Ulf Sunhaussen’s *Terrorism and America* provides a scathing indictment of recent US foreign policy, particularly during the Presidency of George Bush. Some may view the paper as excessively critical but it does highlight important deficiencies in the US approach to combating the threat of terrorism that have left it open to justifiable censure for arrogance, insensitivity and hypocrisy. The increasing limitation of civil liberties and the curtailment of legal rights by the US are justified to protect democracy but are undermining the very values they claim to protect. The claims about Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction and their linking with terrorism in general and September 11 have received particular censure.

The motives for the US administration’s Iraq venture are scrutinised against the writings of influential neo-conservatives who were grouped around the project for a new American century (PNAC). This group which included Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz had been seeking to find a way for the US to benefit from its overwhelming military superiority. The stated aims for the invasion of Iraq were considered alongside another agenda that included oil and support for Israel. Sundhaussen is right to be sceptical of the motives of this group but by now the neo-cons must have learnt what many others have learnt before, that there will always be substantial restrictions on the usability of military force if you wish to gain control of the object of force from the ground and maintain the support of its inhabitants. As what has become a guerrilla war has dragged on, hopefully the neo-cons have also learned that believing intelligence because it is what you want to hear is not a wise policy.

Sundhaussen challenges the way the US government has defined terrorism to differentiate the terror and civilian casualties caused by groups designated ‘terrorists’ from that caused by government-directed actions carried out by military forces. This enables the administration to ignore violence perpetrated by states including the USA itself, and to define terrorism as something ‘other’ and particularly evil. Yet, as the article points out, the terror and ‘collateral damage’ inflicted by governments on civilians leave them just as injured or dead as a terrorist attack would. The majority of violence perpetrated against civilians in the last century has been perpetrated overwhelmingly by governments — on their own people as in the case of Stalin or Hitler, by an occupying power such as France on the Algerians, or by an outside enemy power such as the USA on North Vietnam.

The Bush administration accused Iraq of continuing to possess and develop weapons of mass destruction but these weapons have not been found. This article correctly indites the US, with its vast arsenal of weapons including cluster bombs, missiles and nuclear weapons, as being a country that actually does have weapons of mass destruction. Not only do they have these weapons but they have used them causing countless civilian casualties from Hiroshima to Baghdad. These weapons have killed civilians and combatants indiscriminately and have been responsible for the death and injury of children, the elderly and the infirm. This critique mirrors the anger of the Muslim world at what is seen as the hypocrisy of the US administration which opposes Muslim nations acquiring small quantities of the weapons it stockpiles with such abundance while turning a blind eye to Israel’s nuclear weapons program.

The article is particularly scathing about the Bush administration’s approach to a uniform and blanket condemnation of non-state terrorism without making any attempt to distinguish the underlying grievances and military weakness that lead groups to turn to terrorism. This is a crucial issue. Terrorists differ in the extent of their grievances, the feasibility of their aims and the popularity of their causes. Groups with a justifiable grievance and achievable aims could be provided with redress that could end violence and save lives. Leaders of anti-colonial groups have moved from terrorists to politicians in a short space of time. Groups subject to oppression from their government or an occupying power such as the Tamils of Sri Lanka or the Palestinians could be turned from terrorism to negotiation if a just solution were offered. But it would be almost impossible to negotiate with groups whose aims are unrealistic and had little popular support like Aum Shinriky. US policy would be more convincing and effective if its approach to terrorism was more discriminating.

Two areas in the Middle East are identified as demonstrating the failure of US policy towards terrorism. Israel is correctly identified as a central issue and as a catalyst for Muslim hostility towards the USA. In recent years, particularly under the Bush administration, the US has repeatedly supported the actions of Israel against
the Palestinians in the occupied territories. Palestinian suicide bombings should be and are condemned but excessive force applied by the Israeli army is not. In recent months images of Israeli tanks and helicopter gunships firing at unarmed crowds while the Israeli army demolishes Palestinian homes have been broadcast around the world increasing Muslim outrage. The continuing oppression has increased the anger, despair and hopelessness amongst Palestinians. As they see the only power capable of influencing Israeli acting in a blindly partisan way, they are less likely to put any hope in US peace plans that have continually turned out to be illusionary.

The precipitate US invasion of Iraq without explicit authorisation from the United Nations is also signalled out for criticism in this article. The failure to gain international support, the failure of intelligence and the failure to find weapons of mass destruction undermined the credibility of the USA and turned the secular and authoritarian Iraq into a lure for terrorists throughout the Middle East seeking an opportunity to attack the US. Iraq may have been unjustifiably linked to terrorism and September 11 by the Bush regime but it has certainly become a front for terrorism following the invasion. The long suffering Iraqi people have exchanged the dictatorial Hussein regime for invasion and continuing civil war while the US action has increased Muslim dislike of the US even among those nations totally out of sympathy with the Hussein regime.

Sundhaussen is rightly critical of the media control exercised by the Bush and Blair Governments. Democracy is put at risk when governments use the excuse of national security to distort the truth and shield themselves from scrutiny. Government spin and use of intelligence justified the Iraqi war as necessary against a rogue regime developing weapons of mass destruction and capable of passing them to anti-western terrorists. The Bush regime was highly critical of the coverage of the Arab media which it could not control, attacking them for showing the faces of US prisoners though no criticism had been levelled at American television footage of Iraqi prisoners. Widespread scepticism arose over the ‘accidental’ strike on al Jazeera’s Baghdad office. In the UK and in Australia governments have vented their wrath at the public broadcasters who did not provide the governments with the coverage they had hoped for. Initially elements of the US media were more compliant but the failure to find WMD, the escalating casualties and rising financial costs of the war have undermined that sympathy. This has been compounded by the revelations of abuse of Iraqi prisoners held by US forces and all the Governments in the coalition of the willing are facing increasing media scrutiny despite their attempts to avoid it.

 While the article makes some important points about the deficiency of US foreign policy, there is one claim in the article that must be questioned. In more than one place Sundhaussen suggests that solutions to the problems that cause terrorism are easy to find but this is very doubtful. Terrorism falls into that category of policy problems identified by Rittel and Webber (1973) as ‘wicked problems,’ where there is no agreement on causes let alone on solutions. Attempts to provide a solution can result in waves of action and reaction which create even more problems.

It would not be easy for the US government to remove its long held support for Israel as the policy has been sold the American voters as both a good strategic policy and one that supports a democracy. Even disagreeing with Israel can be costly for American governments who will then face the wrath of the small but influential Jewish vote as Jimmy Carter found when negotiating the Camp David accord. Relying on US voters to influence their government seems a questionable strategy given the years of politically inspired misinformation about Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. Taking a more conciliatory stand towards the Palestinians would not be easy for Israel either. Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish Israeli when he proposed serious negotiations and since the adoption of suicide bombings by some Palestinian groups there has been increasing hostility towards Palestinians and little support for negotiation. The Peace Now group and those groups sympathetic to a negotiated settlement have lost much of their earlier support. Sharon could not get his governing coalition to agree to even a limited withdrawal from Gaza, let alone making concessions on the West Bank needed to get Palestinian support. Negotiating with Israel would not be easy for the Palestinian leadership either. It would mean the acceptance of a Jewish state in what was Palestinian territory and negotiating with a government that has perpetrated violence and state terror on the Palestinian people.

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