

“We Must Remember What We Are Fighting For,” Cautions Gupta  
BY MATTHIAS NIKAJ

“Do you think,” asks **Dipak Gupta**, “that it’s true we know how to define terrorism?”

In many ways, terrorism is the issue of modern times. America is engaged in a war against terrorism, and the fear of another attack is in the back of everyone’s mind. Terrorism has become a fact of life. Yet according to Gupta, an expert in the study of terrorism and ethnic violence, for all the ado surrounding terrorism, we still cannot define it.

“No state really wants to define terrorism because they might have to use those tactics against their enemies later on,” Gupta explains. The international vocabulary of the United Nations includes “universal human rights”, “genocide”, and “war”, but “terrorism” is conspicuously missing.

What is terrorism? What constitutes an act of terror? Who exactly is the United States fighting in this war on terror? These were the questions Gupta addressed in a briefing session with students during the 10 Annual WorldLink Youth Town Meeting in San Diego. Throughout the session, Gupta dispelled the stereotypes that terrorists are ignorant and desperate and that terrorism is a recent, mainly Islamic phenomenon. Among the earliest terrorists were a group of extremist Jews known as the Sicarii, which may have included Judas Iscariot. The Sicarii fought the Roman occupation of Judea during the first century B.C.E. through public assassinations and other acts of terror.

According to Gupta, “the aim of the Sicarii and the aim of the 9/11 bombers was the same... they were provoking governments to overreact.” Gupta claimed that terrorists set a trap for civilized society by provoking overreaction. Once civilized societies overreact against terrorists and inadvertently attack innocents, the cause of the terrorists is emboldened.

Gupta showed that acts of terrorism are the work of educated and calculating individuals. He reminded delegates that more former terrorists—including Yasser Arafat, Menachem Begin, and Nelson Mandela—have won the Nobel Peace Prize than U.S. presidents. Al-Qaeda number two man Ayman al-Zawahiri holds a medical degree as a surgeon, while Osama bin Laden was educated at some of the finest schools in the Middle East.

Therefore, says Gupta, it is impossible simply to characterize terrorists as irrational or insane. But what motivates terrorists to commit atrocities against civilians? “We forget what people can do in the name of a group,” Gupta answers.

Gupta grew up in India, amidst the throes of a violent Maoist Revolution. He recounted how his brother was tortured by police on suspicion of participating in revolt, and of how dire situations such as war drive people to commit atrocities in the name of a group. Gupta remembered a story told to him by his grandmother, in which a group of Muslims had attacked her village. In reprisal, the citizens of the village reasoned that to get back at the extremist Muslims who had attacked their village, they needed to kill Muslims—any Muslims. So, the citizens of the village went to an elderly and peaceful Muslim couple who lived in the outskirts of town, dragged the man out of his house, and killed him.

The man’s wife asked Gupta’s grandmother why they had targeted them—why her husband had been killed for the crimes of others. At that point, according to Gupta, the enormity of what had occurred settled on his grandmother. “We can paint them [people] with one sweep of a collective brush, and feel no remorse in torturing them,” Gupta said. That is precisely the trap the terrorists set—they want civilized societies to abandon their principles and the cherished goals that such societies have worked generations to build. Gupta concluded his presentation aptly. In the war on terrorism, he cautioned, “We must remember what we are fighting for.”