

**Ignatieff, M. (2005) *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)**

One of the recurring difficulties in thinking clearly about terrorism is how to evaluate the threat it actually poses. In this chapter, I review the historical evidence about how seriously terrorism has threatened liberal democracy since the mid-nineteenth century, explain why liberal democracies have often exaggerated the threat, and suggest what we can do to get risk and reaction into a better balance.

When terrorist emergencies are proclaimed, abridgments of liberty are justified in terms which assert that "the life of a nation" is at risk. When political leaders declare a "war on terror," they imply that terrorism poses a threat equivalent to war. Yet there is a world of difference between the threat posed by armed attack by another state and a terrorist incident. Even if the plane that came down in Pennsylvania had struck the White House or the Capitol, the attacks of September 11 did not endanger the social order of the United States or threaten its democracy with collapse. Even if the president's office had been successfully struck, the functions of government would have continued, as they have done following the assassination of presidents from Lincoln to Kennedy. While September 11 is often compared to Pearl Harbor, Al Qaeda certainly has nothing like the resources of the Empire of Japan. In order to think clearly about terror, we must distinguish moral condemnation from threat assessment, to try to separate the anger we feel from the risk they actually pose. Terrorist attacks may be odious and they may demonstrate alarming shortcomings in the system of national defense, but they do not necessarily threaten us with defeat, collapse, or capitulation. Indeed, when public authorities exaggerate a terrorist threat, they risk instigating the panic that terrorists are seeking to achieve. They also tend to take measures that democracy later regrets.

Summing up so far, we can conclude that terrorism has damaged liberal democracies, but it has never succeeded in breaking their political systems. Liberal states turn out to be much less weak than they perceive themselves to be; indeed, their chief weakness is to underestimate their strengths.

One further assumption of the terrorists has proven wrong: that democratic peoples lack the will to fight for democracy. It is a commonplace, of both Burkean conservatives and left-wing communitarians, to bemoan the dearth of civic spirit, the ennui and disenchantment, of elites and electorates alike in capitalist democracies? These democracies, it is said, lack a common goal or a unifying civic purpose. Terrorist emergencies have shown, on the contrary, that democratic elites and publics alike can show a surprising tenacity when attacked. Even in Italy, with relatively weak coalition governments and a bureaucracy not known for its efficiency, the police and military forces proved energetic in fighting Red Brigade terrorism in the 1970s. Judges and juries did not hesitate to convict. The public strongly supported the defense of constitutional liberty. Theorists who suppose that liberal democracy is enfeebled by capitalist individualism, incapable of mobilizing the civic will to stand together, should look at terrorist emergencies and think again. To take but one example, which I witnessed myself, in 1988 after a Basque group bombed a supermarket in Barcelona, killing several innocent shoppers, a huge demonstration took place in the streets, involving hundreds of thousands of citizens, trade unions, and professional organizations, all carrying their banners dipped to the ground, marching in perfect silence, to express their solidarity and their disgust. Such collective actions have a real political impact cutting the ground from under the feet of those fellow travellers who are apt to say that they support the goals of terrorists but not their means. Here was an occasion where citizens en masse seemed to be saying, by their very silence, that some means irretrievably tarnish the goals themselves.

The American response to the catastrophe of September 11, 2001, fits into the same pattern. The courage of the police and firefighters who went up into the burning World Trade Center to help their

fellow citizens revealed the true extent of the solidarity that democracies can call upon when attacked. This example inspired candlelight vigils, a flood of applications for public service work, and a host of other forms of civic activism and engagement. We had forgotten that democracies are also communities of sacrifice. September 11 proved that this capacity for sacrifice—as well as civic courage, ingenuity, and defiance—was as strong as ever.

We do not know exactly what image of liberal democracy Al-Qaeda leaders have in their minds, but we can be reasonably certain that it includes an idea of decadence, a belief that Westerners are unable to match their technological superiority with a will to fight when attacked. This has surely been proven wrong. Certain virtues—specifically the capacity to improvise, to lead from the bottom, as in the heroic conduct of the passengers of United Flight 93—do seem to grow in democratic soils. They are less likely to be displayed in authoritarian societies. As Elaine Scarry has pointed out, the single most effective act of national defense during the September 11 attack was carried out, not by the armed forces, but by the ordinary citizens who rushed the cockpit of the aircraft heading toward Washington and managed to divert it so that it crashed in a field in Pennsylvania, killing all on board but possibly sparing the White House or the Capitol.