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The Moral Equivalent of Terrorism?

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Predictably, Yasir Arafat's death has rekindled an old debate: Was he a terrorist or a freedom fighter? Will he be remembered as the godfather of low-intensity warfare against civilians -- and as the man who promoted terrorism's nastiest weapon, the suicide bomber? Or was he a leader who unified a dispersed people and taught them to use the only force available to them in fighting the superior might of their oppressors?

History will render its political judgments on that point. But Mr. Arafat's death raises another, more dangerous argument that is not political but moral. It's the argument that tries to equate radical terrorism with democratically controlled military power. Put simply, the argument suggests that however many civilian deaths Mr. Arafat caused in his lifetime -- first by personally practicing terrorism and later by permitting and encouraging it -- his actions are morally no worse than the actions of Western democracies whose military might kills civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan, and (via their Israeli proxies) the West Bank and Gaza.

In other words, is Mr. Arafat (or, by extension, Osama bin Laden) morally indistinguishable from U.S. President George Bush or British Prime Minister Tony Blair?

To see the subtleties of this argument, we first need to unpack it and separate *explanations* from *moral judgments*. You can certainly *explain* how Arafat and bin Laden capitalized on political outrage and frustration. You can properly describe terrorism as a message system for the disenfranchised. You can note how it uses global publicity to go over the heads of its enemies' leaders and address their citizens. You can point out the economic, political, and even religious pressures inciting terrorists to take action -- and how those actions included bombing busses in Tel Aviv or flying airliners into tall buildings in New York. You can acknowledge that military actions by Western nations in reaction to 9/11 have been early, crude responses against wily enemies who took democracy's defenses by surprise. You can even admit that, as a result of Western military actions, civilian lives have been lost in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Palestinian Territories -- perhaps more than were lost in the 9/11 attacks, though perhaps fewer than Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, and Hamas had previously destroyed over the years.

But explanation is not moral argument. Knowing where something comes from is different from determining whether or not it's right. For that, we need to look at two things: motives and trends.

Motives. The motive that leads Western democracies into war is not the desire to kill noncombatants. It is not to capture and torture innocent citizens. Neither the Congress in Washington nor the Parliament at Westminster would vote to approve kidnappings and beheadings, or the videotaping of them. By contrast, such things are explicitly approved by terrorists, who are motivated by a desire to spread fear through the media by extreme acts of carnage, often against defenseless individuals. But if their motive is to air their grievances, don't they have the moral right to use any means necessary to achieve their freedom? No. To say otherwise is to agree that "the end justifies the means" -- a cynical and discredited philosophy that ignores the long-term downsides of corrupt and violent means. Unethical motives typically lead to unethical end results.

Trends. The moral equivalency argument also suggests that the Western militaries use increasingly lethal weapons in careless disregard for human life. That view has little support from military history. Following millions of casualties in World War I, the West has grown more and more concerned about wartime death tolls among troops and noncombatants. One result is that technology now creates weapons that reduce the risk to the troops using them and increase the accuracy against the enemy. Smart bombs, for instance, make the atomic bombs dropped on Japan, the firebombing of Dresden, and the carpet-bombing of Vietnam seem old-fashioned and barbaric. And the outcry against landmines and cluster bombs reflects genuine moral concern within democracies. Most would agree that such a trend-line toward reduced casualties is a good thing. Within terrorists organizations, by contrast, the trend-line is the reverse: the more collateral damage, the better.

But what about implementation? How well are Western democracies doing at putting these motives and trends into action? Pretty well in Afghanistan, not so well in Iraq, and even less well in the Palestinian territories. And in the broader areas of human rights, two issues -- the Abu Ghraib prison scandals in Iraq, and the holding of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay -- remind us that the United States has lots of room for moral improvement.

As there will always be room. War itself raises profound moral challenges -- although, by that token, so does the pacifism that puts democracy at hazard by refusing to defend its principles, practices, and peoples. Democracy in wartime is not morally pristine. But that doesn't mean it is morally indistinguishable from terrorism. If we surrender to the argument of moral equivalence, we abandon every effort to improve the moral condition of nations and citizens -- an effort to which democracies, unlike terrorist organizations, are deeply committed.