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A Progressive Approach to Force

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From: *Madison Capital Times*

Date: 10/1/2001

Still more on Sept. 11 and its aftermath ...

First, a word of praise for the Bush administration. As it has gone about formulating its response to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, to the astonishment of many the administration has shown great restraint and care thus far in pursuing military force. It has also moved decisively on a range of nonmilitary fronts that nearly everyone agrees are essential to long-term success in limiting terrorism - from enhancing airport and other transportation security while still respecting civil liberties, to freezing questionable assets and moving to re-regulate the offshore banks that help finance terrorism. These are no less welcome for being belated, and give the "package" of anti-terrorist policy some real form beyond a military one.

After early missteps, the administration has also toned down its rhetoric on the ends and justification of its actions. The calls for a new "Christian Crusade" in the Middle East have faded. Bush has been at pains to de-demonize Islam and show respect for the diversity of American religious belief. The offensively named Operation Infinite Justice has given way - and "infinity" again restored to God and mathematicians alone - to the more secular and slightly less grandiose Operation Enduring Freedom. And the apocalyptic ranting of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson has been left alone, to embarrass itself with the unlikely claim that God would burn innocents to make a political point, and one that just happens to be their own.

Last week I argued that it was past time for progressives to enter national security discussions, and to articulate a view of the use of force that was not just principled, but practical. This week let me swallow my own medicine: How should progressives think about force in such matters as Sept. 11?

I start from a conflict that most progressives, and many other Americans, now feel between the demand for and justification of force in this circumstance, and a practical and moral skepticism about its use in this or any other. Force in response to the murder of innocents does seem justified. It is because, to paraphrase Lincoln's remark on slavery, if the murder of innocents is not wrong, nothing is wrong, and the threat of more of the same seems imminent and real.

But practical skepticism follows, since it is not at all clear that force here will do much good - violence begets violence, particularly given the background of historic hatreds; and simply "removing" one or another terrorist leader would do little to remove the long-term threat of the network they have created, or the popular support they find abroad. And a certain moral skepticism follows from even passing notice that the past use of force by the United States, often announced at its outset with the sorts of just motives offered here, has often done moral wrong, including great harm to innocent life.

Taking both these sorts of considerations into account, how can one develop a real view on what should be done? Here are three considerations on the who, why and how of policy.

Who: Make It Truly International - Sept. 11 was not an act of war, but a hideous crime. It harmed individuals of many nationalities, with more threatened now. It appears to have been committed by individuals operating in a network that is based in many countries, and draws support from individuals located in still more. And getting at that network will require the cooperation of police and intelligence forces within those many countries. From start to finish, then, this is most appropriately understood as a truly international matter, the first real conflict of the new Age of Globalization and a post-bipolar Cold War world. And for both the prudential reason that more than approval or money is needed from allies - what is needed is real operational capacity (here, contrast the Gulf War) - and the moral reason that we face a common threat, the United States should be at pains not to act alone.

Why: A Cosmopolitan Rationale - Again for both prudential and moral reasons, the rationale for action should be anchored in a common principle. This might be thought difficult since the causes of the horrors on Sept. 11 are a matter of dispute. Some think they resulted from hostility to elected government, women's equality, the rule of law, material prosperity or religious pluralism; others argue that they were provoked by U.S. support for the corrupt Saudi theocracy, cultural imperialism or support for Israel; and still others see the killings as expressing a perverse form of Islam (Islamic in name only) that denies all value to the lives of alleged infidels. But such disagreements are wholly irrelevant to thinking clearly about the present use of force, and how it might be justified.

The reason is that what happened on Sept. 11 was a slaughter of innocents. And no one - whether traditionalist or hedonist, Muslim or Jew or Christian or Hindu or Buddhist or secular Kantian, or whether a critic of past U.S. behavior or not - can condone such slaughter. The response need not and should not be parochial - for example, a defense of "the American way of life," or democracy, or individualism, or open societies and pluralism, or even the rule of existing international law. Reciprocally, antagonism to American culture or politics, or hostility to the U.S. role in much of the world, provides no reason to reject a forcible response. The core of the current conflict - and the defining idea of the emerging coalition - is a cosmopolitan moral principle, the most elementary of human conduct, that we all have compelling reason to defend: that the innocent should never be deliberately harmed.

How: Moderation and Restraint in Force - Finally, any response should give clear priority to nonmilitary means, and be moderate in the use of force. The prudential concern here is in keeping the coalition together, something that excessive force will inevitably threaten. The moral concern is minimizing the loss of innocent life - something always associated with military application - which is the essential rationale for force in the first place. As between military and peaceful means for achieving ends, the appropriate general rule seems to be that military action should only supplement nonmilitary action, and only be undertaken when and where the latter is insufficient. Application of this rule leaves ample room for needed force, while appropriately limiting its role as part of a broader strategy.

In sum, a "progressive" view on the use of force in response to Sept. 11 - and one that I think would find support in the general public, where it should be argued for - takes seriously the new realities of global interdependence, and the quest for peace within them. Considering both morality and practicality, the best response is a broad multilateral coalition, with deep cooperation among its members, justified in terms acceptable to all members, using military force only when nonmilitary means prove insufficient, and even then with appropriate restraint.

This column draws from joint work with Joshua Cohen.

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