



## DEFINING TERRORISM

# A Module for Democracy/Civic Mission Classrooms

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# Defining Terrorism

## Overview

This unit is a discussion of terrorism – what it is, how different people understand it, and why these differences are important. The unit also introduces the Public Issues Model for discussing terrorism and other controversial public issues in our society.

## Objectives

- < Discuss different definitions of terrorism.
- < Promote skills for discussing controversial public issues in a civil and respectful manner.

## Materials

A: Reading: What is Terrorism?

B: Activity: Defining Terrorism

C: Source: Definitions of Terrorism in the U.S. Code

D: Strategy: Discussing Controversial Issues

E: Deliberation Model: The Public Issues Model

## A: Reading: What Is Terrorism?

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Since the terrible events of September 11, 2001, with the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the subject of terrorism has exploded on the world stage. President George W. Bush has declared a war against terrorism. The vast resources of the United States and other countries have been directed toward ending terrorism in America and around the world. Yet, in spite of these developments, it is clear that countries are not only divided about what to do about terrorism, but even about how to define it.

By its nature, the term "terrorism" is bound up in political controversy. It is a concept with a very negative connotation. Because terrorism implies the killing and maiming of innocent people, no country wants to be accused of supporting terrorism or harboring terrorist groups. At the same time, no country wants what it considers to be a legitimate use of force to be considered terrorism. An old saying goes, "One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter."

Today, there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism. Countries define the term according to their own beliefs and to support their own national interests. International bodies, when they craft a definition, do so in the interests of their member states. Academics striving to define terrorism are also subject to their own political points of view.

European countries and the United States tend to define terrorism narrowly, making sure that it only applies to acts of non-governmental organizations. For example, Title 22 of the U.S. Code defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence" against "noncombatant targets by subnational groups" usually with the goal to influence an audience.

The U.S. Department of Defense uses a definition that highlights another element of the Western concept of terrorism. Terrorism is "the calculated use of violence or the threat of violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological." In other words, terrorism is violence designed to advance some cause by getting a government to change its policies or political behavior.

Contrast these definitions with one produced by Iranian religious scholar, Ayatulla Taskhiri in a paper delivered at a 1987 international terrorism conference called by the Organization of the Islamic Conference. After a review of Islamic sources concerning terrorism, Taskhiri defined it as follows: "Terrorism is an act carried out to achieve an inhuman and corrupt objective and involving threat to security of any kind, and in violation of the rights acknowledged by religion and mankind."

This is a much broader definition of terrorism. Under this definition, nation states themselves could be guilty of terrorism. Any inhuman or corrupt objective coupled with an act that threatens security and rights regardless of the motivation could be considered terrorism. Later in his paper, Taskhiri accuses the United States of being the "mother of international terrorism" by oppressing peoples, strengthening dictatorships, and supporting the occupation of territories and savage attacks on civilian areas.

The United States would likely reject this definition and Taskhiri's charges and could point out that many states under this definition would also be chargeable with terrorism. Nevertheless, the definition points out the wide gulf in perceptions about what is terrorism and who is guilty of it.

Consider some additional definitions of terrorism.

- § "All criminal acts directed against a State intended or calculated to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons or persons in the general public." (League of Nations, 1937)
- § "Act of terrorism = Peacetime Equivalent of War Crime." (Alex P. Schmid of United Nations Office for the Prevention of International Terrorism. He is the author of many books on terrorism, including *Terrorism and the Media*, 1992.)
- § "Terrorism is the premeditated, deliberate, systematic murder, mayhem, and threatening of the innocent to create fear and intimidation in order to gain a political or tactical advantage, usually to influence an audience." (James M. Poland, professor of criminal justice at California State University, Sacramento. He has written extensively on terrorism and hostage crisis intervention.)

While there is no universal definition of terrorism, various experts point out that there are common elements to most terrorist acts.

Acts of terrorism usually are committed by groups who do not possess the political power to change policies they view as intolerable. Middle Eastern terrorism intensified in the 1970s in response to defeats of Arab nations in wars with Israel over the Palestine issue. Convinced that further wars were futile, a number of countries, including Egypt, sought peace with Israel. This enraged groups within those countries dedicated to the defeat of Israel, who then turned to terrorism.

Terrorists choose targets and actions to maximize the psychological effect on a society or government. Their goal is to create a situation in which a government will change its policies to avoid further bloodshed or disruption. For these reasons, terrorists often choose methods of mass destruction, such as bombings, and target transportation or crowded places to increase anxiety and fear.

Terrorists plan their acts to get as much media exposure as possible. Media coverage magnifies the terrorist act by spreading fear among a mass audience and giving attention to the terrorist cause. The attacks on Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics assured a worldwide television audience, as did crashing planes into the World Trade Center.

Terrorists often justify their acts on ideological or religious grounds arguing that they are responding to a greater wrong or are promoting a greater good. For example, Leon Trotsky, a communist leader during the Russian Revolution, justified the use of terror by the Red Army as a necessary evil to promote the worldwide cause of workers and as a response to the military actions of counterrevolutionaries and Western powers.

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From: Constitutional Rights Foundation, [http://www.crf-usa.org/terror/What\\_Is\\_Terrorism\\_rev.htm](http://www.crf-usa.org/terror/What_Is_Terrorism_rev.htm)

## B: Activity: Defining Terrorism

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Divide the class into small groups. Have each group review the various definitions of terrorism listed below and choose the best one. Groups can also use the definitions provided in Handout C, "Definitions of Domestic and International Terrorism in the U.S. Code." Alternatively, each group can begin with these definitions and then create their own definition of terrorism.

- § "[P]remeditated, politically motivated violence" against "noncombatant targets by subnational groups" usually with the goal to influence an audience." (Title 22 of the U.S. Code)
- § "[T]he calculated use of violence or the threat of violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological." (U.S. Department of Defense)
- § "Terrorism is an act carried out to achieve an inhuman and corrupt objective and involving threat to security of any kind, and in violation of the rights acknowledged by religion and mankind." (Iranian religious scholar, Ayatulla Taskhiri)
- § "All criminal acts directed against a State intended or calculated to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons or persons in the general public." (League of Nations, 1937)
- § "Act of terrorism = Peacetime Equivalent of War Crime." (Alex P. Schmid of United Nations Office for the Prevention of International Terrorism)
- § "Terrorism is the premeditated, deliberate, systematic murder, mayhem, and threatening of the innocent to create fear and intimidation in order to gain a political or tactical advantage, usually to influence an audience." (James M. Poland, professor of criminal justice at California State University, Sacramento)

Ask each group to review the following situations, and determine which, if any, are examples of terrorism.

- a. A radical environmental group burns a vacant hotel that was recently legally built in a wilderness area.
- b. Country X, during a time of war, accidentally kills civilians while conducting bombing raids in Country Z.
- c. Country X hires an organized crime group in Country Z to assassinate civilian leaders of a group opposing the international policies of Country X.
- d. A national separatist group in Country X blows up a railroad station in Country Z to discourage that government from supporting policies of the government in Country X.
- e. The bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building
- f. The attacks on September 11

## C: Source: Definitions of Domestic and International Terrorism in the U.S. Code

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The following is the definition of international terrorism in the United States Code, 18 U.S.C. 2331:

"As used in this chapter -

- (1) the term "international terrorism" means activities that -
  - (A) involve violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State, or that would be a criminal violation if committed within the jurisdiction of the United States or of any State;
  - (B) appear to be intended -
    - (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population;
    - (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or
    - (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by assassination or kidnapping; and
  - (C) occur primarily outside the territorial jurisdiction of the United States, or transcend national boundaries in terms of the means by which they are accomplished, the persons they appear intended to intimidate or coerce, or the locale in which their perpetrators operate or seek asylum;

Below is the definition of "domestic terrorism: recently passed in the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 (115 STAT. 376, Public Law 107 – 56 – OCT. 26, 2001)

### SEC. 802. DEFINITION OF DOMESTIC TERRORISM [EXCERPTS]

- a) Domestic Terrorism Defined. -- Section 2331 of Title 18, United States Code is amended --
  - "(5) the term 'domestic terrorism' means activities that --
    - "(A) involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State;
    - "(B) appear to be intended --
      - "(i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population;
      - "(ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or
      - "(iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and
    - "(C) occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States."

## D: Strategy: Discussing Controversial Issues

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As Americans, we cherish our society's openness and our freedom to discuss and argue the issues of the day. This habit of public inquiry is what the scholar Benjamin Barber calls the talk that is "at the heart of strong democracy." Such talk is never more important than during moments of crisis or controversy when our reason is most likely to be clouded by powerful emotions. How can we discuss controversial public issues in a reasonable way that allows us to hear what other people are saying?

This ability is particularly important for students to learn and practice. Students need a variety of skills in order to take part in productive discussions of public issues. Many of these skills require breaking unproductive habits they employ in casual conversation—that is, they must learn techniques of disciplined discussion. Here are a few suggestions and a model to use when conducting discussions of controversial public issues in the classroom.

### Suggestions for Discussing Controversial Public Issues

1. **Practicing Sensitivity.** Conversations often seem to go around in circles because the participants don't seem to be talking about the same issue (even though they are on the same general topic or problem) or do not respond to one another's statements. When this happens, people are not being sensitive to one another. Sensitivity usually involves making a conscious effort to connect the speakers with the issues being expressed. Some tips that can be helpful to students include the following:

- § Put yourself in the other person's place to understand what that person is saying and how he or she feels.
- § Show understanding and acceptance through such nonverbal behaviors as gestures, eye contact, posture, and facial expression.
- § When a person has finished speaking, try restating the person's most important thought or feeling.
- § If there seems to be confusion about the issue under discussion, clarify by summarizing the statements of several of the people who have spoken.

2. **Stating the Issue.** Discussion often begins by concentrating on one aspect of a situation. In a complicated situation, many different opinions are soon thrown into the discussion. One of the first challenges of disciplined discussion is to sort out how many different things are being said about different issues or topics. Another immediate need is to identify points of agreement and disagreement. These steps allow the participants to focus on a limited number of issues and pursue them systematically.

To state issues clearly, it is useful to translate the main positions, or opinions that people have, into questions. Stating the issue in question form focuses the discussion on a specific topic that requires reasoning and justification.

Sometimes it is necessary to stop and summarize the nature of the issue over which you are disagreeing. One advantage of this skill is that it provides focus and direction for the discussion. A second major advantage of stating issues explicitly is that it tends to broaden the discussion and show how a number of similar situations can be related, compared, and contrasted.

3. **Setting an Agenda.** An agenda is a list of issues that a group agrees to consider in the course of a discussion. When a group begins discussing a complicated situation, different people see different issues. Each usually talks about the issue he or she thinks is most important and is insensitive to the issues that others see. One way of dealing with this problem

is to list all the issues that seem important. The discussants then decide which issues they wish to discuss and in what order, and they can remind one another of what points are relevant and what points are not. Sticking with an issue long enough enables the group to deal with its problems thoroughly.

4. Making Clear Transitions. There are points in discussion where it is useful to leave one issue and move on to another. An argument between two discussants may become so deadlocked that no agreement is likely; by "agreeing to disagree," they can move on to another issue related to the general topic. Alternatively another discussant may see that there is a prior issue that must be settled before the issue under discussion can productively be explored.

When someone chooses to change the issue under consideration, he or she should make this known with an explicit transitional statement ("Let's agree to disagree about this," "How about we leave this issue for the moment") and explain why a change of issue at that point would move the discussion forward. When making a transition, it may be helpful to summarize the differences between the two discussants before moving on to the next issue.

5. Potential Roadblocks. For discussion to be productive, students also need to recognize roadblocks and develop strategies for dealing with them. Such roadblocks may include failure to listen and pursue issues systematically; monopolizing the conversation; proof by repetition; personal attacks; and worries about winning the argument. Two potentially difficult roadblocks result when participants have little or no interest in the controversial situation and therefore feel unmotivated to participate in the conversation or, conversely, have such deep interests and convictions that it is difficult for them to be reasonable about the topic. These two problems illustrate the necessity to select issues carefully.

6. Reflecting on the Discussion. Involving students in reflecting on the quality of the discussion may be one of the most direct paths to productive discussion. During a discussion, a group can pause and ask "What's happening now?" The general questions below can be used to determine if the discussion is moving along productively or "going in circles":

- § What issues have been discussed?
- § What positions were taken, and by whom?
- § Was agreement reached on any issue? Which ones?
- § What things helped move the discussion along?
- § What things bogged the discussion down or made it unproductive?
- § What things should be discussed next? Why?

While the answers to these kinds of questions will help students reflect on and improve their discussion skills, they do not ultimately determine whether a discussion has been productive. In order to better measure the quality of discussion, we would advocate the following benchmark: When positions are more complex (in the sense of including distinctions, qualifications, stipulations, etc.) than when the discussion began, then the discussion has been productive.

## Final Thoughts

Open-ended issues that involve emotion-laden value commitments present both a risk and a challenge to teacher and students. The risk lies in a person's sense of frustration when confronted with ambiguity, the lack of clear answers, or the difficulty of arriving at logical justifications for "gut-level" feelings. The challenge lies in achieving the sense of satisfaction and intellectual accomplishment that a productive discussion of such an issue generates.

In such discussions, the teacher's goal should not be to have students master discrete packets of information, but to have students understand the complexity of a problem and be able to make their positions reflect that complexity. Consensus may not be reached, and doubts may remain, but this is a more authentic outcome than leaving students submerged in isolated, decontextualized, and meaningless bits of information.

Teachers and students also benefit from remembering that a production discussion of issues isn't a "quick fix"—something done the day after a major event and then followed by a quick return to business as usual. Both teachers and students need time to identify and locate the information necessary to discuss an issue with insight; they need time to discuss, reflect, and discuss some more. Sometimes a discussion can be continued and extended beyond school. Service projects, such as writing letters to policymakers or the newspaper, organizing an out-of-class discussion on the issue and reporting back on the results, or preparing informational materials on the issue, offer ways for students to test out what they discuss in class and to gain a deeper understanding of the issue.

Very often there is a "messiness" to discussions of controversial public issues: the "end" of one issue can lead to the "beginning" of numerous other issues. Like so many other aspects of civic engagement, however, the rewards for the classroom—and for society—are thereby multiplied and enriched.

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Adapted From: Laurel R. Singleton and James R. Giese, "Preparing Citizens to Participate in Democratic Discourse: The Public Issues Model," in Ronald W. Evans and David Warren Saxe (eds.), *Handbook on Teaching Social Issues: NCSS Bulletin 93* (Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies, 1996). Reprinted with permission of the author. All rights reserved.

## E: Deliberation Model: The Public Issues Model

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This Public Issues Model, developed by the Harvard Social Studies Project during the 1960s and 1970s, rests on the idea that citizens in a democracy differ in their views and priorities and that democratic values often conflict in specific cases. Learning how to take part in this conversation is therefore critical to becoming an effective citizen.

The purpose of discussion in the public issues model is not to resolve disagreements—although that can be an outcome—but to help participants learn to state their ideas with more precision, to develop stronger reasons for their positions, and to understand precisely how their ideas differ from the ideas of others.

This model also is based on the idea that disagreements can be of several types and that discussion will be more productive if students learn the strategies best suited to dealing with different kinds of disagreements. In general, disagreements that arise in discussing public issues fall into three categories: (1) questions involving facts and explanations (2) questions of definition and (3) ethical or value questions (see figure 1).

<i>Figure 1. Areas of Disagreement when using the Public Issues Model</i>			
ISSUE/QUESTION	Fact/Explanation Issues	Definitional Issues	Ethical/Value Issues
TYPE OF DISAGREEMENT	Disagreements about the descriptions or explanations of events; conflicting claims about what the was like, how it is, or how it will be	Disagreements about the meaning of important words or phrases	Disagreements about what actions are “right” based on general ethical principles
EXAMPLES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Immigration to the United States increased greatly in the late 1900s.</li> <li>§ Terrorism is caused by ....</li> <li>§ The U.S. Government will enact more restrictive immigration laws.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ What do we mean by <i>oppressed</i>?</li> <li>§ What does it mean to be an <i>American</i>?</li> <li>§ What is <i>terrorism</i>?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Should America be a refuge for the oppressed? (principle: it is morally wrong to refuse entry to people who are mistreated in their home countries)</li> </ul>

(1) Issues Involving Facts and Explanations. These issues focus on disagreements about the descriptions or explanations of events. Example: Will the fingerprinting of non-citizens entering the country be an effective way to prevent terrorist attacks against the United States? In discussion, factual claims can be supported by appealing to common knowledge, citing personal observations, or referring to authoritative sources. In the face of disagreements about facts/explanations, discussion can be moved forward by stipulation (participants agree to proceed on the basis of one set of factual claims, even though not all agree with those claims) or by agreeing to support their positions using other arguments. In fact, fact/explanation issues over which there is disagreement offer good opportunities for further study.

(2) Questions of Definition. These questions revolve around the meaning of important words or phrases. Example: What do we mean by terrorism? Resolving these questions can often be achieved through use of an authoritative source or agreement to use a word in a specific way. While the previous sentence might suggest that definitional issues are not of much significance, that conclusion would be false. Disagreements over definitional issues are often numerous, profound, and unrecognized, and they can result in discussions that go nowhere. (Of course, realizing that someone else has a totally different definition of “terrorism” than you do is also very valuable.) Learning to develop workable definitions—by selecting criteria for a definition and testing those criteria against possible examples—is an important skill.

(3) Ethical or Value Questions. These questions deal with judgments about what should or ought to be done—they are judgments about rightness and wrongness. Example: Is it ethical for the United States to use torture with suspected terrorists to stop an imminent attack against civilians? Often, disagreements about these kinds of questions have to do with which of two conflicting goods (e.g., liberty and security) should take priority. In resolving such disagreements, the model encourages participants to look for compromises that violate each contending value to the least extent possible. One of the most powerful techniques for clarifying thinking on ethical issues is the analogy—such as comparing September 11 to the attack on Pearl Harbor. Examining how an issue might be resolved in one or more related cases forces discussants to make distinctions and qualifications that strengthen and clarify their position.

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Adapted from: Laurel R. Singleton, “Following a Tragic Event: A Necessary Challenge for Civic Educators,” *Social Education* 65 (7), pp. 413-418. Adapted and reprinted with permission of the author.