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Talking about Culture

Philip Smith (2001)

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A second nonviolent option against terrorism is timely awareness of the possibility of attacks so that steps can be taken to prevent them. Conventionally this is called ‘intelligence,’ which involves collecting information and drawing conclusions from it. The 11 September attacks revealed a massive failure of conventional intelligence despite annual expenditures of tens of billions of dollars.

A forthcoming study by Dutch researcher Giliam de Valk suggests a nonviolent ‘intelligence system’ would do better. He compares the performance of Dutch government intelligence services with the performance of the Shipping Research Bureau (1995), a non-government operation that studied violations of UN resolutions against South Africa’s apartheid regime. The Shipping Research Bureau did far better in the 1980s, according to a wide range of criteria.

One of the big problems with spy operations is that they are run by agencies with a communications function within agencies as well as with outsiders, and enables inadequate thinking or incompetence to persist. The Shipping Research Bureau, because it was open, could better verify information by seeking reactions from opponents such as shipping companies. It published its reports and used subsequent criticism to learn from its mistakes rather than covering them up. The Bureau’s public credibility also enhanced its information gathering capacity; in its final years of operation, it was able to obtain information from within apartheid South Africa itself.

An open nonviolent intelligence system would do better than the US National Security Agency, CIA and FBI. It could hardly do worse than the failures of conventional intelligence—or political controls over intelligence—prior to 11 September. An open operation would be far more accountable to the public and could not so easily become a tool of state elites. Giliam de Valk thinks that there should be several open intelligence agencies, with competition between them to guard against politically biased or self-serving reports.

A third crucial dimension to a nonviolence strategy against terrorism is the challenge that those who are opposing apartheid in South Africa, communist repression in Eastern Europe and military dictatorships in several continents (Ackerman and DuVall, 2000). Not all struggles are successful but many are.

It is remarkable that nonviolent action is ever successful considering what it is up against. Hundreds of billions of dollars are spent on military every year, with millions of soldiers in uniform and the most sophisticated technologies available developed by the capitalist and imperialist powers of the world and their scientists and engineers. Added to this is production of what can be called the ‘technology of repression,’ including equipment and training for surveillance, crowd control and torture. Set against this enormous and powerful system for institutionalized violence and social control are networks of action groups with relatively little money, training or productive capacity.

A four component of a nonviolence strategy against terrorism works by showing results, namely that nonviolent approaches are more effective than terrorism in overcoming oppression and repression. Violence does not seem all that more effective in the strategy for challengers: there is not a single case where popular armed struggle has toppled the government of an industrialized country. Perhaps the attraction of violence has less to do with proven or likely effectiveness and more to do with symbolic expression of masculine virility or attachment to secrecy, hierarchy and exclusionary politics. How to challenge the counterproductive allure of revolutionary violence is one of the great challenges for nonviolent communication. For example, in the Middle East there are excellent nonviolent actions and strategies (Crow et al., 1990; Dajani, 1994) but such efforts are overshadowed by violent approaches.

Nonviolence against hypocrisy

Politicians and others define and think about terrorism in a way that excludes the role of ‘respectable’ states in terrorism. Terrorism is commonly defined as the use of violence by nonstate groups and so-called ‘rogue states’ against civilians for political purposes. This is a very selective, indeed incomherent, usage (Geary, 1997). Dictionaries have defined terrorism in a more generically as, for example, ‘an organised system of intimidation, especially for political ends’ or ‘the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion’ or ‘domination or coercion by intimidation.’

By such definitions, governments can be involved in terrorism. The evidence is that state terrorism is far greater than non-state terrorism, but state terrorism, ex-