

TERROR, EVIL, and the New Cold War

by John Buell

After his first meeting with Vladimir Putin, George W. Bush assured the American people that he had looked into the Russian leader's eyes and established that "he was a good man." This president has extraordinary confidence in his ability as an ophthalmologist of the soul. Discerning obvious good and evil, he moves ahead single-mindedly. Yet dividing the world neatly into good and evil states may not have unequivocally good consequences. It produces a comforting level of moral outrage and strategic clarity, but it risks making us insensitive to nuances and cruelties implicit in our understandings of good and evil. These misunderstandings and gaps may ultimately undermine even our security. Unfortunately, Bush's confidence that the United States is a beacon of freedom and that Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein are singularly crazed and incomprehensibly vicious masterminds of evil is mirrored by some left and anti-war activists.

For Bush, rhetoric of *axis powers* allows him to tap and expand vague currents of "civilizational" war without opening himself to charges of antipathy to all Muslims. Nonetheless, images of the West versus the East are deeply problematic. Iran and Iraq are already internally complex and mutually hostile mixes of secular and absolutist religious and political currents. The West itself is indebted to those Eastern philosophers who preserved some of its great mathematical and philosophical traditions.

Equally problematic are notions of the evil Western powers and their pristine, innocent adversaries. So-called Muslim fundamentalists have an agenda that may be exacerbated and subtly shaped by U.S. policy, but its origins long precede the U.S. role in the world. Roxanne Euben points out that the Egyptian Islamic jihad has historically been more interested in toppling modernist Arab regimes than in attacking American interests.

Terrorism is better understood as a form of civil war. It reflects the fundamental tensions and incompatibilities within a global economy where most citizens—and terrorists—still embrace nineteenth-century conceptions of race, nationalism, and ethnic and cultural identity— notions that are themselves residues of some modes of conventional theism.

Many U.S. citizens find September 11, 2001, especially upsetting because the terrorists blended so well into American life. That life is no longer—if it ever was—culturally homogeneous. For many this is a source of anxiety. When some visitors who privately disparage mainstream culture viciously attacked one of that culture's most prestigious symbols, many Americans embraced an all too familiar response: since these "intruders" are here illegally, our government is justified in preventive detentions and other forms of racial profiling.

Yet even if constitutional for non-citizens, these steps still amount to guilt by association. They are the domestic

equivalent of Bush's axis of evil and serve a similar political and psychological purpose. Not only is even their short-term efficacy debatable, they also make the world a more divided and dangerous place.

When intentional human acts turn our technologies against us, those who are already coded as enemies of our beliefs and lifestyles are immediately singled out for blame. Before September 11, the worst terrorism on American soil was the Oklahoma City bombing. At the time, network pundits painstakingly identified the various "Arab" terrorist organizations that were the likely perpetrators. Profiling may instill a sense of comforting rage and security, but it also blinds us to the protean and adaptable nature of terror. Israel has already witnessed several instances of suicide bombing by young women, a phenomenon that should give all but the most ardent profilers pause.

The world is dangerous, but our current rhetoric and practice of threat reduction suggest that we are selective in the dangers we identify. Copious circumstantial evidence suggests that the Anthrax perpetrator emerged from American bioterrorism experts. Nonetheless, I doubt that profiling and preventive detention even for bioterrorism experts will be considered—fortunately in this case. Physical security in this world will never be perfect, but greater physical safety will require a different understanding of both our own technological hubris and of the origins of domestic and international terror, two categories themselves increasingly indistinct.

Profiling hinges on a highly questionable dichotomy between host and guest, inside and outside. At the same time as the Justice Department imprisons some non-citizens, Congress enacts liberal visa provisions to bring trained foreign technicians to our shores. Even for less esoteric occupations, reliance on foreigners has become entrenched. Neal Pierce, a syndicated columnist, points out: "The economy of many Sunbelt cities would grind to a halt overnight without their legions of Hispanic gardeners, waiters, maids, and truck drivers—some in the U.S. legally, many not."

World-class hotels, restaurants, meat-packing and food-processing firms widely employ "illegal aliens" but seldom press for their legalization. With the threat of INS inspection over their head, these workers are more likely to work without complaints, no matter how fast the line runs or however long the hours. Most of these workers come from nations where the myth of nationality is pervasive and destructive. Modern nations are composed of many ethnic groups, and even these so-called ethnic groups are scarcely demarcated one from another. The quest for national unity leads to rampant discrimination on ethnic, religious, economic, and ideological grounds. Minorities are often compelled either by force of arms or economic circumstance to relocate. The rapid flow of financial capital, information, and goods exacerbates the urge to reestablish a mythical purity and makes human flight more necessary all the time.

To point out that terrorism's agents often spring from the ranks of these diasporas is taken as a defense of terrorism. Yet unless we deem terrorism a random freak of nature—in which case moral revulsion and consistent policy response hardly seem appropriate or effective—we need to identify its preconditions in ways that encourage its amelioration without fully excusing the terrorists themselves.

Many terrorists are *hypernationalists*. Basque separatists, Hamas militants, the Irish Republican Army, and Kashmiri Muslims have all shared one experience and one response. All have been deemed minorities within nation states where in one way or another the claim is made that political society can be held together only by common ethnicities, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. All have responded to the implicit or explicit demands for conformity or exclusion not with a critique of the national, ethnic, or racial ideal itself but by attempting to become the new center of power and belief—even by annihilating those who once discriminated against them. Paradoxically, the greatest sin of terrorism may be that it apes or even intensifies the worst aspects of the oppressive regimes from which the terrorists emerge.

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For its part, what remains of the economic left might be characterized as responding to terrorism with a paraphrase of Marx: "Guest workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your green cards." Instead of treating the terrorists as utterly different, some proponents of economic development now assume that they are "just like us." They want a house, car, and a DVD player. If they can't get these, they stage high-tech temper tantrums and use our toys to destroy us.

What little evidence we have, however, doesn't support this view. Princeton economist Alan Krueger and Middle East specialist Jitka Maleckova of Prague show that Hezbollah militants of the late 1980s and early 1990s were more likely than the average resident to be above the poverty line and to have enjoyed higher education. Opinion polls in Palestine also show that the poor were less likely to support terrorist attacks. In a thoughtful commentary on this study, *Washington Post* columnist Sebastian Mallaby points out that, even if poverty doesn't directly cause terror, it plays an indirect role. Widespread poverty is often accompanied by political chaos, upon which terrorist cells can thrive. And in such societies, terrorist cells often provide the best avenues of educational and social mobility.

Dissident intellectuals, of whom every society has its share, operate under adverse circumstances in much of the world today. Political chaos does more than provide space for violent political cells. Dissidents witness the suffering and dispersion of their people, but they have no political voice. Negotiations across and within national and ethnic boundaries are closed. Government or "secular" corporate interests dominate the media. Lacking a voice within their larger society, seeing the daily death and starvation of their people, and facing no internal challenge to their own verities, some of the most educated come to regard their own truths as immortal, all embracing, and worth dying for.

Fundamentalists will always be among us, but how do we reduce the odds of their killing in the name of their

truths? If bin Laden celebrated September 11, Pat Robertson chortled that these deaths were God's punishment for the perversions of our secular society. Bin Laden was willing to use weapons; Robertson wasn't—a substantial moral difference. Nonetheless, where the fundamentalist urge takes one is a function of more than merely personal disposition. Political culture does make a difference. A modicum of wealth and security matters, but not simply as ends in themselves. They are a means to broader forms of self-expression and political participation.

The belief that a unitary good always triumphs either through the iron fist or the velvet glove of economic development is deeply problematic and in need of alternatives. Perhaps the best answer to terror lies in the attempt by activists, philosophers, and some within the religious community to insinuate both a new worldview and ethic into political dialogue. That worldview suggests the possibility, which it acknowledges is beyond proof, that the world may always exceed our grasp. The social and natural worlds may

ultimately not be fully known or knowable, perhaps not merely even to human beings but even in principle. But rather than dwell on the anxiety this may cause and seek to fashion comprehensive ideologies and forms of identity that regard all difference as a threat, why not strive to cultivate within others and most especially ourselves a capacity to take joy in the multitudes we as individuals and groups contain? Toward that end, why not celebrate those forms of order most open to change and surprise, and why not view democracy as a route to that end?

Terrorists are like us not in the sense that they harbor similar goals and ambitions but in that they too must live with their own inner demons. All of us die and must find reasons for our death. We harbor

musings, fantasies, and fears that often exceed our most carefully formulated ideals and expectations. If there is any answer to terror it lies in a more open democratic politics than any yet implemented or even fully articulated, in a willingness to engage in dialogue with and find as much

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space as possible for that in ourselves and others that exceeds even our most profound ideals.

Ideals of race, ethnicity, and nationality must be acknowledged as pervasive and potent, as growing out of widely shared anxieties. Nonetheless, they aren't fixed verities. Equally engaging alternatives must be elaborated. The notion that a functioning state must rely upon pure ethnicity and a set of cultural and religious beliefs widely and deeply shared by those within its boundaries may be one of the most destructive ideals of the last millennium. Europeans once believed that only Catholicism, then only Christianity, then only Judeo-Christianity could provide the glue to cement their governments and "civilizations." It took the tragedy of war and the solvent of politics to broaden horizons.

Our security may well demand acts of genuine self-defense, but in the longer term national security requires that we think beyond the alternatives usually posed: idealistic pacifism on the one hand versus some form of realist just war or imperialistic notions of hegemony on the other. Defenders of preemptive strikes against Iraq are right to argue that simply opposing this war isn't enough. But there are better preventive strategies. In the 1970s and 1980s, grass-roots mobilizations—often collaborating across borders—encouraged democracy in formerly totalitarian societies, limited the testing and development of nuclear weaponry, enabled mutual security pacts, and forced more generous international economic policies. Such pacts—establishing boundaries, international police presences, policies, and international standards—are, however, never final accomplishments. They need continual revision in response to the forms of injustice and exclusion they inevitably preserve and foster. The need for a politics across as well as within national borders is likely to be eternal.

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It is also important to rethink but not repudiate all forms of patriotism. A recent Advertising Council campaign chants the familiar line: "I am an American." The voices and faces reflect some of the race, nationality, age, and gender classifications within our official census. Com-

mendably, Native-, African-, and Arab-Americans are included. But as this nation moves toward a war of indefinite scope and duration, the question inevitably arises: what is it to be an American?

Patriotism is deeply destructive if love of country means commitment to a unitary, all-embracing set of ideals and policies. Patriotism then becomes little more than a security blanket. "Patriots" submerge inner doubts and anxieties by immersing themselves in a mass cause and defining all dissidents as not only wrong but inherently dangerous. Native Americans, immigrants from Japan, Italy, China and other nations, and many domestic dissenters paid a high—and now widely lamented—price for this patriotism.

Reacting to such atrocities, a few of my generation's Vietnam War opponents jumped to another extreme and flew Vietcong flags, in deep denial of the atrocities that side itself committed. Treating all "Developing World" targets of U.S. aggression as utterly and equally

without power or choices ironically suggests a view of the world analogous to mainstream perspectives. Portraying all as mere victims either helps foster their passivity or encourages a turn to Leninist political parties. In either case, constructive political dialogue both within and among states is blocked.

Patriotism properly conceived has a different meaning. For me, many of the public commemorations of September 11 reflect not merely chauvinism but also more constructively a will to affirm and preserve life for all, even complete

strangers, amidst social and natural tragedy. They remind me of the great Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's claim that God doesn't will all but rather wills that we make the best of all. These celebrations reflect in part historic struggles to grant opportunities for voice and individuality to all. Our pantheon of patriotic heroes includes in its number Abraham Lincoln, who as a young member of Congress opposed the Mexican War. It also includes Henry David Thoreau, whose reflections on civil disobedience have inspired generations of activist critics of received opinion.

Democracy can fall victim to destructive fits of collective and self-justifying illusions, but democracy is the best answer to these illusions. The democratic celebration of individual voice can also invite demands that we learn to get along with formerly excluded creeds, ethnicities, and races. As Walt Whitman recognized, democracy also encourages willingness to hear and explore the multitude of subterranean voices, currents, and lifestyles that inevitably arise both in others and ourselves in response to mainstream culture and practices. Such openness and exploration is vital if we are not only to survive but also to thrive intellectually and emotionally.

Official patriotic celebrations bespeak a nation where individual rights for the usual list of minorities sanctioned by the ad council represent either the norm or the inevitable course of history. Yet our history may be better understood as one of democratic turbulence. To the extent the United States is the beacon of freedom and democracy it is because of decades of struggle by minorities and reform leaders to expand both our notions of rights and who was entitled to those rights. If this country is to remain a beacon, it is more necessary than ever to remember and commend this activism.

Perhaps we might be better off celebrating the beauty of a democratic politics that has periodically fostered and can continually fashion ever more varied and complex social and cultural mosaics. Rather than trying to impose some illusory common culture, national heritage, or shared economic interest on the protean stuff that is our humanity, our task is to celebrate an expanding democratic pluralism. At its best, American democracy has continually negotiated and revised procedures and policies that allow as many existing and newly emerging cultures and even principles of authority as possible to live and prosper together. Absent a restoration of such a democratic vision, I fear that civil wars within many "nation states"—including our own—will increasingly know no boundaries. ☪

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