

JUNE 08, 2003

Trust, war and terrorism

In a democracy, leaders must earn and retain the public's trust. No matter how loudly those leaders proclaim their dedication to fighting terrorism, we must not flinch from examining whether they are trustworthy. On March 17, 2003, in a major address to the American people, President George W. Bush declared: "Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised." On April 10, in a televised message to the people of Iraq, Prime Minister Tony Blair said: "We did not want this war. But in refusing to give up his weapons of mass destruction, Saddam gave us no choice but to act."

Before and during the war on Iraq, we heard many other such statements from top officials in Washington and London. Ostensibly they justified the war.

Among the horrors of that war are weapons known as cluster bombs. I use the present tense because now – months after the Pentagon and the British military dropped thousands of cluster bombs on Iraq – they continue to explode, sometimes in the hands of children who pick them up. At high velocity, those bombs fire shards that slice into human flesh.

We might say that the cluster bombs are terrifying weapons. We might say that they – and the leaders who authorized their use – are still terrorizing people in Iraq.

In the long run, if leaders want to gain and maintain trust, it's helpful for their logic to be reasonably plausible rather than Orwellian. But when there is no single standard that reliably condemns "terrorism," then the word serves as a political football rather than a term to be used with integrity. Unfortunately, in common usage of the word, it is not the wanton cruelty or the magnitude of murderous actions that determines condemnation, but rather the nationalistic and political contexts of those actions.

It would be bad enough if the leaders of the Washington-London axis of "anti-terrorism" were merely duplicitous in their rationales for going to war. Or it would be bad enough if those leaders were honest about their reasons while ordering their own activities that terrorize civilians. But flagrant dishonesty is integral to broader and

deeper problems with basic policies that tacitly distinguish between "worthy" and "unworthy" victims – that encourage us, in effect, to ask for whom the bell tolls. The official guidance needn't be explicit to be well understood or at least widely internalised: Do not let too much empathy move in unauthorised directions.

For instance: One searches in vain for a record of Washington condemning its ally Turkey while, in recent years, Turkey's government drove millions of Kurdish people from their homes, destroyed thousands of villages, killed many thousands of Kurds and inflicted horrific torture. To take another example: The war on Iraq has been praised for closing down the regime's torture chambers. Meanwhile, billions of dollars in aid continue to flow from Washington to the Egyptian government, which operates torture chambers for political prisoners. One might think that an appropriate way to oppose torture would be to stop financing it.

President Bush routinely denounces terrorists who engage in deadly attacks that take the lives of Israeli civilians. But he never applies similar denunciations to the U.S.-backed Israeli government leaders, who often order attacks that predictably take the lives of Palestinian civilians.

Years before the crime against humanity known as 9/11, the scholar Eqbal Ahmed pointed out: "A superpower cannot promote terror in one place and reasonably expect to discourage terrorism in another place. It won't work in this shrunken world." To deserve public trust, anything called a "war on terrorism" would need to be guided by genuine moral precepts rather than public relations maneuvers to mask ongoing patterns of hypocrisy.

On May 28, a report by Amnesty International condemned the American and British governments for a so-called war on terror that actually emboldens many regimes to engage in terrible abuses of human rights. Amnesty's Secretary-General Irene Khan said that "what would have been unacceptable on September 10, 2001, is now becoming almost the norm" – while Washington promotes "a new doctrine of human rights a la carte." She added: "The United States continues to pick and choose which bits of its obligations under international law it will use, and when it will use them."

Worldwide, it will be impossible to sustain public trust in anti-terrorist efforts without adhering to standards that consistently reject terrorism. Launching aggressive wars and providing massive support to abusers of human rights are themselves acts of terrorism – by the strong. They are sure to heighten rage and provoke acts of terrorism by the weak.

When a country – particularly a democracy – goes to war, the consent of the

governed lubricates the machinery of killing. Silence is a key form of co-operation, but the war-making system does not insist on quietude or agreement. Mere passivity or self-restraint will suffice.

The world is now shadowed by a special relationship between two governments – the superpower and its leading enabler. In the name of moral leadership, they utilize deception. In the name of peace, they inflict war. In the name of fighting terrorism, they engage in terrorism. Such policies demand trust but deserve unyielding opposition. ■

This is an excerpt from presentation made by Norman Solomon on June 5, 2003, to the "Communicating the War on Terror" conference in London at the Royal Institution of Great Britain