Lecture 2: What is Terrorism?

Is this man a “Terrorist” or a “Freedom Fighter?”
International Terrorism: What is Terrorism?

A. Dr. Jim Ray (2010) argues that terrorism has been around for a long time—“terrorist acts were quite common hundreds of years ago”

B. Other experts note that terrorism is a tactic of the powerless against the powerful
What is Terrorism?


   a. Nye notes that terrorism was used by anarchists and other revolutionaries in the 19th century; our text also suggests that WWI was in part sparked by an act of terrorism

   b. Kegley & Wittkopf (p434) note that “terrorism was well known in ancient times, as evident in the assassination of tyrants in ancient Greece and Rome, and killings of zealots in Palestine and the Hashashin of medieval Islam”

   c. The definition of terrorism has also changed a great deal over time, so its meaning seems to shift with the times...
What is Terrorism?

C. As noted on the previous slide, one reason terrorism is difficult to understand is that its definition has changed with the times:

1) Originally, it was defined during the 18th century (French Revolution’s “reign of terror”) as violent actions taken by those in control of the state (ie “violence from above”) against the aristocracy or those seen as enemies of the state…

2) During the 19th century, the definition expanded to include violence against those in power from those not in control of the state. By the end of the 1800s, mostly b/c of bombings and assassinations by anarchists, terrorism was primarily associated with anti-state, anti-government violence

3) In the 20th century terrorism even more so came to mean political violence against those in power from those “below” (ie “violence from below”)...
What is Terrorism?

D. Today we live in what former Harvard Professor and current Sec Def Ashton Carter calls “the age of catastrophic terrorism”

E. It is an era where terrorist orgs such as al Qaeda (AQ) want access to WMD in order to kill as many of its enemy (us) as possible
What is Terrorism?
F. When most people use the term “terrorism” they usually think violence, fear, death, destruction, suicide bombers, etc.
What is Terrorism?
G. One thing that gets in the way of trying to define terrorism is the old “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” issue. For example,

1. to Israelis, Palestinians who detonate bombs which kill innocent Israelis are terrorists

2. Palestinians say they are simply resisting Israeli occupation and brutality and the responses by the Israeli govt. were the deliberate killing of innocent Palestinian civilians (i.e., they see it as terrorism)

3. Given this reality, if the word “terrorism” had existed in 1776, probably our very own founding father’s would have been labeled by British authorities as “terrorists”
What is Terrorism?

H. There is no consensus definition in the field of terrorism studies.

I. Even the United Nations has no definition for terrorism (no consensus amongst members is apparently possible)

J. To confuse matters even more, the Obama administration is refusing to use the phrase “terrorism” and instead is using the term “man-caused” disasters (this is at the directive of the Secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano)
What is Terrorism?

K. Professor Walter Laqueur explains there are over 100 different academic and definitions of terrorism in the field…

L. Some say that terrorism is a tactic or a strategy, so it is impossible to really explain it…

M. I do think it is important though to identify what terrorism is if nothing else to distinguish it from other forms of violence
What is Terrorism?

N. In Chapter 1 (p. 3) of our textbook, Cindy Combs explains that b/c terrorism is “a political as well as a legal and military issue, its definition has been slow to evolve.”

O. She (p. 3) argues that “few of them are of sufficient legal scholarship to be useful in international law, and most of those that are legally useful lack the necessary ambiguity for political acceptance”

P. She agrees with Professor Ray that terrorism “is not a modern phenomenon”
What is Terrorism?
Q. Dr. Combs (p. 4) makes the interesting point that “democracies, throughout history, have been the effective targets of terrorist attacks, because [they] must ‘play by the rules’ and thus cannot respond in comparable fashion to terrorist attacks [unlike] autocracies and totalitarian systems…”
R. I would add a few caveats: first, democracies also make good targets because they are open and free, thus terrorists can move freely within such societies;

Second, democracies like the U.S., France, and Great Britain are specifically targeted by terrorist organizations not simply because they must “play by the rules” and because they are “open” but also because their foreign policies are seen by terrorists as inimical to their interests
What is Terrorism?

S. As noted earlier in this lecture, there isn’t even a general consensus in the UN about a common definition: Arab states have blocked most efforts to do so b/c they want Palestinians groups exempted from being labeled terrorists…

T. Western states, like the US, block any efforts at labeling its allies, like Israel, as terrorists (or state sponsors of terrorism)
1. Title 22 of the U.S. Legal Code defines terrorism as:

“premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents...The term ‘international terrorism’ means terrorism involving citizens or the territory of more than one country”
2. FBI Definition:
“the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives”
3. **Department of Defense:**

“Terrorism is the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological” in nature
What is Terrorism?

4. According to terrorism expert, Bruce Hoffman (2006), there are actually 109 different, distinct definitions of “terrorism”
5. Another prominent scholar in the field, Walter Laqueuer (2004, notes that “it is impossible to define terrorism and fruitless to attempt to cobble together a truly comprehensive definition”
6. Hoffman (2006: 34) does note that “if we cannot define terrorism, then we can at least usefully distinguish it from other types of violence and identify the characteristics that make terrorism the distinct phenomenon of political violence that it is”
d. In other words, terrorism is distinct and discretely different than, say guerrilla war or insurgency (they aren’t synonymous)
What is Terrorism?
*The Latin root of the term terrorism is *terrere*, which means “to frighten”
As we will come to see today and in the coming weeks, terrorism is by nature a political act.

-Bruce Hoffman (2006: 37) argues “the terrorists goal is ineluctably political-to change or fundamentally alter a political system through his violent act”
This is inherently different from the lunatic assassin’s goal which is always idiosyncratic, completely egocentric and deeply personal …

a. for example, John Hinckley tried to kill President Reagan in 1981 to impress the actress Jody Foster
What is Terrorism?
Marc’s Definition of Terrorism (contains 4 elements)
1) First, Terrorism is at root a violent act
   a. which separates it from sit-ins, protests, etc
2) Second, it has a political, religious, or ideological motivation or goal
3) Third, it is perpetrated against innocents
4) Fourth, it is staged to be played before an audience whose reaction of fear & terror is the desired result
*Therefore, terrorism is an act of violence perpetrated on innocent people to evoke fear/terror in a desired audience, for political ends.
**As Dr. Combs (p. 7-8) suggests, “victims are chosen...not because of their personal guilt but because their deaths...will shock the...political or military audience”**
***This eliminates postal workers, soccer hooligans, bad santas, lunatics on a killing spree etc from the label of terrorist***
So...What is Terrorism?
*Dr. Combs (p. 5) says that “...certain types of actions can be identified as terrorism, regardless of who commits them, for however noble a cause”
**IOWs, the focus should be on behavior and NOT on WHO or WHAT GROUP is committing that action.

The focus is on violence perpetrated against civilian non-combatants for political, religious, or ideological ends...
Conclusion

V. As you can see from this discussion, a definition for the term “terrorism” isn’t easy to come by…

a. But by focusing on discrete, measurable actions and NOT the so-called terrorists themselves, we can avoid the “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” debate

and

b. try to embrace an actual definition of the term that allows us to distinguish terrorism from other forms of political violence