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Extremism at Beslan

by Rushworth M. Kidder

In the past week, as the Republican convention wound down in New York and the adversarial rhetoric geysered up from both parties, I heard more than one commentator quote former U.S. senator Barry Goldwater's pithy defense of extremism.

"I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice," Goldwater thundered at the 1964 Republican convention as he accepted its presidential nomination. "And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue."

He later said he was quoting Cicero. Regardless of whose words they were, they took on an eerie significance last week, as Muslim extremists unleashed their mayhem in a school building in the southern Russian city of Beslan.

If ever the world needed to rethink the ethics of extremism, this is the time.

The school siege that left more than 335 dead -- about half of them children -- was apparently the work of insurgents from neighboring Chechnya. Like most acts of terrorism, it was intended as a political message. Like most, it reached its audience of government officials by way of a shocked and horrified citizenry. Like most, it was steeped in symbolism, in this case because it attacked the most defenseless members of society during their ceremonial first day of school. Like most, it was the work of extremists willing not only to kill themselves but to engineer a premeditated slaughter of innocents. And like most, it is excused by its supporters as vengeance for past wrongs committed, in this case, by oppressive Russian regimes.

But is vengeance an excuse for torturing and murdering six-year-olds? Doesn't the Beslan attack deserve the most powerful condemnation that those who love liberty can muster? What did Goldwater mean by saying that extremism is "no vice"?

The problem is that extremism typically has its roots in something useful. Defending liberty is clearly a useful virtue -- unless, as at Beslan, the defense pushes past the borders of human concern and turns bestial. By analogy, wind and rain also are useful in moderation but destructive in the extreme -- as when last week's Hurricane Frances lashed Florida and the Bahamas in a positively Shakespearean symbol of excessive nature imitating the excesses of humanity. By cranking a good impulse to its limits, extremism becomes a parody of itself -- a travesty of the virtue it admires, counterfeiting the goodness it desires.

But like all counterfeits, political extremism isn't easy to spot. Unlike smoking, gambling, or snorting coke, it doesn't immediately betray itself as having no intrinsic worth. Instead, like overeating or speeding, it begins with a natural urge (satisfying hunger or getting somewhere) that goes wrong by degrees. So it's always open to justification by those who agree with its goals but overlook its means.

In so many ways, ours is an age of extremism. We see it in political polarization and in the excessive disparities between rich and poor. We see it in the entertainment media's excessive reliance on sensuality and violence, and in radical interpretations of religion as a license for intolerance. But where are the voices raised in opposition to extremism? Where are the politicians calling for comity and moderation, the corporate boards demanding socially responsible executive pay, the parents taking charge of television? And where, in relation to the massacre at Beslan, are the Islamic clerics and ordinary Muslims thundering their condemnation and calling for moderation?

They're there, but too often they're spooked by Goldwater -- as we all are. All too often we're tempted to confuse the excesses of extremism with the virtues of passionate commitment. Because we admire the latter, we may think we must applaud the former. What's more, we know ourselves to be only human, lacking the courage to be moderate in all things. If we think we lack the moral standing to condemn the immoderate, we may even withhold our censure.

But there is no ethic of political extremism, however subtle, that can support the deliberate slaughter of children. There is no failure of personal moderation, however severe, that can disqualify any of us from the moral standing to condemn such acts. When atrocities reach unspeakable levels, condemnation of extremism -- even when it appears in defense of liberty -- becomes a moral imperative. Cicero was wrong: Extremism, at its limits, is an unmitigated vice. If there's a global message from Beslan, it is that the virtue of moderation must become the goal and vision of a just society.