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The Farcical Definition at the Heart of the War on Terrorism

by James Bovard

A recent denunciation of U.S. government foreign policy offers insights into a paradox of the war of terrorism. On January 24, 2006, the East Timor Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation denounced the U.S. government for backing the 1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor. In the following decades, a quarter million East Timorese residents died as a result of this incursion. The commission declared that U.S. “political and military support were fundamental to the Indonesian invasion and occupation.”

The Indonesian invasion and occupation of East Timor were among the most barbaric actions of the late 20th century. President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger met with Indonesian President Suharto in Jakarta the day before the invasion and gave U.S. approval. The primary concern of U.S. officials seemed to be to get back to Washington before the bloodbath began. Kissinger told Suharto, “We understand your problem and the need to move quickly but I am only saying that it would be better if it were done after we returned.” Kissinger, doing his best imitation of Lady Macbeth, urged Suharto, “It is important that whatever you do succeeds quickly.”

Indonesia used U.S. military weapons to bombard East Timor and to crush resistance. The Indonesian military finally left East Timor in 1999, inflicting one more orgy of burning and killing on the island in the final days before its exit.

More people died as a result of the U.S.-backed invasion of East Timor than were killed by international terrorists in the subsequent 30 years. According to the U.S. State Department, between 1980 and 2005 fewer than 25,000 people were killed in international terrorist incidents around the globe.

The Bush administration, in its war on terror, stresses that anyone who aids and abets a terrorist is as guilty as the terrorist. By this standard, the U.S. government was guilty of enabling the Indonesian government to terrorize the Timorese people. The Timorese victims of U.S.-backed aggression received far less than 1 percent of the attention than have American victims of terrorist attacks.

The U.S. government currently bankrolls and arms many foreign regimes that terrorize their own people, including Colombia, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Frida Berrigan of the World Policy Institute noted that the State Department's 2002 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices "lists 52 countries that are currently receiving U.S. military training or weapons as having 'poor' or 'very poor' human-rights records."

President Bush declared in 2002, "Our mission is to make the world free from terror." But the only way that Bush's pledge makes any sense is by relying on a myopic — if not absurd — definition of terrorism.

The United States has long insisted that government agents cannot be terrorists. The FBI defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives." Since government action is almost always lawful — or at least not considered criminal by the government itself — governments almost never qualify as terrorists under the U.S. definitions.

A far sounder definition was offered by Israeli National Security Council chairman Major General Uzi Dayan, who defined as terrorist in a December 2001 speech "any organization that systematically harms civilians, irrespective of its motives." This definition catches all types of terrorism — not just actions that lack political blessings or official sanctions.

If a government systematically attacks civilians, the government is no less culpable than private cabals that blow up planes, buses, or cafes. By this standard, the Indonesian invasion of East Timor was as much a terrorist action as the bombings of Bali nightclubs in October 2002 that killed hundreds of civilians.

The U.S. terrorism definition is the key to the Bush administration claim that the war on terrorism is automatically a war for freedom. Without the "state-exempt" concept of terrorism, fighting terrorism would, in most parts of the world, have little or nothing to do with defending freedom. With an honest definition of terrorism, many governments in the Bush "freedom-loving coalition" are guilty of inflicting more terrorism than they prevent.

Having a "state action" exemption to the concept of terrorism is like having a "mass murder exemption" in the homicide statute. Any action carried out by private citizens that would be considered terrorism should also be considered terrorism if carried out by government agents. The United States should recognize that its bankrolling and support of governments that terrorize their own people make a mockery of Bush's promise to rid the world of evil.

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