

Reasons of state: what is government for?

by [Robin Lovin](#) in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

Americans are still trying to grasp what happened on September 11, and we don't yet know how to talk about what comes next. "War" was one of the first things we called it, inspired by images of burning buildings and memories of Pearl Harbor. This would not be a metaphorical war on drugs, crime or poverty, but the real thing: a military response to aggression, pursued for an extended time, ending in victory over the aggressor. Then there was another image, invoked by President Bush, which came from another part of our past. It was the image of the frontier sheriff, imposing a rough order on an untamed territory, bringing criminals to justice with the slogan: "Wanted—Dead or Alive."

War seems appropriate to the magnitude of the aggression and to its character. The hijackers who turned civilian aircraft into weapons did not act like criminals. A criminal tries to steal or extort assets to put them to use for the criminal's own purposes. These hijackers used their weapons in a warlike attempt to destroy and demoralize. If the criteria of just war that Christian thought has developed over the centuries mean anything at all, the attacks on September 11 surely qualify as a just cause for war.

But the just war tradition has other elements, including one that received little attention during recent decades when Christian thinking about war and peace focused on superpower conflict. A just war, the tradition says, must be waged by legitimate authority. The U.S. certainly qualifies as an authority competent to declare war in response to an attack, but the criterion of legitimate authority implies something more. It implies that a war, at least a war that can be a just war, must be fought between authorities who are in some way equals.

That clearly doesn't mean equal in power. Nor does it simply mean that the warring parties have to be sovereign states. Modern states didn't really exist when Christian thinking on just war took shape. When the theologians spoke of legitimate authority,

they meant, first, the capacity to organize forces and send them into battle. But they also meant the capacity to call those troops back and bring the fighting to a halt. The loose network of global terrorism has the first kind of authority. It is not so clear that it has the second.

The concept of war, then, probably won't be much help in thinking about what comes next. That's not to say that the military planners won't need all their skill and experience, and it's not to say that what comes next won't seem like war to those who get caught in it. Those who were in lower Manhattan on September 11 have already noted the similarity. But politicians, civil servants and citizens need to think about what comes next in this conflict in some other way. Otherwise, it may be impossible to know when to stop, and difficult to prevent the list of targets from expanding until it includes not just those who harm us but those who refuse to help us, and eventually even those who disagree with us.

Where do we turn for another way to think about what comes next? Perhaps, after all, to the "Wanted" poster and the rough image it implies of a frontier where law and order is still in the making. The most basic task of any state is to protect its citizens from violence. When the modern state was taking shape, Christian political thinking, which was already old, tended to insist that the state stick to this thoroughly secular and not very glamorous task, partly to keep it from the exaggerated visions of its own importance that result when the state takes up the work of religion and morality.

In subsequent centuries, this basic task has had little attention, except in marginal situations like the American frontier, where government's power to hold violence in check could not be taken for granted. But what we saw on September 11 was that when there are networks of global terrorism, frontier conditions exist everywhere, even in our electronically screened airports, our security-guarded office towers and our well patrolled streets. So we are to have a new national Office of Homeland Security, not because we have never had the function before, but because we have never had to pay so much attention to it.

We will not succeed if we try to provide that security all by ourselves. After September 11, we know that no government, acting alone, can protect its citizens from violence, any more than it can unilaterally manage the effects of global markets or protect its environment from global climate change. We are all in this together, not only for the most sophisticated functions of government but also for

the most basic.

The 19th-century “Wanted” poster is, of course, no tool for the 21st-century effort to control terrorism, nor is the frontier sheriff exactly the image we want for the authority that will restore a sense of security to the daily life of ordinary citizens. But the frontier image may help us understand that we are moving into new territory. New kinds of authority will be needed, not only to end the present terrorist threat, but to deal with the new ones that will inevitably emerge in the future. We will require international collaboration on a scale we have not yet seen. We will need to take a real interest in the development and leadership of marginalized groups everywhere. Our politics will never be quite so independent of political movements in other parts of the world. The modern state, which has always accomplished its basic function of protection against violence by carefully controlling its own territory, will have to invent a new way to go about the task.

The state which will emerge in this new situation may be fundamentally different from the state we have known since early modern times. It will have to be more intrusive in our lives in some ways and more aggressive in securing public spaces. But it will also be more interdependent with other states, and more directly involved in the lives of people who are not its own citizens.

The church will be different too. But the church was here before the modern state, and the church will be here to establish a new relationship with whatever comes after it. In the time of transition, the church has a large task to remind people of realities that are even more enduring than markets, communication networks and nations. But the church would also do well to dust off the wisdom we’ve acquired about when it is appropriate to call something a war, and about what a state of any sort is required to do.