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 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 define better 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 nations in Africa and Asia 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.

Following the violence at the 1972 Munich Olympics, UN 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."

—UN 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.

State Terror?

During the UN debates on terrorism, some argue that the methods of violence used by states can be morally reprehensible and a form of 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 UN

Responding to Terrorism: Challenges for Democracy

TRB-7

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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?

Instructions

In this activity, you will examine a series of cases studies. Using the standards of the international community, you are to decide if the case represents terrorism or some other form of political violence. For each case you should answer the following questions:

1) Does your group believe that the decision to use force was acceptable and justifiable?
2) Was the way in which the force was used acceptable?
3) What is your view of the response of the state to the use of force?

Be prepared to explain the reasons for your position. If your group can not come to an agreement on your position, you should be prepared to offer different opinions and provide justification for each.

Case Studies: Revolutionaries or Terrorists?

Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland has been the scene of political violence for many years. The region is currently a province of the United Kingdom, while the rest of the island of Ireland is a republic that gained its independence from Britain in 1921. Since that time, several unofficial military organizations, including the Irish Republican Army (IRA), have continued to fight for British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. Other “paramilitaries” loyal to the United Kingdom have fought back. Between 1969 and 2002, 3341 people were killed and more than forty-seven thousand injured. Most of the victims were innocent civilians caught in bombings and other acts of violence in Ireland and England. The British government has sometimes responded with force. In January 1972, in an incident known as Bloody Sunday, British paratroopers fired on protestors, killing fourteen and injuring another thirteen. Many of the paramilitaries declared cease-fires in the late 1990s as a peace process took shape. In April 1998, a peace accord that became known as the Good Friday Agreement led many to hope for a peaceful resolution of the political differences. However, violence has continued to plague the region. In August 1998, an IRA splinter group claimed responsibility for bombing a shopping center in the town of Omagh which killed 29 and wounded hundreds. Negotiations among paramilitaries, Northern Ireland, and the U.K. have come to a standstill.

1) Does your group believe that the paramilitaries’ decision to use force was acceptable and justifiable? Are they terrorists or revolutionaries?
2) Was the way in which the force was used acceptable?
3) What is your view of the response of the state to the paramilitaries’ use of force?
Chechnya: In 1994, Chechen armed separatists launched a military-style campaign designed to drive Russia out of Chechnya, part of the Russian Federation. The Chechens claimed to be fighting for freedom from an oppressive regime that prevented them from practicing their religion, Islam, and that offered no hope for the future. The Russian military used its weapons against civilians, killing more than ten thousand and displacing half a million from their homes. A peace treaty was reached in 1997, but fighting resumed between Russian troops and Chechens in the fall of 1999. Russian President Putin defended Russian military action in Chechnya, claiming that Chechnya was being used as a springboard for international terrorism against Russia. The Russian government claimed that foreign Islamic terrorists were fighting alongside the Chechens. The Russian government blamed the Chechen rebels for a series of September 1999 bombings of Moscow apartment buildings that killed several hundred Russians. These incidents provoked a strong military response from Moscow, including airstrikes against several Chechen towns and the capital of Grozny. In October 2002 more than forty Chechen militants took eight hundred theatergoers hostage in Moscow. In the government's rescue attempt 129 hostages and all the hostage-takers were killed.

1) Does your group believe that the Chechens' decision to use force was acceptable and justifiable? Are they terrorists or revolutionaries?

2) Was the way in which the force was used acceptable?

3) What is your view of the response of the state to the Chechens' use of force?

Chiapas: In the remote southern state of Chiapas, Mexico, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation began an armed rebellion against the Mexican government on January 1, 1994. The Zapatistas claimed to be fighting against poverty and injustice and for the rights of indigenous peoples. Led by a man referred to as Sub-Commander Marcos, hundreds of peasant soldiers, their faces covered by black ski masks or red bandanas, operated in the countryside. Although most Zapatistas carried weapons dating back to World War II, they occupied several key towns and attacked a regional military base. More than one hundred people were killed in the uprising, including government soldiers, peasants, and government functionaries. The Zapatistas blew up telephone and electrical towers and detonated car bombs in Mexico City, injuring several people. The Mexican military responded with force, and international human rights groups accused the military of torturing villagers to get information about the rebels. Since 1995, the Zapatistas have been committed to negotiating with the Mexican government. Nonetheless, talks between the government and the Zapatistas have stalled. The conflict has pitted village against village, often spilling over into bloodshed. In 1997, for example, pro-government forces massacred 45 villagers for their support of the Zapatistas. At the same time, the Zapatistas rely on the Internet and cellular telephones to maintain a sophisticated communications network. Their website attracts thousands of visitors.

1) Does your group believe that the Zapatistas' decision to use force was acceptable and justifiable? Are they terrorists or revolutionaries?

2) Was the way in which the force was used acceptable?

3) What is your view of the response of the state to the Zapatistas' use of force?
**South Africa:** When the South African government codified into law its system of apartheid in 1948, the African National Congress, a political movement begun in the early twentieth century, launched a national campaign of non-violent resistance to the government's official system of racial segregation. However, after years of political struggle, the ANC had made no progress against the increasingly oppressive apartheid regime. In the early 1960s, the ANC decided that it would use violence to fight the white government, which denied black South Africans their most basic human rights, including access to education, the right to vote, and the right to live and travel where they wanted. Following the 1960 massacre of 69 black Africans by South African forces at a peaceful demonstration in Sharpeville, the ANC embarked on a campaign of sabotage against the country's infrastructure and armed resistance against the South African government, including bombing several government buildings. The South African government continued to crack down on black South Africans as racially motivated violence plagued the country. In 1976, government forces killed more than six hundred people in an uprising at the Soweto township.

1) Does your group believe that the ANC’s decision to use force was acceptable and justifiable? Were they terrorists or revolutionaries?

2) Was the way in which the force was used acceptable?

3) What is your view of the response of the state to the ANC’s use of force?

**The Earth Liberation Front:** Ten years ago a group of radical environmentalists in England formed the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) to combat ecological destruction. Now active in North America as well, the loosely-connected group seeks to protect habitats for endangered animals, to eliminate animal testing for medical and beauty industry purposes, and to reduce our dependence on oil. Like mainstream environmental organizations, the ELF works to end the exploitation of the natural environment and halt construction of new housing developments. Feeling that other environmental groups have had little effect, the ELF uses militant tactics to get its message across. In August 2003, the group claimed to have set fire to twenty Hummers, a large type of SUV, in a California dealership. The group has also claimed responsibility for releasing hundreds of animals in captivity, burning down resort buildings and ski lifts in Vail, Colorado, and sabotaging a genetic engineering lab at the University of Minnesota. Although the group has been careful never to harm humans in its attacks, it has caused more than $100 million in damage since 1997. The FBI continues to investigate the incidents.

1) Does your group believe that the ELF’s decision to use force is acceptable and justifiable? Are they terrorists or revolutionaries?

2) Is the way in which the force is used acceptable?

3) What is your view of the response of the state to the ELF’s use of force?