motive. They weren't "deliberate" killings. I still agree with this defence.

The key concept behind terrorism - as the "high panel" definition implies - is the intent to intimidate - to terrorise - the target population. Or, as [Bill Moyer puts it](#) in his excellent analysis of the rise of the Religious Right:

Terrorists plant time bombs in our heads, hoping to turn each and every imagination into a private hell governed by our fear of them.

I'm sure that their bitterest enemies would disagree with me but I do not believe that the US intent was intimidation. In fact such a view is not feasible. Intimidation would only work if the target population could somehow be expected to influence the behaviour of the real military targets, which clearly, in the case of both the Taliban and Saddam Hussein was not plausible.

But it's not much of a defence - against charges of terrorism - to have to argue that the tens of thousands of unnecessary and illegitimate deaths you have caused were the result "only" of wilful and reckless disregard for the safety of the civilian population. After the first few "mistakes" all subsequent indiscriminate slaughter has been as inexcusable and "evil" as the terrorism it was fighting.

And the survivors should seriously consider using Galbraith's testimony in the American Courts when they sue for billions in compensation.

Do not, meanwhile, expect to find an intelligent definition of Terrorism anywhere near the

American administration or their legislators. Humpty Dumpty like, they seem to believe that “words mean what I say they mean”. Their formal definition has been so widened that it now includes virtually any means of opposing the establishment.

Below is a reasonable summary of the American legal definition of terrorism under the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001. But just before we deal with that, let's consider that title for a few moments.

“USA PATRIOT” stands for:

Uniting and **S**trengthening America by **P**roviding **A**ppropriate **T**ools **R**equired to **I**ntercept and **O**bstruct **T**errorism.

Notice how I've helpfully bolded the initials which make up the acronym? That's just in case you needed help in understanding how they arrived at the acronym because you're as stupid as they must think you are. Just sit back, close your eyes and consider, for a few moments, what that title tells us about the background and mindset of the people who think the acronym, not to mention the law itself, are good ideas.

Now you begin to understand the scale of the problem we are up against! I challenge anyone to provide a better justification of Samuel Johnson's famous epithet -

"Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel" (1775)

One thing it tells us: those involved have

- never read George Orwell's 1984, or worse,
- failed to understand it. Or worse still

- understood it and decided it was a good idea!

Those options are all scary on an increasing scale.

In any case, here is the promised [summary](#) of the USA PATRIOT definition of Terrorism:

Domestic terrorism is now defined in part as any activities that “involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws” and which “appear to be intended” to “intimidate or coerce a civilian population” or “to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion.”

(If you feel the urge to examine the full text, you can find it [here](#))

OK, now let's look at the summary in a bit more detail...

acts dangerous to human life

not obviously unreasonable, at least, not immediately...

that are a violation of the criminal laws

can't argue with that, providing, of course, that the laws have been democratically arrived at.

appear to be intended

What? Whoa there Neddy! *Appear?*

You mean they might not *actually* be committing an offence, but just *look like* they are? And that's enough to qualify as being a terrorist? Even if they *didn't know they looked like* terrorists? They cannot be serious!

But they are. Let's carry on regardless:

to intimidate or coerce a civilian population

hmmm. Go on...

to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion.

OK. In short their definition of terrorism seems to be "life threatening behaviour committed with the aim of intimidation or coercion (of the people or their governments)."

Is an angry mob intimidating? Damn right it is!

But is it terrorism?

Is it bollocks!

Ditto coercion.

An [angry mob evicted the corrupt Georgian regime](#) in November 2003. Certainly storming a government building, even peacefully, is bound to pose some "danger to human life",

particularly if the existing regime is trying to defend it, and we can guarantee that it was a "violation of criminal laws", so using their definition, the authors of the USA PATRIOT act would have you believe that the overthrow of the corrupt Georgian regime was terrorism, or at least, it would be if it happened in the US of A.

“Ah but...” they might protest “the Georgian government was corrupt. They deserved what they got.”

And? Your point is?

Who is to judge whether in the relevant set of circumstances, a charge of corruption is legitimate or not? It certainly can not be those facing the charge!

Not, that is, unless they're also prepared to extend that privilege to all others charged with crime in general:

Now then sonny – was what you just did a Crime?

No sir.

Right then, off you go.

Now that *would* empty the prisons!

The point is that the same uncomplicated minds who believe that the USA PATRIOT Act is both a good name and a good idea are clearly not familiar with either the practice or existence of subtle thought. They further seem unaware that we can see the way they are thinking. Like Ambassador Galbraith, they don't seem to realise what they're saying out loud. Or perhaps they simply don't care that we can read their paranoid minds because they're so convinced of their own righteousness.

yeeech!

There is, of course, a strong case for mobilising the forces of society against the modern threat of religiously inspired terrorism. I've dealt with that, comprehensively, [here](#). There is, however, *no* case for making the [cure worse than the disease](#). Unsurprisingly, the USAPATRIOTs don't see it that way.

Their Not So Hidden Agenda

To some extent, I'm speculating (but with a considerable evidence base as you can see if you follow the previous couple of links) but it seems to me that for the Neocons and elements of

the Religious Right, the very real threat represented by MIFT - and their legitimate need to contain the threat - has presented them with their golden opportunity to put the genie of "permissiveness" back in the bottle. The excuse to impose their [Police State](#) to protect themselves from terrorists also provides their best opportunity for decades to regain the control they lost in the 60s. When America, for a moment, forgot to be a god-fearing country.

All the signs are present; in addition to all the detail revealed by Bill Moyer's piece, we have the Manifesto For the Christian Church, the Wedge Strategy, Patrick Henry College, the "born again" President, the Neocon dominance of the civil power structure and so on. (it's all under the above links if you haven't already been there). This is their opportunity to re-impose that fear of god. This is their religious revival.

And if you think that's scary, remember that what they are up against (where the terrorism is coming from) is *exactly* the same thing – another religious revival – in a different religion. It is no accident that representatives of both sides have called this a holy war.

Meanwhile, if the US Administration really is saying that they would label the Georgian people's triumph - or the 2004 Ukrainian Orange Revolution - as terrorism if it took place in the Land of the Free, then one more thing is clear: They either simply want a definition of terrorism which amounts to "Opposition to US" or they really don't understand what terrorism is. If that's the case, they are going to be somewhat confused by what I'm about to say regarding the events of World War II. On the one hand I've labelled some attacks as the most successful acts of terrorism ever. And, on the other, I've categorically argued that, subject to motivation, some of those terrorist acts were ethical, and thus reasonably defensible.

How can you possibly have ethical terrorism?

It's all to do with your state of mind. If you've bought into the propaganda, then War, with all its official declarations and military pomp, is somehow more honourable than terrorism. Terrorism is the purest form of Evil. (other than sex, of course) To the fundamentalist religious mind on the target side of the fence it is literally Satanic behaviour, while to the equally fundamentalist religious minds on the attacker's side, the same act is considered an act of divinely inspired martyrdom for which the word "terrorism" is wholly inappropriate. It is, in short, the most wholeheartedly demonised word in the English language (and, presumably other human languages). None of which has any bearing on reality.

Terrorism is just another military strategy. And one of the oldest. Regardless of centuries of Bushido, Chivalry and sundry other "codes of honour" – all of which try to provide a moral basis for the conduct of the slaughter of other human beings, there is nothing in reality particularly ethical about trying to ensure that we maintain level playing fields while trying to kill an enemy. In fact it's a stupid concept. It implies that you want to be "fair" to someone you also wish to kill! Generally, if you're intent on killing someone, you simply want to maximise your advantage and minimise your risk as far as is humanly possible.

Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles are the best expression of that ambition that we've created so far. Maximum advantage, and, particularly if the enemy doesn't possess similar weapons, minimum risk.

So why didn't they just nuke Iraq? (An option still under [active consideration](#) for terrorism in general)

Because, of course, they would immediately have become international pariahs. In the longer run, they would almost certainly suffer the most terrible, if somewhat delayed, revenge. And most of the rest of the world would agree they deserved it.

Why?

Because we've evolved notions of fairness even when killing people. And, somehow, it's considered fairer, for example, to kill 200,000 Iraqi troops (the 1991 prequel) with carpet bombing; or a few thousand talibs trying feebly to defend their country against the world's largest conventional weapons, such as the [daisycutter](#), the "poor mans A bomb", which is reputed to kill anything within 1000 yards of ground zero.

Fairer, that is, than vapourising them with a tactical nuclear device.

The Nuke is (or, at least, has been until recently) seen as a step too far. For visceral rather than logical reasons, it marks the boundary over which, should we step, Armageddon is the most probable outcome.

It's an entirely arbitrary line but a useful one nevertheless. It probably has held us back from the Nuclear Holocaust we thought inevitable at various times during the Cold War. So the Western World and the former Soviet Union should be congratulated for their nuclear restraint. The Soviets bankrupted themselves building the damn things, but at least they didn't use them.

Everyone has heard of the Japanese Kamikaze pilots who flew their "Zeros" into the American Pacific battle fleet in a desperate attempt to fend off impending defeat towards the end of the second World War. But until nearly 40 years later, when [Hezbollah introduced suicide bombing](#) as a peacetime option with disregard for civilian casualties, (later perfected by the [Tamil Tigers](#)), this was another line we all thought that no-one would ever cross. There seems to have been a similar notion that the deliberate targeting of civilians was equally taboo. Not so, of course. Both random and deliberate targeted killing of civilians has probably been a mainstream military tactic since before we left the trees. We now know that [even Chimpanzees practice small scale warfare](#) and raids targeted against isolated individuals who are not posing any current threat – the nearest we can get in Chimpworld to a "non combatant"

or civilian.

The Romans, of course, introduced "decimation" as their contribution to terrorism; but with a unique twist. [Decimation](#) was first employed to terrorise the Army itself (to ensure that none dared display cowardice) - not the target population; that was a later addition. Japanese military discipline was almost as brutal and effective in ensuring compliance and "loyalty" and ensured that they too were particularly good at terrorising their target populations. Then, of course, we remember [Atilla The Hun](#) or [Vlad the Impaler](#). Leaving a trail of impaled Muslim corpses here, wiping out a few hundred non combatants there all had the desired effect of terrorising the population and minimising resistance. Not to mention the Vikings, the Goths, the Visigoths and so on. We won't even talk about the behaviour of either side during the conquest of America by the white settlers.

Murder, pillage, rape and terrorism have always been standard parts of the "game" of warfare. Only in recent decades has this begun to change and that is one of the more positive results of the growth of media power and penetration - which renders such behaviour increasingly visible in real time - but which we can discuss elsewhere. Are all those previous wars now to be relabelled terrorism? Fine, but don't even try to limit it to medieval and earlier warfare. Modern wars, as we'll discuss below, have been vastly more brutal and terrorising than any of their predecessors.

Suicidal self sacrifice, in contrast, is much rarer than slaughtering non combatants, but certainly not unheard of. There have always been exceptionally brave and committed fighters who have been prepared to launch an attack, or maintain a defence knowing that, whatever happens, their own death is certain. Military history is littered with examples. The final athletic event of the modern Olympic Games is dedicated to the memory of one of the more famous ones. It is also the case that Suicidal attacks on legitimate military or political targets have frequently also killed innocent civilians.

The combination, however, of suicide and the *deliberate* targeting and slaughter of civilians is - as far as I can tell - a wholly new development for which MIFT can claim the undisputed copyright. Which event can claim to be the first such attack is much disputed. For example, most of us in the West take for granted that Palestinian suicide bombers have been targeting Israeli civilians for a couple of decades. C.E. Carlson went there to see for himself . He [reports it somewhat differently](#), not least because the Israeli military are so ubiquitous that almost any attack in Israel can, arguably, be construed as against a military target, even though it usually - like the average American or Israeli attacks - happens to kill more civilians than soldiers. So it may well be that 9-11 was the first suicide attack against an unambiguously civilian target in the shape of the World Trade Centre.

It is hardly surprising and not seriously disputed that the attack was the purest form of

Terrorism. But I've always been mystified by why it was also labelled Cowardice.

Why on Earth were suicidal terrorists ever described as Cowards?

At 1.04 pm on Sept 11 2001 Bush made his [first public response](#) to the terrorist attack on America which included:

Make no mistake, the United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts.

Initially we might have been inclined to a charitable view. This was just the off the cuff remarks of a very stressed president who is not renowned for his mastery of the English language. But he – and, later, others – kept using the word. I suspect he's still using it today. He was certainly [still using it](#) in 2004. It was obviously a deliberate conscious choice.

Again, only the leading edge minds that think up things like USA PATRIOT would think it appropriate to call such attackers *Cowards*. It certainly implies a new and interesting [definition of Coward](#).

Even Richard Clarke (then Bush's "National Co-ordinator For Security Infrastructure Protection and Counterterrorism" - but you can call him the NCFSSIP for short) did a doubletake when he heard the President referring to this "cowardly" attack during his first TV broadcast. (see "[Against All Enemies](#)" pp 16-17)

"Lunatic" or "Psychotic" or even "Psychopathic" we might accept as being a reasonable description of someone who thinks it a good idea to fly loaded planes into tall buildings full of civilians, but, frankly, its difficult to imagine 19 lunatics organising something that well.

"Psychotic?" well yes, certainly in the same Social Psychotic sense I [describe here](#). Fundamentalism (whether religious or secular) is, in my view, a social psychosis and there is little doubt that the perpetrators of 9-11 were religious fundamentalists; but psychotic in the "mad axeman" sense? Hmm... doesn't work for me. The "social" side of the psychosis is, I speculate, a critical component of the condition. If they weren't members of a like minded group, they would almost certainly not be inclined to behave in such an extreme manner.

I don't know enough about individual psychosis to know whether it usually disables its sufferers. But certainly one of the problems with social psychosis is that it does not disable its. They remain frighteningly capable of following their tunnel vision plans, whether those plans are to "[dismantle science's foundations block by block](#)" or to use a loaded passenger plane as a weapon of mass destruction.. Certainly in the case of the hijackers, despite - or perhaps because of - any social psychosis they shared, the more you think about what those men did, the more you realise how rational and methodical their planning and execution must have

been in order to succeed as well as they did. While we may automatically deplore their target, we have to "admire" their performance.

Certainly, if we want to have any prospect of defending ourselves against the huge range of attacks that became credible after 9-11, we need to acknowledge the skill, planning capability and total commitment that our enemy has displayed. That technically necessary analysis is inconsistent with any form of *cowardice* which does not stretch the English language beyond recognition.

It is also inconceivable that such men were unaware of the ethical basis of their actions. They were certainly not guilty of any kind of moral cowardice. They obviously reached conclusions with which most of the rest of us fundamentally disagree. But they had the moral courage to face the personal consequences of their choices.

Presumably we can skip the debate over whether deliberately flying a bomb into your enemy target constitutes some kind of physical cowardice.

The *real* point, of course, is that they (the USAPATRIOTs) desperately wanted *Coward* to be the right word because the coward is the universal pariah. Everybody despises the coward (except other - honest - cowards, who sympathise). Presumably their thinking must have been along the lines of: "if we could just persuade everyone that the suicidal hijackers were cowards, then everybody will hate them like we do."

This is what (the late) Susan Sontag, one of the few who dared to point out - at the time - that the emperor's threads were a bit bare, had to say in the [The New Yorker 24 Sept 2001](#).

The disconnect between last Tuesday's monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators is startling, depressing. The voices licensed to follow the event seem to have joined together in a campaign to infantilize the public. Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world" but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? How many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq? And if the word "cowardly" is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those who kill from beyond the range of retaliation, high in the sky, than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others. In the matter of courage (a morally neutral virtue): whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards.

The use of the term "coward" wasn't just inappropriate, it was really *dumb!*

It's as though they don't think We The People (WTP) can make the distinction between an act of evil and the skilled execution of that act. Think "Holocaust" and the supremely efficient management of that industrial scale killing machine. We can routinely acknowledge the anal precision of Nazi bureaucracy without conceding any ethical merit to the slaughter they were recording so meticulously.

Is it really necessary for me to emphasise?: *Nobody was one jot less offended or horrified by 9-11 just because we didn't see the hijackers as cowards.*

They were obviously very courageous men. But if they weren't already dead, many of us would gladly rip them limb from limb in response to their awful and awesome attacks.

Anyway, the USAPATRIOT brigade chooses to label these obviously courageous, though psychotically misguided, young suicide hijackers *Cowards*, and presumably hopes that if the docile media repeat it often enough, eventually WTP will believe it. Precisely the kind of logic Orwell is trying to portray in 1984, and, as [Thom Hartmann](#) graphically outlines, it is also the [kind of propaganda](#) technique used by Joseph Goebbels.

The problem for them (USAPATRIOTs) – if that analogy isn't just an American liberal's not so private nightmare – is that, nowadays, too many people can see the source documents and make up their own mind. Granted most of the sheep won't bother checking beyond their "Fair And Balanced" Fox News reports. But there are tens of millions of goats out there as well and they're all chewing over the evidence with varying degrees of intelligence. Few are dumb enough to be persuaded by the [Project Leaders](#). ("Project for the New American Century" - PNAC) There were doubtless a couple of million goats in Germany in the mid 30s, but unlike today's goats, they couldn't get at the data. They couldn't expose the lie.

Or perhaps the USAPATRIOTs also thought that this early attempt to belittle the 9-11 attack would help to soften the [barely suppressed celebrations](#) on the "Arab Street."

Only in Palestine did we see actual celebrations. Hardly surprising once you [begin to understand](#) what is going on there. Palestine was the major item on the Hijackers' agenda. And the deep and bitter resentment provoked within the Muslim community largely by that issue resulted in a considerable measure of satisfaction that, at last, the Americans had got something of what they deserved. Up to a quarter of the population in some Islamic countries actually regarded the attack as legitimate – for reasons it has taken the years since for the minority of Americans, who are so inclined, to begin to understand.

But the natural horror and sympathy felt by 95% of the human race, including the majority of Muslims, must have been diluted, not just in the Arab Street but in the Islamic world generally by that description of the killers as cowards. That attempt to trivialise what they had done

actually constituted the very first self imposed "shot in the foot" by the Americans. They lost their first few percent of global sympathy just through that naïve and manipulative drafting decision.

Perhaps, given their apparent lack of socio-analytical abilities generally, they (the US administration) don't (or didn't) even understand that there is such a constituency as the "Arab Street". Or worse, they believed that its members were so unintelligent or so gullible that they'd be taken in by the description of suicidal hijackers as *cowards*. They cannot imagine that literally millions in that constituency will - feeling insulted or patronised - reply along the lines of: *One day, Imshallah, I will get my chance to die with such cowardice.*

And, as Susan Sontag discusses, if there is a cowardly way to kill people, surely cruise missiles must be a major contender. It doesn't take a fraction of the courage to order the death of a few hundred people under a guided missile that it takes to fly a plane into a tall building.

The use of the pariah word "Coward" is a juvenile, simplistic and naïve attempt at portraying the attackers as inherently weak minded and evil. If this characterisation were remotely accurate, then the enemy would be a lot less serious threat than they obviously are.

The objective evidence suggests that the 9-11 terrorists were no more inherently *evil* than their enemy. And no less.

Their tactics and targets were, of course, appalling and inexcusable. But no more so than the subsequent retaliation in both the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which have killed far more innocent non-combatant civilians than died on 9-11. It is simply not good enough for the Americans to argue that their use of precision weapons is unprecedented and has resulted in major reductions in civilian casualties. "Only" killing 10-20,000 civilians (in Afghanistan; 30-100,000 in Iraq) in response to the terrorists slaughter of 3,000 is every bit as evil, if not considerably more so than the original crime. There is simple no rational ethical argument which can justify that equation. The Americans blew it. Big time.

Of course, we can and should welcome the fact that they could have killed even more but didn't. But that only sets an upper limit on their crime, it doesn't begin to excuse it.

The real problem is...

...this aint just their problem.

They've made it a huge problem for the world at large. They have dramatically increased the risk that we, the human race, will self destruct.

A bizarre competition has emerged. Politicians in what was once called the “free world” compete to invent ever more repressive measures against their own citizens in their desperate attempts to regain control of what goes on within their borders. On the terrorist side, they compete to outdo each other in the extent of merciless terror they can exploit. Russia’s own 9-11 – Beslan September 3 2004 – represents the lowest point they have sunk to at the time of writing. It, too, is a more evil act even than 9-11 for reasons we will discuss below. The televised execution by hacking off a hostage’s head with a knife is not far off the same level.

Most prominently in the firing line in 2005 are the main supporters of the United States – particularly if their support extended to the invasion of Iraq – and Russia which has its own home-grown problem in the Caucasus. But the week before the Beslan slaughter, the kidnapping of the two French journalists was in the news. They were taken by a (non Iraqi) fundamentalist outcrop of MIFT calling themselves “Islamic Army of Iraq”. Their [sole demand](#) (on pain of death of the hostages) was the reversal of the French law on the wearing of Islamic headscarves in schools.

This marked a dramatic new development with such far reaching implications that they were *forced by other fundamentalists* to back down. Most of Islam realised that this was a step too far.

Islamic leaders around the world rose up to protest at this kidnapping in a way they had not done – to the same degree at least – for any previous victims. Why? Well, partly because the French [called in the diplomatic favours](#) they have been cultivating in the Arab world for the previous 40 years, but partly also because they knew that if they didn’t protest and this demand was seen to be condoned, even if only by passive acceptance, they knew how this would be seen in the rest of the world.

Such demands by militant Islam clearly endorse the view that certain strains of Islam have their own World Domination agenda. If moderate Islam was not seen vigorously to oppose such ambitions and tactics, this would imply support amongst mainstream Islam and move us all a step closer to the major religious war which bin Laden seems to be playing and praying for and most Muslims don’t want even to contemplate.

This global Islamic pressure resulted in the reasonably swift release of the French hostages, and, in the process, revealed an important feature which has (to my knowledge) gone unremarked elsewhere. It proved that there are channels of communication and levers which can be pulled to influence even the most extreme MIFT players. It also showed that they're not quite as insane as we may have either hoped or imagined.

Many have tried to comfort themselves and come to terms with this new reality, by imagining that Bin Laden and his colleagues are short of a few marbles. Not playing with a full deck.

Educationally sub normal. Not very intelligent. As well, of course, as psychotic, like all fundamentalists.

But it's much much worse than that.

In truth, he is completely

Barking

Sane.

No. You're right, that is going too far. Sane and "wouldn't it be a good idea to fly loaded airplanes into the World Trade Centre?" can't really fit into the same mental universe. But one has to admit that within the confines of their distorted world view, they are behaving, if not rationally, then at least intelligently and consistently.

Whether anyone cares to admit it or not, they obviously have a legitimate and rational basis for a number of their complaints. They also have the record of the past 50 years to show that these complaints have not only not been largely ignored, but exacerbated. They also have the sympathy of a large minority of the global Muslim community. They have the active support and participation of tens of thousands of very angry Muslims, a significant minority of whom are sufficiently committed to allow themselves to be used as weapons in this war, even if it means their own certain death.

Furthermore, although individual tactical operations have been of questionable benefit to their own cause, their overall strategy is sound. They clearly cannot confront either a superpower like the United States, or an ex superpower like the Russians on the battlefield where they are hopelessly outgunned.

What they can do, however, is work towards making those societies tear themselves apart. In order to achieve that, they must provoke an internal crisis within each country. The polarisation we are seeing in the United States was evident well before 9-11. The Republican attacks on Clinton in the late 90s followed by the Bush election in 2000 revealed that. But the depth and scale of the political chasm has been massively expanded since then by three main factors.

The first is the growth of the Police State of America. The Bush administration's desperate attempt to achieve security through a mixture of intrusive and repressive laws giving levels of unsupervised authority to their enforcement apparatus more effective and sweeping than those the Stasi enjoyed in East Germany.

The second is the damage done to America's reputation and standing by the cavalier attitude of the administration towards the rest of the world. This peaks in the conduct of their invasion of Iraq but is also visible in their attitudes to many international issues such as their refusal to join the Kyoto protocol, their refusal to join the International Court of Human Rights, their double standards with regard to many World Trade issues and so on.

Third, of course, is the rise of the Christian Taliban and the attack on Rationalism which we've already covered elsewhere.

Such issues are either a cause for embarrassment or a cause celebre for the minority of Americans who take any notice at all of what is going on, politically, in their own country. It doesn't matter which side of those issues you are on. The inescapable truth is that America is much more bitterly divided now than, probably, at any time since its Civil War. MIFT can claim a fair proportion of the credit/blame for that.

Furthermore, they have also demonstrated that their actions can more directly affect the (so called) democratic process in the West. The current Spanish government would not be in power were it not for 3-11 – the bombing of commuter trains in rush hour Madrid on March 11 2004. Granted, the bombs didn't frighten the Spaniards into voting against their incumbent incompetents. It was the pathetic way the then Government tried to mislead its people (by insisting that it must have been the work of Basque terrorists - who have never even attempted an attack on that scale, particularly against civilians) that ensured their ballot failure. Nevertheless, MIFT can claim full credit for provoking the crisis at the opportune time.

More recently, we've had the [London Bombings](#) and within weeks, the UK Parliament was signing up to further ill thought out [repressive measures](#) which restrict liberty and hand further victories to the terrorists.

These political successes are a major incentive for the terrorists to continue their military campaigns. They also offer a clue as to what kind of attacks we might begin to anticipate. It is not simply the terrorising of the population that matters. The aim is to do so in such a way that the host governments exacerbate the problem by creating ever increasing internal dissent.

For example, if they had wanted a different president following the 2004 elections, we would have seen a major escalation of activity in Iraq (of the kind we saw after the "agreement" on the Iraqi Constitution) in order to demonstrate the continuing failure of that policy. In fact, it was a reasonably calm period in Iraq (by their standards) because, of course, the last thing that MIFT wanted was a change in the American Establishment. They were more than happy with the direction the Americans were taking. Why upset that apple cart?

The last thing they want at the moment is a Democrat president. There is a serious risk that he

would take steps (or at least try) which would significantly decrease the tension and conflict which they've worked so hard and, so far, so successfully to achieve. And they can't imagine a Democrat ratcheting up the Police State at anything like the pace of the PNAC zealots. They look forward to their own version of a "tipping point". The point at which the authoritarianism begins to produce home-grown terrorism from within the extensive reservoir of libertarians in the United States who already believe their government has gone many steps too far.

Either MIFT or PNAC subcontractors might still try to kill Bush, as I first discussed [here](#). The purpose of such an assassination would be to provoke a massive pro-religious-republican backlash which would ensure that the Project continues.

You may or may not agree with that conspiratorial analysis but I doubt if you would disagree that any further 9-11 scale attacks (or even 3-11) on the American mainland will cement the Police State mentality deeply into the American psyche - they might even push for and get Amendments to the constitution designed to undermine the protections of the previous amendments.

Should MIFT attacks continue to succeed in this manner, and both America and Russia begin to implode, and Europe, led by Britain begin to follow in their footsteps, then what hope for the human race?

And what, if anything, can WTP do about it?

Kick out the governments responsible is an obvious choice. Providing you can stomach what you'll get instead.

But even after that electoral bloodletting, the very real problems will still remain. We have to address them. We need much more than a change of personnel. More even than a change of political system. We need to start using our intelligence, in ALL senses of that word.

We can begin by understanding what Terrorism is. And we can start that process by stating clearly what:

Terrorism is NOT:

- New
- Taking a pair of nail cutters on a plane
- Protesting at the bullying tactics of the State
- Supporting the Palestinian cause against the Israelis
- Buying cocaine
- Preaching religious hatred

- Restricted to private individuals or private armies

Terrorism IS:

- The lethal targeting of non combatants to promote fear throughout the enemy population.
- Motivated by the primary aim of all warfare, short of genocide - to coerce the enemy to bow to the demands of the attackers.
- Generally unethical - but no more so than “traditional” warfare techniques where those result in the reckless deaths of non combatants

See? Not that difficult to define - providing we're not trying to leave escape clauses or score political points. It is, as I said earlier, just another military strategy.

The military logic of attacking the non combatant (“civilian”) population is fourfold.

- Unlike those with military training, civilians are much more likely to be intimidated by brute force.
- It forces the enemy to divert military resources to civil protection tasks
- There is less risk and fewer obstacles to the attacker from a non military target.
- Demonstrating the enemy leadership’s inability to protect their civil population places enormous pressure on that leadership which the attackers hope will cause the enemy to concede their demands by recognising capitulation as the only way to stop the slaughter.

So, with all that in mind...

What was the Most Successful Terrorist Attack ever?

Easily the most successful (in the sense that they achieved their objective) single acts of terrorism to date were the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in August 1945, which forced Japan to surrender in a matter of days.

Still horrified by the suggestion that Hiroshima was a Terrorist attack? Then read the “Terrorism IS” paragraph again and point out where Hiroshima fails to fit. If you don't like my definition, then read the "high panel" definition at the top of this article - with or without the added "*cannot be justified on any grounds and constitutes an act of terrorism*" bit and point out where Hiroshima fails to fit. Or challenge Tony Blair's "Terrorism is killing innocent civilians - deliberately". Incidentally, I must take this opportunity to congratulate Anthony Howard who became the first person I've ever heard make this point on air (Any Questions Radio 4 16 Sept 2005 ([exerpt on mp3](#) - 260k))

It gets worse. Hiroshima wasn't just a non combatant target. It had deliberately not been attacked up to that point, partly because it had no major military significance, even as a port, but mainly in order that accurate assessments of the effect of the world's first atom bomb attack could be measured without confusing those effects with damage wreaked by conventional weapons. *That's* how cold blooded humanity can be.

The precise aim of the attack, of course, was to *coerce* or *influence the policy* of the Japanese Government into unconditional surrender by attacking and *intimidating* the civilian population with a public demonstration that further resistance would result in unimaginable levels of civilian (and military) slaughter and destruction. It even fits the USAPATRIOTS' own definition of Terrorism!

[This](#) puts it nicely:

A good place to start thinking about the moral issues involved in the atomic bombing is with this description of the Japanese attack on Hong Kong from Allen and Polmar (p. 158):

To force the surrender of Fort Stanley in Hong Kong in December 1941, Japanese troops began torturing British and Chinese captives, cutting off ears and fingers, cutting out tongues, and gouging eyes before killing the victims by dismemberment. British and Chinese nurses were tied down on corpses and raped, then bayoneted to death. The captors allowed some witnesses to escape and report the atrocities. Fort Stanley surrendered.

We are naturally nauseated by this behavior. But why? Presumably there are some Japanese apologists who would be only too glad to point out that the number of civilians raped and butchered to induce surrender was less than the number of Japanese soldiers who might have died in an assault on the fort. Nevertheless, Allen and Polmar expect us to be repelled by the Japanese action and rightly so, because there is a moral distinction between civilians and combatants. But nowhere in their book on why "the atom bomb had to be dropped" (to quote their subtitle) do they ever apply this same moral standard to U.S. behaviour.

In short, if Hiroshima *wasn't* Terrorism, then nothing else is or ever could be. But it gets better than that.

Not only does Hiroshima fit any reasonable definition of Terrorism, but, even more

awkwardly, it is, as I hope to demonstrate, almost certainly defensible – not least because of the effect it has had on our history. This should not be misconstrued as an argument that "the end justifies the means". Its only relevance is that it lends considerable credibility to the potential ethical motivation which may have driven it forward. If my arguments hold water, then Hiroshima is a glaringly prominent example of how even Terrorism can be ethical.

Even some Japanese have accepted that without Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they might never have surrendered. The debate still rages and yes, I'm aware that some Japanese historians argue that it was actually the Soviet declaration of War against Japan that was the final straw, but there is also a strong argument that this declaration was itself provoked by the display of the Atom bomb. The debate will no doubt go on for centuries. But, for me, the most cogent and credible picture of events, is contained in [Herbert Bix's summary](#), which includes the following

We may never know the actual thinking of Hirohito when he decided to surrender. General MacArthur would not allow him to be questioned. But (Hirohito's chief political adviser) Kido gave extensive depositions to the interrogators of the International Prosecution Section of GHQ, which wrote the scenario for the Tokyo Tribunal in accordance with Truman administration policy. In those depositions he said the emperor surrendered in order to bring the war to an end and save human lives. He and the other top leaders figured that the new U.S. weapon of mass destruction, the atomic bomb, had given them a face-saving excuse -- a way to accept defeat that would enable them to lead the nation through the immediate post-surrender situation.

There is no dissent from the view that, had they refused to surrender, the Japanese would eventually have been defeated and that it would have cost them many millions more lives. The Americans, in turn, knew that continuing the conventional war might have cost them upwards of a further million lives. Whether those deaths would definitely have resulted can never be known, but the predictions were certainly not unreasonable. Hence it is reasonable to argue that the quarter of a million victims of the two atomic bombs may have saved many many more lives in the long term than they cost at the time. That alone would have been sufficient, at least in any utilitarian analysis, to qualify as an ethical motive.

One can also make a powerful argument that those two uses of the atomic bomb were responsible for the fact that, despite the subsequent development of enormous nuclear overkill capacity, no other nuclear weapons have ever been used by one State against another. Those very public demonstrations of relatively trivial weapons (by later standards) made it impossible for anyone to ignore the full potential consequences of a nuclear war. In the end, that knowledge has proved enough to prevent such a war. It is tempting to argue that this too provides ethical justification. That would be a dangerous fallacy.

The ethical defence in the form "I did X in order to prevent Y" (where Y consists of harm to me or innocent 3rd parties) is, of course, the root of the "right to self defence" and is (almost) universally accepted. What is implicit about that defence, and prominently absent from the "Hiroshima prevented Nuclear War" defence, is both imminence and evidence. To sustain the defence, there must be reasonable evidence that the Y we claim to have prevented would have happened in the very near future had we not done X.

Not even in the United States, can you get away, for example, with shooting a known burglar on the grounds that you are preventing him committing further burglaries, not just against yourself, but the rest of the community. He must be in the act of burgling before the right to self defence kicks in. The same logic applies in War. If you're not under attack or obvious and imminent threat of attack ("clear and present danger") then your pre-emptive attack itself constitutes an inexcusable act of aggression. In the case of Hiroshima, the water is muddied by the fact that we were already at war. Fortunately - from the ethical defence point of view - the ongoing war and probable casualty count resulting from continued conventional warfare provided sufficient justification for the Atom Bomb. No such defence exists, more topically, in relation to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In short, by way of explanation rather than excuse, it seems that, in the cases of both the Atom Bombs and the Firestorms (in both Germany and Japan), the attackers took the view - a view which would almost certainly have attracted overwhelming democratic support at the time - that the enemies' own conduct had been so vicious and inhuman up to that point that they no longer deserved to be treated as part of the same species. If killing a few hundred thousand extra enemy citizens was likely to have the extra benefit of deterring future aggression from a new potential enemy, then it was not much of a price to pay.

You have to understand the degree of hatred, at the time, for the Nazis and the Nips in order to understand why such attacks were genuinely widely welcomed. I'm too young to have experienced that, but I've seen the dying embers of it in that generation. My (Jewish) grandmother carried it to her grave only a few years ago. I remember her getting very upset in the 1980s because my brother shacked up with a German girlfriend! I wouldn't wish to defend such attitudes, but as someone who didn't live through those times and didn't have the responsibility of making decisions at the time, neither would I dare condemn them.

None of us, at this distance, can settle the question of whether the American or British motives were sufficiently pure to render the attacks definitively ethical. It doesn't matter. At least, not in the context of this article. My only point is that the case of Hiroshima, at least, demonstrates that such behaviour COULD have been ethically motivated; which, in turn, supports the argument that, under the right circumstances, Terrorism can indeed be ethical.

So we observe that the world's biggest terrorist acts to date have been committed by the British and American armed forces. Their motivation may have been ethical or not. The

possibility of ethical motivation forces us to conclude that terrorism is no more “good” or “evil” than many other techniques of warfare. If the intent is “pure” and includes a net saving of lives, then whether or not it succeeds, even the largest scale fear-producing slaughter of civilian populations can be justified - or condemned - on precisely the same basis as any other form of military slaughter. This, of course, is such an embarrassing conclusion for the world to sign up to that they are forced to squirm into all sorts of tortured negotiating postures when trying to agree something as simple as the definition of Terrorism. They must have a definition which doesn't immediately reveal their own past guilt.

If Terrorism is ever to be justified, we have to understand and accept the ethical ambition of the Terrorist. In the case of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is reasonably probable that the most important motive was indeed the immediate saving of both Japanese and American lives in what would otherwise have been a very bloody invasion of Japan. It is thus plausible to describe it as an ethical act of terrorism - even if it was also partly driven by other less than ethical motives.

The more pertinent question today though, is:

What were the ethical ambitions of the 9-11 hijackers?

Did their methods and motives put the attack in the plausibly defensible Hiroshima category?

It clearly isn't as simple as the common protest at the choice of target. As the above examples illustrate, the major powers have been more than willing and much more successful in targeting vastly more civilians than MIFT have so far managed. Moreover, since 9-11, the Americans have killed more than 30 times as many civilians as the act they are protesting about. We make that at least 30 times more unethical.

The USAPATRIOTs would, of course, blithely ignore embarrassing precedents like Hiroshima and argue that it was the deliberate targeting of civilians which makes 9-11 more evil than their retaliation. But even their Bible only goes as far as "eye for an eye" and I'm [with Ghandi](#) on that one. In any case, nothing in any even childish attempts at ethics can justify 30 eyes for an eye. Especially when they're not even the eyes of the enemy who took the first eye! And we can't even agree whose eye was taken first! (I think I've tortured that analogy sufficiently)

It is as visible to the world as black American inner city poverty has become, following hurricane Katrina, that the American response to 9-11 has been even more indiscriminate and even more lethal to civilians than the attack which provoked that response. Denying that obvious truth is clinically delusional.

The result of that conclusion is that even though we cannot label the American response as Terrorism, and thus add the bogey word to our condemnation of its ill judged bullying, it is still clearly more evil than the particular act of terrorism which got their ball rolling. Terrorism is - as I keep saying - just another military strategy. Worse than some. Outdone by others.

But, having raised the topic, what *were* the ethical motives (at least from their own point of view) of the hijackers?

Although there is plenty of discussion about it here on the web, there has been very little cogent discussion on the motives of the 9-11 hijackers in the mainstream western media. It is as though no-one can imagine any possible motivation that would provide an ethical basis for the attack. Which is bizarre, because clearly the hijackers were little more deranged than the average social psychotic. They were obviously not a co-ordinated bunch of mad axe men. They and their supporters believed they were committing a justifiable, and, presumably, ethical act even within the terms of their own rather strict religion. So there must be an ethical case, even if the vast majority of the human race would oppose it.

Ethical validity, of course, is no more a matter for democracy than theocracy. Mere majorities cannot and do not determine what is "right and wrong" (even though they may determine what is publicly considered "right and wrong"). This is why no ethical argument can be made against the individuals who refuse to accept the majority view and do whatever they can to resist. I will fight to the death - for example - to avoid being eaten by the nine out of ten democratic cannibals who vote to eat me. Similarly it is at least conceivable that the ethical basis for the 9-11 attacks has some merit that the rest of us are blind to. We should at least ensure we know what the attackers think that basis is.

Why? Well, on a purely practical security level we should find out what makes these people tick. After all, if a complete stranger starts attacking you and your family, then as well as improving your defences and trying to interdict the attacker, is it not common sense to try to find out why they are attacking you? Not only may it turn out to be for reasons that can be cleared up without further bloodshed, but even if you insist on responding to the attack by wiping out all the attackers, knowing why they attacked may help to anticipate and prevent further similar attacks in the future.

Prevention is always ethically superior to Cure. (discuss!)

So, let's begin by asking George Bush Junior why MIFT attacked America on Sept 11 2001. What response will we get from the "leader of the free world"? What can we expect from the spokesman for the nation which runs the world's biggest ever intelligence gathering network, has thousands of analysts and diplomatic experts and even a handful of experts on Islam

[America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.](#) (Pres GW Bush 9-11-2001)

We'll ignore, for the time being, the bitter irony of the burgeoning Police State with the largest per capita prison population in the world – most of whom are political prisoners of the war on drugs – seeing itself, Orwell-like, as the “brightest beacon of freedom” and move quickly on to [bin Laden's own explanation](#) for the attack which, hopefully, will be a little more enlightening:

"... the Mujahideen saw the black gang of thugs in the White House hiding the Truth, and their stupid and foolish leader, who is elected and supported by his people, denying reality and proclaiming that we (the Mujahideen) were striking them because we were jealous of them (the Americans), whereas the reality is that we are striking them because of their evil and injustice in the whole of the Islamic World, especially in Iraq and Palestine and their occupation of the Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries. Upon seeing this, the Mujahideen decided (to) teach them a lesson and to take the war to their heartland. On the blessed Tuesday 11 September 2001, while the Zionist-American Alliance was targeting our children and our people in the blessed land of Al-Aqsa, with American tanks and planes in the hands of the Jews, and our people in Iraq were suffering from the America's sanctions upon them, and the Islamic world was very far away from establishing Islam properly." -Osama Bin Laden, February 14, 2003

from which we can summarise the basic motivation as the desires:

- To end American “occupation” of the Middle East, particularly the Islamic holy lands and sites
- To end American support for Israel.
- To liberate Palestine
- To end American sanctions against Iraq.
- To establish Islam “properly”

The only American “freedoms” being targeted here seem to be the freedom to support MIFT's chief enemy - Israel - their freedom to impose sanctions against Iraq and their freedom to station military forces in the region. If any other American freedoms are under attack, it must be from another direction.

OK, so now we know why 19 hijackers turned themselves into human guided missiles with the aim of killing as many Americans, civilian and military as possible. How does this inform the ethical analysis?

First: do such motives constitute a prima facie case for going to war? Ethical pacifists will, of course, say “no”. But they would say that about all wars and we've [already rejected](#) the pacifist argument and don't need to expand on that here. Nor do we intend going into detail about what does or does not constitute a valid basis for war. In essence, we agree, ethically, with the pacifists that there is no ethically acceptable basis for initiating mass slaughter, but, unlike pacifists, we accept that it's going to happen anyway and we're often going to have to choose sides for our own survival. The right to self defence is certainly the easiest ethical case to make in support of war.

Relativism will do the job nicely for our present purposes. Bin Laden's declared motives are certainly no worse a basis than most wars fought in the previous hundred years or so. More valid than some (like the first world war, for example) and less valid than others (like the second world war). Liberating countries and ejecting invaders is a fairly standard cause for war. Even Peter Galbraith conceded that one.

Nor is here the place to go into the ethics of what is going on in the Middle East. Here it would just be a distraction. For the time being all we need to acknowledge is that there are serious genuine grievances underlying the 9-11 attack and the many attacks since. We don't have to agree with the grievances or accept any of their terms for the purpose of this analysis. Really all we're doing is acknowledging that the motives of the attackers were real rather than frivolous issues. They were the type of issues that traditionally spark wars and not just puerile attention-seeking or psychotic behaviour. They were not protesting about trivia like the London "congestion charge."

Now we can move on to consider whether the attack itself was ethical and, if not, precisely why not. Here is where Hiroshima and Dresden might help. The terrorism of Hiroshima, I argue, was justifiable on the basis that its main aim to save more lives than it cost. Dresden has always been more difficult to defend. In the original version of this piece, I was far more critical of the attack on Dresden than I have been in this version. Essentially I made the mistake of swallowing the "Holocaust Denial" line on Dresden, which seeks to redress the crimes of the Nazis by pointing out our own war crimes. This line is widely repeated even by leftist sources who would normally be opposed to the likes of David Irving and his selective use of sources. (Lesson: always check your sources and your sources' sources dammit!) I am now inclined to agree with Frederick Taylor's somewhat more balanced assessment as illustrated in [this interview](#) with "Spiegel Online".

I personally find the attack on Dresden horrific. It was overdone, it was excessive and is to be regretted enormously. But there is no reason to pretend that it was completely irrational on the part of the Allies.

If Dresden was any kind of crime (other than in the more general sense that all warfare is criminal, attacks which target civilians more so) it was not because there was no military

rationale for the attack. There was. It was not because it killed more than Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined (which I had originally implied). It didn't.

Its justification was not dissimilar to the justification for other attacks of its kind. It was a significant strategic target. However, there is no disguising the fact that it was disproportionate, the firestorming was not militarily necessary and the civilians were not legitimate targets. Whereas the military strike was justifiable, the terrorism was clearly not. That renders it distinctly more criminal than Hiroshima, where the terrorism can be justified.

But which of those two scenarios is 9-11 closest to?

If the answer is that is ethically even lower than Dresden, we're essentially arguing that there was no real purpose to the attack, military, ethical or otherwise. The purposes, as we've seen, were fairly clear and fall well within the traditional "legitimate" aims of warfare. The attack included the military target of the Pentagon, which is ethically no different to the attacks on the military targets in Dresden. And it deliberately targeted and killed civilians in the planes and World Trade Centre, which is on an ethical par with the attacks on the civilians of Dresden, though on a much smaller scale - which renders it - numerically at least - less "evil" than Dresden. Can this moral equivalence be sustained?

Why was Hiroshima defensible - because its motives included the immediate saving of a larger number of lives than it would cost. Clearly no such argument is available either to MIFT in respect of 9-11 or the attackers of Dresden. But then, neither was such an argument available to defend the lethal firebombing of the 64 main towns and cities in Japan which took place prior to Hiroshima. Were they ethically defensible? If so, how?

The answer is the same as for Hiroshima itself. Indeed one can argue that the "conventional" firebombing was an attempt to avoid the atomic option. By that stage of the war, the Japanese military had essentially lost the fight but were refusing to concede. It became necessary to begin pummeling Japan into submission. The military aim was to cripple Japan and make it impossible for it to continue to fight. It was because it refused to show any sign that it was prepared to concede, even if it meant the extinction of its race, that Hiroshima and Nagasaki became wholly reasonable options. Clearly all or most of those urban bombing campaigns qualified as terrorism every bit as much as Hiroshima itself. The reason they don't fall into the Dresden category is because there was still a very clear military need for the terrorism. Can 9-11 claim the same necessity? Had they, in other words, exhausted all other options?

Well, it is obviously not difficult to demonstrate that all peaceful and military efforts in the past 50 years had failed to resolve the fundamental cause of conflict - the theft or re-occupation (depending which side you support) of the lands of Palestine/Israel in order to provide a homeland for the Jews. Not only have the then occupants of those lands never been properly compensated for their loss, but their loss has been exacerbated by the seizure of

further territories since 1948 - in all cases as a direct result of successive failed Arab attempts to roll back the first occupation.

Recognition, on the Arab side, that they could not defeat Israel militarily is no more than a rational analysis of their strategic situation. But why should that make them more inclined to accept the situation? From their point of view (and, frankly, from mine) they were robbed. Plain and simple. Why should they ever accept that? But given that they realise that they can't beat Israel in a fair fight, and the rest of the world has shown itself utterly unable or unwilling to help alleviate the situation, what other course of action is open to them? Bin Laden recognised that there was only one other option - to take on the main ally of Israel whose support had made it impossible for the Arabs to regain their territory militarily.

That may seem insane - not least because if you recognise that you can't even beat Israel, by fair means or foul, how on earth are you going to beat the world's remaining superpower? Answer: by doing exactly what they are doing - causing America to implode. Everything that America has done since 9-11 has justified 9-11 in purely strategic terms. Bin Laden hoped for precisely this kind of response. His wider goal is to spread the conflict so that it becomes a very clear war between Islam and The West (or at least America). He also had a major advantage over Arab states. He wasn't one. And, although he had "the base", it was not a static territory which the Americans could occupy and thus eliminate the problem (as indeed, they have and it hasn't).

This strategic success, however, does not confer any shred of the ethical merit or necessity that can be claimed for, say, the fire bombing of Tokyo. Why not? Because he could have achieved just as much without attacking non combatants. Had he limited the attacks to legitimate strategic targets such as the Pentagon, the Capitol and the White House, America would have been every bit as wounded, every bit as likely to respond in the fashion it has since. Furthermore, it would have been seen as a straightforward military attack and would have commanded much greater support in the Arab street than the cold blooded killing of 3,000 civilians. That decision might, therefore, be seen as a strategic failure on Bin Laden's part because it left MIFT isolated. Fortunately for him, the Americans came to the rescue in the form of their indefensible over-reaction which produced the chaos and indiscriminate slaughter of civilians in Iraq.

There is a darker angle still. One can also argue that, had the attacks been limited to recognised legitimate military and political targets, the American Police State would not have received the massive impetus that it has since 9-11. The excuse for most of the authoritarian measures introduced since 2001 is that they are necessary to protect the American civil population and, of course, given that the American population justifiably feels that it is under direct attack as a result of the destruction of the World Trade Centre, it has been more compliant than it otherwise might have been had the targets been purely military. Conspiracy theorists use this angle to argue that this was in fact the real motive for the attacks and then

argue that either the Bush regime directly engineered the attacks or, at least, permitted them, in the expectation that they would then have a free hand to implement their Police State and PNAC dreams. I'm still hugely sceptical of such theories, not least because they imply a level of collective intelligence and foresight which has been so obviously absent ever since.

I am more inclined to the view that this was actually part of Bin Laden's own "Wedge Strategy". As he is reported to have said in the immediate aftermath of 9-11 (October 2001):

I tell you, freedom and human rights in America are doomed. The U.S. government will lead the American people, and the West in general, into an unbearable hell and a choking life. (quoted in NewsMax.com 2/1/02)

...which tells me that he had a pretty clear vision of how the American establishment would react to the attack, by turning in on its own people almost as much as against the overt enemy - which, in turn, strongly suggests to me that this wasn't just a prediction on his part, but a clear strategic goal. And, in that context, the slaughter of innocent civilians was an entirely necessary component of the plan. If he couldn't beat them militarily, he had to find a way to make them beat themselves to death, or at least cause such a schism within their ranks, that they would lose either their ability or will to sustain the fight and, in particular, to continue support for the real enemy - Israel.

There is no sign yet of a willingness to withdraw support from Israel, but one has to accept that the will to continue the fight is now in serious question. The Bush administration is now (2005) constantly fighting a rearguard action to resist the mounting polling evidence for the decline in support for the war in Iraq. Whichever way you cut it, Bin Laden's strategy seems to be working and certainly looks far more intelligent and effective than his enemies'.

But, here, we're still primarily concerned with the ethical analysis of terrorism, not the military. And ethically, we're still left with the deliberate slaughter of innocent civilians who had no part in the conflict. This would appear to close the ethical case against Bin Laden and cement 9-11 firmly into the Dresden category of unjustifiable terrorism, albeit on a dramatically smaller scale.

Unless, that is, we give ethical credence to another of Bin Laden's arguments - which turns democracy itself into the excuse for killing civilians. In the quote above he refers to "*their stupid and foolish leader, who is elected and supported by his people*" and elsewhere he makes more of this along these (paraphrased) lines: *you (American voters) voted for these people who are committing (the above) crimes against us and you, therefore, must share responsibility for their actions.*

In a Democracy - We're All Guilty

This is actually his strongest ethical argument. If the actions of our governments do indeed

reflect the wishes and instructions of WTP, then an enemy is entitled to argue that each and every citizen who voted for that government is partly responsible for whatever behaviour the enemy is objecting to. If that objection eventually leads to War, then those same citizens are legitimate targets. It is a fundamental implication of Democracy. If a government truly represents WTP and then commits acts, on our behalf and in our name, which cause major offence to third parties, those third parties are obviously entitled to point the finger at WTP for electing that government.

None of which, however, applies to 9-11. Although the chief reason it doesn't will not please the average USAPATRIOT. As I've been at pains to point out throughout most of my book, like nearly all so the called western democracies, America isn't one. It's not even close. And, as it isn't a democracy, its citizens cannot truly be held responsible for the actions of its governments past or present. (And even if it had been a democracy, less than 25% of the voting age population supported Bush in 2000, so it is reasonable to suggest that approximately 3/4 of the civilians attacked could not have been held responsible for their government's actions)

Of course, that argument will carry no more weight with MIFT than it will with the average USAPATRIOT. We cannot expect those whose mindset encompasses attacks like 9-11 as being a legitimate and honourable part of their armoury to appreciate this kind of nitpicking secular philosophical logic. From their point of view, one way or the other, it is either WTP's fault that America behaves like it does, or it is WTP's fault that they haven't turned American into a democracy and stopped such behaviour.

The trouble is, I'm inclined to agree with that analysis. It *is* WTP's fault that we still live under various flavours of dictatorship. As long as we continue to let these incompetent self-serving sanctimonious bastards get away with this kind of shit, in our name, then in a sense we are all to blame. The benefit of openly opposing democracy, as MIFT does, is that when anything goes wrong, WTP can't be blamed. But, conversely, when we in the West openly espouse democracy, yet continually refuse to implement it, then we're either guilty of the offending errors as charged, or guilty of denial and hypocrisy.

Essentially, whether you place 9-11 in the indefensible Dresden or the defensible Hiroshima category depends on how culpable you believe the American public to be for the actions of its governments. From my point of view, the world at large, certainly including the United States, is so far away from achieving true democracy that its citizens cannot yet be blamed for what their governments do either to their own citizens or in their name. What We The People can be blamed for is allowing that situation - the absence of true democracy - to continue for as long as it has.

It is also this democracy based MIFT argument that paints Beslan as even more black and evil than 9-11. They may indeed have an arguable case that, if we lived in democracies, every

adult supporter of the enemy government would share responsibility for the actions of that government and thus put themselves in the firing line. Whether or not you accept the logic of that argument, however, there is no question of applying it to the schoolkids who were mown down at Beslan.

So we can now create some kind of ethical league table of Terrorist attacks: At the top, with a plausible claim for positive ethical merit, we have Hiroshima. Clearly at the bottom, given the sheer scale of the attack, we have Dresden. Beslan is more evil than 9-11 because of the deliberate targeting of the children, so it's at number 3 and 9-11 is at number two with its ethical merit dependent on whether or not you consider America to be a democracy.

Either there are no ethically acceptable human targets in war - the pacifist position - in which case the American response to 9-11 is every bit as reprehensible as the original attack. Or there *are* ethical cases for selected human targets and these would essentially be either the decision makers or their armed representatives and critical logistical support staff. But in a democracy, we're all supposed to be decision makers. In which case we're all legitimate targets – unless, of course, we're not (yet) living in democracies. Take your pick.

One day, I hope, we will not be able to make that argument because we will all live in real democracies. In a democracy, amongst other things, We The People, will always make the final decision on whether to go to war. Such far-reaching decisions can not sensibly – or ethically – be based on simple majorities. Democracy does not mean "Majority Rule" as most naive commentators would lead you to believe. Democracy simply means "People Power" which in turn means AT LEAST "Majority Rule".

This is a vital distinction. The seriousness of war, the deaths it is about to unleash, together with the need for unity and willing co-operation throughout the population demand much more than mere majority support. It requires Near Consensus. (Literal Consensus - meaning the complete absence of dissent - is not, in my view, realistically achievable - other than in small groups - at this stage of human development) Near Consensus implies that 90-95% of the entire voting population should be prepared to indicate positive support in favour of going to war before any blow can be struck "in our name". Less than that might, I concede, still be democratic, but it would also be dangerous and foolish. It ensures that you will have an active "fifth column" within your own community; the kind of thing that led to the London Bombings, for instance.

Mind you, the UK has never shown even so much as a clear simple majority in favour of the War on Iraq. The polls prior to the invasion of Iraq showed a fairly even split. The opposition was the most vocal we have ever witnessed in the build up to a war in modern history. The government's indifference to that opposition was one of the most alarming developments in recent years in the UK. After all, if a peaceful march of between one and two million citizens has no effect on a government, it should not be surprised if less peaceful means are employed

in future disputes. By contrast, when "only" 150,000 marched in the so called "Countryside March" in 1997, the government rapidly revised their plans (to ban hunting with dogs) and it took a further 7 years before they finally grudgingly permitted the House of Commons to deliver a policy promised in their manifesto for 1997. This contrast cannot be intelligently justified.

Snatching Defeat From The Jaws of Victory

Meanwhile, the behaviour of the US government in regard to Iraq was, in short, so unforgivably stupid and short sighted that as I've explained in the above linked references, I've already concluded that we are dealing with a psychological phenomenon which I call "social psychosis". It's probably not a new concept but I couldn't find anyone else describing it. In any case, there is an old joke that a neurotic builds castles in the air but a psychotic lives in them. It seems, from our current perspective that the entire American administration under George W Bush, is living in an airborne castle of truly heroic proportions. Their grasp on reality is clinically psychotic.

When people like that also happen to control the largest and best equipped military force on the planet we are all placed in mortal danger, if not directly by them, then indirectly by the hostile reaction which they encourage and inflame. Their behaviour can only be likened to hosing a fire with gasoline. They have succeeded in taking a massive problem – global terrorism – and turning it into a looming catastrophe. For all our sakes, they really need to be locked up in comfortably padded cells.

You may or may not agree with that outburst. I certainly can't defend it as the result of philosophical inquiry. The only claim I would make for it, academically, is that it is probably the widely held belief of many, if not most, informed observers, although few would choose to put it in quite those terms. They would not wish to offend either their readers or the leaders who might encounter it.

I take the more robust view that there's no point "beating about the bush". As much as any of the political clowns who have got us into this mess, it is equally your responsibility, and mine, to begin to correct the conditions which make this kind of insanity possible. If you're not happy with accepting any part of the responsibility, then consider it necessity instead. As they say, if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. (although, having just spotted it on a K5 story, I love "If you're not part of the solution, you're a precipitate")

What solution? "Terrorism" is a red herring. For the last time, it's just another way of waging war. As a label it is used as a propaganda tool to demonize the enemy and make their military efforts seem less legitimate than "ours". Sometimes they are. And sometimes, what is done in our name is every bit as evil.

The real root of the problem is that, after at least 10,000 years of advances in civilisation and

communal living, we still haven't evolved a rational basis for either Conflict Avoidance or Conflict Resolution. Hence, warfare is still perceived as the occasionally necessary evil it was when we were still nomads and encountered other tribes trying to muscle in on what we regarded as our ancestral resources (or we were the aggressors seeking to expand our own territory). It was no more rational then than now, but at least, in those early days, only the tribe was at risk of extinction. Unless we can stop the spiral of violence, however, the entire species is now at risk - not just from warfare but from our general inability to resolve conflicts such as whether Global Warming is a real phenomenon and, if so, what to do about it. Violence is the most damaging and least effective form of conflict resolution and it must be made both unacceptable and, eventually, impossible.

My own efforts in this direction are focussed on [Survival Based Ethics](#) and "Trusted Surveillance". The former seeks to address conflict avoidance by providing a rational platform for consensus based decisions. The latter is a much more practical approach to the problems of physical security which arise from our tendency to conflict. I am not yet ready to publish anything on that but, in outline, it is intended to make life difficult for all those who might wish to attack us. This includes fraudsters, muggers, rapists, burglars and, of course, terrorists. But, more importantly, it is designed to limit the ability of governments (and their agents) to abuse the power they can exercise over individuals and society in general - largely by making all their activities much more transparent than they have been to date.

I'm sure others will improve on my attempts, or create alternatives which command consensus. Not everybody will want to tackle the problem from first principles like I'm trying to do and there are plenty of other ways you can get involved in improving the human condition and prospects for our species' survival. Unless, however, you are indifferent to our long term future, or foolishly prepared to leave it to "the powers that be", inaction and apathy are not options.

The world moved into a new era on September 11 2001. Never in human history has an enemy emerged with so little regard for its own welfare or choice of target; nor so much contempt for the court of world opinion. The concept of indiscriminate slaughter of non-combatants with the voluntary sacrifice of your own troops makes even the likes of Nazi Germany look relatively civilised. The mere fact, for example, that the Nazi regime tried to hide their slaughter of the Jews/Gypsies/Homosexuals etc, tells us that they were at least aware that what they were doing was "wrong" in all civilised senses of that word and preferred to keep it under wraps.

The new enemy doesn't feel the need to hide its murderous intent or practices. Indeed, it seeks to maximise them and the publicity that goes with them as it believes only the fear engendered by such insane measures can achieve its long term goals. This is the purest form of terrorism the world has ever seen. It is difficult to imagine how it could be "improved" upon.

All of which is really *really* bad news.

The really really good news, however, was the global coalition which formed amazingly quickly in the days and weeks after that notorious attack. Almost every country on the planet was signed up to “The War On Terrorism” (even though, four years later they still couldn't agree what it is and any sensible definition makes it clear that the USA and UK have committed, between them, the world's most successful and the world's most indefensible terrorist acts).

It is likely that this coalition could, in time, have confronted the relevant (Islamic) terrorists and controlled them. It could have changed the conditions, eventually, which provoke and promote Islamic terrorism in the first place. For the first few weeks after 9-11, it seemed that, in one stroke, the terrorists appeared to have dramatically miscalculated the outcome. Particularly by targeting civilians, they had united the whole world against them. They had ensured that all the goodwill required to make the kind of international agreements (which remain necessary) in order to tackle this problem was made available in abundance.

We can only guess whether, as suggested by Bin Laden's prediction regarding American Freedom and Human Rights, MIFT's judgement of the American psyche was superior to our own, or whether, like the collapse of the twin towers, they just got “lucky”. Either way, the rest of the world reckoned without the ascendancy of the Neocons and Religious Right in the United States of America. In what can only be increasingly seen as a breathtakingly self-destructive and psychopathic episode, the Americans chose to alienate the vast bulk of that global support and to go out on a limb of their own to pursue the unrelated target of Saddam's Iraq.

The USAPATRIOTs weren't blind to the global threat posed by MIFT and its like. Indeed they trumpeted it from the rooftops. They even got the appropriate global response. There has probably never been such an overwhelming international Consensus about any other global issue – nor one so quickly reached. History will not forgive the Americans for so egregiously destroying that Consensus. It is the biggest strategic blunder in their history – possibly all human history - and has, as I've already intimated, significantly increased the risk that the human race will destroy itself.

If you hadn't guessed, we weren't impressed.



Harry Stottle October 15 2005

Revised (Re Dresden refs) November 2 2005

This work is licensed by Harry Stottle (2005) under a
[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/).