

Terrorism and the Current Crisis

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By Karen Kampwirth

I. Introduction

Karen Kampwirth is Associate Professor of Political Science at Knox College, specializing in Comparative Politics. Following are remarks she presented at a panel held at Knox College on Thursday, September 20. Kampwirth argues for use of a concept of "terrorism" that values human life equally throughout the world.

II. Essay By Karen Kampwirth

"Terrorism and the Current Crisis"

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I think my colleagues who are going to speak after me are going to focus on the need for more security, especially in airports. We agree completely on that point. But since no security will ever be perfect, the only way to work toward a more peaceful and just world is to also think about the causes of terrorism.

First of all, I want to make clear that I am speaking of terrorism in the analytical sense of the word. I will NOT define terrorism in the nationalistic sense as military violence against civilians committed by people or organizations that are not allied with the US government, which unfortunately is the way in which it is often defined in common usage.

As I will use the term, terrorism is military violence against unarmed civilians.

Why does terrorism occur?

One of the most fundamental reasons is the tendency to see the world in terms of "us and them." So while violence against civilians who we define as part of us, like the people in the World Trade Center is justifiably seen as an outrage, many people defend terrorism against people that we define

as them as "necessary" or "collateral damage" or "an unavoidable consequence of the struggle against them."

In the analytical sense of the word terrorism, terrorism has been conducted by US governments--of both parties--as an element of foreign policy at least as recently as the bombing of the pharmaceutical factory in Sudan in the wake of the bombings of US embassies in Africa. Certainly a whole series of actions over the past several decades in the Middle East and Central America have been terroristic, that is, they have involved the murder of unarmed non-combatants.

Am I saying that terrorism justifies terrorism?

Absolutely not.

But terrorism does engender more terrorism.

So if we want to avoid moral relativism, to avoid thinking that terrorism against people in other countries is more acceptable than terrorism against people in our country we have to stop dividing the world into "us and them."

First, I think it helps to know people who are citizens of other countries. If you are know an Iraqi you are unlikely to believe that an attack on Iraqi citizens is an attack against Saddam Hussein just as if you know an American you are unlikely to believe that an attack on US citizens is an attack against George Bush.

A second thing that will help reduce our tendency to simplify the world into "good guys and bad guys," is to live in another country for a while, which for students is pretty easy to do through study abroad programs.

Third, we would reduce political violence if the media would take the deaths of civilians elsewhere as seriously as it takes the deaths of civilians here. If ABC news were to interview the grieving widows and widowers of the victims of bombing campaigns in Iraq, we might think more before we support such campaigns.

Finally, we can all stop buying into nationalistic ideas, like that the US is "number 1." The idea of "number 1" may be appropriate in sports competitions but it is hurtful when used to compare ourselves to people in other countries.

As many of you know, I have a 2 year old daughter who was born in China. Now her life is just as precious as the lives of people who were born in this country. And if she were still in China her life would be no less precious. And if she had been born in Afghanistan or the Sudan, or Palestine, or El Salvador, her life would be no less precious.

I think we all know this at some level but our actions are often inconsistent with that knowledge. I hope we will all do our part to stop contributing to terrorism, no matter where the victims live.

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