

"9/11" AND AFTER

A British View

Sir Michael Howard

© 2002 by Sir Michael Howard

It may seem rather unnecessary to call any assertion by an Englishman “a British view.” The views that I am going to express are probably shared by many Americans, continental Europeans, and Russians, to say nothing of Chinese, Indians, Brazilians, and the rest of the human race. I also suspect that quite a large number of my fellow countrymen may not share them—mine is certainly not *the* British view. But my views have inevitably been shaped, and probably prejudiced, by my national background and personal experience.

The British experience of terrorism on our own soil—mainly, though not entirely, at the hands of the Irish—goes back for well over a hundred years. I myself lived for two decades in London when it was a target of terrorist attacks. The loss of life was mercifully light, but those attacks did kill people, caused untold damage to property, and inflicted immense inconvenience to millions of London commuters. To take only one small but telling example: even today you will not find, in any main-line railway station, either a trash can or a left-luggage locker. They are far too convenient for the placement of Irish Republican Army bombs. In Belfast, of course, the situation was far worse. Many more people were killed, and much property was destroyed. There were times, I admit, seeing collectors for NORAID (the Irish Northern Aid Committee) rattling their boxes in the bars of Boston, when some of us thought that the United States might do just a little more to help us with our own war against terrorism. I make this point not just to have a dig at the Yanks (though this never does any harm) but to remind them that terrorism, in one form or another, has been going on for quite a long time and that the ethics involved are not always straightforward.

But the IRA attacks, of course, were pinpricks compared to the atrocities of 11 September 2001. This was an escalation of terrorist activity as great, and as threatening to mankind, as was the explosion of the first nuclear weapon in comparison to the “conventional” campaigns that had preceded it. We understood very well that “9/11” posed a threat to ourselves, not just to the United States. By “ourselves” I mean not simply the British or even “the West” but every country—irrespective of location, race, or creed—that was attempting to create or maintain civil societies based on democratic consensus, human rights, and the rule of law—all the principles for which we had fought two terrible world wars. The attack on the Pentagon in Washington may have been aimed specifically at the United States, but those on the World Trade Center in New York, a supranational institution housing a multinational population in the greatest polyglot city in the world, was directed against the nerve centre of an international community of which the United States is certainly the heart but that embraces the whole developed world. That was why the whole of that world—in fact, the whole world, with the exception only of a few predictable rogue states—immediately declared its support to the United States in its hour of need.

That is why I must admit to a twinge of annoyance whenever I hear the phrase “America’s War against Terror.” It is not just “America’s War.” We are all in it. Of course, Americans were the major victims, or at least have been up till now. Of course, the Americans are able, with their immense military resources, to make the major contribution in any military campaign that has to be fought. But American citizens were not the only people who suffered on 11 September. The United States is not the only nation with troops in Afghanistan—and if there are not larger contributions from allies, it is because the U.S. high command made it clear from the very beginning, for understandable reasons, that it did not want them.

In any case, armed forces are not the only, or perhaps even the most important, instruments in dealing with terrorism. Intelligence services, police forces, immigration officials, financial managers, diplomats, even theologians, can play, and indeed are playing, an equally important role in the struggle. So to call it “America’s

War,” and even more to wage it as if it were just “America’s War,” is to miss its full significance. It is a profound and global confrontation between, on the one hand, those who believe in all the civilized and civilizing values inherited from the Enlightenment, and on the other those who detest those values and fear them as a threat to their own core beliefs and traditional ways of life. In this confrontation armed force must inevitably play a part, but the struggle can never be won by armed forces alone—not even those of the United States.

So is “war” the right word to describe the conflict? I do not think that it is pedantic to ask this question. Journalists and politicians may have to reduce complex issues to headlines or sound bites; professional students of war and of international relations have to be more precise. The word “war” is dangerously misleading. It suggests a conflict waged against a clearly defined political adversary by armed forces to whose activities everything else is subsidiary; more important, it connotes a conflict that can end in a clear victory. This mind-set is revealed whenever the press speculates about “the next phase” in “the war against terror.” For the media it is a conflict conducted in a series of military campaigns. After Afghanistan, where? Iraq? Somalia? Yemen?

But in fact there need be no “next phase.” The campaign is being waged the whole time, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, all over the world. So long as there are no further outrages, we can be said to be winning it—winning through international police work, diplomacy, financial pressure, and propaganda. Whether another military campaign will be needed remains an open question. If we play our cards properly, we may succeed in rooting out al-Qa‘ida and its associates without any further military action at all.

Still, it is perhaps inevitable that the word “war” should be used as an analogy, in the same way that we speak of a war against disease, or against drugs, or against crime—the mobilisation of all national resources to deal with a great social evil. But these are campaigns that cannot be “won” in any military sense. Crime and disease as such cannot be “defeated.” We have to live with them. They can, however, be reduced to acceptable levels. It is the same with terrorism. Terrorism is a strategy, a means of making war, the classic instrument of the weak against the strong. It is used by desperate and ruthless people who are determined to bring down apparently immovable forces of authority by any methods that lie to hand. It was used long before al-Qa‘ida was ever thought of, and it will continue to be used long after al-Qa‘ida has been forgotten. But if we are to deal with terrorism effectively, we need to know precisely who our adversaries are, how they are motivated, and where they come from.

First, even if a “war” against “terrorism” in general can no more be “won” than a war against disease, particular diseases can nonetheless be controlled or even eliminated. So can particular terrorist groups. Today we are dealing with an exceptionally dangerous network of transnational conspirators using all the traditional instruments of terrorism. They strike at soft targets. Their object is to gain publicity for their cause, to demoralise and discredit established authorities, and to gain popular support by provoking them into overreaction. Governments should regard them as criminals—criminals of a particularly dangerous kind. The appropriate instruments for dealing with them will be intelligence services and police, backed where necessary by special warfare units. The use of regular armed forces should be seen as a last resort, especially if one is dealing with urban terrorists. It is one thing to conduct a campaign in the sparsely inhabited mountains of Afghanistan or the jungles of Malaya. It is quite another to do so in the streets of a modern city, whether Londonderry or Jenin. In such an environment, armies, however hard they may try to exercise restraint, are bound to cause collateral damage that plays into the hands of terrorist propaganda. In plain English, a great many innocent people—small children, pregnant women, the elderly, the helpless—will be killed. The British learned all about this in Northern Ireland. The Israeli defence forces are experiencing this in dealing with Palestinian terrorists today. Such a campaign gives the terrorists exactly the kind of publicity, and belligerent status, that they need.

If terrorists can provoke the government to using regular armed forces against them, they have already taken a very important trick. They have been promoted to the status of “freedom fighters,” a “liberation army,” and may win popular support from sympathisers all over the world. Even if they are defeated, their glorious memory will inspire their successors. Pictures of Che Guevara adorned the walls of student dormitories for a generation, and I am afraid that images of Osama bin Laden will occupy the same place of honour in Islamic equivalents for quite as long.

Nonetheless, there are times when one cannot avoid the use of military force. It has to be used when the

terrorists are able to operate on too large a scale to be dealt with by normal policing methods, as was the case in Ireland and is now in Israel. It has to be used when enemies establish themselves in territory that is virtually “no-man’s-land.” Finally, it has to be used when they enjoy the protection of another sovereign state.

For the flushing of terrorists or their equivalents out of no-man’s-land we have plenty of historical precedent. The Caribbean was a nest of pirates until cleaned up in the eighteenth century. The coasts of the Mediterranean were terrorised by Barbary pirates until the U.S. Marine Corps landed on the shores of Tripoli. Today “failed states” like Yemen and Somalia cannot prevent their territory being used as terrorist bases, and armed force must be used to flush such foes out. Even states that in other respects may be achieving limited success in establishing the rule of law, such as Colombia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, may need help in eliminating terrorist elements on their own territory. When a terrorist organization enjoys the open protection and support of another sovereign state, as was the case with al-Qa‘ida and the ruling government of Afghanistan, there is a serious *casus belli*, and a regular war may be the only way to bring the criminals to justice. (Whether it is always wise to do so is another matter. In 1914 the Austrian government took advantage of that excuse to declare war on Serbia and thereby caused a world war. Also, it is not at all obvious that the best way of dealing with IRA supporters in the United States would have been for the British to burn down the White House again.)

The struggle against a global terrorist network, then, though it may be misleading to call it a war, may involve specific wars. When it does involve such a war, if we are to retain our self-respect and the regard of the international community as a whole, we should conduct it in accordance with the obligations and constraints that the civilized world has developed for armed conflicts over the past three hundred years. The war should not be undertaken unless legitimized by general international support. In conducting it, care should be taken to avoid collateral damage. Enemy forces should be given the protection of the Geneva Conventions that we expect for our own. The status of members of terrorist organizations that do not belong to the armed forces of the enemy should be defined, and individuals suspected of criminal acts should be tried and judged accordingly. Not least important, we should have a clear vision of the long-term objective of the war; victory in the field must be converted into a stable peace. War, in short, is a serious matter, not just a manhunt on a rather larger scale.

That is why there was so much hesitation in the international community as a whole, not least in the United Kingdom, when the president of the United States linked the campaign against the terrorist network responsible for the atrocities of 11 September with a broader “[axis of evil](#),” consisting primarily of countries hostile to the United States that are developing “weapons of mass destruction”—Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. These are all very different cases, and each of them needs to be considered on its merits. There is some evidence linking Saddam Hussein with al-Qa‘ida, but no more than points to Libya, or Syria, or even Saudi Arabia. The real charge against Saddam is that he is continuing to develop weapons of mass destruction in defiance of United Nations prohibition, and he should certainly be stopped—but that is rather a different matter. In the case of Iran there is a stronger connection with al-Qa‘ida, which enjoys the open support of the mullahs; however, in that country modernising and Western-leaning elements have made huge headway since the days of the Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, and to condemn their entire nation as “evil” does little to help them. As for North Korea, though it is a very rogue state indeed, linking it with the Islamic fundamentalism that inspired the perpetrators of “9/11” has caused general bewilderment.

Certainly, all three are problem states that pose dangers to global stability, but opinions quite justifiably differ as to how urgent are the threats they respectively pose and how they can best be dealt with. Their connection with the “9/11” atrocity is at best remote, and “regime changes” in them could not prevent a new such outrage. There is a real danger that in enlarging the objective of its campaign from a war against a specific terrorist organization to a general and almost indefinable “War against Terror,” the United States is not only losing the support of many of its friends and necessary allies but becoming distracted from the real long-term threat that emerged in Manhattan, the Pentagon, and rural Pennsylvania on 11 September. That horrific event was like the sudden eruption of a flame from a fire that had long been smouldering underground. It will continue to smoulder whatever happens to Saddam Hussein.

Although terrorism, like war itself, is probably as old as mankind, there are two particularly alarming features of the present situation. The first is the new vulnerability to terrorist attack of our fragile and interdependent societies. The destruction of the twin towers and the gouging of the Pentagon were horrific and spectacular, but

the actual damage caused was finite. The massacre of some three thousand people was horrific and spectacular enough, but if nuclear or chemical weapons had been used the death toll would have been at least ten times as great. The disruption of world trade was traumatic, but it was temporary and minimal; skilful infestation of global computer networks could have magnified and prolonged that disruption indefinitely. The terrorist attacks of 11 September constituted a single if terrible act; a linked series of such catastrophes could have caused widespread panic, economic crisis, and political turbulence on a scale that could make democratic government almost impossible.

Dystopian scenarios of a kind hitherto confined to Hollywood have now become real possibilities, if not yet probabilities. They could all be caused, like the destruction of the twin towers, by conspiratorial networks that need no state sponsorship to provide them with weapons, expertise, finance, or motivation. These “nonstate actors” (to use political-science jargon) are nourished and supported by the very societies they are attempting to destroy. Their members have been educated in Western universities, trained in Western laboratories and flying schools, and financed, however unwittingly, by global consortiums. They are not tools of Saddam Hussein or anyone else. We have bred and educated them ourselves. One can buy box-cutters and airway schedules nearer home than Baghdad, Tehran, or Pyongyang.

The second feature of this breed of terrorists is even more disquieting—their motivation. Normally, terrorism has been a method used to achieve a specific political objective. In nineteenth-century Russia, where the technique was invented, the goal was the overthrow of the tsarist regime. In the Ireland of Sinn Fein it was liberation from British rule. In British-ruled Palestine in the 1940s, the terrorist tactics of Irgun and the Stern Gang were highly effective in securing the establishment of a Jewish state. Once their objective is achieved, such terrorists—now transformed into “freedom fighters”—are welcomed into the community of nations and their leaders become respected heads of state, chatting affably with American presidents on the lawn of the White House. The terrorist activities of contemporary Islamic fundamentalists are certainly linked to one particular political struggle—what they see as the attempt of the Palestinians to achieve independent statehood and recognition, which is a struggle that, in spite of the methods they use, enjoys a wide measure of support throughout the Islamic world. But even if that attempt were successful and President Arafat were once again received in the White House, this time as head of a fully fledged Palestinian state, the campaign of the fundamentalists would not come to an end. The roots of the campaign go far deeper, and the objectives of the terrorists are far more ambitious. The fundamentalist campaign is rooted in a visceral hatred and contempt for Western civilization as such and resentment at its global ascendancy. The object of the extremists is to destroy it altogether.

Here this analysis becomes influenced not so much by a British as a European background—or rather, by European history. This teaches that there is nothing new about such hatred and that it is not peculiar to Islam. It originated in Europe two centuries ago in reaction to the whole process of what is loosely known as the Enlightenment. It was a protest against the erosion of traditional values and authorities by the rationalism, the secularism, and the freethinking that both underlay and were empowered by the American and French Revolutions. It gained further strength in the nineteenth century as industrialisation and modernisation transformed European society, creating general disorientation and alienation that was to be exploited by extreme forces on both the Left and the Right. By the beginning of the twentieth century it was reinforced by mounting alarm at the development of a global economy that, in spite of the growth of democracy, seemed to place the destinies of millions in the hands of impersonal and irresponsible forces beyond the control of national governments. It was, in short, a cry of rage against the whole seemingly irresistible process that has resulted from the dissolution of traditional constraints on thought and enterprise and the release of the dynamic forces of industrial development collectively known as “capitalism.” It was to provide the driving force behind both fascism and communism, and it was to be one of the underlying causes of the Second, if not indeed the First, World War.

The experience of Europe in the nineteenth century was to be repeated in the twentieth and continues today throughout what is still, for want of a better label, described as the “third world.” There also industrialisation has led to urbanisation, with the resulting breakdown of traditional authority and the destruction of cultures rooted in tribal rule and land tenure. There also medical advances, by reducing the death rate, have led to unprecedented increases in the population. There also a surplus population has fled from the countryside to overcrowded cities, and from the cities to, where possible, overseas. But there the similarity ends. In the nineteenth century there was a New World prepared to accept immigrants on an unlimited scale. Today there is not. The third world has to absorb its own surplus population, as best it can.

In nineteenth-century Europe the immiseration of the Industrial Revolution was certainly eased by emigration, but it was eventually conquered by the very economic development that had originally caused it. Market economies overcame their teething troubles and converted their hungry masses into consumers with money in their pockets. State activities expanded to curb the excesses of the market and to care for its casualties. Today the general assumption in the West is that the problems of the third world, with the help of Western capital and technology, will ultimately be solved by the same process—the creation of thriving national economies that will absorb surplus labour and transform the unemployed masses into prosperous consumers, within a stable infrastructure provided by an efficient and uncorrupt state.

The trouble is that this very goal—that of a prosperous materialist society with religion as an optional extra—appalls Islamic fundamentalists, as well as many Muslims who are not fundamentalists. They regard Western society not as a model to be imitated but as an awful warning, a Sodom and Gomorrah, an example of how mankind should *not* live. Instead they embrace a heroic anticulture, one that has much in common with the European ideologues who protested against the decadence of Western materialism and preached redemption of mankind through war; they hold it, however, with a fanaticism possible only to those who believe that they will receive their reward in an afterlife. Like fascism and communism, their creed appeals to the idealistic young, especially those who feel rejected by the society around them, as do all too many immigrants in the cities of Europe. Like fascism and communism, it attracts all who are disillusioned with the promises of liberal capitalism or are suffering from its defects.

It is only natural that this appeal should be most effective among peoples for whom the world of Western capitalism is not only profoundly alien and offensive in itself—with its godlessness, its shamelessness, its materialism, and its blatant vulgarity—but worse, seems to be winning, bulldozing away the world of their ancestors and the values that held their societies together for aeons. For them the enemy is not just Western capitalism as such but its powerhouse, the United States, the Great Satan. More specifically, it is those elements within Islamic societies that appear to be cooperating with it.

Nevertheless—and this cannot be too often or too strongly stressed—there is as little sympathy in the Islamic world for the methods and objectives of the terrorists as there is in the West. Whatever their self-appointed spokesmen may say, the rising expectations of the Islamic peoples are almost certainly focused on achieving the kind of material well-being that the West ultimately promises (and the terrorists reject), so long as that goal remains compatible with their core cultural beliefs. Al-Qa'ida and its associates are exactly the kind of puritanical iconoclasts who emerge in all revolutionary situations and try to remould humanity to fit their own ideal worlds. In unstable societies the ruthlessness and fanaticism of such people bring them to the fore and enable them, however briefly, to seize power and do an untold amount of harm.

So the global reach of contemporary terrorists should not blind us to the fact that their strength derives from the general instability of contemporary Islamic societies and that therefore the problem, ultimately, is one for Islam itself. If there is indeed “a war against terrorism,” it has to be fought and won within the Islamic world. The role of the West must be to support and encourage those who are fighting that war, and we must take care that we do nothing to make their task more difficult.

This will not be easy. How can we support our friends in the Islamic world, those who are seeking their own path to modernisation, without making them look like Western stooges, betraying their own cultures? How should we treat their leaders who are as hostile to—and as threatened by—Islamic fundamentalism as we are but who use what we regard as unacceptable methods to suppress it? How can we avoid being associated with the wealthy elements in Islamic countries that are most resistant to the social changes that alone can make possible the spread and acceptance of Western ideas?

These are all problems for the long run. What about the short?

There are two paradigms for dealing with “international terrorism,” both equally misleading. One is the liberal ideal, held by well-meaning Europeans and perhaps a good many well-meaning Americans as well. According to this, international terrorists should be dealt with by police action under the auspices of the United Nations. Any military action should be conducted by UN forces, and suspected terrorists should be brought to trial before an

international court. The other is rather more popular in the United States—“America’s War,” a private fight conducted by the armed forces of the United States against almost cosmic forces of evil. In this conflict no holds are barred; America must do “whatever it takes” to destroy those forces. The support of the outside world is welcomed, indeed expected—as President Bush put it, “[Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists](#)”—but the war will be waged and won by Americans without any interference by well-intentioned but wimpish allies, condemnation by woolly-minded do-gooders, or constraints imposed by outmoded concepts of international law. The first of these paradigms, the liberal ideal, may be desirable, but is quite unrealistic. Apart from anything else, in their present mood the American people are simply not prepared to subject themselves to any international authority or to hand over the perpetrators of the “9/11” massacre to any foreign jurisdiction. In any case, the record shows that “the international community” as such is quite unable to organize any serious military intervention unless the United States not only supports it but plays a leading role. Whether the other nations involved like it or not, the campaign against international terrorism must be conducted on terms acceptable to, though not necessarily dictated by, the United States, and in waging it American resources will be indispensable.

The other view, “America’s War,” may be realistic, but it is both undesirable and likely to be counterproductive. By nationalising the war in this manner, there is a real danger that the United States will antagonise the entire Moslem world, lose the support of its natural allies in the West, and play into the hands of its former opponents, at present quiescent but by no means eliminated, in Russia and the People’s Republic of China. This would be a profound tragedy. In 1945 the United States was able to convert a wartime alliance into a framework for world governance capable of embracing its former enemies and surviving the tensions and trials of the Cold War. In 1990 its rapid liquidation of the Cold War and generosity to its former adversaries held out genuine promise of a New World Order. The impact of “9/11” seemed to provide just such another catalytic moment. America’s traditional rivals and adversaries fell over one another in offering support, which was eagerly accepted. It looked as if a genuine world community was being forged, one of entirely new range and strength. Out of the evil done on 11 September, it seemed, unprecedented good might come. It still might, and it still should.

But it will only come if the United States abandons its unilateral approach to the handling of international terrorism and recognises that the problem can effectively be dealt with only by the international community that America has done so much to create—a community embracing the bulk of the Islamic world—and that still needs American leadership if it is to function effectively.

There is considerable risk that otherwise, however effective America’s armed forces may prove in the field and however many “regime changes” they may precipitate, the United States may end up not only alienating its traditional allies but indefinitely facing a sullen and hostile Islamic world where terrorists continue to breed prolifically and the supporters of the West live in a state of permanent siege. It would be a world in which, to my own perhaps parochial perspective, countries like Britain with large Islamic minorities will live under a perpetual shadow of race war. Is it too much to hope that I shall live to see a world where it is safe to have trash cans in our railway stations?

