The Journalist from Mars

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from the book

Media Control

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The proper topic for an occasion like this, I suppose, is pretty obvious: It would be the question of how the media have handled the major story of the past months, the issue of the "war on terrorism," so-called, specifically in the Islamic world. Incidentally, by media here I intend the term to be understood pretty broadly, including journals of commentary, analysis, and opinion; in fact, the intellectual culture generally.

It's a really important topic. It's been reviewed regularly by FAIR, among others. However, it isn't really an appropriate topic for a talk, and the reason is that it requires too much detailed analysis. So what I'd like to do is take a somewhat different approach to it and ask the question of how should the story be handled, in accord with general principles that are accepted as guidelines: principles of fairness, accuracy, relevance, and so on.

Let's approach this by kind of a thought experiment. Imagine an intelligent Martian-I'm told that by convention, Martians are males, so I'll refer to it as "he." Suppose that this Martian went to Harvard and Columbia Journalism School and learned all kinds of high-minded things, and actually believes them. How would the Martian handle a story like this?

I think he would begin with some factual observations that he'd send back to the journal on Mars. One factual observation is that the war on terrorism was not declared on September 11; rather, it was redeclared, using the same rhetoric as the first declaration twenty years earlier. The Reagan administration, as you know, I'm sure, came into office announcing that a war on terrorism would be the core of U.S. foreign policy, and it condemned what the president called the "evil scourge of terrorism. " ~ The main focus was state-supported international terrorism in the Islamic world, and at that time also in Central America. International terrorism was described as a plague spread by "depraved opponents of civilization itself," in "a return to barbarism in the modern age." Actually, I'm quoting the administration moderate, Secretary of State George Shultz.

The phrase I quoted from Reagan had to do with terrorism in the Middle East, and it was the year 1985. That was the year in which international terrorism in that region was selected by editors as the lead story of the year in an annual Associated Press poll, so point one that our Martian would report is that the year 2001 is the second time that this has been the main lead story, and that the war on terrorism has been redeclared pretty much as before.

Furthermore, there's a striking continuity; the same people are in leading positions. So Donald Rumsfeld is running the military component of the second phase of the war on terrorism, and he was Reagan's special envoy to the Middle East during the first phase of the war on terrorism, including the peak year, 1985. The person who was just appointed a couple of months ago to be in charge of the diplomatic component of the war at the United Nations is John Negroponte, who during the first phase was supervising U.S. operations in Honduras, which was the main base for the U.S. war against terror in the first phase.

Exercising the Power Element

In 1985, terrorism in the Middle East was the lead story, but terrorism in Central America had second rank as the story of the day. Shultz, in fact, regarded the plague in Central America as what he called the most alarming manifestation of it. The main problem, he explained, was "a cancer right here in our hemisphere," and we want to cut it out and we'd better do it fast because the cancer was openly proclaiming the goals of Hitler's Mein Kampf and was just about to take over the world. And it was really dangerous. The danger was so severe that on Law Day 1985, the president announced a state of national emergency because of, as he put it, "the unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States" posed by this cancer. (Law Day, incidentally, is the day that in the rest of the world is commemorated as a day in solidarity with the struggles of American workers. In the United States it's a jingoist holiday, May 1.)

This state of emergency was renewed annually until finally the cancer was cut out. Secretary of State Shultz explained that the danger was so severe that you can't keep to gentle means; in his words (April 14, 1986), "Negotiations are a euphemism for capitulation if the shadow of power is not cast across the bargaining table." He condemned those who "seek utopian legalistic means like outside mediation, the United Nations, and the World Court while ignoring the power element of the equation."

The United States had been, in fact, exercising the power element of the equation with mercenary forces based in Honduras, under the supervision of John Negroponte, while it was successfully blocking pursuit of utopian legalistic means by the World Court, the Latin American countries, and of course the cancer itself, bent on world conquest.

The media agreed. The only question that arose, really, was tactics. There was the usual hawk/dove debate. The position of the hawks was expressed pretty well by the editors of The New Republic (April 4, 1984). They demanded, in their words, that we continue to send military aid to "Latin-style fascists...regardless of how many are murdered," because "there are higher American priorities than Salvadoran human rights," or anywhere else in the region. That's the hawks.

The doves argued, on the other hand, that these means were just not going to work, and they proposed alternative means to return Nicaragua, the cancer, to the "Central American mode" and impose "regional standards" on it. I'm quoting the Washington Post (March 14,1986; March 19, 1986). The Central American mode and the regional standards were those of the terror states E1 Salvador and Guatemala, which were at that time massacring, torturing, and devastating in ways I don't have to describe. So we had to return Nicaragua to the Central American mode as well, according to the doves.

The op-eds and editorials in the national press were divided on this roughly fifty-fifty between the hawks and the doves. There were exceptions, but they're literally at the level of statistical error. There's material on this in print, and there has been for a long time if you want to take a look. In the other major region where the plague was raging at that time, in the Middle East, uniformity was even more extreme.

Same War, Different targets

Well, the intelligent Martian would certainly pay great attention to all of this very recent history, in fact with remarkable continuity, so that the front pages on Mars would report that the so-called war on terror is redeclared by the same people against rather similar targets, although, he would point out, not quite the same targets.

The depraved opponents of civilization itself in the year 2001 were in the 1980s the freedom fighters organized and armed by the CIA and its associates, trained by the same special forces who are now searching for them in caves in Afghanistan. They were a component of the first war against terror and acting pretty much the same way as the other components of the war against terror.

They didn't hide their terrorist agenda that began early on, in fact in 1981, when they assassinated the President of Egypt, and is continuing. That included terrorist attacks inside Russia severe enough so that at one point they virtually led to a war with Pakistan, although these attacks stopped after the Russians withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, leaving the ravaged country in the hands of the U.S. favorites, who turned at once to mass murder, rape, terror-generally described as the worst period in Afghanistan's history. They're now back in charge outside of Kabul. According to this morning's Wall Street Journal (January 22, 2001), two of the major warlords are now approaching what could turn out to be a major war. Let's hope not.

All of this is headline news in the Martian press- along, of course, with what it all means to the civilian population. That includes vast numbers of people who are still deprived of desperately needed food and other supplies, although food has been available for months but can't be distributed because of conditions; that's after four months.

The consequences of that we don't know, and in fact will never know. Because there's a principle of the intellectual culture that although you investigate enemy crimes with laser-like intensity, you never look at your own-that's quite important-so we can only give very vague estimates of the number of Vietnamese or Salvadoran or other corpses that we've left around.

The Heresy of Moral Equivalence

As I say, this would be headlines on Mars. A good Martian reporter would also want to clarify a couple of basic ideas. First of all, he'd like to know what exactly is terrorism. And, secondly, what's the proper response to it. Well, whatever the answer to the second question is, that proper response must satisfy some moral truisms, and the Martian can easily discover what these truisms are, at least as understood by the leaders of the self-declared war on terrorism, because they tell us, they tell us constantly, that they are very pious Christians, who therefore revere the Gospels, and have certainly memorized the definition of "hypocrite" given prominently in the Gospels-namely, the hypocrites are those who apply to others the standards that they refuse to accept for themselves.

So the Martian understands, then, that in order to rise to the absolutely minimal moral level we have to agree, in fact insist, that if some act is right for us then it's right for others, and if it's wrong when others do it then it's wrong when we do it. Now that's the most elementary of moral truisms, and once the Martian realizes that, he can pack up his bags and go back to Mars. Because his research task is over. He would be unlikely to find a phrase, a single phrase in the vast coverage and commentary about the war on terrorism that even begins to approach this minimal standard. Don't take my word for it; try the experiment. I don't want to exaggerate-you can probably find the phrase now and then, way out at the margins, though very rarely.

Nevertheless, this moral truism is recognized within the mainstream. It's understood to be an extremely dangerous heresy, and therefore it's necessary to erect impregnable barriers against it, even before anybody exhibits it, even though it's so rare. In fact, there's even a technical vocabulary available in case anybody would dare to engage in the heresy, to involve themselves in the heresy that we should abide by moral truisms that we pretend to revere. The offenders are guilty of something called moral relativism-that means the suggestion that we apply to ourselves the standards we apply to others. Or maybe moral equivalence, which is a term that was invented, I think, by Jeane Kirkpatrick to ward off the danger that somebody might dare to look at our own crimes.

Or maybe they're carrying out the crime of America-bashing, or they're anti-Americans. Which is a rather interesting concept. The term is used elsewhere only in totalitarian states, for example in Russia in the old days, where anti-Sovietism was the highest crime. If somebody were to publish a book in Italy, say, called The Anti-Italians, you can imagine what the reaction would be in the streets of Milan and Rome, or in any country where freedom and democracy were taken seriously.

An Unusable Definition

But let's suppose that the Martian isn't deterred by the inevitable tirades and stream of vilification, and suppose he persists in keeping to the most elementary moral truisms. Well, as I said, if he does that, he can just go home, but suppose out of curiosity he decides to stay on and look a little bit further. So, what will happen? Well, back to the question, what is terrorism?-an important one.

There is a proper course for a serious Martian reporter to follow to find the answer to that: Look at the people who declared the war on terrorism and see what they say terrorism is; that's fair enough. And there is in fact an official definition in the U.S. code and Army manuals, and elsewhere. It is defined briefly. Terrorism, as I'm quoting, is defined as "the calculated use of violence or the threat of violence to attain goals that are political, religious or ideological in nature...through intimidation, coercion or instilling fear." Well, that sounds simple; as far as I can see, it's appropriate. But we constantly read that the problem of defining terrorism is very vexing and complex, and the Martian might wonder why that's true. And there's an answer.

The official definition is unusable. It's unusable for two important reasons. First of all, it's a very close paraphrase of official government policy-very close, in fact. When it's government policy, it's called low-intensity conflict or counterterror.

Incidentally, it's not just the United States. As far as I'm aware, this practice is universal. Just as an example, back in the mid 1960s the Rand Corporation, the research agency connected with the Pentagon mostly, published a collection of interesting Japanese counterinsurgency manuals having to do with the Japanese attack on Manchuria and North China in the 1930s. I was kind of interested-I wrote an article on it at the time comparing the Japanese counterinsurgency manuals with U.S. counterinsurgency manuals for South Vietnam, which are virtually identical. That article didn't fly too well, I should say.

Well, anyhow, it's a fact, and as far as I know it's a universal fact. So that's one reason you can't use the official definition. The other reason you can't do it is much simpler: it just gives all the wrong answers, radically so, as to who the terrorists are.

So therefore the official definition has to be abandoned, and you have to search for some kind of sophisticated definition that will give the right answers, and that's hard. That's why you hear that it's such a difficult topic and big minds are wrestling with it and so on.

Fortunately, there is a solution. The solution is to define terrorism as the terrorism that they carry out against us, whoever we happen to be. As far as I know, that's universal-in journalism, in scholarship, and also I think it's a historical universal; at least, I've never found any country that doesn't follow this practice. So, fortunately, there's a way out of the problem. Well, with this useful characterization of terrorism, we can then draw the standard conclusions that you read all the time: namely, that we and our allies are the main victims of terrorism, and that terrorism is a weapon of the weak.

Of course, terrorism in the official sense is a weapon of the strong, like most weapons, but it's a weapon of the weak, by definition, once you comprehend that "terrorism" just means the terrorism that they carry out against us. Then of course it's true by definition that terrorism is a weapon of the weak. And so the people who write it all the time, you see it in the newspapers or the journals, they're right; it's a tautology, and by convention.

Textbook Terrorism

Suppose the Martian goes on to defy what are apparently universal conventions, and he actually accepts the moral truisms that are preached and he also even accepts the official U.S. definition of terrorism. I should say that by this time he's way out in outer space, but let's proceed. If he goes this far, then there certainly are clear illustrations of terrorism. September 11, for example, is a particularly shocking example of a terrorist atrocity. Another equally clear example is the official U.S.-British reaction, which was announced by Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, chief of the British defense staff, and reported in a front- page story in the New York Times in late October (October 28, 2001). He informed the people of Afghanistan that the United States and Britain would continue their attack against them "until they get the leadership changed."

Notice that this is a textbook illustration of international terrorism, according to the official definition; I won't reread it but if you think about it, it's just a perfect illustration.

Two weeks before that, George Bush had informed the Afghans, the people of Afghanistan, that the attack will go on until they hand over wanted suspects. Remember that overthrow of the Taliban regime was a sort of afterthought brought in a couple of weeks after the bombing, basically for the benefit of intellectuals so they could write about how just the war is.

This of course was also textbook terrorism: We're going to continue to bomb you until you hand over some people we want you to hand over. The Taliban regime did ask for evidence, but the U.S. contemptuously dismissed that request. The U.S., at the very same time, also flatly refused to even consider offers of extradition, which may have been serious, may not have been; we don't know because they were rejected.

The Martian would certainly record all of this, and if he did a little homework he would quickly find the reasons, adding many other examples. The reasons are very simple: The world's rulers have to make it clear that they do not defer to any authority. Therefore they do not accept the idea that they should offer evidence, they do not agree that they should request extradition; in fact, they reject UN Security Council authorization, reject it flatly. The U.S. could easily have obtained clear and unambiguous authorization-not for pretty reasons, but it could have obtained it. However, it rejected that option.

And that makes good sense. In fact, there's even a term for this in the literature of international affairs and diplomacy. It's called establishing credibility. Another term for it is declaring that we're a terrorist state and you'd better be aware of the consequences if you get in our way. Now that's, of course, only if we use "terrorism" in its official sense, as it's defined in U.S. government legal code and so on, and that's unacceptable for reasons that I mentioned.

Uncontroversial Cases

Let's go back to the moral truism. According to official doctrine, which is almost universally accepted and described as just and admirable and obviously so, the United States is entitled to conduct a terrorist war against Afghans until they hand over suspects to the United States, which refuses to provide evidence or request extradition, or, in Boyce's later terms, until they change their leadership. Well, anyone who is not a hypocrite in the sense of the Gospels will therefore conclude at once that Haiti is entitled to carry out large-scale terrorism against the United States until it hands over a murderer, Emmanuel Constant, who has already been convicted of leading the terrorist forces that had the major responsibility for four to five thousand deaths.

No question about the evidence in this case. They've requested extradition repeatedly, most recently on September 30, 2001, right in the midst of all the talk about Afghanistan being subjected to terrorism if it doesn't hand over suspected terrorists. Of course, that's only four or five thousand black people. I guess it doesn't count quite as much.

Or perhaps they should carry out massive terror in the United States. Since they can't bomb, maybe bioterror or something, I don't know, until the United States changes its leadership, which is, in fact, responsible for terrible crimes against the people of Haiti right through the twentieth century.

Or certainly, keeping now to moral truisms, Nicaragua is entitled to do the same, incidentally targeting the leaders of the redeclared war on terrorism, the same people often. Recall that the terrorist attack against Nicaragua was far more severe than even September 11; tens of thousands of people were killed, the country was devastated, it may never recover.

Also, this happens to be an uncontroversial example, so we don't have to argue about it. It's uncontroversial because of the judgment of the World Court condemning the United States for international terrorism, backed up by the Security Council in a resolution calling on all states to observe international law-mentioning no one, but everyone knew who they meant-vetoed by the United States, Britain abstaining. Or the judgment of the General Assembly in successive resolutions confirming the same thing, opposed by the United States and one or two client states. The World Court ordered the United States to terminate the crime of international terrorism, to pay massive reparations. The U.S. responded with a bipartisan decision to escalate the attack immediately; I already described the media reaction. All of this continued until the cancer was destroyed and it continues right now.

So in November 2001 there was an election in Nicaragua, right in the middle of the war on terrorism, and the United States radically intervened in the election. It warned Nicaragua that the United States would not accept the wrong outcome, and even gave the reason. The State Department explained that we cannot overlook Nicaragua's role in international terrorism in the 1980s, when it resisted the international terrorist attack that led to the condemnation of the United States for international terrorism by the highest international authorities.

Here all of this passes without comment in an intellectual culture that is simply dedicated passionately to terrorism and hypocrisy, but I guess it might have had some headlines in the Martian press. You might look and see how it was treated here. You might also incidentally try out your favorite theory of "just war" in this uncontroversial case.

Domesticating the Majority

Nicaragua, of course, had some defense against the U.S.-run international terrorism being carried out against it under the pretext of a war on terrorism. Namely, Nicaragua had an army. In the other Central American countries, the terrorist forces that were armed and trained by the U.S. and its clients were the army, so not surprisingly the terrorist atrocities were far worse. That's the Central American mode that the doves said we have to return the cancer to. But in this case the victims weren't the state, and therefore they could not appeal to the World Court or to the Security Council for judgments that would be rejected, tossed into the ashcan of history, except maybe on Mars.

The effects of that terror were long-lasting. Here in the United States, there's a good deal of concern- very properly as a matter of fact-about the very wide-ranging effects of the terrorist atrocities of September 11. So, for example, there's a front-page article in the New York Times (January 22, 2002) about the people who are beyond the reach of benefits for the tragedy that they suffered. Of course, the same is true for those who are victims of vastly worse terrorist crimes, but that's reported only on Mars.

So you might try to find the report, say, of a conference run by Salvadoran Jesuits a couple of years ago. The Jesuits' experiences under U.S. international terrorism were particularly grisly. The conference report stressed the residual effect of what it called the culture of terrorism, which domesticates the aspirations of the majority, who realized that they must submit to the dictates of the ruling terrorist state and its local agents or they will again be returned to the Central American mode, as recommended by the doves at the peak of the state-supported international terrorism of the eightees. Unreported here, of course; maybe headlines on Mars.

Enthusiastic Partners

Actually, the Martian might notice some other interesting similarities between the first and the second phase of the war on terror. In the year 2001, just about every terrorist state you think of was eagerly joining in the coalition against terrorism, and the reasons are not hidden.

We all know why the Russians are so enthusiastic: they want U.S. endorsement for their monstrous terrorist activities in Chechnya, for example.

Turkey was particularly enthusiastic. They were the first country to offer troops, and the prime minister explained why. This was in gratitude for the fact that the United States alone was willing to pour arms into Turkey-providing eighty percent of their arms in the Clinton years-in order to enable them to expedite some of the worst terrorist atrocities and ethnic cleansing of the 1990s. And they're very grateful for that, and so they offered troops for the new war on terrorism. Incidentally, none of this counts as terrorism, remember, because by the convention, since we're carrying it out it's not terrorism. And so on down the list; I won't go through the rest.

And the same, incidentally, was true of the first phase of the war on terrorism. So the announcement by Admiral Boyce that I quoted was a close paraphrase of words of the well-known Israeli statesman Abba Eban in 1981. That was shortly after the first war against terrorism was declared. Eban was justifying Israeli atrocities in Lebanon, which he acknowledged were pretty awful, but justified, he said, because "there was a rational prospect that affected populations would exert pressure for a cessation of hostilities." Notice that's another textbook illustration of international terrorism in the official sense.

The hostilities that he was talking about were at the Israel-Lebanon border, overwhelmingly Israeli in origin, often without even a pretext, but backed by the United States, so therefore they're not terrorism by convention and they're not part of the history of terrorism. At the time, with decisive U.S. support, Israel was carrying out attacks in Lebanon, bombing and other atrocities, to try to elicit some pretext for a planned invasion. Well, they couldn't get the pretext, but they invaded anyway, killing about eighteen thousand people and continuing to occupy southern Lebanon for about twenty years with many atrocities, but all off the record because the U.S. was decisively supporting it.

Prize Atrocities

All of this peaked-the post-1982 attack, in 1985, and that was the peak year for U.S.-Israeli atrocities in southern Lebanon, what were called the Iron Fist operations; these were large-scale massacres and deportations of what the high command called "terrorist villagers. " These operations, under Prime Minister Shimon Peres, are one of the candidates for the prize of the worst international terrorist crime in the peak year of 1985, remember, when terrorism was the leading story of the year.

There are other competitors. One of them, also in early 1985, was a bombing in Beirut, a car bombing. The car bombing was outside a mosque timed to go off just when everybody was leaving to insure the maximum number of casualties. It killed eighty people and wounded more than two hundred fifty, according to the Washington Post, which gave a pretty grisly account of it. Most of them were women and girls, but it was a heavy, strong bomb, so it killed infants in their beds and all kinds of other atrocities. But that doesn't count, because it was organized by the CIA and British intelligence, so therefore it's not terrorism. So that's not really a candidate for the prize.

Now, the only possible other competitor in the peak year of 1985 was the Israeli bombing of Tunis, which killed seventy-five people; there were some grisly accounts of it in the Israeli press by good reporters. The U.S. cooperated in the atrocity by failing to inform its Tunisian ally that the bombers were on their way. George Shultz, secretary of state, immediately called the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, to inform him that the United States had considerable sympathy for this action, as he put it. However, Shultz drew back from open support for this international terrorism when the Security Council condemned it unanimously as an act of armed aggression, with the U.S. abstaining.

Let's continue to give Washington and its clients the benefit of the doubt, as in the case of Nicaragua, and let's assume that the crime was only international terrorism, not the far more serious crime of aggression, as the Security Council determined. If it was aggression, then, observing moral truisms, we move on to Nuremburg trials.

Those are the only three cases that come anywhere near that level in the peak year of 1985. A couple of weeks after the Tunis bombing, Prime Minister Peres came to Washington, where he joined Ronald Reagan in denouncing "the evil scourge of terrorism" in the Middle East. None of this elicited a word of comment, and that's correct because by convention none of it is terrorism. Recall the convention: It's only terrorism if they do it to us. When we do much worse to them, it's not terrorism. Again, the universal principle. Well, the Martian might notice that, even if it's not discussable here.

I got my favorite review in history when I did write about this some years ago. It was a review in the Washington Post (September 18, 1988), a two-word review by their Middle East correspondent, who described it as "breathlessly deranged." I kind of like that. I think he was wrong about the breathless-if you read the article, it was pretty calm-but deranged is correct. I mean, you have to be deranged to accept elementary moral truisms and to describe facts that shouldn't be described. That's probably true.

Contemptible Excuses

Let's get back to the Martian. He might be puzzled about the question of why 1985 is the peak year for the return to barbarism in our time by depraved opponents of civilization itself, referring to international terrorism in the Middle East. He'd be puzzled because the worst cases by far of international terrorism in the region just are down the memory hole, like international terrorism in Central America. And lots of other cases. Current ones, in fact.

However, some cases from 1985 are remembered, well remembered, and rightly, because they are terrorism. The official prize for terrorism for that year goes to the hijacking of the Achille Lauro and the murder of a crippled American, Leon Klinghoffer. Everyone knows about that one. Correctly; it was a terrible atrocity. Now, of course, the perpetrators of that atrocity described it as retaliation for the Tunis bombing a week earlier, a vastly worse case of international terrorism, but quite rightly we dismissed that excuse with the contempt that it deserves.

And all of those who do not regard themselves as cowards and hypocrites will take the same principled stand with regard to all other violent acts of retaliation, including, for example, the war in Afghanistan, which remember was undertaken with the clear and unambiguous expectation that it might drive millions of people over the edge of starvation. As I said, we'll never know. For principled reasons.

Or lesser atrocities, such as those retaliations in the Israeli-occupied territories right now-with full U.S. support, as always, so they're not terrorism. The Martian would surely report on page one that the United States right now is once again using the pretext of the war on terror to protect and probably escalate terrorism by its leading client state.

The latest phase of this began on October 1, 2000. From October 1, the first days after the current Intifada began, Israeli helicopters began to attack unarmed Palestinians with missiles, killing and wounding dozens of them. There wasn't any pretext of self-defense. [Side comment: When you read the phrase "Israeli helicopters" you should understand it to mean U.S. helicopters with Israeli pilots, provided in the certain knowledge of how they are going to be used.]

Clinton immediately responded to the atrocity. On October 3, 2000, two days later, he arranged to send Israel the largest shipment of military helicopters in a decade along with spare parts for Apache attack helicopters that had been sent in mid-September. The press cooperated by refusing to report any of this-not failing, notice, but refusing; they knew all about it.

Last month the Martian press would certainly have headlined Washington's intervention to expedite the further escalation of the cycle of terror there. On December 14, the U.S. vetoed a Security Council resolution calling for implementation of the Mitchell proposals and sending international observers to monitor reduction of violence. It went at once to the General Assembly, where it was opposed by the U.S. and Israel also; therefore, it disappears. And you can check the coverage.

A week earlier, there was a conference in Geneva of the high contracting parties of the Fourth Geneva Convention, who are obliged by solemn treaty to enforce it. The Convention, as you know, was instituted after World War II to criminalize the atrocities of the Nazis. The Convention strictly bars virtually everything the U.S. and Israel do in the occupied territories, including the settlements that were established and expanded with U.S. funding and full support, increasing under Clinton and Barak during the Camp David negotiations. Israel alone rejects this interpretation.

When the issue came to the Security Council in October 2000, the U.S. abstained, apparently not wanting to take such a blatant stand in violation of fundamental principles of international law, particularly given the circumstances of their enactment. The Security Council therefore voted fourteen-zero to call upon Israel to uphold the Convention, which it was again flagrantly violating. Pre-Clinton, the U.S. had voted with the other members to condemn Israel's "flagrant violations" of the Convention. That's consistent with the Clinton practice of effectively rescinding international law and earlier UN decisions for Israel-Palestine.

The media tell us that Arabs believe that the Convention applies to the territories, which is not false, although there's kind of an omission-the Arabs and everybody else. The December 5, 2001, meeting, including all of the European Union, reaffirmed the applicability of the Convention to the territories, the illegality of settlements; called on Israel, meaning the U.S. and Israel, to observe international law. The U.S. boycotted the meeting, thereby killing it. You can check the coverage again.

These acts again contributed to the escalation of terrorism there, including its most severe component, and the media contributed in the usual way.

Responses to Terrorism

Suppose, finally, that we join the Martian observer and we depart from convention radically. We accept moral truisms. If we can rise to that level, we can then, and only then, honestly raise the question of how to respond to terrorist crimes.

One answer is to follow the precedent of law-abiding states, the Nicaraguan precedent, for example. Of course that failed, because they ran up against the fact that the world is ruled by force, not by law, but it wouldn't fail for the U.S. However, evidently that's excluded. I have yet to see one phrase referring to that precedent in the massive coverage of the last couple of months.

Another answer was given by Bush and Boyce, but we instantly reject that one because nobody believes that Haiti or Nicaragua or Cuba and a long list of others around the world have the right to carry out massive terrorist attacks against the United States and its clients, or other rich and powerful states.

A more reasonable answer was given by a number of sources, including the Vatican, and was spelled out by the preeminent Anglo-American military historian, Michael Howard, last October. Actually, it's published in the current issue of Foreign Affairs (January-February 2002); that's the leading establishment journal. Now Howard has all the appropriate credentials, a lot of prestige; he's a great admirer of the British Empire, even more extravagantly of its successor in global rule, so he can't be accused of moral relativism or other such crimes.

Referring to September 11, he recommended a police operation against a criminal conspiracy whose members should be hunted down and brought before an international court, where they could receive a fair trial, and if found guilty be awarded an appropriate sentence. That was never contemplated, of course, but it sounds kind of reasonable to me. If it is reasonable, then it ought to hold for even worse terrorist crimes. For example, the U.S. international terrorist attack against Nicaragua, or even worse ones nearby and elsewhere going up to the present. That could never be contemplated, of course, but for opposite reasons.

So honesty leaves us with a dilemma. The easy answer is conventional hypocrisy. The other option is the one adopted by our Martian friend, who actually abides by the principles that we profess with grand self-righteousness. That option is harder to consider, but imperative if the world is to be spared I still worse disasters.