Michael Walzer

ARGUING about WAR

For JBW, always

AFTER 9/11: FIVE QUESTIONS ABOUT TERRORISM
(2002)

This is not going to be a straightforward and entirely coherent argument. I am still reeling from the attacks of September 11, and I don't have all my responses in order. I will try to answer five questions about terrorism. Whether the answers add up to a "position" — theoretical or practical — I will leave to the reader.

1. What is terrorism?
2. How should we go about explaining it?
3. How is it defended or excused?
4. How should we respond?
5. What will be the signs of a successful response?

1. *What is it?* It's not hard to recognize; we can safely avoid postmodernist arguments about knowledge and truth. Terrorism is the deliberate killing of innocent people, at random, in order to spread fear through a whole population and force the hand of its political leaders. But this is a definition that best fits the terrorism of a national liberation or revolutionary movement (the Irish Republican Army, the Algerian National Liberation Front [FLN], the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Basque Separatist Movement, and so on). There is also state terrorism, commonly used by authoritarian and totalitarian governments against their own people, to spread fear and make political opposition impossible: the Argentine "disappearances" are a useful example. And, finally, there is war terrorism: the effort to kill civilians in such large numbers that their government is forced to surrender. Hiroshima seems to me the classic case. The common element is the targeting of people who are, in both the military and political

senses, noncombatants: not soldiers, not public officials, just ordinary people. And they aren't killed incidentally in the course of actions aimed elsewhere; they are killed intentionally.

I don't accept the notion that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." Of course, the use of the term is contested; that's true of many political terms. The use of "democracy" is contested, but we still have, I think, a pretty good idea of what democracy is (and isn't). When communist Bulgaria called itself a "people's democracy," only fools were fooled. The case is the same with terrorism. In the 1960s, when someone from the FLN put a bomb in a café where French teenagers gathered to flirt and dance and called himself a freedom fighter, only fools were fooled. There were a lot of fools back then, and back then — in the sixties and seventies — was when the culture of excuse and apology was born (but I want to deal with that later).

2. *How should we go about explaining terrorism — and particularly the form of terrorism that we face today?* The first thing to understand is that terrorism is a choice; it is a political strategy selected from among a range of options. You have to imagine [see Chapter 4] a group of people sitting around a table and arguing about what to do; the moment is hard to reconstruct, but I am sure that it is an actual moment, even if, once the choice is made, the people who opposed terror are commonly killed, and so we never hear their version of how the argument went. Why do the terrorists so often win the argument? What are the political roots of terror?

I don't think that a simple materialist explanation works, though there has been a lot of talk in the last couple of months about the human misery, the terrible poverty, the vast global inequalities in which terrorism is "ultimately rooted." Also about

the terrible suffering, as someone wrote in one of our weeklies, endured by "people all over the world who have been the victims of American military action — in Vietnam, in Latin America, in Iraq . . ." The author of those words doesn't seem to have noticed that there are no terrorists coming from Vietnam and Latin America. Misery and inequality just don't work as explanations for any of the nationalist terrorist movements and certainly not for Islamic terror. A simple thought experiment in comparative politics helps explain why they don't work. Surely it is Africa that reveals the worst consequences of global inequality, and the involvement of the West in the production and reproduction of inequality is nowhere more evident. There is a lot of local involvement too; many African governments are complicitous or directly responsible for the misery of their own people. Still, the role of the West is fairly large. And yet the African diaspora is not a friendly sea in which terrorists swim. And the same thing can be said for Latin America, especially Central America, where U.S. companies have played a significant part in exploiting and sustaining poverty: and yet the Latin diaspora is not a friendly sea. We need another explanation.

We need a combined cultural-religious-political explanation that has to focus, I think, on the creation of an Enemy, a whole people who are ideologically or theologically degraded so that they are available for murder: that's what the IRA did to Irish Protestants, the FLN to French Algerians, the PLO to Israeli Jews. This kind of Enemy is the special creation of nationalist and religious movements, which often aim not only at the defeat but at the removal or elimination of the "others." Wartime propaganda commonly has the same effect, demonizing the other side, even when both sides expect the war to end with a negoti-

ated peace. Once the Enemy has been created, any of "them" can be killed, men, women, or children, combatants and noncombatants, ordinary folk. The hostility is generalized and indiscriminate. In the case of Islamic terrorism, the Enemy is the infidel, whose world leader is the United States and whose local representative is Israel.

Islamic terrorists don't call themselves freedom fighters; they have a different mission: to restore the dominance of Islam in the lands of Islam. Osama bin Laden, in the speech he delivered on video shortly before (it was broadcast after) the September 11 attacks, spoke about eighty years of subjection, which takes the story back to the establishment of European protectorates and trusteeships in the Middle East after World War I; the effort to create a Christian state in Lebanon; the effort to set up Western-style constitutional monarchies and parliamentary republics in the Arab world; the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state after the Second World War; and then the long series of military defeats from 1948 to 1991, not only in the Middle East but in East Asia, all of them experienced as terrible humiliations, at the hands of Jews, Hindus, and Americans, who are not supposed to be warrior peoples at all.

But the military defeats are part of a larger story of the failure of state building and economic development in most of the Islamic world. The fundamentalist religious response to modernity, which is common across all the major world religions, comes up here against governments that are very far from admirable representatives of modernity: secular governments often, or governments that are ready for accommodation with the West and eager to absorb the latest technologies, but at the same time brutal, repressive, corrupt, authoritarian, unjust . . . and unsuccessful in

providing either the symbols or the substance of a decent common life. And some of these governments, in order to maintain their own power, sponsor a kind of ideological and theological scapegoating, directed against external enemies: Israel, America, the West generally, who are blamed for the internal failures. Some of these governments are our allies, Islamic moderates or Arab secularists, but they have yet to take on the extremists in their midst; they have yet to commit themselves to an open struggle against the theological radicalism that inspires the terrorist networks. Jihad is a response not only to modernity but also to the radical failure of the Islamic world to modernize itself.

Earlier terrorist campaigns are also explicable, in part, by the internal authoritarianism and weakness of the "liberation movement," in this case, its refusal or inability to mobilize its own people for other kinds of political action. Terrorism, after all, doesn't require mass mobilization; it is the work of a tiny elite of militants, who claim to represent "the people" but who act in the absence of the people (that's why classical Marxism was always hostile to terrorism — the reason, alas, was strategic, not moral). When someone like Gandhi was able to organize a nonviolent mass movement for national liberation, there was no terrorism.

3. *How is terrorism defended?* In certain extremist Islamic groups today there is a straightforward defense, which is also a denial: there are no innocent Americans, hence attacks like those of September 11 are not terrorist in character. But the arguments that I want to consider are of a different sort: they don't justify the acts that we call terrorism. Instead, they are expressions of what I have already described as a culture of excuse and apology. There are basically two kinds of excuses. The first looks to the desperation of the "oppressed," as they are called (and as they

may well be): terror, we are told, is the weapon of the weak, the last resort of subject nations. In fact, terror is commonly the first resort of militants who believe from the beginning that the Enemy should be killed and who are neither interested in nor capable of organizing their own people for any other kind of politics: the FLN and the PLO resorted to terror from the beginning; there was no long series of attempts to find alternatives. And as we have seen, there is at least one alternative — nonviolent mass mobilization — that has proven itself a far more effective "weapon of the weak."

The second kind of excuse looks to the guilt of the victims of terrorism. Here is how it works for Americans: we fought the Gulf War, we station troops on the sacred soil of Saudi Arabia, we blockade and bomb Iraq, we support Israel — what do we expect? Of course, the September 11 attacks were wrong; they ought to be condemned; but — a very big "but" — after all, we deserved it; we had it coming. Generally, this argument comes from people who before September 11 wanted us to stop protecting the Kurds in northern Iraq, to stop supporting Israel, and to get out of Saudi Arabia; and now they see a chance to use Islamic terrorism as a kind of "enforcer" for their own political agenda. They attribute their agenda to the terrorists (what else could terrorists have in mind but what Western leftists have always advocated?), and then call for a policy of appeasement in order to avoid further attacks. That is a policy, it seems to me, that would begin with dishonor and end in disaster. But I won't talk about that now; I want simply to deny the moral legitimacy of the excuse. Even if American policies in the Middle East and in East Asia have been or are wrong in many ways, they don't excuse the terrorist attack; they don't even make it morally comprehensible. The murder of innocent people is not excusable.

4. *How should we respond?* I want to argue for a multilateral response, a "war" against terror that has to be fought on many fronts. But who is the enemy here? Is it the people who planned or sponsored or supported the September 11 attacks or is it any and all other groups that practice a terrorist politics? I suggest that we think in terms of an analogy with humanitarian intervention. We (the United States, the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Organization of African Unity, and others) intervene, or ought to intervene, against genocide and "ethnic cleansing" wherever they occur. There are, of course, many different political and religious doctrines that inspire genocide and ethnic cleansing, and each intervention is distinct; each one requires its own calculations of morality and prudence. But our commitment should be general. The case is the same with terror: there are many terrorist ideologies and many terrorist organizations. We should oppose them all, but the different engagements will have to be considered one by one. We should imagine the "war" as including many possible engagements.

"War" is a metaphor here, but real war is a necessary part of the metaphorical "war." It may be the only part to which the frequently invoked doctrine of "just war" applies; we will have to look for other, though not unrelated, kinds of ethical guidance on the other fronts. The question about justice in the real war is a familiar one, and so is the answer — though the answer is easier in principle than in practice. In fighting against terrorists, we must not aim at innocent people (that's what the terrorists do); ideally we should get close enough to the enemy, or to his supporters, so that we are quite sure not only that we are aiming at them but also that we are hitting them. When we fight from far away, with planes and missiles, we have to get people in, on the ground, to

select the targets, or we have to have very good intelligence; we must avoid overestimating the smartness of our smart bombs. Technological hubris isn't, I suppose, a crime, but it can lead to very bad outcomes, so it is better to leave a wide margin for error. And, finally, because even if we do all these things, we will still be imposing serious risks on the civilian population, we must reduce those risks as far as possible — and take risks ourselves in order to do that. This last is the hardest thing I have to say, because I'm not the one who will have to take those risks. The proportionality rule is commonly invoked here: civilian deaths and injuries, euphemistically called "collateral damage," should not be disproportionate to the value of the military victory that is being sought. But because I don't know how to measure the relevant values or how to specify the proportionality, and because I don't think that anyone else knows, I prefer to focus instead on the seriousness of the intention to avoid harming civilians, and that is best measured by the acceptance of risk.

Assuming that we correctly identified the terrorist network responsible for the September 11 attacks and that the Taliban government was in fact its patron and protector, the war in Afghanistan is certainly a just one. The point of the war is prevention above all: to destroy the network and stop the preparation of future attacks. We shouldn't, in my view, think of the war as a "police action," aimed at bringing criminals to justice. We probably don't have the evidence to do that; and it may well be the case that evidence collected by clandestine means or by armed force in distant countries, evidence that doesn't come from official archives, such as the German records that figured in the Nuremberg trials, but from e-mail intercepts and similar unofficial sources, would not be admissible in an American court — and

probably not in international courts either, though I don't know what rules of evidence apply in The Hague. In any case, do we really want trials now, while the terrorist networks are still active? Think of the hostage-takings and bomb threats that would almost certainly accompany them. The use of military courts would avoid these difficulties, because the rules of evidence could be relaxed and the trials held in secret. But then there will be costs to pay in legitimacy: for justice, as the saying goes, must not only be done, it must be seen to be done; it must be seen *being* done. So . . . there may be trials down the road, but we shouldn't focus on them now; the first object of the "war" against terrorism is not backward looking and retributive, but forward looking and preventive. If that's the point, then there is a sense in which Afghanistan is a sideshow, however necessary it is, however much attention the media give it, however focused on it our diplomats and soldiers have to be.

The most important battle against terror is being waged right here, and in Britain and Germany and Spain, and other countries of the Arab and Islamic diaspora. If we can prevent further attacks, if we can begin to roll up the terrorist cells, that will be a major victory. And it is very, very important, because "successes" like September 11 have energizing effects; they produce a rush of recruits and probably a new willingness to fund the terrorist networks.

Police work is the first priority, and that raises questions, not about justice, but about civil liberties. Liberals and libertarians leap to the defense of liberty, and they are right to leap; but when they (we) do that, we have to accept a new burden of proof: we have to be able to make the case that the necessary police work can be done, and can be done effectively, within whatever constraints we think are required for the sake of American freedom. If we can't make that case, then we have to be ready to consider modifying the constraints. It isn't a betrayal of liberal or American values to do that; it is in fact the right thing to do, because the first obligation of the state is to protect the lives of its citizens (that's what states are for), and American lives are now visibly and certainly at risk. Again, prevention is crucial. Think of what will happen to our civil liberties if there are more successful terrorist attacks.

Covert action is also necessary, and I confess that I don't know what moral rules apply to it. The combatant-noncombatant distinction is crucial to every kind of political and military activity; beyond that it is hard to know. Moral argument requires its cases, and here the cases are, deliberately and presumably rightly, concealed from view. Perhaps I can say a word about assassination, which has been much discussed in recent months. The killing of political leaders is ruled out in international law, even (or especially) in wartime — and ruled out for good reason — because it is the political leaders of the enemy state with whom we will one day have to negotiate the peace. There are obvious exceptions to this rule — no one, no moral person, would have objected to an allied effort to assassinate Hitler; we were in fact not prepared to negotiate with him — but ordinary political leaders are immune. Diplomats are immune for the same reason: they are potential peacemakers. But military leaders are not immune, however high they stand on the chain of command. We have as much right to shell the enemy army's central headquarters as to shell its frontline positions. With terrorist organizations, this distinction between military and political leaders probably collapses; the two are hard to mark off, and we are not planning on negotiations. At

any rate, it would seem odd to say that it is legitimate to attack a group of terrorists-in-training in a camp in Afghanistan, say, but not legitimate to go after the man who is planning the operation for which the others are training. That can't be right.

Diplomatic work comes next: right now it is focused on building support for military action in Afghanistan and for some kind of future non-Taliban regime. But over the long run, the critically important task will be to isolate and punish states that support terrorism. The networks look transnational; they exploit the globalist modernity that they so bitterly oppose. But make no mistake: neither the transnational networks, nor most of the more provincial ones, could survive without the physical shelter, the ideological patronage, and the funding provided by such states as Iran, Syria, Libya, and others. We are not going to go to war with those states; there is no *causus belli*, nor should we look for one. But there are many forms of legitimate political and economic pressure short of war, and it seems to me that we have to work hard to bring that kind of pressure to bear. This means that we have to persuade other countries — our allies in many cases, who have closer ties than we do with terrorist states and whose leaders have not been heroes in these matters — to bring pressure of their own to bear and to support disinvestment, embargo, and other sanctions when they are appropriate.

War, police work, covert action, and diplomacy: all these are tasks of the state. But there is also ideological work, which can't and shouldn't be directed or organized by the state, which will only be effective if it is carried on freely — and that means in the usual democratically haphazard and disorderly way. I suppose that the state can get involved, with the Voice of America and other media. But what I have in mind is different. Secular and religious intellectuals, scholars, preachers, and publicists, not

necessarily in any organized way, but with some sense of shared commitment, have to set about delegitimizing the culture of excuse and apology, probing the religious and nationalist sources of terror, calling upon the best in Islamic civilization against the worst, defending the separation of religion and politics in all civilizations. This sort of thing is very important; argument is very important. It may sound self-serving for someone who makes his living making arguments to say this, but it is true nonetheless. For all their inner-directedness, their fanatical commitment and literal-minded faith, terrorists do rely on, and the terrorist organizations rely even more on, a friendly environment — and this friendly environment is a cultural/intellectual/political creation. We have to work to transform the environment, so that wherever terrorists go, they will encounter hostility and rejection.

5. *What will be the signs of a successful response?* How will we know when we have won this "war"? We have already been told by the secretary of defense that we are not going to get the conventional signs: formal surrender, signatures on a peace treaty. The measure of success will be relative: a decline in attacks and in the scope of attacks; the collapse of morale among the terrorists, the appearance of informers and defectors from their ranks; the rallying of opportunists, who have the best nose for who's winning, to our side; the silence of those who once made excuses for terror; a growing sense of safety among ordinary people. None of this is going to come quickly or easily.

There is one more measure: our ability to shape our foreign policies, particularly toward the Islamic world, without worrying about the terrorist response. Right now, we have to worry: we cannot do things that would lead someone like bin Laden to

claim a victory, to boast that he had forced our hand. We have to walk a fine line: to sustain a defensible policy with regard, say, to the blockade of Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Kashmir dispute, and not to do anything that can plausibly be construed as appeasement. [But see "Terrorism: A Critique of Excuses" (Chapter 4) for the necessary limits of this argument. It must not become an excuse for indefensible policies.] There are American policies (not only in the Islamic world, but globally as well) that should be changed, but in politics one must not only do the right thing, one must do it for the right reasons; the attacks of September 11 are not a good reason for change. One day we will be free of this kind of constraint, and that will be another way of knowing that we have won.

Inspectors Yes, War No
(September 2002)

The Bush administration is threatening to attack Iraq and has been doing so for many months now. But it is hard, even after the president's U.N. speech, to see the point of the threat. It might be intended to deter the Iraqis from developing weapons of mass destruction, but it seems more likely to speed up the work they are already doing—especially since George W. Bush has repeatedly insisted that his goal is not just to stop weapons development but also to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein. It might be intended to rally support for the war to come, but so far it has had exactly the opposite effect, giving every country in the world (and every former general in the U.S. Army) a chance to say no—a chance that many of them have eagerly seized. It might be intended to press Iraq to accept a renewed U.N. inspection system or to press our allies to impose such a system. That would be a rational goal, but it doesn't seem to be what the administration really wants. The United States has taken little part in the months-long negotiations aimed at bringing the inspectors back.

Without access to U.S. intelligence it is hard to judge how grave a threat Saddam poses. But let's make some commonsense stipulations: First, the Iraqis have developed chemical and biological weapons and are trying to develop nuclear weapons; second, our government isn't certain about how close they are to having a usable nuclear weapon, but as of this moment they don't have one; third, Iraq has used chemical weapons in the past, though only on its own territory during the war with Iran and in efforts to repress the Kurds; and fourth, the Iraqi regime is