

Teaching “Terrorism”: Pedagogical Perspectives and Problems (August 17, 2007)

How do we avoid defining terrorism as an *abstract concept*? How do we avoid presenting the concept in a vague and general manner? How do we frame the concept so the student can place it in a historical, social, economic and political context?

How can we reconcile the need to keep our “pedagogic eye” on the global war on terror (GWOT) - the “big picture” - with the need to analytically break the study of terrorism down into manageable units, e.g. by geographical region or historically, socially, economically or politically?

How can the use of *comparative historical analysis* help promote a better understanding of the spread of terrorism in the modern world? What elements of our own historical experience can we draw upon to promote such comparative analysis? One of the key questions raised here is whether terrorism functions in the same way in all time periods and regions of the world.

How do we avoid overwhelming the student with an enormous amount of facts drawn from different cultures and societies around the world? If the struggle against terrorism is truly a *global war*, then does not the student need to study it on that level? How can the student acquire the necessary knowledge to understand terrorism in a meaningful sense?

How do we avoid instilling *fear* in our students when detailing the political violence and social and economic chaos that terrorist organizations have spread throughout the world? What pedagogic tools can we use to make the student feel *empowered*, rather than *intimidated*, when studying the phenomenon of terrorism?

How do we sustain support for civil liberties, human rights, democratic values and the rule of law in the face of attacks on Western societies by terrorist organizations? Is not one of the main goals of terrorist organizations to disrupt the ability of democracies to function? Does the indefinite detention of those termed “enemy combatants” at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba represent a victory or defeat for democratic government and the rule of law?

How can we teach our students about terrorism in a responsible manner? How do we teach that terrorism constitutes a plague on modern society without losing sight of the different contexts in which it develops? How do we teach students that terrorism often develops in response to social and economic decay and authoritarian rule in various societies throughout the world, without “relativizing” it, and inadvertently providing normative justification for terrorist activities and organizations?

How do we prevent existing stereotypes of specific religions, e.g., Islam, and ethnic groups, e.g., Arabs and Pakistanis, from being reinforced through the study of terrorism? How can a study of the history of the United States help us offset this problem? By demonstrating how American society has confronted prejudice against specific groups in the past, how can we use these experiences to help students confront it today?

How do we promote a better understanding of the relationship between authoritarian rule and the spread of terrorism as a political process? How can we help students comprehend the manner in which democratic governance can work to overcome support for terrorism?

Under what conditions is the use of military force appropriate in confronting terrorism and under what conditions is its effectiveness limited? Why has the use of military force been so unsuccessful in confronting terrorist groups in Iraq and Afghanistan? If military force alone cannot eradicate terrorism, what additional strategies are needed to supplement the use of force?

How do we approach different types of students when teaching the topic of terrorism? What different types of orientations towards the topic of terrorism can we envision among our students when we teach it?

How, for example, do we approach the *unidimensional student*? This student may be defined as one who refuses to intellectually engage the complex analytic framework required to understand the causes and functioning of terrorism. Such a student may view confronting terrorism as simply requiring the deployment of overwhelming force, or as a traditional law enforcement problem.

How do we approach the *cynical student*? This student may view terrorism as a form of political hyperbole. S/he may see the threat posed by terrorism as exaggerated, or simply not express any interest in the topic at all. How do we engage this type of student?

How do we approach the *oppositional student*? This student may feel that terrorism is a “natural” response to authoritarian and oppressive conditions in the country where it occurs. This sub-stratum of students may feel that the global war on terror is just a policy to divert attention from the excesses of US and Western corporations in non-Western countries. In other words, this student may feel that the real problem is not terrorism, but Western “imperialism.”

How do we approach the *idealist-activist student* who comprehends both the threat of terrorism and its root causes, and sincerely wants to “make a difference,” such as interacting with and learning from citizens in countries where terrorism is a serious problem? What types of activities can such a student pursue? How can we give such students the tools to begin develop new solutions to the problem of terrorism?

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