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Advocating for the Devil

Hearing Al-Qaeda's Case Against the United States

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Introduction

[1] Since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, nearly every angle of these events has been explored in print, pertaining to everything from the individuals and nations involved to the political and historical precursors and ongoing social ramifications of the attacks. Yet few writers have seriously analyzed the actual *arguments* that Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda have used (or might use) to defend their actions. Even some of the most thoughtful pieces I have read take it for granted that the attacks were morally unjustifiable, even atrocities. Some writers, such as Noam Chomsky, have dared to propose that we had it coming, due, for example, to the history of U.S. foreign policy, but in the end all seem to agree that the attacks are beyond rational defense. (Chomsky himself called the attack an "appalling atrocity"). The question of the moral justifiability of the attacks, it is assumed, is not even worth asking.

[2] But there *is* an interesting question here: If the 9-11 attacks were so obviously morally wrong, then why do al-Qaeda and their sympathizers believe so strongly otherwise? (Some Muslims in the Arab world were seen dancing in the streets on 9-11.) Believe what one will about the morality and religious commitments of their subculture, these are on the whole intelligent people, certainly no less intelligent than you or I. So simple stupidity is not the explanation for their deeds. Are they mad? Even so crass an explanation as this has its appeal and carries weight with many Americans. But, of course, to dismiss bin Laden and al-Qaeda as crazy or insane, too, is implausible. After all, these people are rational in so many other respects.

[3] What might be called the "standard account" appeals to a deep resentment on the part of al-Qaeda and their ilk. Alan Wolfe's explanation along these lines is representative:

I think they hate us because we are a standing rebuke to their vision of the way the world should be organized: Every time an American expresses his or her own beliefs about God; every time an American woman does not wear a symbol of her oppression in the form of a veil; every time we prove that it is possible for people of different religious faiths to live together and to work together. In short, every time we practice the sort of moral freedom that characterizes our society, we offend people who insist that our version of the right and the good way to live is bankrupt, corrupt, evil, or whatever other terms they use upon it.

Wolfe's explanation is only a slightly nuanced version of that which has been consistently offered by President Bush. Here is one of Bush's summations of the motives for the attacks:

These are people that hate America because we love freedom. They hate what we stand for. They hate the fact that we worship freely, that all religions are welcome here in America. They hate that. They hate the fact that we speak our mind; they hate the fact that we have good political discourse. They hate everything we stand for.

[4] But the standard account is too simplistic. Simple hatred of American freedom is not sufficient to motivate the systematic plotting of al-Qaeda that culminated in the 9-11 attacks, particularly given the self-sacrifice involved on the part of the hijackers. Hatred and its cognates - envy, jealousy, resentment - are powerful passions, but only devout belief in the *moral justification* of one's actions can prompt such extreme devotion. So we must not succumb to the self-flattering reasoning of the standard account.

[5] If appeals to stupidity, madness, and hatred are implausible, then perhaps the explanation has to do with mistaken thinking. Could it be that al-Qaeda operatives are simply misled, specifically in terms of their moral beliefs? But if they are morally misguided, just where did they go wrong? And what are our grounds for believing their moral position to be mistaken? These are just the sorts of questions that have not been discussed - or have not been discussed widely - in the public square during America's "war on terrorism." It is crucial that we address these questions. Failure to do so shows that our outrage is purely emotive, and public opinion, particularly about matters as grave as this, must be based on something more secure than emotion. Even if our own consciences are unshakeable, others' might not be. The treachery of John Walker Lindh is an alarming case in point. Refusal to grapple with the moral arguments on both sides of the issue renders the American public vulnerable to the defection of other young minds who don't happen to share our feelings. On the other hand, a willingness to meet the arguments head-on is the best assurance we have of staving off the lethal ideas that led to 9-11 and possibly other attacks. So I propose that we give the devil his day in rational court before rebutting him with *good reasons*.

Al-Qaeda's Case Against the United States

[6] So what moral ground could al-Qaeda possibly have? In a 1998 interview, bin Laden offered numerous arguments defending his position, including this summary:

The call to wage war against America was made because America has spear-headed the crusade against the Islamic nation, sending tens of thousands of its troops to the land of the two Holy Mosques over and above its meddling in its affairs and its politics, and its support of the oppressive, corrupt and tyrannical regime that is in control. These are the reasons behind the singling out of America as a target.

The al-Qaeda case against the United States can be spelled out in much more detail, as follows. First, there is the matter of U.S. military presence in the Muslim holy land, Saudi Arabia. In late 1990, a U.S. led Western alliance began deploying military personnel and equipment in the area in preparation for the eventual liberation of Kuwait and invasion of Iraq. After succeeding in these missions the military presence persisted. This defiles the holy site of Mecca, the birthplace of Islam's prophet Mohammed, where over 600,000 Muslims make pilgrimage annually. It also defiles Medina, where the Mosque of the Prophet, containing the tomb of Mohammed, is located. So, the argument goes, the United States is guilty of continuing attacks on Islam and Muslim people in the form of religious desecration. The Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, speaks plainly to such matters: infidels must be killed. The 9-11 attacks were simply a partial fulfillment of this mandate.

[7] Some point out that King Fahd of Saudi Arabia invited Western forces to deploy on his nation's soil and that his government permits the U.S. military presence to this day. To this, al-Qaeda sympathizers retort that the Saudi regime is corrupt and illegitimate. They are themselves guilty of defiling the Islamic holy sites. No government policies can override the commands of the Muslim faith as expressed in the Qur'an. To the extent that King Fahd and his ministers have allowed the United States to violate basic precepts of the Qur'an, they are guilty of complicity with religious desecration and are subject to the same retribution due the United States and other Western forces involved.

[8] Secondly, there is the matter of U.S.-led sanctions against Iraq, which resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent civilians, including many children. Iraq is a Muslim nation, so the sanctions represented an affront to Islam itself. This quiet atrocity - the extent of the suffering of the Iraqi people was not widely reported in the West - was an act of war against Islam, so Muslims are justified in making an aggressive response, according to the Qur'an. The September 11 attacks were one legitimate instance of such a response. The few thousand people who died in those buildings and on those planes were no more innocent than the tens of thousands who died in Iraq as a result of U.S. policy. On the contrary, U.S. citizens are guilty for their complicity and even active support of the policies that brought such devastation to the Muslim people of Iraq.

[9] Thirdly, the U.S. has been a strong supporter of Israel and opponent of the creation of a Palestinian nation. From the creation of Israel in 1948 to this day, the U.S. position has constituted an attack on the Muslim people, as Palestinians have been repeatedly persecuted, displaced, and murdered. This represents a return to the Crusader mentality of the middle ages, when thousands of Muslims were mercilessly killed by European Christians aiming to dominate the holy land. Today, as then, acts of war on Muslims deserve an aggressive response, and terrorist tactics like those on 9-11 are legitimate instances of this.

[10] Finally, for decades the United States has led an attack on Islamic culture and values through its economic power and entertainment industry. The U.S. has dominated the world economically, forcing nations either to play the game of capitalistic greed or become impoverished. This has been especially oppressive in Arab countries where such values are considered offensive to many Muslims. Moreover, the Hollywood entertainment industry's exportation of immorality amounts to a further attack on Islamic values. American music, film, television programs and commercials persistently promote all kinds of sexual promiscuity, materialism, and blasphemy.

[11] In sum, then, al-Qaeda accuses the United States of desecration of the Muslim holy sites, the murder of tens of thousands of Iraqi Muslims, the persecution and displacement of Palestinian Muslims, and continuous subversion of Islamic culture and values. Taken individually, any one of these attacks on the Muslim world constitutes sufficient grounds for a counter-attack on the United States. Jointly considered, they constitute overwhelming grounds. Thus, the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were morally justified. So goes al-Qaeda's case against the U.S.

Problematic Responses

[12] Several objections immediately come to mind. Here are some of the most common lines of reasoning, along with the likely responses from supporters of al-Qaeda. First, one might grant the validity of the above arguments in favor of attacking the U.S. but reject the legitimacy of the *means* by which this was carried out. The 9-11 attacks targeted innocent civilians rather than military personnel and installations, and this is always unjust. However, in reply, it may be noted that U.S. civilians working in the WTC and Pentagon were in fact working for the U.S. economic machine and military, respectively. Thus, these were not innocent people but conspirators in the on-going attack on Islamic culture and values and the oppression of Muslim people. The use of this objection by Americans is somewhat ironic, given the military history of the U.S., which has occasionally featured the targeting of civilians, including Sherman's rampage through Georgia during the Civil War (arguably the first instance of modern terrorism) and U.S. nuclear attacks on Japanese civilian populations at the end of World War II.

[13] On top of this, it is important to note that the Muslim world has no effective recourse but to use terrorist tactics. The military power of Arab states is minuscule compared to that of the West, so some non-conventional means of getting the attention of the international community is necessary. Again, contemporary terrorists take their cue from U.S. military history, for it was precisely because of their own unorthodox guerilla warfare tactics that Americans prevailed in their revolutionary war. So for Americans to complain that the 9-11 attacks were inappropriate because they targeted civilians is not only mistaken but hypocritical.

[14] A second objection appeals to the notion that the use of terrorist tactics is inconsistent with true Islam. The very name of this religion is derived from *Salam*, which means "peace." Moreover, the Qur'an explicitly teaches kindness to neighbors and advocates non-violence. In reply, however, the Muslim may appeal to the doctrine of Jihad or "holy war." While non-violence is generally normative for Muslims, there are exceptions to this rule, such as when the Islamic religion itself is attacked. In such cases, infidels may be killed. The United States

is for the most part a nation of infidels, citizens who blithely participate in the persistent attacks on the Muslim way of life and the desecration of Islamic holy sites, so attacks on U.S. citizens are appropriate exceptions to the rule of peace taught in the Qur'an.

[15] A third line of objection is theological in nature. The doctrine of jihad is just wrong. God would never command or in any way sanction the killing of innocent people. "Thou shalt not murder," the Lord commanded, and all people of the book, Muslims included, should recognize this fundamental precept of human conduct. The problem with this approach, however, is that there do seem to be instances in the Old Testament in which God does in fact command the killing of innocent civilians. In Joshua 6, for example, the Lord approves the destruction of the city of Jericho, including the killing of all men, women, and children (with the exception of Rahab and her family). And in Joshua 8 the Lord commanded the same complete destruction of all the people of Ai, and the Israelites obeyed. 12,000 men and women died in that attack, most of whom were non-military. So for those who regard the Old Testament as divinely inspired, here is significant precedent for God's commanding the intentional killing of civilian populations. Thus, devout believers in the Judeo-Christian tradition cannot reject the doctrine of jihad on basic principle.

[16] It seems that the al-Qaeda position wields a more subtle logic than we might have suspected. Indeed, while we might have thought there was no respectable argument to be made in defense of the 9-11 attacks, we now might find ourselves squirming in search of some rational armament to justify our outrage. Fortunately, there are some further arguments that carry the day for critics of al-Qaeda, but they demand a deeper level of philosophical and theological reasoning than most are prepared to admit. We must analyze the situation in light of just war theory and engage in critical analysis of Islamic doctrinal positions.

Appealing to Just War Theory

[17] So let us consider the principles of just war theory. According to this perspective, war is morally legitimate in the case of self-defense and perhaps also to protect the innocent (depending on the version of just war theory). Now there are two aspects to a just war. The first regards *jus ad bellum*, the conditions that must be met to justify going to war. These include the following: (1) war may be waged only by a legitimate authority, that is, an autonomous nation state (I will leave aside the thorny matter of just revolutionary wars), (2) there must be sufficient cause, namely real or imminent military attack or perhaps severe economic attack (again, depending upon the brand of just war theory), (3) there must be a reasonable chance of success in achieving the stated aim of the war, and (4) war must be a last resort; all reasonable diplomatic means must have been exhausted before the option of war is pursued.

[18] Secondly, there is *jus in bello*, the guiding principles for conduct in war. There is a principle of proportionality, which mandates that the means of war be reasonably proportionate to the ends sought. So a nuclear attack is an unjust retribution against a country that has sponsored illegal importation of drugs. Another principle pertains to just discrimination. Military operations may intentionally and directly attack only appropriate military targets, namely combatants and the machinery of war. Both of these principles are difficult to apply in uncontroversial ways. Proportionality is a vague concept, and just who

counts as a "combatant" is not always clear. But suffice it to note that these are the general principles of just war theory.

[19] So how does al-Qaeda's case for the 9-11 attacks fare according to these basic requirements of just war theory? Not too well, it seems. It fails to meet conditions for both *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. As for the former, several, if not all, of the four conditions were not met to justify such an attack. First, there was no legitimate political authority behind the attacks, only a clandestine network of terrorists, united under the al-Qaeda banner. Had the Taliban leaders in Afghanistan declared and executed the attack on the WTC and Pentagon, then this condition would have been met. But such was not the case.

[20] With regard to the second condition, it is questionable, to say the least, that the economic and cultural attack by the West, principally the U.S., on Muslim culture has been severe enough to justify military action against the U.S. As for the desecration of the holy land of Saudi Arabia, it is worth noting that it was the Arab, and primarily Muslim, nation of Iraq that actually attacked Saudi Arabia with Scud missiles (though fortunately most were intercepted by U.S. patriot missiles) during the first Gulf War. So, to be consistent, should not al-Qaeda have attacked Iraq as well? At least the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia was and has been ostensibly in the interest of preserving peaceful relations and protecting innocent people. This point should not be overlooked when evaluating U.S. military activity.

[21] Thirdly, as regards achieving the stated aims of al-Qaeda, they do not seem even to have any clear constructive aims. They certainly have not publicly articulated their demands. And assuming that their aim is to overthrow the West or to bring an end to U.S. foreign policy as it now stands (such as with regard to sanctions on Iraq), is it reasonable to think that the 9-11 attacks and other terrorist activities, such as the post-9-11 biological warfare tactics, could really change things for the better? Surely not.

[22] Finally, diplomatic means had not been exhausted. In fact, difficult as Middle East peace talks have been, positive steps have been taken in recent years, and there is some reason to think that a long term peace can be achieved, perhaps even through the new Israeli-Palestinian "road map" currently under discussion. Also, with regard to the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, extensive diplomatic attempts had not been pursued by objectors.

[23] Turning now to the principles of *jus in bello*, we may ask whether the devastation wreaked by the 9-11 attacks was proportionate to the ends sought. Supposing the primary end in view for al-Qaeda was retributive, what similar devastation has the U.S. visited upon the Muslim world? To this the most plausible response will be that the U.S. effectively killed thousands of Iraqi civilians through the sanctions levied upon that country. But this overlooks a salient point, namely the reason *why* the sanctions were applied. It was because of Iraq's violations of U.N. Security Council resolutions (regarding the development and testing of weapons of mass destruction). Iraq's defiance was a continuing threat to world peace and international concord, so some action had to be taken to prod its leaders back into cooperation with U.N. demands. As for the effects of the sanctions on the Iraqi people, the blame must rest on the shoulders of Sadaam Hussein. For it was he who ultimately decided whether the sanctions would continue and, therefore, whether his people would continue to

suffer as a result. It is Sadaam, not the U.S.-backed sanctions, who is to blame for the plight of the Iraqi people.

[24] Now supposing bin Laden and al-Qaeda had another end in view, say the improvement of U.S. foreign policy, these attacks again fail to meet the condition of proportionality. Killing approximately 3000 civilians and causing untold grief to tens of thousands of others is surely too high a price to pay to prompt the U.S. to reconsider its approach to Middle East relations, even if such an atrocity were to cause our leaders to make some adjustments that are more sympathetic to the Arab world. Alas, the long-term effect is likely to be an impediment rather than a boon to the Palestinian side of peace talks.

[25] As for the principle of discrimination, the 9-11 attacks unabashedly targeted civilians, at least in the case of the World Trade Center. It is true that these buildings were symbols of Western commerce, and we may even grant that Western commercialism has deeply and negatively encroached upon the Arab world, Muslim culture in particular. But even on the most generous application of the principle of discrimination, the workers in the WTC buildings cannot be considered "combatants" in a war against the Muslim world. The absurdity of the very suggestion becomes apparent when one considers that many devout Muslims were victims of the attacks.

[26] So from the standpoint of just war theory, the case against al-Qaeda is conclusive. But there remain a few more matters to address. The first of these regards American hypocrisy. What are we to say in defense of U.S. military actions which seem to fail the criteria of just war, such as Sherman's tactics during the Civil War and the use of the atomic bomb in World War II (which appear to violate *jus in bello*) and our involvement in Vietnam (which might violate *jus ad bellum*)? While Sherman's tactics are indefensible from the standpoint of just war theory, some reasonable defense of the other two cases might be possible. But even if the U.S. violated just war theory in all of these cases, this does not entitle other nations or rogue groups to commit similar injustices. One agent's hypocrisy never justifies another's immorality, whether at the personal or national level.

[27] Secondly, there is the more difficult matter of addressing the Islamic doctrine of jihad. What are we to say to those Muslims who justify their militancy by appealing to the Qur'an's directive to defend their religion and even to kill the infidels? It seems this perspective can be met on one of two fronts, from a perspective that is internally or externally critical. According to the first approach, one may counter such thinking by arguing that this is an improper interpretation or application of the Qur'an's actual teaching, that those militants who favor the use of violence to advance the cause of Islam are being unfaithful to true Islam. According to this approach, then, the militants are the true infidels, for they misrepresent Allah and his teachings. Such an approach seems to be the more popular one in public discussions these days, notwithstanding the fact that it presupposes some fairly deep acquaintance with Islamic theology and Qur'anic textual hermeneutics. One wonders how many of those who glibly declare that true Islam is a peaceful religion are able to support their assertion with references to the Qur'an, other sacred Islamic writings, or at least a scholarly authority. Such passages as these are especially problematic: "Fight for the sake of Allah those that fight against you, but do not attack them first. Allah does not love the aggressors. Kill them wherever you find them. Drive them out of the places from which they

drove you . . . Fight against them until idolatry is no more and Allah's religion reigns supreme" (The Koran: 2:190-93). Such passages as these (see also 2:216, 8:60, and 9:29) are interpreted by many Muslims as justifying nothing more than protection of the community, but it is easy to see why others disagree. Such directives are understandably the source of serious Islamic theological debate, and to casually take a side without actually exploring the issue is imprudent, not to mention insulting to Islamic scholars. And yet that is what many of us have done.

[28] An externally critical approach to Islamic militancy avoids these difficulties by simply rejecting the Qur'an as a special divine revelation. One might appeal to certain criteria to justify this position, such as the demand for miracles associated with the religion's central human figures or evidence of fulfilled predictive prophecy as signs that the text has a divine origin. Of course, while avoiding the problems of internal criticism, this tack is not without problems of its own. Even rigorous efforts to make a strong defense of one's rejection of a religion in this way will be cumbersome at best. What are the criteria for concluding that a miracle has occurred or that a claim is genuinely prophetic? Such debates often don't get past the procedural phase, much less alter people's beliefs about a religion. So the externally critical approach to Islamic militancy devolves into a foreclosure on public dialogue about the matter. But what's worse is that it is a barrier to any productive public dialogue with Muslims, including those who are non-militant. And surely that is not what we want.

[29] So it seems that whichever route we choose, the internally or externally critical approach, we face serious difficulty. Yet we must choose, for arguments from just war theory will not convince militants to abandon their commitment to jihad. Al-Qaeda sympathizers and the would-be John Walker-Lindhs of the world cannot be engaged at that level. But they must be engaged somewhere.

Conclusion

[30] The methodological lesson to be gleaned from this discussion is that we cannot avoid doing careful political philosophy and theological analysis even when it comes to discussion of the worst atrocities. Of course, in a culture that prizes superficial thinking and knee-jerk judgments (and which is guided by broadcast media resistant to thoughtful examination of moral foundations) such care is usually avoided. It can be uncomfortable, even frightening. What 9-11 and its aftermath have shown us is that the defense of truth in the public square is sometimes both.

[31] Having seen the cases that can be made both for and against the 9-11 attacks and the critical analysis necessary to rebut al-Qaeda, how are we to explain the nearly universal American sentiment about the immorality of these attacks? As noted earlier, I believe the root of this pervasive dogmatism is emotive rather than rational, that most Americans have responded with their guts on this one. In some respects this is understandable, seeing as so many innocent people were killed on 9-11, and the terrorists themselves have not offered a moral defense of their position, or at least this has not been done in a formal way as I have done above. While our guts or, to use a more dignified term, our moral intuitions, are accurate here, reliance upon them as a moral tutor is problematic. Gut responses are essentially non-rational and thus liable to influence by non-rational factors. Public opinion is

a vessel that floats upon turbulent waters, and without the rudder of rational thought, the winds of emotion will prevail in determining where it goes.

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