**The War On Terror: An Exercise in Hypocrisy**

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About a hundred thousand Americans are killed annually by medical errors in hospitals [[1]](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref1). So how come we are not fighting a "War on Error"? We *are*, supposedly, engaged in a "War on Terror" (WOT), even tho the average number of Americans killed annually by terrorists since 9/11 is less than 3, all but a few outside our borders (not counting those killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.) [[2]](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref2)? Whereas a properly fought war on *error* would clearly *save* many lives, a good case can (and shortly will) be made that the WOT is resulting in *more* deaths. But there are more fundamental reasons why a WOT is a bad idea.

**The Victory Problem**

In a conventional war, there is a well defined enemy (e.g., another nation, or a subgroup within a nation). There is a reasonably well defined cause (sometimes several) over which the war is being fought. A conventional war ends when one side surrenders, or is rendered incapable of continuing the struggle, or when both sides agree to stop fighting. How does all this apply in the WOT case?

First, the "enemy" consists of those who have committed, or are willing to commit, terrorist acts. This is a very ill-defined group. Who is on the membership committee and what are the criteria for admission? At any time, some previously obscure group, for example the Bozhbjeks of Whatsistan, might join the terrorist side by shooting down a US airliner with a stinger missile, while also seizing a busload of touring US students. So there is nobody who can surrender on behalf of all terrorists. There are no war aims other than the complete and permanent elimination of terrorism, an obviously unattainable goal. Therefore a WOT can never end in victory for the good guys. The situation is even further confused because (as will be shown below) the US itself has often engaged in or supported terrorism.

**On and On**

War is a time when governments often expand their powers to do things that would normally be unacceptable. Usually, in retrospect, these usurpations are judged to have been totally unjustified. For example, during World War I, newspapers were censored and over a thousand Americans were imprisoned for peaceful expressions of opposition to our entry into the war [[3]](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref3). (Note that Woodrow Wilson was elected president in 1916 after having pledged to keep us out of the war.) During World War II, over 100,000 Japanese-Americans (mostly US citizens) were interned in prison camps without being tried [[4]](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref4).

An unending war implies a permanent loss of liberty, as well as a serious on-going financial burden. We see today, as a result of the current wars being waged, ostensibly to combat terrorism, serious losses of privacy as email and telephone communications are now subject to ever-increasing surveillance by security agencies. Our government has seized and imprisoned people (including US citizens) without due process [[5]](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref5). People captured by the US government in the course of the WOT have been tortured, some to the point of death. More recently, the president has claimed the right to order, without due process, the killing of people, not on any battlefield. He has actually issued such orders several times against US citizens, and they were carried out [[6]](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref6).

If the WOT continues indefinitely, we can expect further erosion of individual liberty as we evolve toward a garrison state, with a growing proportion of the nation's energy being diverted toward destructive ends. The financial stability of the country is in jeopardy, partly because of the huge sums of money squandered on these wars.

Defenders of the governmental power grab argue that the 9/11 atrocity represented a novel threat requiring an array of new security measures. However, tho the 9/11 attack was spectacularly successful (due to the unpredictable total collapse of the twin towers), there is nothing new about the use of terrorism by both nongovernmental organizations and governments.

**Calling the Kettle Black**

Terrorism is generally defined as the calculated use of violence, or the threat of violence, against civilians in order to attain goals that are political or religious or ideological in nature. Sadly, it has a long history, encompassing virtually every segment of humanity all over the world. In recent times we have seen horrendous, large scale examples, mainly in Southern Europe and in Africa. Generally, spokespeople of any group or nation interpret the definition of terrorism so as to exclude from that category any acts of their own people. Only their enemies use such tactics. Below, I present a few historical examples illustrating the hypocrisy of this contention by Us, and continues to do so. Many Israeli Jews, as well as Jews elsewhere in the world, including in the US (you are hearing from one now), deplore such behavior, while others justify it as an appropriate, perhaps necessary, response to terrorism practiced by Palestinians. The US government has subsidized Israeli terrorism, supplying weapons on a generous scale.

Thru the 1980s, the US government supported the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, despite its murderous behavior, which included use of poison gas that killed thousands of Iraqi Kurd civilians [[22]](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref22).

**Is the Enemy Us?**

If there is any meaning to a WOT, then the enemy must bestrip away the hypocrisy and rhetoric, we would see that the concern driving the US WOT is about loosely organized groups of fanatics, some of whom are willing to sacrifice their lives in order to kill others. What got our attention was the spectacular disintegration of the World Trade Center towers. Since then fewer than ten people have been killed by terrorists on American soil. How come?

Is it because of the great job being done by our intelligence agencies and Homeland Security? Not likely, given the gross defects reported in the air transport security system [[23](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref23), [24](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref24)], which is probably the most visible, tho, I believe, one of the least important, aspects of guarding against terrorist attacks. It is hard to believe that a determined terrorist, unconcerned about personal survival, would find it all that difficult to detonate a bomb in a crowded public place in this country.

An alternative explanation for the paucity of such attacks is that the number of capable people determined to hurt the US via brutal attacks on ordinary people is actually minuscule. Maybe the concern about terrorism has been greatly exaggerated. If so, this would not be the first time in our history that fear of sinister outside forces has been inflated to justify assaults on civil liberties. Recall the Eighteenth Century Alien and Sedition Laws, the post World War I Palmer raids and mass deportations, and the McCarthy era hysteria.

A serious effort to thwart all plausible terrorist attacks would entail measures that would alter our lives drastically. It would require a good deal more than requiring travelers to take off shoes at airports. This does not mean that nothing should be done. As with respect to more commonplace crimes, there are sensible things that could be done to make things harder for terrorists. Locking the flight deck doors of airliners (already done), and supplementing air marshals with a program to encourage law enforcement officers, perhaps via fare discounts, to carry sidearms on flights, and maybe a few other simple measures, might be the best we can do to discourage airline hijacking. More generally, the kind of international cooperation employed to combat other types of criminals ought to be effective against terrorist organizations. The most effective defense would be to reduce sharply the number of people supporting and willing to carry out terrorist acts.

The US has routinely supported many oppressive governments (as shown above), and maintains hundreds of military bases all over the world [[25]](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref25). It has been among the top two arms exporters (usually number one) for many years [[26]](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref26). This behavior has antagonized huge numbers of people, creating a large pool of potential recruits for terrorist organizations. Policy reversals in these areas would have a major impact in reducing the threat of terrorist attacks, and are justifiable on other grounds as well.

The Iraq war and the Afghanistan war [[27]](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref27)) are both justified as being components of the WOT. Rather than helping reduce terrorism, these are more like recruiting and training operations for terrorists. I find it interesting that Zbigniew Brzezinski, whose views in general are quite different from mine, has written an article [[28]](http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~unger/articles/TerrorWarRevised.html#ref28) that also takes a dim view of the WOT, making arguments only partly overlapping the above, but which I do agree with.

The greatest terrorist danger is that some group might smuggle a nuclear bomb into a US city. Preventing this can best be done by reducing the prevalence of nuclear weapons worldwide. What is needed is a serious program of nuclear disarmament. As the principal nuclear power, the US should lead the way. *Not* by trying to coerce other countries into giving up or not developing nuclear weapons, but by significantly reducing our own stockpile of such weapons and then negotiating a worldwide treaty, with appropriate inspection procedures, to get rid of them altogether. The possibility of terrorists obtaining such a device will remain very real as long as thousands of nuclear warheads exist all over the world.

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