Revolutionaries or Terrorists?

Throughout history, the world has known political violence and war. For centuries political and religious thinkers from many traditions have wrestled with two key questions. When is the use of force acceptable? What principles govern how force that may be used? These two questions are central to something known as "just war" theory.

These two questions and the concepts of just war theory may also be useful in considering terrorism. In past debates about terrorism, some have suggested that one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. Are these terms merely labels that have to do with whether one agrees or disagrees with the cause? Or is the distinction based on more concrete and objective grounds?

Today, just war theory underlies much of accepted international law concerning the use of force by states. International law is explicit about when states may use force. For example, states may use force in self-defense against an armed attack. International law also addresses how force may be used. For example, force may not be used against non-combatants. Despite these laws and norms, there are those who oppose the use of violence under any circumstances. For example, this commitment to non-violence led Mohandas Gandhi to build a movement of national liberation in India organized around the practice of non-violent resistance.

Over the years, the international community has been working to better define the rules of war. The Geneva Conventions established in the aftermath of World War II introduced new internationally accepted regulations on the conduct of war between states. These rules protect non-combatants, govern the treatment of prisoners of war, prohibit hostage-taking, and respect diplomatic immunity.

In addition, the concept of proportionality-long a part of just war theory-has gained new importance as the weapons of war have become increasingly destructive. Proportionality argues that it is wrong to use more force than is necessary to achieve success.

After the Second World War, the use of violence in struggles for self-determination and national liberation fueled a new aspect of the debate on legitimate use of force-the differences between freedom fighters and terrorists. For example, newly independent Third World nations and Soviet bloc nations argued that any who fought against the colonial powers or the dominance of the West should be considered freedom fighters, while their opponents often labeled them terrorists.

> **State Terror?**
>
> During the U.N. debates on terrorism, some argued that the methods of violence used by states can be morally reprehensible and a form a terrorism.
>
> *"…the methods of combat used by national liberation movements could not be declared illegal while the policy of terrorism unleashed against certain peoples [by the armed forces of established states] was declared legitimate."*
>
> -Cuban Representative to the U.N.

Following the violence at the 1972 Munich Olympics, U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim called on the General Assembly to discuss measures to prevent terrorism. Waldheim's suggestion provoked furious debate over the nature of terrorism and the role of armed struggle in national liberation.

"…all liberation movements are described as terrorists by those who have reduced them to slavery. …[The term] terrorist [can] hardly be held to persons who were denied the most elementary human rights, dignity, freedom and independence, and whose countries objected to foreign occupation."

- U.N. Ambassador from Mauritania Moulaye el-Hassan

Critics countered that this argument was misleading because it failed to consider the issue in its entirety. What mattered was not the justness of the cause (something that would always be subject to debate) but the legitimacy of the methods used. The ends, they argued, could not be used to justify the means.

By the late 1970s, significant portions of the international community (though not the United States) had decided to extend the protection of the Geneva Convention to include groups participating in armed struggle against colonial domination, alien occupation, or racist regimes; and to those exercising their right of self-determination. The significance of this change is that it seemed to extend legitimacy to the use of force by groups other than states.

The events of September 11 and the subsequent war on terrorism have led us to consider important questions concerning the use of force. When is force justified? What is a terrorist? How does a terrorist differ from a freedom-fighter? Who decides?

_____

This lesson is excerpted from Responding to Terrorism: Challenges for Democracy (© August 2002, Choices for the 21st Century Education Program, Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University. All rights reserved.)