Lunch With 3 Prospective Bombers

By AMITAI ETZIONI

Last Sunday I met three would-be bombers, two young men and a young woman whom I'll call Jim, Dick and Sally. As far as I could tell, they have not participated in any terrorist act nor do they really intend to. Nevertheless, they were full of "hip" talk about "blowing things up," and they professed admiration for the Weathermen's actions.

"If I had my way, I would blow up the bridges and stifle Manhattan," Dick maintained.

Jim showed his expertise: "It would be easy to blow a hole into the T-Z (Tappan Zee Bridge), but it would not stop the traffic for long. On the other hand, it is more difficult to get to the cables of the George Washington Bridge. But if you get to those—you'd bring down the whole thing."

"It's not that difficult," Dick protested, "just four or five feet above the ground."

"Yes," Jim demurred, "but you could work under the T-Z and have as much time as you want, while everyone would see you working on the cable."

I inquired at this point, "What about all the people on those bridges?"

"They will be called," Jim answered. "But if you get to those— you'd bring down the whole thing."

"They will still have a fair chance of succeeding in the struggle against the Government. On the other hand, as long as bombers are arrested fairly frequently and receive severe punishments, these sympathizers will stay on their farms. They will still provide the hard-core terrorists with money, information, contacts and always with sympathy. They constitute the oxygen in which the urban guerrillas swim."

Doing Your Own Thing

"What would you achieve by blowing up some banks or bridges?" I asked, when coffee was served.

"Arbiter," Jim replied. "Man, this is an old-generation hang-up. Doing your own thing is what counts."

"Yeah," Dick concurred, "Shake it up. Show it up."

Sally surmised, "If people's washing machines would cease to work—power failures, you know— they could not take it, and they would finally rebel."

Here I almost erupted. "What nonsense. Let's forget for the moment the question of whether this country is ripe for, or is in need of, a revolution. What kind of strategy is this? What if you do blow up a few places? What will this amount to, what will it accomplish?"

"You can't kill," Dick replied. "You cannot plan a revolution. Do you think Stalin knew, when he robbed a bank, that it would lead to a revolution? When Lenin studied, did he visualize himself a revolutionary leader? You try things. You blow things up. If this won't work, we'll try something else. Anyhow—now it is time to act. We are mad...."

Sally spoke softly, describing her vision:

"You get to the banks, which is where their money is. And to the Federal buildings and to the armories and to the bridges. You blow it all up. The people's confidence in their Government will be shaken and its legitimacy will be undermined."

"Oh, come off it," I said. "Blowing up a few windows, ceilings, and floors will have no such consequence."

This response, all three agreed, was mere rationalization—an excuse for passivity.

Upon leaving, it was clear to me that these youngsters, brought up in an ultra-permissive home, were rather different from the disciplined die-hards in the Old Left who quoted Marxist dogma in response to any and all questions. These youths in the New Left were apparently without a systematic ideology and lacked an overall strategy. They responded emotionally and instinctively to a few "cute" words, rhetoric that has more psychoanalytic connotations than political ones.

A Selfish Philosophy

To this extent that their philosophy emerged from this encounter, it appeared to be a selfish, indulgent one. They seemed to be a willingness to approve of, if not to actually engage in, acts of violence without a clear sense of social purpose or consequence. All of their terror was a move not of self-expression and spontaneity; planting dynamite, a form of finger painting. Societal processes are unrecognized in what is surely the most individualistic revolutionary talk since anarchism.

Ultra-progressive education, hip talk and the use of mind-expanding drugs seem to have left these three unable to carry an argument to its logical conclusion. Moral considerations are brushed aside by pointing to the "devils of the system."

I wish I could conclude by saying that this or that course of action—changing our curricula in schools, substituting for the latest edition of Spock (which is much less permissive than the earlier ones), hiring more policemen—would help these infatuated would-be terrorists to grow up and face the moral and social consequences of the "topsideds" they endorse so willingly. Granted, our educational system, child rearing practices, and social system and crime prevention techniques all are in need of extensive reform, but this will take time.

Meanwhile, more and more of us like Jim, Dick and Sally will come up, their parents will come to finance their games, and responsibility will set in. Then, perhaps, they will tire of playing revolutionaries. For the time being, however, the most we can do, I am afraid, is to make it as clear as possible to these would-be bombers that dynamite theoretics are utterly unimpressive modes of self-expression and are of no societal consequence.

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