Maurice Merleau-Ponty once wrote that history itself is terror, and that the common assumption of all revolutionaries is that "the contingency of the future and the role of human decisions in history makes political divergences irreducible and cunning, deceit and violence inevitable."¹

If this should be true, have we no choice but, in Camus's words, to be either victims or executioners? Must we either allow violence to be done to ourselves and those we care about, or resort to it ourselves against those we perceive as threats?

This is perhaps the central dilemma confronting anyone who has an active engagement with social, political and moral problems. It is not altered by the fact that most of us do not use violence ourselves—that is done for us by others—or by the fact we deplore violence at some level of our thinking. Our social life has so institutionalized violence that, despite ourselves, we support and sustain its use through government, taxation, the economy, and even the educational system, which at the highest levels trains officers for the military and profits from military-related research.

Notice that we do not view all violence in the same light. That which helps to maintain the status quo, whether in the way of police or military action, is approved by those who are its beneficiaries; that which threatens it, whether in the way of criminal or revolutionary violence, is condemned. And on the international scene we deplore the growing threat of nuclear war. But we support preparations for conventional war, as though it were somehow a respectable compromise.

But the mode of violence that is almost universally condemned is terrorism. Although terrorism stands at the other end of the scale from nuclear war, it rivals nuclear war in the dread that it inspires. If we are better to understand the nature of violence, we must at some point confront the problem of terrorism.

My aim will be to argue for the need for a better understanding of
terrorism and Violence

terrorists themselves, their motives, values and aspirations, and for
greater recognition of responsibility on the part of others, like
ourselves, to work for constructive resolution of the problems that give
rise to terrorist activities in the first place. This, rather than increasingly
tough responses, is the only approach that can promise success in the long
run.

I

What is terrorism? More and more the term is used almost
exclusively emotively, to stand for virtually any use of political
violence of which we disapprove. This deprives the term of most of its
usefulness by turning it into little more than another weapon in the
arsenal of polemical disputes. One and the same person becomes a
terrorist or a freedom fighter, depending upon whether we approve or
disapprove of what he does.

But terrorism also has an underlying descriptive meaning. In this
more basic sense, terrorism is the practice of terrorizing for social,
political or moral ends, typically by the use or threat of violence, often
against innocent persons. Who does the terrorizing does not matter;
what counts is what is done and for what reasons. Individuals acting
alone can terrorize; but so can governments or armies. And it does not
matter what the cause is for which terrorism is undertaken or how much
legitimacy it enjoys. What makes a terrorist a terrorist is the means by
which his or her ends are pursued, not the ends themselves.

Terrorism presents the greatest challenge when it is undertaken for
a cause. For then terrorism represents a rationally chosen means to an
end. And however much we deplore terrorism, it is not necessarily a
less rational choice, in the sense of being an effective means to one’s
ends, than many of the conventionally accepted modes of
violence. Trotsky perceived this when writing of the Russian
revolution. A victorious war, he observed, usually "destroys only an
insignificant part of the conquered army, intimidating the remainder
and breaking their will. The revolution works in the same way: it kills
individuals, and intimidates thousands."

II

by breaking the will of the thousands who learn of it. That is why
publicity is important to its success. Indeed, if we accept the
Clausewitzian definition of war as "an act of violence intended to
compel our opponent to fulfill our will," terrorism can itself be
considered a form of warfare. Terrorism intimidates by instilling terror,
whereas conventional war intimidates by inflicting losses.

Conventional war, however, may itself be terrorist. Its rationale
then is usually military necessity. This was put bluntly by the Kaiser
during World War I, when he said:

My soul is torn, but everything must be put to fire and sword; men,
women, and children and old men must be slaughtered and not a tree
or house be left standing. With these methods of terrorism, which are
alone capable of affecting a people as degenerate as the French, the
war will be over in two months, whereas if I admit considerations of
humanity it will prolong for years.

Essentially the same rationale underlay the fire-bombings of Dresden
during World War II and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and
Nagasaki. Those, too, were acts of terrorism, employing massive,
discriminate violence against mostly innocent persons.

Because of the resources at a government’s command, state terror
is often the most effective kind. When undertaken openly, governments
have a vast propaganda apparatus to justify what they do. But state
terror can also be used surreptitiously, as Libya, Iran and Syria have
been accused of doing, and against a country’s own people, as Stalin
did in the ’30s, and as some Latin American governments do today.

But whereas the latter operate through the torture and assassination of
death squads, Stalin worked through the Soviet Union’s legal
institutions. There was no gunfire in the night, no bodies on Moscow’s
outskirts in the morning. Yet through trial, conviction and execution,
perceived enemies were eliminated as effectively as though they had
been gunned down, and others were frightened into submission.

Terrorism is commonly represented in the U.S. as primarily Arab.
When a toy manufacturer recently produced a doll representing a
terrorist, the doll was named Nomad, dressed in Arab garb and, and,
according to the company’s description, engaged in “terrorist assaults
Terrorism and Violence

Political cartoonists depicting terrorists regularly show them grizzled and wearing keffiyehs. Admittedly, some of the most dramatic acts of terrorism, from the Munich Olympics in 1972 to the 1986 massacre at the Neve Shalom synagogue in Istanbul, have been by Arabs directed against Jews, notably Israelis. But much of recent terrorism in this country—we tend to think of terrorism as something that mostly happens elsewhere, but we have it here as well—has been against Arabs. The October 1985 assassination of Alex Odeh of the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee was a terrorist act. Although it occurred within the borders of Ronald Reagan’s home state of California and killed the same number of Americans as the 1986 bombing of the discothèque in Berlin—a second person subsequently died of injuries from the latter attack—it occasioned no comparable outrage. And it was but one of five terrorist attacks against Arabs in the U.S. that year, prompting then FBI director William H. Webster to say: “Arab individuals or those supporting Arab points of view have come within the zone of danger—targeting by a group as yet to be fully identified and brought to justice.”

It is misleading to represent even Middle East terrorism as exclusively the work of Arabs. The Jewish underground used terrorism against the British in Palestine in the 1940s. Both Yitzhak Shamir and Menachem Begin, who later were to become prime ministers of Israel, led such groups: Begin led the Irgun; Shamir, the Stern Gang. The former was responsible for the 1946 bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem; the latter for the assassinations in 1944 of Lord Moyne, Britain’s Minister of State for the Middle East, and in 1948 of Swedish Count Folke Bernadotte, the United Nations representative to the Middle East. More recently, in the 1980s, Jewish settlers resorted to terrorism against West Bank Palestinians. Iran, which was high on President Reagan’s list of terrorist governments, is not even an Arab country. Nor is Arab terrorism all the work of Moslems. The Phalangists who massacred Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps of Lebanon are Christians. So are George Habash and Nayef Hawatmeh, leaders, respectively, of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the two main factions of the PLO after Al Fatah, both of which have been implicated in terrorist activities. Nor is the West the sole victim of terrorism. The Soviets were victimized when four of their embassy officials in Beirut were taken hostage and one of them executed. And some of the worst car-bombings outside of Lebanon have taken place against Syria.

Nor, of course, is terrorism by any means confined to the Middle East or those acting in Middle Eastern interests. The Pol Pot regime in Cambodia undertook a campaign of genocidal terror in Cambodia that has been exceeded in recent history only by the Nazis’ exterminations of Jews. Long-standing terror has been used by the IRA in Northern Ireland, by the Basques in Spain, and, by some accounts, at least, by the African National Congress in South Africa. The growing practice of “necklacing” of black South Africans by other black South Africans is a particularly ghastly form of terrorism.

The point is that terrorism is misleadingly represented as a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Any people desperate enough are capable of engaging in it; any government unscrupulous enough, capable of using it.

III

If terrorism is not clearly less rational than the accepted violence of warfare, neither is it less moral. If a band of men slips across a border and plants bombs at the home of the nation’s leader and his family, then disappears into the night as the resultant explosions kill his baby daughter and leave his son permanently brain-damaged as well as killing scores of other people, that is terrorism. But if those same men put on uniforms, swoop over the country in the dead of night and bomb those same targets from military aircraft, as the U.S. did against Libya, that is not considered terrorism. But why not? It would take a casuist of exceeding skill to point to a moral difference between the two. The killing of children does not become less reprehensible because done from a plane, by soldiers trained in warfare and acting under orders from a duly elected leader than when done clandestinely by men acting on their own or in concert with a few conspirators.

Terrorism is not in itself any worse than many conventionally accepted forms of violence. True, terrorism is probably directed against civilians more often than is standard warfare. But ordinary warfare can use terror as a tactic. When it does, the proportion of violence may be small in absolute numbers of persons killed, relative to the overall violence of the war effort, but it dwarfs terrorism by comparison. The terror-bombings of Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki undoubtedly
Nor is the terrorist as a person necessarily any worse than the soldier in uniform. If the one uses unconventional means, that is because such means are all he has at his disposal. Are we to say to terrorists that if they had an army and an air force at their disposal, it would be all right to use them; but as they do not, they may not use the homemade bombs they do have? Indeed, the terrorist may more often be a person of conviction than the ordinary soldier. The soldier does what he does because he is told to. Often as not, he has been involuntarily pressed into service, and has little or no understanding of the issues for which he has been asked to kill. The terrorist typically does what he does voluntarily, knowledgeably, and with conviction of the rightness of his cause. And he often thinks of himself as legitimately involved in a military struggle. When Georges Abdalla was convicted of terrorist activities in France, he asserted that he was a "Palestinian fighter," not a terrorist. When former Jewish terrorists gathered at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1981 to reminisce about their 1946 bombing of the hotel that left 91 dead, one of them said, "I am very proud of the operation militarily. I felt myself like a soldier of these Jewish forces." Whatever one thinks of the merits of their respective causes, these are people who freely commit themselves to a cause, and in so doing, undertake the actions they do with conviction. Indeed, it is precisely because their conviction is greater than that of most people, at least as measured by their willingness to sacrifice and kill, that they are willing to perform acts that ordinary persons consider abhorrent.

Men the world over readily become killers if told to by their governments, or, as with terrorists, if they believe strongly enough in their cause. There is not much difference between them. They were recruited and exploited by our own government in the Vietnam War. An officer of a U.S. helicopter unit, who had commented upon the gloomy prospects of success in the operations in the delta area, was asked what the answer was.

"Terror," he said pleasantly. "The Vietcong have terrorized the peasants to get their cooperation. . . . We must terrorize the villagers even more, so they see that their real self-interest lies with us. We've got to start bombing and strafing the villages that aren't friendly to the Government." He then added, "Of course, we won't do it. That's not our way of doing things. . . . But terror is what it takes."
But it did become our way of doing things. It was reported soon after:

U.S. and allied forces are adopting a program of destroying homes and crops in areas which feed and shield the communist forces. For years, Americans have refused to participate in "scorched earth" efforts, leaving them to the Vietnamese. Now Americans are directly involved.  

*Washington Post* correspondent John T. Wheeler reported on one such operation on March 30, 1967:

The Vietnamese woman ignored the crying baby in her arms. She stared in hatred as the American infantrymen with shotguns blasted away at chickens and ducks. Others shot a water buffalo and the family dog.

While her husband, father and young son were led away, the torch was put to the hut that still contained the family belongings. The flames consumed everything—including the shrine to the family ancestors. The GI's didn't have much stomach for the job, but orders were orders.

"God, my wife would faint if she could see what I'm doing now," an infantryman said. "Killing...[Vietcong] is one thing, but killing puppies and baby ducks and stuff like that—it's something else, man."

The point is that ordinary people can be brought to do such things. Young Russians have done comparable things in Afghanistan, Israelis in the Middle East and Contras in Nicaragua, as have the Mujahadeen, the Palestinians, and the Sandinistas, in varying degrees and with allowance for the means at their disposal.

But if, as I have maintained, the violence of terrorism is no worse morally than much of that of warfare, it is also true that the violence of warfare is no less terrible than that of terrorism. We have so compartmentalized our thinking that we fail to see this, thinking of one as respectable, the other vile.

What is common to the violence of the terrorist and that of the soldier is that they both treat human beings as though they were physical objects to be removed or destroyed when perceived to be obstacles to the attainment of one's ends. Or treat them as instruments by which those ends are to be promoted. Once one accepts the premise that violence is a permissible means by which to pursue ends, and that one may do virtually anything to achieve those ends, one only needs to accustom people to overcome their natural revulsion to killing to turn them to your purposes. The techniques are there. They are not the special province of terrorists. The armies of the world specialize in them. "We're military people," one of the pilots involved in the U.S. strike against Libya said. "We were told what to do and we did it."

Asked about the people who were probably killed on the beach, he remarked that that responsibility "is above my pay grade."

It is this feature of violence, whether military or terrorist, that highlights the central fact in its moral assessment. Kant captured the idea in his second formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only." To allow yourself to be used by others to do their killing is to allow yourself to become a means. To kill others to promote your own ends is to use them as means. We need to rediscover the humanity of all persons, friends and adversaries alike, and to accord them the respect owed them as persons.

But what, if it may be asked, are people to do who suffer persecution and injustice? What were European Jews to do who fled the holocaust and sought a homeland in Palestine, only to be turned back by the British? What are Palestinians to do who seek to return to their homeland, only to be turned back by the Israelis? Should the former have folded their hand and waited for the world to offer them security? And should the latter resign themselves to refugee camps until the Israelis invite them back?

Neither I nor anyone else has easy answers to these questions. But I would make two suggestions, one concerning the need for a change in our outlook toward terrorists, the other concerning our own responsibility and that of others like us who are not principals in most of these disputes, for the perpetuation of conditions that lead to terrorism.

The first is to try to understand terrorists, to open communication with them, to listen to their side of the conflicts they are involved in, rather than, as now, refusing to deal with them at all. Terrorism does not exist in the abstract. People do not just decide to become international terrorists and then conspire with others to go about their deadly business. "We are people," one of the women said at the aforementioned gathering at the King David Hotel. "We know how to love, we know how to hate. We know how to kiss. We have all the
emotions of everybody else." We need to recognize terrorists as persons like ourselves, taking into their own hands the violence most of us leave to others. They are not subhuman monsters, to be fought with blood and iron and all the righteous fury that civilized people can muster. And part of our responsibility is to understand what it is that can lead them to perform such acts, and what measure of justice their cause may embody.

When the hijackers of the TWA airliner in 1985 reportedly shouted the words "New Jersey" in the aisles of the plane, most Americans, if they heard it at all, would scarcely have been aware that the reference was to the battleship New Jersey. After the bombing of the Marine Barracks, the battleship had turned its 16-inch guns upon Shi'ite Moslem villages in Lebanon, hurling 2,000 pound shells into the homes of those who could not possibly have been responsible for the bombing. One of the hijackers, it was reported, lost his wife and daughter in that shelling. It is decent, well-dressed men in Washington—family men, churchgoers, good neighbors and friends—who ultimately bear responsibility for such actions. With the unprecedented military power at their command, they need only issue a command, and a sequence of events is set in motion that results in shells exploding in Arab villages thousands of miles away. Those in the Middle East who burn to avenge such actions, or to redress what they perceive as wrongs wrought by the policies of these men in Washington, have only guns or explosives, and their own strength and wit, with which to work. When they commandeer a plane, or plant a bomb, they are terrorists. But what they do is no different in kind from what others do or have done. If the challenge is to understand better and appreciate the position of the terrorist, or the revolutionary, or the advocate of violent change, the imperative is to find nonviolent ways of dealing with the problems of injustice, poverty and oppression that are typically at the root of their actions. That requires that others, who are not desperate in the way in which the oppressed are, and who have the means, power and influence to redirect the course of events, involve themselves cooperatively with all sides in the controversies that lead to violence in an attempt to find creative solutions to them.

Nonviolence, so conceived, must be active, not passive. In a sense, violence—by which I mean reliance upon violence as the ultimate recourse for resolving problems—is more passive than nonviolence.

Violence often waits until situations have deteriorated to the point where there is gross injustice, doing nothing, or worse yet, doing the wrong things, then flaring up and engulfing those it would help as well as those it opposes. Reliance upon the institutionalized violence of modern war systems did not prevent Hitler from coming to power. While it eventually vanquished him at a horrendous cost of mostly civilian lives, it left in its wake a situation arguably as bad as that which, following World War I, eventually led to World War II, and which today casts the shadow of World War III over the world. The War was begun by the French and the English to save Poland. But nearly 50 years later Poland is not free. The Vietnam War was ostensibly begun to secure the freedom of the South Vietnamese people. But today the whole of Vietnam is communist. Arab states went to war in 1948 to liberate Palestine, and yet today Palestinians live by the tens of thousands in refugee camps. And Israel relies on military might to preserve itself; yet its security gradually erodes as its margin of superiority over its Arab neighbors diminishes and its domination of Palestinians generates a growing internal crisis.

Nonviolence requires a commitment to become actively engaged with the problems of peace and justice, rather than ignoring such problems so long as things remain orderly, and then sending in troops when bloodshed finally becomes inevitable. This is what nonviolence has meant for leaders such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

But can nonviolence "work?" Can it resolve the problems of injustice and oppression? We do not know. But we do know that resort to war and violence for all of recorded history has not worked. It has not brought either peace or justice to the world. The most it has achieved are brief interludes, in which the nations of the world can regroup, catch their breath, and prepare for the next war. Nonviolence worked in India with Gandhi, in the U.S. with King, and in Scandinavia against the Nazis during World War II. More recently, it has worked when Filipinos placed themselves in front of oncoming government ranks, averting what might have been a bloody civil war when the Marcos government sought to confront rebel commanders in their headquarters. It has brought dignity and respect to the Solidarity movement in Poland when violence would almost certainly have brought a crushing Soviet response. Would it work on a larger scale? Who knows? No one can foresee what the results might be if a country
like the U.S. were to spend $300 billion a year in research on techniques of nonviolent resistance and on training people in their use.

What is needed here? A new perspective, I suggest, on our interaction with others in the world, a perspective which, in Kantian terms, respects persons as ends in themselves. We need a willingness to cultivate and put into practice an awareness of the humanity in our adversaries, even when they are terrorists, a perspective which approaches conflict in a spirit of seeking the truth in the issues that divide us from our adversaries rather than assuming our own righteousness and trying only to work out the means to our ends. Violence is for the morally infallible, while nonviolence is for those who recognize their own limitations and their adversaries' hold on important parts of the truth. But nonviolence is, I submit, the only approach which holds the remotest hope of resolving the dilemma with which we began. In the nuclear age, we are at the point where we must move on to a new plane, and make of the future what we want it to be. We must not allow it to be shaped by the same forces, including the same outdated ways of thinking, that have led us into the predicament we face today.