

# A Simple View of Terrorism

For Stewart Bell, the security argument trumps civil liberties every time.

W. WESLEY PUE

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## Cold Terror: How Canada Nurtures and Exports Terrorism Around the World

Stewart Bell

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The events of September 11, 2001, will shape the foreseeable future, though not for the reasons most commonly thought.

Although we postmoderns suffer from attenuated memory, it is important to recall that politically motivated terrorism is not a new invention. Canada's legal definition of "terrorism" would capture a wide array of historical actors. Two thousand years ago, a Jewish resistance group known as Zealots used terror tactics against the Roman Empire (some speculate that Jesus' disciples may have been associated with this group). In other times and places, terrorist strategies have frequently been employed against overwhelming power: America's revolution, like most colonial insurgencies, was born of terrorism. The African National Congress, including its great hero, Nelson Mandela, was branded a terrorist group by the apartheid state and its apologists. In Western Europe, the sting of terrorist violence has long been felt in Britain, Spain, France, Italy, Russia and Germany. In England in the 1970s, members of the British Cabinet were murdered or maimed and their national political meetings disrupted by IRA bombs. Many in Britain wondered why U.S. citizens were allowed to openly raise the funds used to attack them.

September 11 was not even the first time terrorists had struck in North America. Fenian terrorists attacked Canada from safe bases in the United States during the 19th century and the FLQ wrought havoc during the 20th. Klu Klux Klan terrorism proved unstoppable for over a century, Islamist bombs went off in New York's World Trade Center in 1993, made-in-America terrorists destroyed Oklahoma City's Alfred P.

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Murrah Federal Building in 1995, and explosives destined for the Los Angeles Airport were intercepted at the U.S.-Canada border in 2000. In the Oklahoma attack, former U.S. soldier Timothy McVeigh and co-conspirators killed 168 people, including 19 kids in a daycare centre. A decade earlier, 329 people (82 children), most of them Canadians, were killed when a terrorist bomb destroyed Air India flight 182 from Vancouver. On a population-adjusted basis, Canada's death toll that day was equivalent to that suffered by the U.S. on 9/11.

September 11 was different, however. That day's coordinated attacks were devastating in effect, partly because the targets were enormously symbolic. The World Trade Center, the Pentagon and (we assume) another major public building in the U.S. capital represented "American" economic, military and political dominance. A formidable enemy had revealed itself:

hateful, highly organized, well resourced, committed and capable of great evil. The U.S. administration responded at first boldly and then recklessly: international law was jettisoned, enduring institutions and alliances trashed, and two overseas wars launched (with no exit strategy planned for either). The U.S. constitution, one of the greatest human achievements of all time, was distorted beyond recognition as heresy after heresy was propounded. A prominent lawyer sought to reinstitute judicially supervised torture, security officials exported foreigners for torture overseas (this may be what happened to Canadian citizen Maher Arar) and the Republican Cabinet shamelessly usurped powers common to police states everywhere—including, bizarrely, the assertion that the government could, without charge, secretly imprison U.S. citizens indefinitely, prohibit access to legal counsel and render nugatory the ancient writ of habeas corpus.

The appearance of a new book on Canada's responses to the challenge of terrorism is, then, important. The threat of terrorism has been brought home and it seems that its pace is accelerating, its scale expanding. The future is both unknown and terrifying. The responses of the liberal democracies of the world will shape the future every bit as much as the actions of terrorists themselves. Fundamental issues of international world order and of security and liberty at home have to be confronted. The choices are difficult, the consequences of "getting it wrong" severe.

Stewart Bell's *Cold Terror: How Canada Nurtures and Exports Terrorism Around the World* will shake Canadian complacency. Bell does singular service by chronicling the terrorist activities that have been aided and abetted by Canadians:

Canadian terrorists spill blood around the world. They are known to have taken part in the 1993 World Trade Center truck bombing in New York, as well as suicide bombings in Israel and bombings by the Provisional Irish Republican Army; political killings in India and the murder of tourists in Egypt; a 1996 truck bombing in the heart of Colombo, Sri Lanka, that killed close to one hundred civilians; the 1995 bombing of the

Egyptian embassy in Islamabad, which killed seventeen; and the Bali bombing of October 2002, which killed more than two hundred innocent people. A Canadian was part of the group blamed for the 2003 bombing of Western housing complexes in Riyadh. In 1985, Canadians were behind one of the deadliest terror attacks in history, the Air India tragedy.

Our country “has provided a haven, money, propaganda, weapons and foot soldiers to the globe’s deadliest religious, ethnic and political extremist movements, murderous organizations that have brought their wars with them, turning this country into a base for international terror.” Only the United States, as one of Bell’s sources points out, surpasses us in this regard. We are not, alas, a country of girl guides and boy scouts.

Much of the book is given over to demonstrating the obvious: that terrorist attacks on civilian populations are very bad. Extended accounts of lives ruined and of the pain and suffering experienced by the victims of terrorism make for compelling reading, especially because they provide an uncontroversial moral baseline. The work is woefully short on analysis, however. This is a fatal flaw in a book that speaks to public policy. Like a Hollywood movie’s, the book’s central thread is charmingly simplistic:

1. Canadian-based terrorists wreak havoc around the world. They raise money and supplies in Canada through crime, extortion and deception, often working under cover of real or fraudulent “charities.”
2. The Bush II administration provides the gold standard with regard to all things terrorist related. Wherever Canadian leaders decline to follow Washington’s lead, it must be the result of having done a deal with the devil, succouring terrorists in order to win over the new immigrant vote at home.
3. Police and security officials should not be fettered by either legal or political oversight.

The book operates as a sort of extended footnote to David Frum and Richard Perle’s *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror*, a work recently described by Janice Gross Stein in these pages as “remarkable for its certainty, for its absence of critical reflection and for its unshakable confidence that U.S. policy was, and is, right.” That description fits this book perfectly. *Cold Terror* is first and foremost a propagandistic work promoting assumed truths (Frum, as it happens, gets a credit in the acknowledgements and provides a cover blurb).

Although Bell’s efforts to understand the internal workings of terrorist groups mark an important contribution, he displays a shocking lack of grounding in Canadian civics. Consider, for example, the book’s penultimate paragraph:

Counterterrorism may be distasteful to some, and it will rightly set off debate about the balance between civil liberties and state security, but so be it. If that debate is fairly argued, the lies and exaggerations—and sometimes the outright naiveté—of interest groups opposed to antiterror measures will lose out and the security argument will prevail because the state’s primary function

is the protection of its citizens, and there is just no rational defense for the kind of random violence directed at noncombatants that is the essence of terror.

Let us overlook the equation of civil liberties with the defence of “random violence directed at noncombatants.” Bell probably regrets penning a blooper on that scale. Even so, this passage reveals serious ignorance. Civil liberties are not some left-wing conspiracy invented only in order to destroy western civilization. Individual liberty is the sharp end of the rule of law, and that is the essence of our constitution. Those who would trash civil liberties, constitutionalism and the rule of law in pursuit of any cause fail to appreciate the magnificent, fragile, human achievement that is liberal democracy. Because of the corruption of power, all of our legal and constitutional

### **The future is both unknown and terrifying. The responses of the liberal democracies of the world will shape the future every bit as much as the actions of terrorists themselves.**

traditions are designed to protect us from unchecked, secret, state power. Freedom-loving societies know that spy, police, and security agencies are dangerous. This is neither because the people who staff them are “bad” nor because their institutional objectives are improper. All humans, even spies, cops and soldiers, make mistakes. All but saints are susceptible to the intoxication of unbridled power, and secret power, by definition, is unbridled.

Whatever we are to make of claims such as the assertion that “Canada’s official terrorism policy ... is merely a public relations strategy intended to manage Washington,” Bell’s disregard for the lessons of our own history is distressing. We have not become who we are through the fantasy role-playing of the cultural left. Rather, we have evolved our constitutional and legal culture pragmatically, learning from centuries of experience containing Tudor and Stuart despots, overbearing Hanoverians, *agents provocateurs*, domestic spies, Duplessisists and their ilk. Bell’s casual assumption that “the security argument” trumps “civil liberties” reveals a dangerously narrow historical consciousness. There are many ways for states to fail, and we do well to recall the Star Chamber, the Inquisition, Pinochet, the East German Stasi, Mugabe’s state thugs, the “security apparatus” of mid-20th century fascism and, yes, a certain witch-hunting senator from Wisconsin. Bell also displays ignorance of the structures of Canadian governance (the role of courts, independent tribunals, administrative agencies, the executive branch or legislatures, for example). *Cold Terror* does not provide a balanced treatment of court rulings or of immigration and refugee board decisions.

Unfortunately, too, the book confounds things that ought not be confounded. It serves Bell’s purpose to emphasize a 2001 statement by Prime Minister Jean Chrétien to the effect that there were no terrorists in Canada. Although Chrétien’s blooper is quite properly held up for ridicule, everyone knows that he was a special case. It is disingenuous to attempt to attach his goofiest pronouncements to the government as a

whole or even to Chrétien himself in, let us say, his more lucid moments. One such lucid moment occurred when the former prime minister set out a coherent policy of promoting greater global equity as one means—among others—of demonstrating to ordinary people of Islamic faith that the West is not their enemy and that terrorists are not their champions. Individuals will inevitably disagree about the optimal mix of surveillance, invasion and assassination on the one hand and “hearts and minds” strategies on the other. To caricature Chrétien as attempting to “smother terrorism with kindness,” however, is ludicrous; this is the prime minister who brought us the draconian Bill C-36, Canada’s new and very flawed *Anti-Terrorism Act*. The cartoon-like reduction of Chrétien offered in *Cold Terror* has no place in a purportedly serious work on Canadian anti-terrorism policy.

How does Bell go about defining and recognizing terrorists? Well, it turns out that evil is banal. Terrorists hold day jobs, live in suburbs, form relationships, love, marry, attend religious ceremonies, participate in social life and have families. And how does he distinguish between terrorists and others who engage in violence (police, armies and freedom fighters, for example)? He resorts to an oft-repeated rhetorical ploy: the essence of terrorism is the deliberate targeting of civilian populations. Those who perpetrate such acts “are terrorists, even if their propaganda departments say otherwise.” Because a deliberate attack on civilians is indeed evil, this rhetorical move works well. It papers over fuzzy thinking and obscures important issues. Although a useful starting point, the simple formulation that one ought not kill civilians on purpose raises difficult questions that state institutions cannot avoid—for example, how many civilians? how deliberate? and how carefully must combatants seek to avoid collateral damage?

The unspoken principle undergirding this book is deference to the U.S. government. If the United States deems someone to be a terrorist, that is what he or she is, regardless of what the rest of the world thinks, regardless of the Canadian government’s considered opinion, regardless of the integrity (or not) of the motivations that propel U.S. policy. By the same token, bloodthirsty killers whose murderous activities advance our interests (identical, of course, to those of the U.S.) are never treated as terrorists. It is salutary to recall that Afghanistan’s Mujahideen, in company with many brutal dictators and murderous bands around the world, have enjoyed U.S. sponsorship. The murder of nuns, priests, men, women or children is forgiven surprisingly quickly when it suits us.

Similarly, “taint by association” raises a series of complexities that render the application of law and policy more difficult than Bell acknowledges. Such issues arise directly at the borderline between charity work and terrorist support. Terrorist organizations sometimes camouflage their fundraising activities through “a central fund, which finances humanitarian and political causes, as well as terrorist activity.” Moreover, just as state governments support both welfare programs and armed forces, so too do many sub-state political organizations in unstable regions

seek to engage in both charitable and military activities. This, according to Bell, is the case with Hezbollah, Hamas and even Al Qaeda. Though there may be clear-cut cases, identifying the point at which a charity is sufficiently connected to terrorist activity to become transformed into a terrorist organization involves more art than science. Distinguishing between the two in the real world of law and policy can be agonizingly difficult. It requires judgement, not just with regard to the proportionate efforts dedicated to violence or good works, but also, frankly, with regard to how we value the organization's ends: Contras good, Hamas bad. Bell's approach—to follow the lead of the radicals who have for the time being captured U.S. foreign policy—leaves him untroubled by such matters of detail.

As a liberal democracy and, at most, a middle power, Canada's role in the world rests in large measure on moral leadership rather than military force. It is important that we act with integrity, independence and fortitude as we struggle to get things right. One difficult moment of choice occurred after Chrétien's *Anti-Terrorism Act* had passed. The government had to decide whether to list Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. It was clear that Hezbollah engaged in terrorism. However, according to the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, it is also "an important player in Lebanon's politics, a key vehicle of Lebanese Shiite empowerment, and a major provider of social services to thousands of Lebanese Shiites."<sup>1</sup> This, obviously, is just the sort of group that has to be brought to the table if a lasting peace is to

be forged. It is not surprising, then, that Canada's Minister for External Affairs, the Honourable Bill Graham, agonized over whether to classify Hezbollah as a terrorist group or to treat its political and terrorist wings as different sorts of creature (the sort of fiction that proved so useful in maintaining communications between British authorities and the IRA, for example). In the end, Canada banned Hezbollah outright, just as the U.S. wished. Nonetheless, the issues confronted by Canadian politicians were complex, multifaceted and difficult. As Graham explained, it would be hard to sustain dialogue if an organization that included "Lebanese members of parliament, teachers, doctors and farmers" was treated as entirely beyond the pale. *Cold Terror*, unfortunately, dismisses all such nuanced concerns with an unbecoming contempt.

Many religious or charitable foundations, labour groups and others expressed fear that they would be caught in the anti-terrorist net when the *Anti-Terrorism Act* was passed. Muslim Canadians and First Nations activists were concerned that they might be targeted or labelled terrorists because of activities to which they were in some degree connected. One umbrella group representing a large number of potentially vulnerable charities said that it is hard to distinguish the innocent from the evil in real-world conflict-ridden situations. Because of this, they could not ensure that none of their "resources would assist someone who could be considered an insurgent or terrorist." As a result, assisting "communities that contain or are associated with terrorists"

imports the risk of prosecution. So does providing "financing or resources to a group" subsequently designated as a terrorist group. Moreover, the charities feared they would be victimized by illegitimate foreign governments communicating "false or misleading evidence" secretly to the government of Canada, transforming our government into an agent of "foreign governments" in pursuit of "religious, political and ideological purposes against Canadian people or organizations."

None of this, of course, would dissuade the author of *Cold Terror* from his view: terrorists are terrorists are terrorists. End of story.

That the suspect group that articulated these concerns was the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada—an umbrella group of "32 evangelical, Protestant denominations" and more than 100 organizations such as "churches and relief and development organizations ... involved in religious and humanitarian work around the world"—might, however, give pause to others.<sup>2</sup>

The lines are not at all as clearly demarcated as *Cold Terror* would have us think. Anti-terrorism policy is too important to be driven by ideological zeal unleavened by pragmatism. That way disaster lies. □

#### Notes

- 1 Council for Foreign Relations. "Hezbollah," available at <cfrrterrorism.org/groups/hezbollah.html>.
- 2 Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. "Submission to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights on Bill C-36, An Act in Order to Combat Terrorism," November 8, 2001 (available at <www.evangelicalfellowship.ca>).

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