

'War' may not be best term for terrorism fight

We are beginning to get over the shock of Sept. 11 and are trying, I suppose, to think more clearly about the many implications and ramifications of those terrible events in a more systematic and rational way. I still struggle with many of the same questions that affected me earlier on, but now have new thoughts and questions as well.

For example, I have grown increasingly skeptical about using the term "war" for the present military engagement. Throughout history, "war" has referred to violent conflicts between nation states. In the present conflict, our nation has, indeed, launched military attacks against the Taliban government in Afghanistan. The forces of al Qaeda have apparently been shattered, and a new government is now in place.

Because of the use of military force, U.S. actions do resemble traditional warfare. But there are other factors that make me question whether war is the right name for this effort. For one thing, the forces that attacked our nation on Sept. 11 were not officially dispatched from any nation. They represented not officials of a nation state, but a gang of radical ideologists acting on their own. They aimed directly at destroying innocent civilian life and symbolic centers of our culture as a means of threatening our sense of security and well being. Their attempt to make some kind of "point" against our way of life led them to engage in the tactics of terrorism, which include surprise, random attacks



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, S.J.

on unsuspecting civilian targets.

The Sept. 11 attack against us did not even use military force. Instead, it relied on "civilians" who would use our transportation system as a weapon of slaughter. The attack did not emerge from any conflict we knew about or could respond to. There was no declaration of war, and the terrorists did not name a set of objectives we could have discussed or negotiated in order to avoid armed conflict. In all these ways, Sept. 11 does not fit the ordinary criteria for "war."

In response to the strikes against people in our country, the U.S. and other Western nations acted to dismantle the infrastructure that made the attacks possible. Thus, we engaged in a series of military actions. We sought to capture or eliminate the leaders of movements behind the attacks in order to reduce the possibility of repeat attacks. Our national leaders also determined that the terrorism made visible on Sept. 11 was more widespread than the gangs loyal to Osama bin Laden. They assured us that

we are now involved in a protracted struggle to identify and defeat other sources of similar threats and potential terror.

True, we think that certain nations and certain leaders tolerate the presence and even may aid terrorist cells. Like Afghanistan, these nations and their governments may become targets of U.S. military action. Still, the target of our action is not really any single nation state or any combination of them. We really need to act against individuals and groups of renegades.

Thus, it seems to me that the customary patterns of warfare are not present. We lack the criteria that ordinarily help us identify whether our efforts in war have been "successful" or not. We have no identifiable structures for helping us know when to stop the attack. In any ordinary sense, "goals" of war are lacking.

So I wonder whether we should think of the struggle we now engage in as "war" at all. Perhaps it would be more accurate to think of it as a kind of "police action" aimed at thwarting the perverse actions of a gang or cell whose attacks are not just against the innocent citizens most directly affected, but also attack the very existence of law, order, common civil discourse and due process.

The use of military force alone — and the fact that the struggle we engage in is international rather than domestic in scope — does not mean that we must think of ourselves as at war. In fact, the parallels to police action are strong: In-

vestigative detective work is needed to try to identify and locate the perpetrators; particular individuals and groups rather than official governments are targeted for capture; success is identified in terms of the removal of particular individuals so that they can no longer disrupt and destroy the lives of innocent civilians.

Removing the connotation of warfare might help us to remain a moral people while we engage in the conflict before us. First, it could lessen the emotional reaction associated with war. This could help us move beyond the desire for revenge and to assign victory and defeat that we have experienced at other points in our history. This will make us more realistic in the face of our current struggle, I think. It might also help to focus us on who the targets in this struggle really are — not so much nations as individuals gone awry. In this, we might grow more reluctant to tolerate the destruction of innocent civilians that our own actions cause.

Today my biggest fear is that we can actually make things worse if we put the wrong name on what needs to be done here. We have an urgent task to confront terrorism and its roots. To the extent that we mistake this goal for some false attempt to defeat or control nations that fail to submit to our control, we will deflect our focus and compromise our moral integrity.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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