

ON TERROR AS A FUNCTION OF GOVERNMENT: V, HIS VENDETTA, AND THE ENGLAND OF THE FUTURE

We did what we had to do. Islington. Enfield. I was there, I saw it all. Immigrants, Muslims, homosexuals, terrorists. Disease-ridden degenerates. They had to go. Strength through unity. Unity through faith. I'm a God-fearing Englishman and I'm goddamn proud of it! –Lewis Prothero, 'The Voice of London'¹

When, during the course of the popular 2005 film *V for Vendetta*, the title character storms the headquarters of the British Television Network in order to broadcast his message to the people of London, he does so with a bomb strapped to his chest. Coming on the day of 5 November, which is celebrated as Guy Fawkes Day (in honor of his attempt to destroy the Houses of Parliament in 1605), and just hours after blowing up the Old Bailey (the center of English jurisprudence), this act renders for the viewer a disturbing cognitive dissonance. V, after all, is a man seeking to redress his grievances against the government that has diseased and disfigured him (dialogue later in the film between V and Evey goes like this: 'What was done to me was monstrous—' 'And they created a monster.'). So one roots for him against the proto-fascist regime of High Chancellor Adam Sutler. However, regardless of whether the bombs themselves are real (and there is reason to wonder about this, considering the ease in which Dascomb, the head of BTN, can disarm the device), V has obviously carried out a terrorist action against innocent civilians, placing them not just in possible physical danger but definite psychological trauma, and thus pitting his agenda of terror against that of the government he despises.

This paper will not focus on V so much as the role he plays in the movie, and indeed in the larger sense of governments & war, terrorism & civilians, for they are all invariably interlinked. The text tells us that

¹ Internet Movie Database, 'V for Vendetta (2005) – Memorable Quotes,' IMDB, <http://imdb.com/title/tto434409/quotes>

... [D]isorganization in social institutions, for example, the government, contributes to overall political instability. Militia members believe that the U.S. government no longer serves the purpose for which it was intended, namely to protect the individual's rights and freedom. In their eyes, the U.S. government has become dysfunctional, and they engage in acts of terrorism to undermine the government so that it will change radically or be abolished.²

However, the text does not seem to consider the notion that a government may use terrorism against its own people, nor at the very least allow some manner of terrorism in order to take advantage of the circumstances. It does not take a conspiracy theorist to note the incredible track record of certain high-profile politicians and their interests in the years since 11 September 2001, with the spectre of Osama bin Laden and Islamic terrorism being consistently played in the media without hesitation or break. A functionalist perspective must take into account that if a function of government is to increase its authority and power, and that if one of those ways is to wage war outside of its borders, then surely the waging of war inside its borders would also be possible if the right circumstances and processes presented themselves.

[T]ruth be told, if you're looking for the guilty, you need only look into a mirror. I know why you did it. I know you were afraid. Who wouldn't be? War, terror, disease. There were a myriad of problems which conspired to corrupt your reason and rob you of your common sense. Fear got the best of you, and in your panic you turned to the now high chancellor, Adam Sutler. He promised you order, he promised you peace, and all he demanded in return was your silent, obedient consent. –V3

Perhaps the most popular and effective artist to present the notion of governments terrorizing their own people, in various and numerous ways, is George Orwell. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is widely considered to be the quintessential dystopian future under totalitarianism, and is thought to be a rejoinder against the Soviet Union. However, it is the contention of this writer that the England of Orwell's imagination is not a description of the regime that has taken over through brute force, but is instead a regime that has taken over through deception to the point that the people justify the use of brute force. Orwell is warning us of the dangers and pitfalls of all democratic states that allow their gov-

² Diana Kendall, *Social Problems in a Diverse Society* (Boston: Pearson, 2007), 391.

³ IMDB

ernments and media to run unchecked. For under the guise of choice and freedom, those choices and freedoms can become undermined, can come to mean nothing, can even be considered themselves dangerous in the long run; in other words, it wasn't *Pravda* that would have frightened Orwell, but Fox News. The journalist David Neiwert expands on the notion that the most insidious regimes are the ones that creep in under the cover of choice:

Fundamental to understanding totalitarianism is realizing that, contrary to the “brainwashing” model in which the totalitarian regime is imposed on a society from without and against their will, the reality is that nearly every totalitarian regime in history has succeeded because of the avid and willing participation of citizens eager to be its subjects.⁴

When V addresses the people of Britain, he means to illustrate to them not only their complicity in the regime that now controls every aspect of life, but also that their choice was not a choice at all. After all, as the comedian Eddie Izzard notes, ‘Cause “cake or death,” that’s a pretty easy question. Anyone could answer that.’⁵

As regards terrorism, one needs only read the final scenes with O’Brien torturing Winston:

The heretic, the enemy of society, will always be there, so that he can be defeated and humiliated over and over again. Everything that you have undergone since you have been in our hands—all that will continue, and worse. The espionage, the betrayals, the arrests, the tortures, the executions, the disappearances will never cease. It will be a world of terror as much as a world of triumph. ... Goldstein and his heresies will live forever. Every day, at every moment, they will be defeated, discredited, ridiculed, spat upon—and yet they will always survive.⁶

Thus the State admits that it uses terror to keep its citizens in line, to solidify its control of the state apparatus, to further expand and inflict its power for the sake of power itself. This is not shocking, for it goes along with the very image we have of a totalitarian regime. But why do we think that democracies are inherently immune to such activities as well? In the totalitarian regime it is a small group of elites who hold power and are willing to arrest, torture, expel or even execute those it

⁴ David Neiwert, ‘The Rise of Pseudo-Fascism’, <http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/> (essay in PDF form), 36.

⁵ cake or death: an eddie izzard site, “Dress to Kill Transcript,” <http://www.auntiemomo.com/cakeordeath/d2ktranscription.html#churchofengland>.

⁶ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Plume 1983), 277.

deems to be a threat to the continued order of society. In a democracy, mobs do much the same thing. And may even do it better.

Imagine a virus—the most terrifying virus you can, and then imagine that you and you alone have the cure. But if your ultimate goal is power, how best to use such a weapon? It is at this point in our story that along comes a spider. He is a man seemingly without a conscience; for whom the ends always justify the means and it is he who suggests that their target should not be an enemy of the country but rather the country itself. —V⁷

This paper began with a description of V's attack on BTN headquarters in which he put civilians in harm's way. He does this as an act against the government, but the government is quick to use V and his methods to its own devices. In the quest to find V, we hear that arrests and 'black bags' are at an all-time high. The government, through its BTN mouthpiece, delivers horrifying news stories at a breathless pace, with the goal, in High Chancellor Sutler's words, of wanting 'them to remember why they need us!' Meanwhile, the chief of intelligence agrees to hand Sutler over to V so as to take over the government and, likely, increase the police state. In essence, he has made a deal with a terrorist to pull off a coup d'état and further terrorize the citizens.

My point here isn't that terrorism is an inherent facet of every government, nor that all governments ultimately turn to it. But if we look at functions of the modern government, especially if it be an economic power with a large military, terror does serve at least some role in how that government acts and operates towards not just other nations, but towards its own people. Lewis Lapham sums up the case rather succinctly:

The work goes more smoothly when conducted in an atmosphere of constant dread, and how better to magnify that dread than by declaring a war against terrorism? Enemies on every hand and all of them unseen; nothing safe, not even a postcard from a maiden aunt. Happy to be of service and proud to protect the American people not only from bearded strangers but also from themselves, the Congress in September hurried to the task of forging legal shackles and re-

straints, also to the broadening of the government's police powers and the further destruction of the Bill of Rights.⁸

In the end, the three terrorists of England—V, Sutler, and Creedy (the intelligence chief)—all die at each other's hands, and the train loaded with explosives makes its way underneath the Palace of Westminster to the sounds of the *1812 Overture*. Terror has begat terror, and this cycle of violence and death has ended. And as much as we hope and wish for England to recover, to end the cycle, the disturbing thought does and must intrude in our minds: what's to stop it from happening here? What's to stop it from happening again? And when it does, what if we don't have V on our side?

⁸ Lewis Lapham, *Theater of War* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 169.