

Whose “Terrorism”?

BY BILL BIGELOW

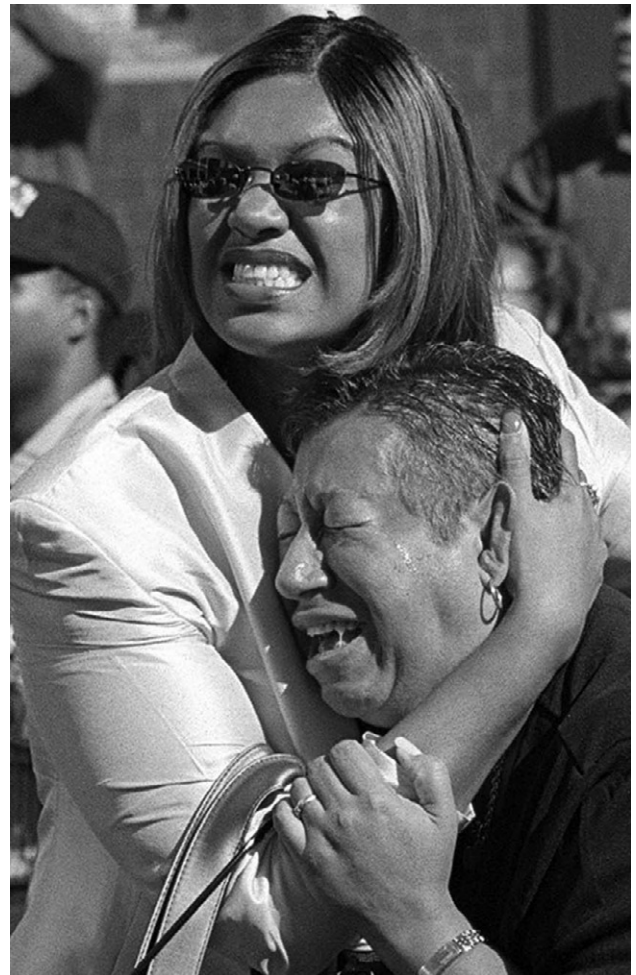
SHORTLY AFTER THE SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACKS on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, President George W. Bush announced these as acts of war, and proclaimed a “war on terrorism.” But what exactly was to be the target of this war? And what precisely did the president mean by terrorism? Despite uttering the words “terror,” “terrorist,” or “terrorism” 32 times in his September 20 speech to the nation, he never defined terrorism.

Teachers need to engage our students in a deep critical reading of terms—such as “terrorism,” “freedom,” “patriotism,” and “our way of life”—that evoke vivid images but can be used for ambiguous ends.

Lesson on Terrorism

I wanted to design a lesson that would get students to surface the definitions of terrorism that they carry around—albeit most likely unconsciously. And I wanted them to apply their definitions to a number of episodes, historical and contemporary, which involved some kind of violence or destruction. I didn’t know for certain, but my hunch was that as students applied definitions consistently, they might be able to call into question the “We’re Good/They’re Bad” dichotomies that have become even more pronounced on the political landscape.

So I wrote up several “What Is Terrorism?” scenarios, but instead of using the actual names of countries involved, I substituted fictional names. Given the widespread conflation of patriotism with support for U.S. government policies, I had no confidence that students



AP Images/Ernesto Mora

Women watch the World Trade Center burn.

would be able to label an action taken by their government as “terrorism” unless I attached pseudonyms to each country.

In the following scenario I used the example of U.S. support for the Nicaraguan Contras in the 1980s. Tobian is the United States; Ambar is Nicaragua, and the country next door is Honduras:

The Tobian government is very unhappy with the government of Ambar, whose leaders came to power in a revolution that threw out the former Ambar dictator. Tobian decides to overthrow the new Ambar leaders. It begins funding a guerrilla army that attacks Ambar from another country next door. Tobian also builds army bases in the next-door country and allows the guerrilla army to use these bases. Tobian supplies almost all of the weapons and equipment of the guerrilla army fighting Ambar. The guerrillas generally try to avoid fighting Ambar's army. Instead, they attack clinics, schools, and cooperative farms. Sometimes they mine the roads. Tobian-supported guerrillas kill and maim many, many civilians. The guerrillas raid Ambar and then retreat into the country next door where Tobian has military bases.

Question:

1. Which, if any, of these activities should be considered “terrorism” according to your definition?
2. Who are the “terrorists”?
3. What more would you need to know to be more sure of your answer?

I knew that in such compressed scenarios lots of important details would be missing; hence, I included question number three to invite students to consider other details that might influence their decisions.

Other scenarios included Israeli soldiers taunting and shooting children in Palestinian refugee camps, with the assistance of U.S. military aid; Indian farmers burning Monsanto-supplied, genetically-modified cotton crops and threatening to destroy Monsanto offices; the 1998 U.S. cruise missile attack on Sudan's main pharmaceutical plant; and sanctions against Iraq that according to the U.N. reports killed as many as a half million children. I wasn't aiming to prejudge any of these as “terrorist,” but I hoped that the diversity of examples would prompt students to wrestle with the concept.

Defining Terrorism

As I was on a leave of absence, my colleague, Sandra Childs, invited me into her Franklin High School classroom to teach this lesson to her 11th-grade Global Studies students. I began by asking students to write down their own personal definitions of terrorism, and to keep these questions in mind: Does terrorism need to involve the killing of many people or can it affect just one person?



AP Images/Marco Di Lauro

An Afghan funeral service for a 20-year-old woman killed by U.S. bombing north of Kabul.

Can it involve simply the destruction of property, with no injuries? Can governments commit acts of terrorism, or is the term reserved only for people who operate outside of governments? Must terrorism involve the people of one country attacking citizens of another country? Does motive make a difference? Does terrorism need to be intentional?

Immediately following, I explained to students that, in preparation for an activity, I'd like them to get into small groups and read their individual definitions to one another to see if they could build a consensus definition of terrorism. They could choose an exemplary definition from one member or, if they preferred, cobble one together from their separate definitions.

Some groups quickly agreed upon definitions; others would have spent the entire 83-minute class debating definitions if Sandra and I had let them. In most cases, the definitions were simple, but thoughtful. For example: "Intentional acts that create terror, targeted towards a specific group, or innocent people. Not just directly, but indirectly."

I distributed the "What Is Terrorism?" scenarios to students, reviewed the instructions with them, and emphasized that all the scenarios were real. Their task was to read each situation and to decide whether any of the actions described met their group's definition of "terrorism." I gave them permission to approach the situations in whatever order they liked.

Watching students attempt to apply their definitions of terrorism, I was impressed by their eagerness to be consistent. As Sandra and I wandered from group to group, we heard students arguing over whether there was a distinction between oppression and terrorism. Most groups wanted more information on the motives of various actors. Some insisted that if a country supported terrorist acts in another country, then it too was a terrorist; others held that a supporting country could not be held fully responsible for the actions of the actual perpetrators—but if a country knew about terrorism enabled with its funds, and did nothing to prevent it, then it too could be considered guilty of terrorism.

Although this activity was far too involved to be neatly contained in an 83-minute class, by the end many students came to important insights.

One student said, "Ever since they announced that we were going to have a war on terrorism I have wondered who or what a terrorist is. And ... it's suspicious that they still haven't defined terrorism." I asked students why they thought the U.S. government had failed to offer a clear definition of terrorism. One student said, "If you don't have any boundaries, then anyone can be a terrorist." Another said, "The U.S. government won't define terrorism because they don't want to be able to be considered terrorists."

These comments echoed Pakistani scholar and activist Eqbal Ahmad's insight that countries that have no intention of being consistent will resist defining terms. ["Terrorism: Theirs and Ours," a speech by Eqbal Ahmad at the University of Colorado, Boulder, Oct. 12, 1998.] As one student wrote after the activity: "I also realized how many terrorism acts the U.S. has committed. When our government doesn't define terrorism, it makes me think that they just want a free shot to kill anyone they want." Wrote another student: "Bush needs to define terrorism in front of our nation before he does anything else, and then he needs to stick with the definition, not bend it to suit the U.S."

But then there was this student comment: "I, myself, am really tired of hearing about it. If I go to war, so what, I'll fight for my country. What does this have to do with global studies?" And this young man: "I feel if we don't get our revenge against these 'terrorists' it will diminish the trust of our nation towards our government."

These remarks reminded me of being in the classroom during the fall of 1990, after Iraq had invaded Kuwait and the United States was assembling its military attack force. Many students resisted critical analysis, sensing that critique eroded the "patriotic" unity then building in the country—that appending a "not so fast" onto the flag-waving interrupted a sense of collective purpose that felt good to many of them. At least that was how I read some students' resistance. During times of war, students may regard even the mildest critical examination of government policy as unpatriotic or even subversive. Nonetheless, I was impressed by how many students in Sandra's classes appeared eager to question their government's framing of key issues.



"Truth and Justice." Relatives of victims who disappeared during the 1973-90 dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet in Santiago, Chile.

As we wrapped up in one class, Sandra asked a wonderful question: "What difference do you think it would make if students all over the country were having the discussion that we're having today?"

There were two quick answers before the bell rang: "I'd feel a lot better about the U.S.," and "I think we'd lose a lot of people who'd want to go fight for the country."

My interpretation: The more students understand about the exercise of U.S. power in the world—both military and economic—the less likely they are to want to extend it.

Economic Terrorism

After I'd used the "What Is Terrorism?" situations with Sandra's classes, I realized that, with the exception of sanctions, all of them were incidents of direct attacks on civilians or property. Did my examples narrow students' consideration of "terrorism"?

In her article "Solidarity Against All Forms of Terrorism," Indian environmentalist and scholar Vandana Shiva urges us to embrace a more expansive notion of terrorism. She asks us to consider "economic policies which push people into poverty and starvation as a form of terrorism," such as International Monetary Fund/World Bank-mandated structural adjustment

programs that force governments to cut food and medical programs, with the full knowledge of the misery this will engender. In India, Shiva writes:

Fifty million tribals who have been flooded out of their homes by dams over the past four decades were also victims of terrorism—they have faced the terror of technology and destructive development. The whole world repeatedly watched the destruction of the World Trade Center towers, but the destruction of millions of sacred shrines and homes and farms by forces of injustice, greed, and globalization go unnoticed.

To help students consider whether some situations could be considered economic terrorism, I've added several new "What Is Terrorism?" scenarios. One deals with deaths in southern Africa from AIDS, where, for instance, international banks have forced the Zambian government to pay annual debt service charges greater than spending on health and education combined and where, according to the United Nations, life expectancy will soon drop to 33 years, a level not seen in the Western world since medieval times. Another new scenario focuses on transnational corporations that knowingly pay wages that are insufficient to sustain life.

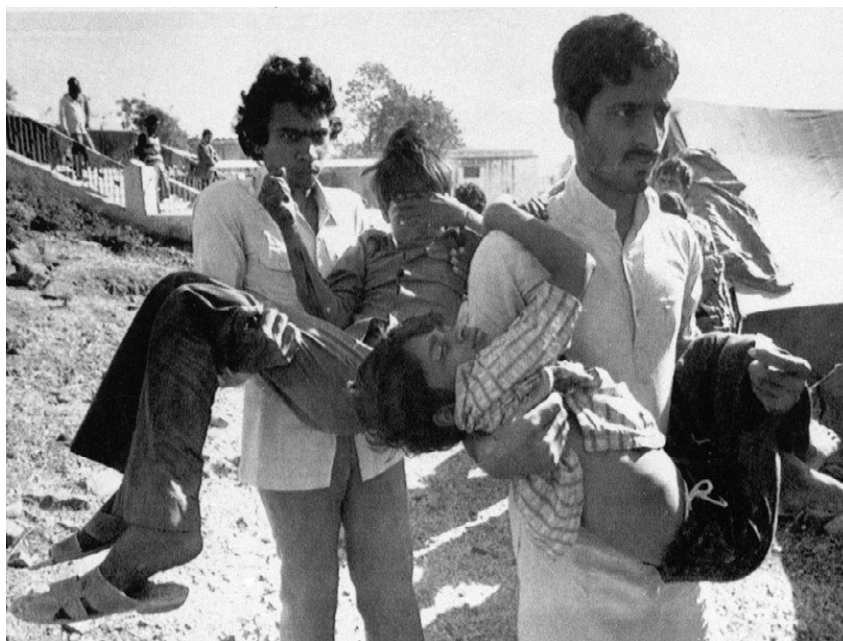
Terrorism's Ghosts

The U.S. government is ill-placed to lecture the world about terrorism, especially when it has never bothered to define it. Writing in the British daily *The Guardian*, Indian novelist Arundhati Roy offered the perspective of an individual who is on the receiving end of U.S. global power:

The Sept. 11 attacks were a monstrous calling card from a world gone horribly wrong. The message may have been written by bin Laden (who knows?) and delivered by his couriers, but it could well have been signed by the ghosts of the victims of America's old wars. The millions killed in Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia, the 17,500 killed when Israel—backed by the U.S.—invaded Lebanon in 1982, the 200,000 Iraqis killed in Operation Desert Storm, the thousands of Palestinians who have died fighting Israel's occupation of the West Bank. And the millions who died, in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Panama, at the hands of all the terrorists, dictators and genocidists whom the American government supported, trained, bankrolled and supplied with arms. And this is far from being a comprehensive list.

It's not our role as teachers to climb on our soapbox to rail about U.S. foreign policy. And yet without an honest examination of events like those listed by Roy, how can we expect students to maintain any critical perspective on the U.S. "war against terrorism"? Let's clarify with students what precisely we mean by terrorism. And then let's encourage students to apply this definition to U.S. conduct in the world.

Underlying this curricular demand for consistency is the basic democratic, indeed human,



Two men carry children blinded by the Union Carbide chemical pesticide leak to a hospital in Bhopal, India, Dec. 5, 1984.

premise that the lives of people from one nation are not worth more than the lives of people from another. A Pakistani university student, Nabil Ahmed, expressed this sentiment to the *Christian Science Monitor*: "There is only one way for America to be a friend of Islam. And that is if they consider our lives to be as precious as their own." ■

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What Is Terrorism?

Who Are the Terrorists?

Instructions:

Based on the definitions of terrorism that your group came up with, decide:

1. Which of the situations below are “terrorism”;
2. Who are the “terrorists” in the situation; and
3. What additional information you would need to know to be more sure of your answers.

All the situations below are true, but the names of countries and peoples have been changed. It may help your group to make a diagram of some of the situations.

Situations:

1. Soldiers from the country of Marak surround a refugee camp made up of people from the country of Bragan. The refugee camp is crowded and the people there are extremely poor. Most of the Bragan people in the refugee camp hate the Marak army, believing that Marak has invaded Bragan, has taken all the best land and resources for themselves, and treats people from Bragan very poorly. Young men in the refugee camp sometimes fire guns at the soldiers.

According to an eyewitness, a reporter from the *New York Times*, Marak soldiers use loudspeakers to call insults into the refugee camp—in the Bragan language. Over the loudspeakers, soldiers shout obscenities and things like, “Son of a whore!” They dare Bragan boys to come out near the electric fence that separates the refugee camp from

a wealthy settlement of Marak citizens.

When the boys—sometimes as young as 10 or 11—and young men go near the fence to throw stones or yell at the Marak soldiers, the soldiers use silencers and fire on the boys with live ammunition, often killing or maiming them. In an article, the *New York Times* reporter expressed horror at what he witnessed. He wrote: “Children have been shot in other conflicts I have covered—death squads gunned them down in El Salvador and Guatemala, mothers with infants were lined up and massacred in Algeria, and Serb snipers put children in their sights and watched them crumple onto the pavement in Sarajevo—but I have never before watched soldiers entice children like mice into a trap and murder them for sport.” The Marak government clearly knows about the behavior of their soldiers and does nothing to stop them. Indeed, Marak soldiers so regularly taunt Bragan citizens that this behavior appears to be the policy of the Marak government. One additional fact: Every year, Marak is given enormous amounts of money and military equipment by the country of Bolaire, which is aware of how these are used by Marak.

2. Farmers from the country of Belveron are angry at their own government and at a corporation from the country of Paradar. The Belveron government has allowed the Paradar corporation to plant “test” crops of genetically-engineered cotton. The genetically-engineered crops produce their own pesticide. Many Belveron farmers worry that

the genetically-engineered crops will pollute their crops—as has happened many times in other countries—and will lead to a breed of super-pests that will be immune to chemical pesticides and also to the organic pest control methods many poor farmers use. Without growing and selling cotton, the farmers have no way to feed their families. Belveron farmers also believe that the Paradar corporation does not really care about them, but they instead care only for their own profit. They believe that the corporation wants to get Belveron farmers “addicted” to genetically-engineered cotton seeds—which the corporation has patented—so that the corporation will have a monopoly. Belveron farmers further point out that the corporation has not told farmers that the “tests” on their land may be risky, and could pollute their non-genetically-engineered cotton crops.

Belveron farmers have announced that they will burn to the ground all the genetically-engineered cotton crops. They hope to drive the Paradar corporation out of Belveron. Belveron farmers have also threatened that they may destroy the offices of the Paradar corporation.

3. The Kalimo army has invaded the country of Iona, next door. There are a number of refugee camps in Iona with thousands of people living in them. The refugees themselves lost their homes many years before—some in wars with Kalimo, others were forced out of their homes by Kalimo. The area around the refugee camps is controlled by the Kalimo army. The commander of the Kalimo army sealed off the refugee camps and allowed militias from Iona, who are hostile to the refugees, to enter two refugee camps and slaughter hundreds of people. The killing went on for 40 hours. At least 1,800 people were murdered, perhaps more. One additional fact: The Kalimo army receives a great deal of military aid from the country of Terramar. Terramar learned of the massacre of the refugees in Iona, but did not stop military aid to Kalimo.

4. A corporation based in the country of Menin has a chemical factory located in the much poorer country of Pungor. One night, huge amounts of poisonous gases from the factory begin spewing out into the area around the factory. Nobody outside the factory was warned because someone in the company had turned off the safety siren. Not until the gas was upon residents in their beds, searing their eyes, filling their mouths and lungs, did the communities surrounding the factory know of their danger. According to one report: “Gasping for breath and near blind, people stampeded into narrow alleys. In the mayhem children were torn from the hands of their mothers, never to see them again. Those who still could were screaming. Some were racked with seizures and fell under trampling feet. Some, stumbling in a sea of gas, their lungs on fire, were drowned in their own bodily fluids.” No one knows how many people died, but perhaps as many as 6,000 that night and in the years after, more than 10,000.

The corporation had begun a cost-cutting drive prior to the disaster: lowering training periods for operatives, using low-cost materials, adopting hazardous operating procedures, cutting the number of operatives in half. A confidential company audit prior to the accident had identified 61 hazards. Nothing was done.

After the tragedy, the corporation concentrated on avoiding liability, sending in its legal team days before a medical team. Company officials lied about the poisonous nature of the chemicals at the plant. To this day the corporation refuses to disclose medical information on the leaked gases, maintaining it to be a “trade secret.” The company did pay some of the victims’ families. On average, victims received less than \$350 from the company—a total loss of 48 cents per share of company stock.

Today, conditions in this Pungor community are hazardous: soil and water are still heavily contaminated. Mercury has been

found at between 20,000 and six million times the expected levels. In this community, the rate of stillborn infants is three times the national average of Pungor; infant mortality is twice as high as the national average.

5. The Tobian government is very unhappy with the government of Ambar, whose leaders came to power in a revolution that threw out the former Ambar dictator. Tobian decides to overthrow the new Ambar leaders. It begins funding a guerrilla army that attacks Ambar from another country next door. Tobian also builds army bases in the next-door country and allows the guerrilla army to use these bases. Tobian supplies almost all of the weapons and equipment of the guerrilla army fighting Ambar. The guerrillas generally try to avoid fighting Ambar's army. Instead, they attack clinics, schools, and cooperative farms. Sometimes they mine the roads. Tobian-supported guerrillas kill and maim many, many civilians. The guerrillas raid Ambar and then retreat into the country next door where Tobian has military bases.
6. Simultaneously, the embassies of the country of Anza in two other countries were bombed. In one country, 213 people were killed and over 1,000 injured; in the other, 11 people were killed and at least 70 injured. In retaliation, about three weeks later, Anza launched missiles at the capital city of Baltus, destroying a pharmaceutical factory and injuring at least 10 people, and killing one. Anza claimed that this factory was manufacturing chemicals that could be used to make VX nerve gas—although Anza offered no substantial proof of this claim. Anza also claimed that a prominent individual whom they link to the embassy bombings was connected to the pharmaceutical factory, although they provided no evidence of this claim, either—and a great deal of evidence exists to prove that there is no link. Baltus pointed out that two years earlier they expelled the prominent individual, and vigorously denied that the pharmaceutical plant was producing nerve gas agents. They

said that this was an important factory, producing 70 percent of the needed medicines for the people of Baltus—including vital medicines to treat malaria and tuberculosis. They allowed journalists and other diplomats to visit the factory to verify that no chemical weapons were being produced there. Journalists and others who visited the factory agreed that the destroyed factory appeared to be producing only medicines. It is not known how many people may have died in Baltus for lack of the medicines that were being produced in that factory. Anza blocked the United Nations from launching the investigation demanded by Baltus.

7. At least one million people in the country of Lukin are infected with HIV/AIDS. Between 1991 and 2001, 700,000 people died of AIDS in Lukin. Currently, about 300 people die each day of AIDS-related causes. Largely because of the HIV/AIDS crisis, life expectancy in Lukin is expected to drop from 43 to 33 years, a level last experienced in Europe in medieval times. AIDS could be controlled with a combination of drugs, frequently called a drug “cocktail,” including AZT. However, given current drug prices, this could cost as much as \$18,000 a year per patient.

This year, Lukin will pay \$174 million in interest payments on its debt—most of which will go to two large international banks. This debt was incurred many years ago, by a different government than the current one. The loans were pushed by banks, which had huge amounts of money to lend because oil-producing countries had deposited so much of their revenue into these banks. As one observer put it, “The banks were hot to get in. All the banks ... stepped forward. They showed no foresight. They didn’t do any credit analysis. It was wild.”

Loans benefited mostly bankers and the rich of Lukin. However, most people in Lukin are poor—the gross national product (GNP) per capita is \$350. The \$174 million in interest payments is more than the money

Lukin will spend on health care and education combined. Money that could go to pay for AIDS prevention and therapies for people with AIDS instead is being sent to banks in so-called developed countries.

The international banks know about the dire health situation in Lukin. They have allowed Lukin to postpone some debts—but only after Lukin agreed to certain conditions set by the banks that gave the banks greater control over Lukin's economy, for example requiring Lukin to sell its national bank to private investors. Still, so long as the banks force Lukin to pay interest on its debts, there is no way Lukin can deal effectively with the AIDS crisis. Three hundred people a day continue to die.

8. Led by the country of Lomandia, the United Nations waged a war against the country of Moretta, saying that Moretta illegally invaded another nearby country. After Moretta's army was defeated and removed from the country they'd invaded, Lomandia pushed for "sanctions" against Moretta, until Moretta could prove that it was not engaged in a program to produce "weapons of mass destruction," like nuclear bombs or poison gas. The sanctions meant that Moretta was not allowed to buy or sell almost anything from other countries in the world. Moretta could not get spare parts to repair water purification plants damaged by bombing during the war. It could not get medicines and spare parts for medical equipment. Moretta claimed that it allowed inspections from the United Nations, but Lomandia says that it did not. Documents from Lomandia show that it knew that Moretta civilians were dying as a result of water-borne diseases. When asked in a television interview about the reports of massive numbers of civilian deaths—perhaps as many as half a million children over several years—a high government official from Lomandia said: "I think that is a very hard choice, but the price, we think, the price is worth it."
9. Bartavia is considered by many to be one of the most repressive countries in the world,

especially if you are not white. Only whites can vote; only whites can travel freely; only whites can live where they like. Most whites live comfortably, even luxuriously. Conditions for people who are not white are some of the worst in the world. Bartavia imprisons people who organize for change. Torture is widespread and used by the Bartavia government against people working for equality. Over the years, there have been numerous massacres of non-white Bartavia civilians—sometimes of young children. The main organizations working for change in Bartavia have asked the world not to invest money in Bartavia and not to have economic or cultural relations with the country until it commits itself to change. Nonetheless, many countries continue to do business with Bartavia. One in particular, Sarino, has allowed its corporations to increase their investments in Bartavia from \$150 million to \$2.5 billion—all this during a period of tremendous violence and discrimination. Who knows how many thousands of people have been killed—through guns or poverty—as a result of Sarino's actions.

10. The Sport-King Corporation produces athletic equipment sold all over the world. Although the headquarters of Sport-King is in the country of Morcosas, all of its products are manufactured in other countries. Sport-King contracts with subcontractors to make its products. Over 500,000 people, mostly women, work for these subcontractors in poor countries.

Sport-King has a "Code of Conduct" which is supposed to ensure that workers are not mistreated by Sport-King's subcontractors. For example, no child laborers are supposed to be hired; no prisoners may be used as workers; workers may not be forced to work more than 60 hours a week, etc. Sport-King's "Code of Conduct" specifies that workers must be paid a country's "minimum wage." However, it does not say that this minimum wage needs to be a living wage. Even poor country governments admit that the

minimum wage is not enough for people to live on. Sport-King says that it pays the legal wage, but it knows that not all its workers can survive on this wage.

Companies like Sport-King locate their factories in countries that don't allow unions, that outlaw strikes, and that jail workers who demand higher pay and better conditions. In fact, Sport-King chooses to locate its factories in some of the most repressive countries in

the world. Human rights groups argue that companies like Sport-King knowingly locate their factories in repressive places so that workers can more easily be controlled and exploited. These human rights groups argue that companies like Sport-King could easily afford to pay their workers living wages, but because this would come out of their enormous profits they choose not to. ■

What Is Terrorism?

Who Are the Terrorists?

Who's who:

Situation 1:

Marak is Israel. Bragan is Palestine. Bolaire is the United States. This particular example is taken from "A Gaza Diary," by Chris Hedges in the October 2001 *Harpers*.

Situation 2:

Belveron is India. Paradar is the United States. The corporation is Monsanto.

Situation 3:

Kalimo is Israel. Iona is Lebanon. Terramar is the United States. The refugees are Palestinian. The camps were Sabra and Shatila in 1982. The militia was Christian Phalangist.

Situation 4:

Menin is the United States. Pungor is India. The corporation was Union Carbide, in Bhopal, India. The year was 1985.

Situation 5:

Tobian is the United States. Ambar is Nicaragua. The country next door is Honduras. The time is the 1980s during the U.S.-sponsored Contra war.

Situation 6:

Anza is the United States. Baltus is Sudan. The countries where the U.S. embassies were bombed are Kenya and Tanzania. The prominent individual mentioned is Osama bin Laden.

Situation 7:

Lukin is Zambia. The banks are the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Situation 8:

Lomandia is the United States. Moretta is Iraq. The U.S. official quoted was then-U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, later Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright on *60 Minutes*, interviewed by Leslie Stahl in 1996.

Situation 9:

Bartavia is South Africa during apartheid. Sarino is the United States.

Situation 10:

Sport-King is Nike, although it could be many transnational corporations. Morcosas is the United States.

rethinking schools

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