Rational Extremism: Understanding Terrorism in the Twenty-first Century

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In the last decade, the field of international relations has undergone a revolution in conflict studies. Where earlier approaches attempted to identify the attributes of individuals, states, and systems that produced conflict, the "rationalist approach to war" now explains violence as the product of private information with incentives to misrepresent, problems of credible commitment, and issue indivisibilities.[1] In this new approach, war is understood as a bargaining failure that leaves both sides worse off than had they been able to negotiate an efficient solution. This rationalist framework has proven remarkably general—being applied to civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and interstate wars—and fruitful in understanding not only the causes of war but also war termination and conflict management.[2] Interstate war is no longer seen as *sui generis,* but as a particular form within a single, integrated theory of conflict.

This rationalist approach to war may at first appear to be mute in the face of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Civilian targets were attacked "out of the blue." The terrorists did not issue prior demands. A theory premised on bargaining, therefore, would seem ill-suited to explaining such violence. Yet, as I hope to show, extremist terrorism can be rational and strategic.[3] A rationalist approach also yields insights into the nature and strategy of terrorism and offers some general guidelines that targets should consider in response, including the importance of a multilateral coalition as a means of committing the target to a moderate military strategy.

Analytically, and more centrally for this essay, extremist terrorism reveals a silence at the heart of the current rationalist approach to war even as it suggests a potentially fruitful way of extending the basic model. In extant models, the distribution of capabilities and, thus, the range of acceptable bargains are exogenous,

1. Early works here include Wittman 1979; Bueno de Mesquita 1981; and Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman 1992. The approach is synthesized and elaborated in Fearon 1995.
2. See Goemans 2000; Lake and Rothchild 1999; and Walter 1997.
3. On terrorism as strategic interaction, see Crenshaw 1998.

even when power is allowed to vary. Extremists, on the other hand, seek to use terror to provoke the target into a disproportionate response that radicalizes moderates and drives them into the arms of the terrorists, expanding their supporters and allies. In this interaction, the capabilities of the two parties are clearly endogenous and need to be considered as such. Understood in this way, extremist terrorism highlights new directions for future research in conflict studies.

The Rationalist Approach to War

The basic idea behind the rational approach is quite simple. Two actors, *A* and *B,* have well-defined preferences over the division of an issue, say, a piece of territory that lies between them or a set of rules (such as property rights) that will generate income (for simplicity, a one-time event). *A* prefers to control all the territory or enact that set of rules that gives it all the income; the same for *B.* Arrayed on a single dimension and valued (without loss of generality) between zero and 1, *A*'s ideal point is to the far right at 1, and *B*'s ideal point is to the far left at zero (see Figure 1).[4] The division of the issue is determined by the (actual or expected) outcome of a violent contest (q). If the actors were to fight to alter the division, they would incur costs *a* and *b,* respectively. Their net benefits to fighting are, for *A,* $q - a$, and for *B,* $q + b$.[5] Since fighting is costly, this opens up a bargaining space (between $q - a$ and $q + b$) in which both parties would prefer any division of the issue to actually fighting. Even if one side becomes more powerful and could shift the division to, say, *p* (representing the expected outcome of a war under a new distribution of capabilities), a bargaining space would still exist between, now, $p - a$ and $p + b$. Thus, even though one side becomes more powerful and the old status quo (q) is no longer satisfactory, both parties still have an incentive to negotiate rather than fight.

   As James Fearon succinctly showed, war occurs in this framework when one or both parties (1) have private information with incentives to misrepresent (such as war plans that, if revealed, would negate any advantage they might yield); (2) are unable to credibly commit to respect the new division of the issue (either because relative capabilities continue to shift exogenously over time or there are random shocks that affect capabilities); or (3) the issue is indivisible (perhaps because of strong "homeland" loyalties).[6] Much work has focused on the problem of private

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4. A single dimension is merely an expository simplification. The same framework carries over to an n-dimensional issue space. In this case, the single line in Figure 1 is equivalent to the contract curve created by the tangencies of the indifference curves of the two parties. This would have the effect of enlarging the number of Pareto-preferred points (to include the entire lens created by the relevant indifference curves) but does not contravene the basic point that, as long as war is costly, some mutually preferred bargain always exists to war.

5. Both sides incur costs in fighting. Adding b to q is required by the assumption that the issue ranges from zero to 1. It does not imply that B somehow benefits from fighting.

6. Fearon 1995.
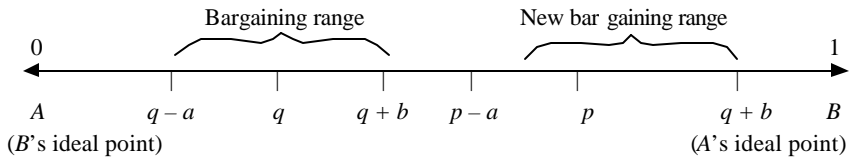
Source: Adapted from Fearon 1995.

FIGURE 1. *The costs of war and efficient bargaining*

information, with the implication, described by Eric Gartzke, that it is precisely the unobservable traits of the actors that lead to war and, in turn, make war so difficult to predict.[7] Problems of credible commitment have been addressed more fully in the literature on war termination.[8] Even more recent work is addressing the anomaly of why, once wars start, they are not ended quickly, with the idea that conflict is a process in which information is revealed, prior beliefs are updated, war aims are altered, and so on.[9] The major study using this approach, Robert Powell's *In the Shadow of Power*, examines exogenous changes in the distribution of capabilities and, in turn, the probability of war under different configurations of power.[10]

Despite this promising research agenda, extremist terrorism would appear inconsistent with this model. As I argue later, terrorists resort to violence not because of private information, incredible commitments, or indivisible issues, although these factors may also matter, but because no bargain is acceptable to them under the current distribution of capabilities. The terrorist act itself is designed to shift the balance of power between the parties and to produce a better bargain at some point in the distant future. Bargaining over particular issues now is subordinated to a broader strategy of using violence to change the relative capabilities of the two sides.

Rational Extremism

Since September 11, we have been particularly concerned with what is often termed extremist terrorism. But this begs the question of what we mean by the terms *terrorist* and *extremist* —traits that are often in the eyes of the beholder. Terrorism is the irregular use of violence by nonstate groups against nonmilitary targets and personnel for political ends.[11] Almost by definition, since they often target civilians, terrorists lack moral strictures against the use of violence. Extremism is harder to

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7. Gartzke 1999.
8. See Walter 1997; and Goemans 2000.
9. See Wagner 2000; and Reiter 2001.
10. Powell 1999.
11. The closest form of violence is guerilla warfare, which is directed at military targets.

define, but two attributes seem key. First, extremists hold political preferences that, in any distribution of opinion, lie in one of the "tails." In other words, their political beliefs are not widely shared even within their own societies.[12] Second, extremists currently lack the means or power to obtain their goals. Both traits are important in understanding their choice of strategy.

These attributes suggest a continuum of different types of terrorism.[13] At one end, political goals are ill-defined, with the proximate goal of the terrorist being the simple extortion of resources. We can think of this as a form of quasi-banditry, and it is found today in the Philippines, Columbia, and elsewhere where ostensible terrorists seize hostages for ransom. At this end of the continuum, terrorism is little more than simple extortion and can be usefully understood as such.[14] It follows that the terrorists, or quasi-bandits, choose targets that are likely to yield large financial rewards relative to the effort required and chances of success.

In the middle are "moderate" terrorists with well-defined and limited political aims, such as secession from an existing state or empire. Their positions are somewhat more widely shared within their societies, as in the cases of the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland and the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Liberty group) in the Basque region of Spain. In turn, violence is used to influence a political process to either spur or sabotage on-going negotiations depending on the outcome otherwise likely to arise. Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter provide a detailed study of terrorism in this middle range and demonstrate how terrorists can use violence to undermine trust between two other, even more moderate bargainers.[15] By playing on the uncertainty that exists between groups seeking to negotiate a peace settlement, they show that terrorist violence can persuade one side that the other is unwilling or unable to enforce its terms and thus thwart agreement.

At the other end of the continuum, extremists possess unpopular goals that they cannot now realize. A moderate has some social support and from that basis is willing to negotiate, to compromise on the possible, to take what he or she can get. An extremist lacks broad backing but nonetheless wants what is beyond reach and refuses to settle for less. Osama bin Laden, as best we know, wants to

12. The rationalist approach to war does not itself explain why individuals hold the preferences they do. For my purposes, it is necessary only to posit that preferences are diverse and randomly distributed over a population, implying that within any society some "extremists" will exist.

13. Treating any terrorist organization or target as a unitary actor is, of course, an analytic simplification. Some distinguish between concentric rings of social-movement radicals (who share goals), sympathizers (who provide active support, such as apartments), and actual terrorists (who carry out the violence). Moderates would lie outside these groups, and the process of radicalization is understood as a shift of the population from one ring into another (that is, moderates into social-movement radicals, radicals into sympathizers, sympathizers into terrorists).

14. Sandler, Tschirhart, and Cauley 1983.

15. Kydd and Walter 2002. While showing that terrorism can be used rationally for political ends, their model does not seem to capture the causes or consequences of the September 11 attacks in which the bargaining process is more deeply submerged.

- create fundamentalist regimes throughout the Islamic world,
- stop the West from polluting Islamic culture,
- force the United States to withdraw from the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, and
- destroy Israel.

At the moment, he and his organization lack the means to realize any of these objectives. Thus, in common language, we call him an extremist.

The Strategy of Extremism

The strategy adopted by extremist terrorists follows from their preferences and, more important, from their political weakness relative to their goals. Their strategy is to shift the balance of power in their favor and, over time, to shift the bargaining range closer to their ideals. Practically, this implies that no overt bargaining is likely to occur at the time of the terrorist act. The object is not to bargain over what is acceptable today, but to change the range of what is acceptable tomorrow. Analytically, the strategy implies that the balance of capabilities and, thus, the future division of the issue is endogenous, part of the game itself. This is a particularly hard problem to characterize, and no formal model is presented here. Endogenizing capabilities within a model of bargaining lies beyond current techniques, but the phenomenon of extremist terrorism suggests that this may be a theoretically and empirically fruitful direction for future research. The intuition can nonetheless be captured, I think, by a verbal extension of the basic approach presented earlier.

Constrained by their relative weakness, extremists adopt strategies with two characteristics. First, in a form of political jujitsu, extremists use the strengths of the target against itself. On September 11, we saw how a free, democratic, modern, and industrial society could be seized from within to inflict massive destruction upon itself. Although it undoubtedly required substantial planning and training, it took little in the way of advanced weaponry to turn airplanes into bombs. The numerical and perhaps overall weakness of Al Qaeda did not matter here since it relied on the interdependencies of an industrial economy and the political and economic openness of a democratic society to produce the necessary instruments of destruction.

Second, extremists seek to provoke a response from the target that, through its disproportionate and indiscriminate nature, punishes the broad population of which the terrorists are part.[16] In doing so, the extremists are really aiming to change the preferences and beliefs of moderates in their own societies. As the result of a disproportionate response, some moderates may be radicalized by their suffering collateral damage; the larger the response, the greater the possibility that innocent civilians are killed. This can produce a desire for revenge that manifests itself in greater support for the extremists. Moderates also observe the response of the target and draw inferences about how it is likely to behave in negotiations over outstand-

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16. On the strategy of terrorist provocation, see Laqueur 1987, 74.

ing differences. Moderates have preferences that differ from the target, of course, but they are by definition willing to negotiate a settlement. In many cases, however, they may be uncertain about the preferences of the target state; specifically, they may not know whether it too is moderate and willing to negotiate an acceptable settlement or whether, like the extremists in their own society, it may use violence to impose a settlement that they cannot accept. "Hard" bargaining by the target in on-going disputes—where it seeks the best deal for itself—is consistent with both "types" of targets and thus does not allow the moderates to distinguish which set of preferences the target possesses. When terrorists provoke the target into dispropor-tionate retaliation, they hope to demonstrate to their own moderates that the target is in fact extremist, it is unlikely to settle disputes on acceptable terms, and they should ally with the terrorists to "defend" their interests. In short, by provoking the target into massive retaliation, the terrorists hope to radicalize their own moderates and drive them into their arms. If successful, the terrorists enlarge their group of supporters, increase the number of soldiers willing to fight for the cause, expand the financial and other resources upon which they can draw, and augment their overall power.

Timothy McVeigh sought to provoke a backlash by what he perceived as a re-pressive state that would reveal for all Americans just how oppressive the govern-ment had become; following the tragedy in Waco, Texas, he expected the govern-ment, when challenged, to crack down on dissidents, restrict civil liberties, and thereby cause average citizens to rise up with the extreme right against this newly revealed tyranny.

At the start of the war in Bosnia, Serb extremists desecrated Serb graves, an act that, it was believed, could only have been carried out by Croats. As Serbs rose to defend themselves, Croats armed in response, and a cycle of violence was set off that polarized that society. In essence, by provoking Serb fears of Croats, the ex-tremists succeeded in transforming all Bosnian Serbs into extremists, and they be-came that much more powerful.

The intent of bin Ladin—as best we understand it, though until more informa-tion is made public, this remains somewhat speculative—was to provoke a massive retaliation by the United States against Islamic countries, thereby revealing for all Muslims the imperialist and anti-Islamic face of U.S. power. Suffering under U.S. military assaults, moderates in the Arab world would then come to see the United States as the extremists see it, and would ally with the extremists—thereby aug-menting their numbers and power.

It is precisely because extremists are too weak relative to their ambitions that they must resort to this strategy of baiting the target into aggressive retaliatory acts. The wanton destruction of property and lives in the target state is designed in a cold, cruel, and all too rational way to bring about this retaliation. Indeed, the more heinous the terrorist act, the more likely the target will respond in an overly aggres-sive fashion. When this strategy works, the extremists increase their numbers and bargaining power—and those bargains that initially were impossible become possi-ble. In terms of the model above, terrorism "pays," and can be expected to occur,
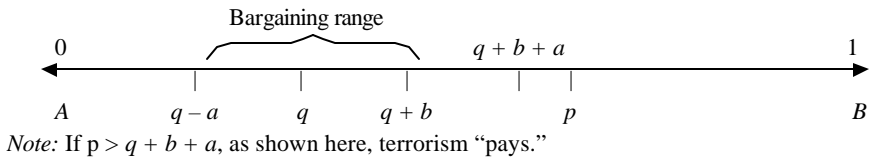
Bargaining range

$$0 \qquad q-a \qquad q \qquad q+b \qquad q+b+a \qquad p \qquad 1$$

A   *q − a*   *q*   *q + b*   *p*   B

Note: If $p > q + b + a$, as shown here, terrorism "pays."

FIGURE 2. *Extremist strategy and shifting probability of victor*

when $p > q + b + a$ (see Figure 2).[17] In words, when the probability of victory in a future contest increases by more than the best deal the extremists could hope to get today $(q + b)$ plus the costs of violence (a), terrorism will be successful on its own terms.[18] Since the costs of violence to the terrorists can be relatively small—on September 11, the deaths of nineteen martyrs—it is easy to see that the probability of victory need not increase by much to make terrorism worthwhile to the extremists. Carried out again and again, the cumulative effect of terrorism can, over time, shift the bargaining range significantly in favor of the terrorists (each attack and subsequent retaliation further polarizes the society, and p shifts further to the right).

The "silence" in the rationalist approach to war arises from the assumption of fixed or, at most, exogenously changing capabilities. The distribution of power, even if evolving over time, provides the basic structure within which the parties negotiate. The phenomenon of extremist terrorism demonstrates that changing the distribution of capabilities can be an action available to actors and thus needs to be incorporated into the strategic setting. In this way, terrorism forces us to rethink how we model and, in turn, understand violent conflict.

The Response to Extremist Terrorism

In responding to terrorism, the target has three basic options, which lie along a continuum. First, it can do nothing or, at most, increase its internal security to prevent further attacks. This was, by-and-large, the response to airline hijackings in the 1970s. No political demands were met, and the targets did not change their policies. Rather, potential targets merely instituted limited security screenings intended to

17. Although he is concerned with long-term exogenous shifts in power and therefore does not consider the possibility that p might shift more than the total per period cost of fighting (a + b), inverting Powell's proposition 4.1, as done here, demonstrates that war will occur under these circumstances even in the presence of complete information. Powell 1999, 132–33.

18. Alternatively, one might model terrorism as a "war of attrition" in which each side imposes costs on the other until one party concedes. Such an approach would focus on the relative ability of the two parties to absorb costs. Although this might be a promising theoretical route, it does not seem intuitively plausible that a knowingly "weak" group would begin this process of "burning resources."

catch "ordinary" terrorists (that is, those not willing to sacrifice their own lives). Second, the target can attempt to capture or eliminate the terrorists in a limited "police" action. Central here is that the terrorists and their organizations are defined as criminals, rather than warriors, and become the subjects of a focused and carefully drawn response that aims to capture them and their supporters. Finally, in a war-fighting strategy, the target can, first, attempt to eradicate the terrorists and destroy their organizations in a military retaliation that, second, aims to deter future attacks not only by the initial terrorist group but by others as well. This strategy may also seek to destroy the regimes that harbor terrorists, making it harder for terrorists to find friendly territories in which to operate.

Many factors affect the likely response to a terrorist attack. Key to any choice, however, is a central tradeoff between success and what might be called support. The larger the response, the more likely it is to succeed in eradicating the terrorists and deterring future attacks. But at the same time the larger the response, the more likely it is that moderates will be radicalized, either because of the collateral damage they suffer or because they infer that the target itself is more extreme than they previously believed and is willing and able to use force to impose a solution they cannot accept. In other words, the larger the response, the more support the target will likely lose. This implies that there is some optimal response that balances the prospects for success against the loss of support for the target.

Managing this tradeoff can be tricky, of course. By restraining its response, the target runs a larger risk of failure and, thus, future attacks. By retaliating strongly, however, the target risks radicalizing moderates and plays into the hands of the extremists, ultimately expanding their support and power. Disabling the extremists while limiting damage to the moderates may be difficult, if not impossible. Indeed, the terrorists count on this.

In terms of the model, the target must increase a, making the costs of violence to the terrorists higher, while lowering (or at least not increasing) p. The response of the target is, thus, clearly endogenous as well, and this is where the simple formalization and intuition discussed earlier becomes incomplete. This is also an area where a more formal model promises significant insights. The important point here, however, is that the tradeoff between success in eliminating terrorism and sustaining political support for the target is real and binding.

This leads to an even more important conclusion: in the fight against terrorism, some measure of restraint can be wise policy. "More" is not necessarily better but may, in fact, erode support for the target. This further implies that in the fight against terrorism, as elsewhere, the quest for absolute security is a chimera. Through massive uses of force, targets might eliminate terrorism. However, this would not only require a considerable investment of resources but also alienate moderates and undermine support for the target throughout the international community. States must learn to live with some risk of terrorism for the indefinite future.

This tension between success and support has existed at all stages of the U.S. response to the attacks of September 11. An immediate and massive retaliation would undoubtedly have been gratifying for an American ego deeply wounded by

the assaults. Certainly many within the Bush administration supported this approach—perhaps even the president himself in the first days after the attacks when he announced the United States would wage war not just on bin Laden, not just on the Taliban, but on evil itself. Cooler heads ultimately prevailed and a more limited military response was taken. Enjoying fairly broad support within Afghanistan from anti-Taliban forces and backing from the broader international community, the United States has avoided the disproportionate response that the terrorists predicated their strategy upon. In the weeks before the initial success of the Northern Alliance, there was nonetheless serious talk of the need for an expanded U.S. presence in Afghanistan. And by the end of November, following the successes of the Northern Alliance, the Bush administration began to hint at broadening the war on terror to Iraq, Sudan, the Philippines, and other countries with Al Qaeda outposts. In his state-of-the-union address, President Bush formally articulated this policy by identifying an "axis of evil."

At each step toward expanding the conflict, the United States increases the probability of success and, simultaneously, the risk that it will drive moderates into the arms of the extremists. The danger is that in seeking the first it may lose track of the importance of the second. Escalating the counterattack too far would frighten other Islamic states and peoples into a far stronger anti-American coalition. We would play directly into the hands of the terrorists. Restraint in response to terrorism can be a virtue.

Understanding the purpose of extremist violence helps clarify how the target can and should respond. It highlights the need for focused efforts to destroy the terrorists and the problems created by collateral damage. More important, it suggests that restraint by the target, however difficult, can signal its own moderation and thwart the ambitions of the terrorists as much, if not more, than military force itself.

Analytically, however, this remains a very difficult problem to unravel. How the ambitions of the terrorists and the response of the target interact will likely hinge not only on the precision of the target's military but also on the beliefs and information each has about the other. Over some range, restraint is likely to induce surviving terrorists to "up the ante," to believe that they can still provoke the target into aggressive responses that will polarize their societies and build support for their extremist views. Over another range, restraint is likely to dissipate the energy of the terrorists. Over a majority of cases, however, I suspect that targeted responses may not fully succeed in eliminating the terrorists but will stop short of radicalizing a significant segment of moderates. In this less-than-perfect world, some risk of future terrorist attacks is a necessary counterpart to maintaining foreign support. Much work on this complicated strategic problem remains.

Maintaining Moderation: The Multilateral Solution

If moderation against extremist terrorism can be a virtue, a key problem is how to maintain this stance in the face of national anger, continued fear, and further attempts by the terrorists to provoke the target. How can a target commit itself to

maintain moderation when its own policy hawks demand retaliation, it is subject to additional attacks, or its policy fails to destroy the terrorist networks?

There are probably many forms of "self-binding."[19] One current mechanism, widely used in international relations, is multilateralism.[20] Instrumentally, multilateralism is often perceived as a means of inoculating the target state against international criticism, thereby lending a measure of international legitimacy to its response. And it has long been recognized that small states use multilateralism as a means of binding the strong, explaining why they participate and thus legitimate the powerful. While important, this is not the full nor even the most important effect of multilateralism. Rather, at least since the end of the Cold War, multilateralism has been used by the most powerful state within the international system—the United States—to bind itself and make credible its commitment to limited foreign-policy aims.

The agreement to work within a large and diverse international coalition has two central and positive consequences for the target. First, once the coalition is formed, withdrawal imposes a cost on the target state. Exiting signals that the target can no longer agree on policy with its coalition members and, therefore, is now choosing to act unilaterally and in a (presumably) more extreme manner than others wish. Thus, by joining a coalition that is costly to exit *ex post,* the target signals the content of its own policy preferences *ex ante.* Because it cannot exit without cost, the target will not enter a coalition whose members have preferences very different from its own (but the larger the cost, the clearer the signal about preferences). The larger the coalition, the more likely the member states will embody the position of the international community on the appropriate response to aggression.

Second, the coalition operates as a "fire alarm" for the international community.[21] More directly implicated in its policies, coalition members have greater incentives to monitor the actions of the target. By voicing concerns or ultimately withdrawing from the coalition, they inform others about the actions taken by the target. The larger the difference in preferences between the target and other members, the more sensitive or easily tripped is the fire alarm. In the Persian Gulf War coalition, for instance, Syria was the key monitor; precisely because its preferences differed on so many other issues from those of the United States, it would have been the first to complain about attempts by the administration of George H. W. Bush to violate the international agreement on how to respond to Iraq's aggression. Thus, the United States was deeply sensitive to Syrian opinion during the war and worked hard to ensure that it participated in the actual fighting to liberate Kuwait.[22] In the current conflict, Pakistan plays a similar role. Formerly allied with the Taliban and under considerable pressure from its own fundamentalists, Pakistan is

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19. See Elster 1984; and Ikenberry 2001.
20. Lake 1999a,b.
21. McCubbins and Schwartz 1984.
22. Lake 1999a, 243–44.

likely to be the first country to withdraw from the informal coalition created since September 11 should the United States overstep in its attempt to capture bin Laden and to bring a more moderate and stable regime to power in Afghanistan.

The international coalition does constrain the United States, much to the consternation of unilateralists and those arguing for a tougher U.S. response to terrorism. It is this constraint that confers international legitimacy. Equally important, and perhaps even more directly beneficial, it also binds the United States to a more moderate response to terrorism than it might be tempted to pursue, especially if further attacks occur or the effort to capture bin Laden fails. In this case, multilateralism not only legitimates U.S. policy but also saves the United States from its impulse to turn wars into crusades.

President George W. Bush came into office as an aggressive unilateralist. Chaffing under the restraints that previous coalitions had exerted on the United States, the new president and his advisors threatened to "go it alone" in foreign policy. This inclination has been tempered in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks and, following in his father's footsteps, the president has worked to build broad international support for his policy. Working with other nations does bind the United States, but this is the purpose of the broad-based coalition that has been formed. The coalition is designed not to share burdens, for this is one conflict for which the United States would surely be willing to bear the costs alone. Rather, it prevents the United States from becoming the imperialist power that the extremists expected.

Although the new-found multilateralism of the Bush administration is to be applauded, it is possible to argue that in the current crisis the United States has still not been multilateral enough. Unlike in the Persian Gulf War where a diverse coalition of states participated in the fighting, the United States has not sought to involve—or has not succeeded in attracting—a similarly broad set of partners in Afghanistan. While many offer words of support, or perhaps behind-the-scenes intelligence, few other than the Afghanis themselves are actually engaged in combat. When the afterglow of September 11 wears off, or if the war in Afghanistan turns bad, the United States may find itself cast far more easily in the role of villain—just as bin Laden intended.

Analytically, the United States' response to terrorism and the larger pattern of U.S. policy since the end of the Cold War shed new light on the institution of multilateralism. It is not simply or even necessarily a reflection of American values.[23] Nor is it simply a more efficient means of managing a large number of partners.[24] Multilateralism is today a principal means of binding the hands of the strongest state not to use all the power it possesses. Security institutions can matter in nonobvious ways.[25]

23. Ruggie 1992. For a more detailed discussion, see Lake 1999a, 217–19.
24. See Kahler 1992; and Martin 1992.
25. Lake 2001.

Conclusion

The rationalist approach to war can help us understand terrorism. It shows that the purpose of extremist violence is to provoke the target into a disproportionate response, radicalize moderates, and build support for its ambitious goals over the long term. It reveals a dynamic process that still, at its core, is about bargaining over ends. It also suggests that moderation by the target can be not only virtuous but also good policy.

Terrorism, in turn, suggests the need to endogenize the capabilities of both the terrorists and the target. Thinking about this problem opens up new avenues for research within the rationalist approach. Indeed, if the intuitive sketch presented here is generally correct, then understanding the action–reaction process between the terrorist and target better, specifying the circumstances under which terrorists are likely to attack, and identifying the best balance for the target between success and support are among the most socially and politically pressing tasks analysts now face.

At the same time, the rationalist approach to war is not the only worthwhile route to travel. In focusing on the bargaining process between two parties, it ignores the internal struggles within terrorist groups and the target nation.[26] Third parties are also slighted.[27] And, perhaps most important, it fails to explain why terrorists have such extreme ambitions in the first place. Nonetheless, even as a self-consciously partial theory and against initial expectations, it provides a compelling interpretation of extremist terrorism.

International relations research has always responded to events in the real world. Vietnam extinguished the idea of the national interest and invigorated the study of the domestic sources of foreign policy. The oil shocks of the 1970s created a whole new subfield of international political economy. The second Cold War of the early 1980s led to the renaissance of security studies. Some argue that the end of the Cold War gave rise to constructivism.[28] The attacks of September 11 and their aftermath will clearly have a strong effect not only on practical politics and everyday life but also on the research agenda of the field of international relations.

Despite sometimes esoteric theory—often derided by pundits more concerned with defending political positions than with obtaining a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of policy—international relations remains a practical science. Indeed, as this essay shows, to be policy relevant does not mean being atheoretical; although we should always be cognizant of their limitations, theories can illuminate immediate policy problems. It is our duty as scholars to bring meaning and perspective to the events of September 11, to explain why these events happened, and to help think through best responses. I hope this essay—and the others contributed to *International Organization*—will help to start this discussion.

26 But see Gourevitch forthcoming.

27. But see Lee 1988. On third parties and ethnic violence, see Cetinyan 2002.

28. Katzenstein 1996, 2.

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