

**Weekend Edition**  
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# *Morality, Terrorism and the Laws of Motion*

## **Lessons City Bombers Need to Learn from Newton and Donne**

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**T**errorist bombings in London, where a great scientist by the name of Sir Isaac Newton is buried, raise important questions of morality and laws of motion. It is customary to discuss and condemn terrorism in the realm of right and wrong. Terrorism is morally wrong, it is commonly believed, because it kills innocents. This moral conception of terrorism is near universal since all moral systems and religions, including Islam, disapprove of violence directed at innocent men, women, and children. A new moral value, embodied in United Nations General Assembly Resolutions, states that nothing, not even invasion or occupation or oppression, justifies terrorism.

This universal rejection of terrorism, however, is unlikely to stop terrorists. Muslim militants will continue to attack targets, including civilians. And terrorist experts will continue to offer diagnoses and prescriptions that evil is incorrigible or that Islam preaches violence or that terrorists are determined to destroy our freedoms and liberties or that parochial schools ought to be shut down in Pakistan or that Muslim nations must be forcibly democratized.

Gung-ho experts would go further and recommend that the US military undertake more decisive campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Sudan, and other Islamic countries to root out evil from its source. Bomb them good and plenty, they say.

These experts perhaps mean well. They want to do something to make America safe, instead of giving sermons to evil perpetrators. But they ignore the laws of motion, especially Sir Isaac Newton's law of reciprocal actions. The law states: Whenever one body exerts force upon a second body, the second body exerts an equal and opposite

force upon the first body. In popular vernacular, this law is also known as "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." Osama bin Laden has translated Newton's law into his own words: "If you bomb our cities, we will bomb yours."

In 1986, US jets bombed Qaddafi's military headquarters and barracks in Tripoli, Libya's capitol and its largest city. A missile went astray and caused fatalities in a civilian neighborhood. In 1998, US missiles destroyed an Aspirin factory in Khartoum, the Sudan's capitol and its biggest city. Civilians were killed but the factory was found to have no terrorist links. The picturesque night bombings of Baghdad, Iraq's capital and its biggest city, during the two Gulf wars, introduced fantasy to the high-tech art of killing. Six million inhabitants of Baghdad lived under terror, night after night. The comprehensive demolition of Falluja, another big city in Iraq, killed hundreds of civilians. Guided and misguided missiles have also killed scores of civilians in many other Muslim cities, including Kandhar, Kut, and Tikrit.

Of course, there is a big moral distinction in all this carnage. The US did not mean to kill civilians in Muslim cities. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has put it well: I can't imagine there's been a conflict in history where there has been less collateral damage, less unintended consequences." Civilian fatalities in Muslim cities must be tolerated, we are told, because no war is clean in killing. But terrorists are different. They have no other intention but to terrorize our civilians and cities. Hence we are good and they are evil, the logic goes, because they have no moral claim to violence as we do.

The distinction above is perhaps fine in the realm of morality. But Newton's laws of motion recognize no such morality. When one body exerts force upon a second body, it cannot say to the second body: I have a good moral reason to hit you. Therefore, do not hit me back. Regardless of morality, the second body will obey the laws of motion.

The laws of motion do not justify terrorist violence. Nor do they merge good and evil. Moral distinctions are important to live in human communities. Only the purest pacifist would claim that all violence is bad. Others would distinguish among forms of violence. Particularly governments would continue to defend violence in the name of morality and national security---ignoring the Newtonian warning that carnage begets carnage.

But all is not bleak. England's ingenuity tells us that natural laws of motion need not be divorced from human morality. English poet John Donne, who shared the 17th century with Newton, and who is also buried in London, captured the union of law and morality in his famous meditation commonly known as For Whom the Bell Tolls, declaring: "Each man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind."

This is the lesson that city bombers need to learn.

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