

# The Terror that Never Arrives

Giles Beilby

Every day we are told to keep ourselves aware of “the threat.” We are told we are always vulnerable, and always on the verge of being attacked. We even have a color-coded indicator of the estimated proximity of the threat. We know this threat, we have seen it materialize in New York, Madrid, Bali, Sudan, Oklahoma, and we see it again every day in Iraq, Israel, and Palestine. Terrorism is now almost omnipresent as a factor in our everyday lives. Yet, when we say this, what do we mean? Do we really feel that at any moment an Arab with bombs and guns might burst into our home, office or school? And do we really feel that following the guidance and advice of our Homeland Security officials, and remaining constantly alert actually protects us? What, exactly, is accomplished by our perpetual anxiety? More importantly, is whatever is accomplished really the most proper mode of addressing the threat which we are, by all accounts, under?

Franz Kafka wrote a story entitled *The Burrow* which bears some striking resemblances to our peculiar situation. In this story, a creature has created for itself a vast labyrinth of underground tunnels and chambers as both a palace of pleasures and a bastion of security. In constructing the burrow, the creature has beaten the sandy walls hard with its head, securing itself from the outside world, and concussing itself with the effort. And yet, as secure as the burrow is, it still has its entrance, covered by a layer of moss which could be breached at any moment. The creature laments “I can scarcely pass an hour in complete tranquility; at that one point in the dark moss, I am vulnerable, and in my dreams I often see a greedy muzzle sniffing around it persistently” (Kafka 467). Nor is this the only threat the creature fears; “there are insatiable robbers who burrow blindly through the ground . . . there are also enemies in the bowels of the earth . . . at any moment [the silence of my burrow] may be shattered and then all will be over” (469). At intervals, the creature must leave the safety of the burrow to hunt, to collect food, and on its return, it spends days agonizing over the

possibility that its reentrance might alert some potential enemy to the vulnerable moss carpeted entrance to its sanctum. At one point, the creature believes it hears a noise, a buzz it believes might signal the approach of an enemy, and so spends the rest of the story half-heartedly seeking it out, never finding anything, but living in perpetual fear, finally hiding indefinitely in the burrow’s keep, silent and still, awaiting its doom.

Do we not find ourselves in an analogous situation? Are we not told we have the best trained, best equipped armed forces of any nation; that America is the premier military power; that our national defense is the most prepared, most versatile, most effective system in the world? Yet simultaneously we are warned that we are ever susceptible to the mobile, adaptable, rapidly acting terrorist threat. Perhaps not coincidentally, these are the same qualities our own armed forces aspire to in their ongoing restructuring. What is this threat that is apparently a match for our defenses, which apparently renders all our efforts moot? Can we seriously believe it is a specific group of individuals “driven by hate, and determined to destroy the ideals we cherish and the way of life we hold dear” as Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge so eloquently put it (Remarks 12/30/03)? If we look at the language Ridge chose to describe the aims of the threat: “hate,” “ideals,” “way of life,” we see that these are all nebulous indicators of intangible ideas. Doesn’t it seem proper then that the threat associated with these intangibles would itself be intangible, rather than embodied in specific individuals? We can look also at the reasoning given for the constant changes in the levels of the Homeland Security Advisory System; that wonderful color coded threat intensity indicator. We hear again and again that the level has been changed up or down (primarily between “Yellow” and “Orange,” or “Elevated” and “High,”) as the result of “a careful review of the available intelligence” (Remarks 1/9/04). At the same time, whenever the threat level is lowered, we

are informed that “the lowering of the threat level is not a signal to government, law enforcement or citizens that the danger of a terrorist attack is passed” (Threat 9/24/04). What then does it indicate if not a nebulous reaction to a nebulous threat?

What are the reasons for remaining so ambiguous in defining the threat level, and what effects does this ambiguity have on a social level? We are told that we do not need the specific information, and indeed that to give that information out would be tantamount to telling the terrorists how we know what they are doing. When Tom Ridge was asked in a press conference what it would take to raise the alert level, rather than specify what the different levels entailed, he responded “Well, we wouldn’t necessarily want to broadcast to the terrorists what it would take [to raise our alert]. . .” (Statement 7/8/04). Still, something in this classified information is apparently enough to justify the almost bi-monthly vacillation between “Elevated” and “High” alert levels, so mustn’t there be some real difference between them? Yet, in an announcement that the DHS was raising the alert level from Yellow to Orange, (the level where federal agencies are advised to consider canceling public events (Homeland Security Presidential Directive), and the public is urged to “exercise caution when traveling” (Citizen Guidance)), Ridge encourages “all Americans to go forward with their holiday plans, gather with family and friends” (Remarks 12/30/03). What is the distinction between these two levels if we are told that an Orange alert ought to change our activities, but also told when it actually occurs to change nothing? At first glance, they are indistinguishable, or one might read “elevated” as an elevation above “high,” though in reality it is the other way around. Without anything specific, we are left to assume that those with access to the classified information are doing whatever is necessary to protect us, and that it is our contribution to shop, travel, and remain in a state of high or elevated alertness. On the one hand, we are told that our fears are real, and on the other to pay them no heed. We, it appears, as concrete citizens can do nothing, and must defer to the shadowy reviewers of information. It seems as though for us, the threat of terrorism has always already arrived, while our agencies still guard against its approach. It seems that, strangely enough, the concrete threat is dealt with by intangible agents,

while the concrete population remains under an intangible menace. We can do nothing, we are told, but leave it up to the capable people of Homeland security.

Despite this subliminal admission of the spectral nature of the threat, we continue to treat it as though it were a concrete entity which we could one day kill off. We send our troops to fight it, we close our borders so it can’t get in, we set up systems to detect its approach, and we prepare ourselves as though it might appear on our doorstep with a letter of introduction. At the same time, are we not all manifestly aware that this is not the case? Don’t we know that terrorism arrives unannounced? If indeed the threat of terrorism is ideological, why do we act as though it were physical? Of course, this is not meant to imply that terrorism does not have real, physical effects, or that efforts to thwart the advent of these effects is improper, but are we doing anything at all to address the more fundamental roots of terrorism? Philosopher Slavoj Zizek writes:

On September 11, the USA was given the opportunity to realize what kind of a world it was a part of. It might have taken this opportunity— but it did not; instead, it opted to reassert its traditional ideological commitments: out with feelings of responsibility and guilt towards the impoverished Third World, *we* are the victims now! (Zizek 47).

When the towers fell, America was thrown into crisis. We had abruptly been linked to the rest of the world in a way we had only ever imagined in action films. Suddenly the movie was real, and the vicarious involvement we had with terror was found to be inappropriate— in fact, we yanked or delayed the release of films which addressed terrorism in this newly inadequate manner. At that moment, we had the chance to reconfigure our place in the world, a chance to address our relationship to international concerns. Instead, we bombed the shit out of Afghanistan. The actions we took after September 11<sup>th</sup> reflect precisely what it is that disallows our active and productive understanding of, and reaction to terrorism. We hear much talk about “September 10<sup>th</sup>” mentalities, where terrorism remains a foreign problem, as opposed to “September 12<sup>th</sup>” mentalities, where terrorism is *our* immediate problem, but we

have yet to recognize the opportunities present in the September 11<sup>th</sup> mentality, where terrorism remains a question. Despite our awareness that this was a new type of conflict, we reacted in an old way. Despite our claims that terrorism was the product of fundamental ideology, we attacked it as though it were a foreign state. Despite our appreciation of the causes of terrorism, we chose to fight its symptoms, and in so doing, we covered over the opening we had to honestly encounter the threat in question.

If we are really serious about addressing terrorism, we cannot content ourselves with abating its symptoms, nor can we ignore the claims of its proponents. While we may certainly feel that Osama bin Laden's judgment of the United States as the Great Satan is unfair, we simply cannot unequivocally deny that judgment validity. By merely dismissing such claims as false, and by naming those who make them fanatics, fundamentalists, or lunatics, we artificially erect ideological blockades which prohibit productive engagement. In fact, we merely reenact those very claims by simply readdressing them to the other side. What we must actually look at is *how* these accusations, if they are, as we feel, patently false, *come to be held as valid* by those recruited as terrorists. No one can reasonably say that antipathy toward America is inborn in Islamic society, and no one can claim that Islamic youth come to bear arms against the United States without having some reason to do so. We cannot remain satisfied with dismissing the ideological claims of terrorism as ludicrous, and then responding in like kind to terrorist actions. If we do, we remain at an impasse, and with a war that, as President Bush has put it, cannot be won.

In order to see why it is that ideological claims against the United States can hold such sway over young people who turn to terrorism to express their views, it is imperative that we first allow their claims to stand as though they were *valid for us*. We see that terrorist recruitment is most effective where the population is poor, where religion is strong, and we immediately blame the problem on ignorance and religious fundamentalism. When we do this, we forget that Islam does not have a history of violence toward other cultures in any greater degree than does Christianity. Thus we cannot blame the particular religion or the mindset of its adherents for the

coincidence of the Muslim faith and terrorism. In this analysis we emphasize religion at the expense of economics, and ignore the astounding discrepancies in quality of life between the Third World and our own. In fact, in this very term: "Third World," we have linguistically excluded the poor from what we think of as the world as such. If we try to think ourselves into the position of frustration and disenfranchisement, and then consider an explanation for the discrepancy between our situation and that of the wealthy, which not only explains, but also gives us a method of redress, and also lays claim to our religious faith, we are not likely to delve into the concrete truth of the argument. We have seen almost the same situation play out with pre-World War II Germany where a sort of political fundamentalism allowed for the most destructive rupture of Western civilization to date. Would we, in the other's situation, be so prescient as to see through the reasoning that claimed we would have to fight the oppressor, an oppressor who would lie to us about their aims? I think we would have to answer in the negative. If we were in the position of most of the Third World, and were convinced our lives were at stake, *of course* we would fight this horrible enemy in any way we could. In fact, we *have* taken that precise position, only we have characterized the *terrorists* as the would-be oppressor. We see *ourselves* as victims of unjustified aggression, precisely as those who join up with terrorist organizations see themselves as victims of our aggression— we join the army, they join al Qaeda; we support our troops, they support their militias. In practical terms, it is irrelevant whether the opposing interpretations actually correspond to reality, because as long as they are held as valid by either side, their enactment *creates* the concrete reality. As long as we refuse to recognize our parallel structural activities, there can be no resolution.

So what, explicitly, can we do? Once we have understood that the real problem is not merely a physical one, but an ideological one, once we cease to confuse the symptom with the sickness, we are in a position to move ahead. First, there must be an effort -- and not a token, photo-op effort -- to alter the fundamental situations which allow ideological radicalism to ferment. This means that Third World poverty must become a serious issue for us at home.

It must become an issue in such a way that we do not simply remain within our own ideological bubble handing down dough from on high, the way we might give change to the homeless, but rather we must concern ourselves with the Third World as though it were the First World. If drastic poverty were to suddenly strike Britain, or France, or Germany, we would not move in and order their affairs for them (we ought to have learned this lesson after the Weimar Republic), but we would *ask* them what assistance we could give. In just the same way, Africa, the Middle East, South America, Asia, and Eastern Europe, all ought to be *asked*, not told. Secondly, it means that our foreign policy must reflect a new kind of honesty. We can no longer say we will deal with some nations despite their handling of internal affairs and refuse to deal with others. If we deal with Saudi Arabia, we ought to deal with Iran and Syria as well. We cannot assume a position of superior moral authority in the world, as though we were above the fray in a way that would allow us to judge the relative merits of other nations, and to bias our actions regarding these nations on a curve reflecting their relative usefulness to us.

All of our dealings in the world must recognize the questions opened up on September 11<sup>th</sup>: who are we? who are they? why did this happen? what do we do now? These questions must remain permanently open, and must configure our relationship to the world. We must begin with a question, and we must carry out a conversation, rather than a monologue. This conversation cannot remain limited to “allies” and “partners” if we want anything to change. Nor can it become a debate, where “sides” are arranged. This conversation must also become an internal conversation where we as citizens have a place other than as shoppers and travelers. If the open question of September 11<sup>th</sup> is not recognized, then we are faced with the fate of Kafka’s creature, hearing threats from every corner, imagining ourselves free and secure in a prison of our own construction.

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