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Nonviolence versus terrorism

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The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 were an enormous setback for the cause of nonviolence. They provided a stimulus and ostensible justification for a spiral of violence in which nonviolent alternatives are marginalised. Nonviolence offers numerous ways to oppose and prevent terrorism, but such responses are totally at odds with the way government leaders conceive the world.

At first glance, there is no reason why the attacks should undermine nonviolent approaches in the slightest. After all, proponents of nonviolence unanimously condemned the attacks, just as they have consistently promoted nonviolent methods of struggle as an alternative to violence. The problem is that nonviolent methods of challenging violence and oppression have little visibility or credibility within governments or mainstream media, where the only credible response to terrorism is seen as military attack, surveillance and repression.

At the core of nonviolent action is political jiu-jitsu (Sharp, 1973). If nonviolent activists circulate a petition, join a rally, go on strike or hold a vigil and are countered by violence, such as beatings or killings,

observers are likely to give increased support for the activists. Violence used against nonviolent protesters is widely seen as unjust and rebounds against those who use violence. Through political jiu-jitsu, activists can use the violence of their opponents to build support and undermine their opponents' power.

Even a little violence on the side of the activists greatly weakens political jiu-jitsu. This is why police often use infiltrators to provoke violence by protesters, thereby legitimising police violence, even when there is a great inequality in the two sides' capacity for and use of violence. During the intifada of 1987-1993, Palestinians who threw stones against Israeli guns and tanks reduced the perception of a qualitative difference between the two sides.

So what happens is that violence legitimates counterviolence. The 11 September attacks have legitimated massive counterviolence, most obviously in Afghanistan but also in the form of surveillance and repression of social activists everywhere. US government leaders have rhetorically linked terrorism and dissent, helping to legitimate attacks on civil liberties, including ways of undermining and countering nonviolent protest.

The 11 September attacks reveal in stark form how counterproductive violence is for promoting justice and equality. They have provided the ideal pretext for massive expansion in apparatuses for 'state security,' including spying, detention, disruption and torture. By the same token, the US government's military actions will provoke greater support for terrorist approaches. What results is a type of 'violence race,' analogous to military races.

Nonviolence against Terrorism

One way that nonviolent approaches can be mobilised against terrorism is by reducing the vulnerability of high-technology societies to sabotage and terrorism. Today, it requires only a small amount of equipment and a few knowledgeable people to bring down a large dam, a power plant or an oil refinery. A few computer programmers can create chaos by disrupting telecommunications or even just traffic lights in a large

city. Large industrial plants can be brought to a halt by damage in key places.

Industrial society's vulnerability to sabotage provides a justification for military defence, since enemy troops cannot be allowed access to key installations.

Imagine, on the other hand, a society relying on nonviolent methods for defence. It would be unwise to rely on large power plants, fertiliser plants or indeed any other facility that could be easily destroyed or occupied to hold a community to ransom. Instead, technologies would need to be designed or chosen to be robust against attack. Instead of large power plants, energy efficiency and small-scale renewable energy sources could be used. Microhydro would reduce vulnerability compared to large dams. Organic farming would be far less vulnerable than monocultures. This sort of analysis can be applied to a range of technologies (Martin, 2001).

In the light of the 11 September attacks, it seems that it would be better to promote small-scale buildings rather than giant office blocks and to carefully consider the use of air transport. But beyond reducing physical vulnerability, technologies should be chosen and designed to foster a greater sense of community solidarity which will in turn increase the capacity for nonviolent struggle. For example, office buildings that encourage workers to get to know each other and work together are better for a nonviolent defence than ones that foster isolation and alienation.

A second nonviolent option against terrorism is timely awareness of the possibility of attacks so that steps can be taken to prevent them. Conventionally this is called 'intelligence,' which involves collecting information and drawing conclusions from it. The 11 September attacks revealed a massive failure of conventional intelligence despite annual expenditures of tens of billions of dollars.

A forthcoming study by Dutch researcher Giliam de Valk suggests a nonviolent 'intelligence system' would do better. He compares the performance of Dutch government intelligence services with the performance of the Shipping Research Bureau (1995), a non-government operation that studied violations of UN resolutions against South Africa's apartheid regime in the 1980s. The Shipping Research Bureau did far

better according to a whole range of criteria.

One of the big problems with spy operations is that they operate in secrecy. This reduces communication within agencies as well as with outsiders, and enables inadequate thinking or incompetence to persist. The Shipping Research Bureau, because it was open, could better verify information by seeking reactions from opponents such as shipping companies. It published its reports and used subsequent criticism to learn from its mistakes rather than covering them up. The Bureau's public credibility also enhanced its information gathering capacity: in its final years of operation, it was able to obtain information from within apartheid South Africa itself.

An open nonviolent intelligence system would do better than the US National Security Agency, CIA and FBI. It could hardly do worse than the failures of conventional intelligence - or political controls over intelligence - prior to 11 September. An open operation would be far more accountable to the public and could not so easily become a tool of state elites. Giliam de Valk thinks that there should be several open intelligence agencies, with competition between them to guard against politically biased or self-serving reports.

A third crucial dimension to a nonviolence strategy against terrorism is to challenge the conditions that foster terrorism, including repressive regimes, poverty, injustice, inequality, exploitation, neocolonialism and torture. This is familiar territory to nonviolent activists who have played key roles in opposing apartheid in South Africa, communist repression in Eastern Europe and military dictatorships in several continents (Ackerman and DuVall, 2000). Not all struggles are successful but many are.

It is remarkable that nonviolent action is ever successful considering what it is up against. Hundreds of billions of dollars are spent on militaries every year, with millions of soldiers in uniform and the most sophisticated technologies available developed by a significant proportion of the world's scientists and engineers. Added to this is production of what can be called the 'technology of repression,' including equipment and training for surveillance, crowd control and torture. Set against this enormous and powerful system for institutionalised violence and social control

are networks of action groups with relatively little money, training or productive capacity.

A fourth component of a nonviolence strategy against terrorism works by showing results, namely that nonviolent approaches are more effective than terrorism in overcoming oppression and repression. Violence doesn't seem all that effective as a strategy for challengers: there is not a single case where popular armed struggle has toppled the government of an industrialised country. Perhaps the attraction of violence has less to do with proven or likely effectiveness and more to do with symbolic expression of masculine virility or attachment to secrecy, hierarchy and exclusionary politics. How to challenge the counterproductive allure of revolutionary violence is one of the great challenges for nonviolent communication. For example, in the Middle East there are excellent nonviolent actions and strategies (Crow et al., 1990; Dajani, 1994) but such efforts are overshadowed by violent approaches.

Nonviolence against Hypocrisy

Politicians and others define and think about terrorism in a way that excludes the role of 'respectable' states in terrorism. Terrorism is commonly defined as the use of violence by nonstate groups and so-called 'rogue states' against civilians for political purposes. This is a very selective, indeed incoherent, usage (Gearty, 1997). Dictionaries define terrorism more generically as, for example, 'an organised system of intimidation, especially for political ends' or 'the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion' or 'domination or coercion by intimidation.'

By such definitions, governments can be involved in terrorism. The evidence is that state terrorism is far greater than non-state terrorism, but state terrorism, except in the case of US-government-defined 'rogue states,' receives little attention (Campbell and Brenner, 2000; Herman, 1982; Stohl and Lopez, 1984). Many methods of warfare, such as bombing of civilians or use of anti-personnel weapons, are terroristic. Indeed, strategic bombing has similarities with genocide (Markusen and Kopf, 1995). It is well documented that the US and other western governments have

repeatedly used, sponsored, supported or tolerated terrorism and regimes that use it (Blum, 2000; Chomsky and Herman, 1979). For example, US bombing in the Southeast Asian war killed hundreds of thousands of civilians. The US and many other governments supported Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq during the 1980s despite its use of torture and chemical warfare. Via Pakistan's intelligence service, the CIA supported the mujahideen in Afghanistan from the 1980s onwards. This included support for bin Laden's network (Johnson, 2000). In the US government's attack on Afghanistan after 11 September, it has forged alliances with governments and forces known for serious human rights abuses, including Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan's Northern Alliance.

One way for nonviolent activists to respond to the self-interested mindsets of governments about terrorism is to refuse to accept their antiterrorist agendas and instead make independent assessments of terror and repression. Rather than (or as well as) using nonviolent action against the Gulf War, a more timely intervention would have been a programme of action against Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1980s, and against support for the regime by the US and many other governments.

A more timely intervention against the 11 September attacks and the subsequent war in Afghanistan was possible. The antecedents grew out of the cold war confrontation between the US and Soviet governments, one facet of which was superpower rivalry in Afghanistan, including longstanding Soviet influence in the country, CIA support for opposition groups, the 1979 Soviet invasion and subsequent CIA support for mujahideen opponents, including al-Qaeda. Thus there were many opportunities for nonviolent intervention against Soviet and US war-making and support for terrorist groups.

The most significant actual contribution in this context was the spontaneous and successful nonviolent resistance to the 1991 Soviet coup, a resistance that helped bring an end to the Soviet Union. What has been lacking is a powerful, systematic programme of nonviolent action against repression and terrorism in Afghanistan over the past several decades. This is not a criticism of the nonviolence movement but rather a comment on gross disparity between resources

available for military forces and repression compared to those available for nonviolent action.

What to do?

In the aftermath of 11 September, there were many eloquent commentaries criticising the US government's rush into a 'war on terrorism.' However, much of this writing seemed written for governments, as authors either said how counterproductive or unethical it would be to bomb civilians or encouraged the addressing of longstanding sources of grievance (such as the treatment of Palestinians). While I agree with the arguments, pleas to governments are unlikely to have much impact. After all, peace activists have been arguing for decades that war and violence are counterproductive, but seldom do government leaders take any notice. In commentaries about 11 September, little has been said about what individuals can do besides protest against government policy.

So, what is a supporter of nonviolence to do in the aftermath of 11 September? Possibilities mentioned here include supporting technologies that are less vulnerable to attack, supporting nonviolent intelligence operations, documenting and promoting the advantages of nonviolent action compared to terrorism, and using nonviolent action against repression and oppression.

Another option is to not be distracted by the rhetoric of the 'war on terrorism' but instead to carefully assess all situations involving violence, including state terrorism, and act where the most impact can be made. This might include exposing the hypocrisy of governments when they point the finger only at terrorism by others and never at their own roles in manufacturing and exporting weapons and torture equipment, in training soldiers and torturers, in propping up dictatorships and undermining democracies, and in fighting wars.

It is wise for nonviolent activists to listen to diverse voices in the debates that followed 11 September. But should the nonviolence movement's agenda be determined by the attacks and the 'war on terrorism'? Or is it better for individuals and groups to keep doing the things that they think will be effective?

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Additional comments by Giliam de Valk

I agree that it is vital to oppose the conditions that foster terrorism. Another possibility for achieving this is implementation of a so-called human rights paragraph. The idea is that if Western security gives support to a third party - to train them or supply them with weapons or intelligence - this third party has to sign a statement supporting human rights. Since Western security often operates in secrecy, this is far from a complete remedy. Its main function would follow the working of the Helsinki Agreements on human rights. Time after time, dissident and human rights groups in communist Eastern Europe referred to the Helsinki Agreements. Like those agreements, a human rights paragraph could promote a change in thinking among citizens, including some working within the security apparatus.

The idea of 'asymmetric conflict' - a conflict between parties with vastly different resources - can provide insight into terrorism and responses to it. When the CIA helped and trained networks and groups in Afghanistan, these groups fought an asymmetric conflict with the Soviets: guerrilla warfare. When finally some of those groups turned against the US, this guerrilla approach was transformed into terrorism, which is even more asymmetric than guerrilla warfare.

I see a tension. Nonviolence is asymmetric to violence. If you opt for nonviolence in relation to the 11 September attacks, you opt for an answer that is of a different nature than the stimulus for the attacks (military support for guerrillas). While I agree that nonviolence has great potential for preventing terrorism, there is a tension in relation to the inner logic of cause and effect if you focus on the phases

afterward.

I doubt that the attacks would have taken place if Western security had not dealt the way it did with the networks that finally turned against the US. If the CIA - created to support and defend democratic legal order - had operated with groups that shared these values, an intervention in Afghanistan would not have occurred as it did.

Still, we need to develop the capacity for nonviolence. In general, I agree with the need to discuss terrorism in relation to nonviolence and think that the major advantages are related to prevention.

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