

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

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Ep. 195: Former Oxford University Head and Terrorism Expert - Finally, A Knowing, Clear-Eyed Look At Terrorism

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President George W. Bush: On my orders, the United States military has begun strikes against Al-Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. These carefully targeted actions are designed to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime.

Lynn Thoman: We live in a time of terrorism — when the fanatical, violent actions of a few can have a major and disturbing effect on the rest of us. The conventional response to terror has been to strike back — hard — in an attempt to punish and eradicate the group responsible.

But is that the best deterrent? Why do terrorists believe the killing of innocent civilians is justified? As Dostoevsky put it: “While nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer, nothing is more difficult than to understand him.” Today’s guest has a deep understanding of the evildoer.

Hi everyone, I'm Lynn Thoman, and this is *3 Takeaways*. On *3 Takeaways*, I talk with some of the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, newsmakers, and scientists. Each episode ends with three key takeaways to help us understand the world, and maybe even ourselves, a little better.

My guest today is Dame Louise Richardson, a renowned academic leader, political scientist and expert on terrorism who comes from a place that has produced many terrorists — northern Ireland. She has written several books on terrorism, including the deeply insightful *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat*.

Dame Louise was head of the University of St. Andrew’s in Scotland and then head of University of Oxford in England. She is currently president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Over the course of her life and study of terrorism, she has arrived at an unconventional, some might say controversial, perspective on solving the problem.

LT: Welcome Dame Louise Richardson, and thanks so much for joining 3 Takeaways today.

Dame Louise Richardson: Thank you, Lynn. It's a pleasure to be here.

LT: The pleasure is really mine. Thank you for taking the time.

LT: How is studying terrorism good training for running universities?

LR: That's a question I often get and usually respond with a flippant comment about counterinsurgency and how useful it is to understand it.

But actually, the thing about terrorism is that they are invariably fairly small organizations operating under conditions of real uncertainty, and yet they manage to have an outsized impact. For much of my career, I was running relatively small institutions, St. Andrews, a relatively small university, and we managed to have, I think, an outsized impact. Indeed, Radcliffe, where I was the Executive Dean before going to Scotland, one of the smallest of the schools at Harvard, I think we managed an outsized impact.

So just understanding how small organizations can function and punch above their weight, I think, is helpful.

LT: Anything related to binary thinking?

LR: Well, I do think that one of the characteristics that terrorists invariably share is binary thinking. That is to say, a Manichaean view of the world that sees the world in black and white terms.

Interestingly enough, most terrorists see themselves as the good guys. They see themselves as David fighting the Goliath. I think universities are the opposite of that.

Part of the whole point of a university education, I think, is to rob one of one's certitudes, to ensure that you never see things in black and white terms, to teach you to appreciate nuance and the various perspectives on any given issue. They are polar opposites, I think, in that respect.

LT: You grew up in Ireland, and like many around you, you grew up with a passionate hatred of England. Yet you ended up leading an English university. What were your views growing up, and how did they change? Most people don't change their views, but you did.

LR: I think education is the answer there.

I grew up in an environment in rural Ireland at a time when Northern Ireland was exploding, and we learned a history of Ireland in which Britain was blamed for all our ills, or England more particularly, blamed for all our ills. There was a period in my life when I spoke Irish in preference to English, again to assert my Irish nationalism. Then I went to university in Trinity College, Dublin, and I learned an entirely different version of Irish history.

I became fascinated by how two sets of people, good, well-meaning people occupying this tiny little island could have diametrically opposed interpretations of the same historical events. Trinity, of course, was traditionally an English university, a Protestant university in the midst of Catholic Southern Ireland. Most of my teachers there were English or certainly Anglo-Irish, so they had a very different perspective.

That was enormously educational for me to hear a completely different version of events.

LT: Terrorists are usually portrayed as psychopaths and criminals and evil, but you knew fellow students, teachers, and the parents of your friends who all joined the IRA. Did the people that you knew and those you subsequently met and studied who joined terrorist groups fit the profile of crazy, evil psychopaths? What were they like, and what did they actually have in common, if anything?

LR: Well, I wouldn't want to overstate my personal linkages to individual terrorists, but I have certainly studied them and met them.

To a person, to a man, because they're almost invariably men, they were not psychopaths. They were not what I would call evil, although they certainly committed evil deeds. I think many were disillusioned idealists, or many were idealists who believed that they were fighting for a good cause and made enormous personal sacrifices to pursue this cause.

It isn't any fun to be a terrorist. The odds are that you will be killed. You're both outmanned and outgunned by your opponents.

Indeed, very often terrorist organizations try to select out people they think are unstable or will be unstable and unreliable, who are mentally deranged. They don't want them in their organization because they want their organization to be filled with people who will follow rules, will follow instruction, and do what's asked of them or what they're instructed to do.

I think it's a mistake to see them as one dimension of bad guys and psychopaths, which is not to suggest that there aren't psychopaths to be found in terrorist organizations, but I don't think that's the norm.

LT: Why would an otherwise responsible person who not only joins a terrorist movement, but remain in one, and then collectively as part of a group choose to kill innocent people?

LR: That's the question that's really motivated my academic career. I don't have easy answers, but I will say that they do it because they believe they're fighting for a good cause. They don't believe, by and large, that the individuals they're killing are innocent.

They rather see them as representatives of a broader group, and they will counter when you challenge them on the ethics of this. They will point to the Allied bombing of Dresden. They will point to Hiroshima and Nagasaki as examples of the West and our governments not respecting civilians in warfare.

They see themselves as soldiers engaged in a legitimate battle for a cause.

LT: What is the objective of terrorists?

LR: There's a number of ways of looking at this. I like to see it as having immediate or primary objectives and secondary objectives.

The different type of primary objective differs with the type of organization. An Islamic group might want to establish a caliphate to remove Western influence from the Middle East and so on. A nationalist group, like the PLO or the IRA or the Tamil Tigers or the Basques in Spain, FARC in Colombia, and so on, want to control a piece of land.

So, different types of groups have different political or religious objectives.

I would argue, though, that all terrorists share the more immediate objectives. The first of these is a desire to exact vengeance, revenge. They want revenge for some atrocity or some unfairness that they believe was visited to a group with which they identify.

I think they also want glory or renown because they want to redress the humiliation they believe themselves to have suffered at the hands of the people they consider their enemies.

Thirdly, and this is something we often forget to our cost, they want a reaction. The bigger reaction they get, the better for them because they are so weak. So, the bigger the reaction, the more important they become.

So, not wanting to oversimplify things, I call these the three R's—revenge, renown, and reaction. I think that's what terrorists want.

LT: I was fascinated by the results of an assignment that you gave your college class on terrorism. Can you share that?

LR: Well, this was years ago in the 90s. At the time, there weren't that many terrorist groups. We were able to cover all of them in a semester at Harvard.

I used to require each student to become an expert on a terrorist group, pick a terrorist group and become an expert on it, read their pamphlets, their publications, find what you can about them, and then I want you to present their case to the class, and we'll have a discussion about them.

The students who took this class were not the countercultural or not the would-be revolutionaries. These were people who wanted to be Secretary of State, President, head of the CIA.

These were Harvard undergraduates, after all. They would stand up and say, well, all these other groups are terrorist groups, but you know, mine actually isn't, because do you know what they have suffered? Do you know how badly treated they were? Do you know what they do for their community? Do you know about their culture?

I learned a lot from that, too, because the more they knew about the terrorist group, the terrorist group didn't fit their image of terrorists as just, again, the one-dimensional bad guys.

LT: That is so eye-opening to me. That is completely astonishing.

LR: It's important for counterterrorism, too, because the approach I take is open to criticism that I'm too understanding or too sympathetic with terrorists, and I counter by saying, on the contrary, by understanding them more, you can counter them much more effectively. I think governments and politicians in particular get too hung up on who's tough on terrorism, and everybody wants to be tough on terrorism.

To me, what matters is who's effective against terrorism.

I think the first question any politician should ask themselves when considering a counterterrorist act is not, is it tough, but is it effective? Then second, if it is, then you should ask yourself, at what cost? Because of course, very often, the costs of counterterrorism are pretty high, too, or high to democratic values.

LT: Before I ask you more about how to fight terrorism, what are the causes of terrorism? How important are factors like poverty?

LR: These are great questions, but very complicated ones, not susceptible to simple answers.

I think it varies because terrorism is a tactic. It's a tactic used by many different groups in many parts of the world in pursuit of many different objectives. I think people will continue to use terrorism as long as it's effective.

In some cases, you'll find a link between poverty and terrorism, but it's not abject poverty. Now, you don't see much terrorism per se in sub-Saharan Africa. Where you tend to see more terrorism is in countries where they are, compared to the poorest countries, relatively well off, but compared to their neighbors, relatively poor.

So, what matters is not so much objective deprivation as relative deprivation. So, it's how you compare yourself to others. Again at the risk of over-simplifying, I have three children and the way I used to describe relative deprivation to my students was to say, if I go home after a day's work and I bring a bag of cookies with me and I keep the cookies in my bag, I walk into the kitchen, the kids are there doing their thing, they say hi Mom and they carry on doing what they're doing. On the other hand, if I come home and give each of the kids a cookie, they will stop and chat with me and be very nice to me for five minutes and then go back to doing what they were doing. On the other hand, if I come home and give my son three cookies and give my two daughters one cookie, I will have two furious children. Now their objective condition will be better than if I gave none of them any cookies. It will be the same as if they all got one cookie. But if their brother gets two and they get one, they will be angry and feel deprived. That's the essence of relative deprivation. It's how you compare yourself to others.

If you look at the educational backgrounds, for example, of some terrorist groups, you'll find this is a subject of particular interest to me, and you'll find different types of educational backgrounds with different types of terrorists.

But say, looking at the Middle East, for example, with Islamic terrorism, a disproportionate number of the leadership have engineering degrees. A significant number also have medical degrees, which you may think, how is that even possible? But actually, the explanation there is these are the most prestigious degrees you can get in many parts of the world, including the Middle East. So, you have smart students who go to university, they become highly educated, and then they finish university and [then go] into an economy which has no place for them.

So, they can't get jobs, and they become angry and embittered. They see other similarly educated people in other countries do extremely well, and that breeds resentment. I prefer to look at it as risk factors.

There are particular risk factors, but absolute poverty is not actually one of them. Again, the Basque Country was relatively better off than other parts of Spain, and the same is true in most places where you have terrorism. It's not abject poverty, though clearly, many of the followers, the foot soldiers, of terrorist groups are drawn from the poor.

LT: You talked about counterterrorism. Why was it a mistake after 9-11 for the U.S. to declare war on terrorism, and what would have been a better strategy?

LR: War is a tactic. So, to me, it makes no sense to declare war on a tactic, or terrorism as an emotion.

It makes simply no sense to declare war on an emotion. The U.S. was the powerful country in the world at the time. Everybody knew that.

So, to declare war on what was a motley collection of extremists living under the sponsorship of one of the poorest governments on the planet was to elevate their stature to a degree they could have only dreamt of. I mentioned the desire for glory before. Well, they played into Al-Qaeda's hands by glorifying them, by declaring them public enemy number one of the most powerful country in the history of world.

I think the atrocity was so appalling that we should have seen this for what it was, which was an attack on humanity, not just an attack on the United States. There were citizens of 62 countries murdered that day. We had global support, the kind of global support we haven't had since.

It was extraordinary the extent to which the world came behind us, united in horror at this ghastly atrocity. We frizzled it all away in our response by declaring war, by misunderstanding this as a military threat. It was never a military threat to us.

It was ultimately a political threat. So, I think any government at the time would have been under enormous pressure to respond militarily or certainly strongly. But if I'd been running the country at the time, and I would never be elected to anything, but if I were, I would have used my leadership position to try to educate the public and say, right, how we prove we are different from the ghastly terrorists who committed this atrocity is not doing what they did.

Let's not seek vengeance. Let's, first of all, understand who did this. We will pursue them.

We will bring them to justice. But let's do it with the countries around the world who were supporting us. I would also have put pressure on the only two governments who had political relations with Afghanistan at the time.

We knew who was responsible for this attack. To hand bin Laden over, but not to us, but to an international court. Let's invite the countries in the region to name their most eminent jurists to a court, and let's present the evidence against them.

Again, showing that we believe that we're utterly different from them. We don't respond to violence with violence. We believe in the rule of law.

We have evidence. Let's make the whole world come together to repudiate this ghastly atrocity. But instead, we figured only our grievance mattered, our own grief mattered.

We saw it as an attack on the US. And we deployed our military in Afghanistan, which again, I do think any president would have been under enormous pressure to do just that. And then the ghastly mistake, which was evident to so many of us, to make this link between Saddam Hussein and bin Laden, which anybody who studied terrorism knew was completely false, and then wage war in Iraq. So that now, the real impact of 9-11 has not just been on the families of the 3,000 people who died, not just been on everybody who gets on an airplane since, but look at what has happened to the Middle East in the years that has followed.

Look at the tens of thousands, even millions of deaths, displacements, and so on that were caused ultimately by this war on terror, which was never going to be won. Why declare a war when you know you can never win? You can never win a war on an emotion, on a tactic. It's just not sensible.

LT: It was such a mistake. What are the lessons from terrorism, including from Afghanistan and from Israel? Israel's years of fighting with Hezbollah in Lebanon, with the Palestinians in the West Bank, and with Hamas in Gaza?

LR: These are really complex issues, and I worry that I'm oversimplifying everything. Ultimately, Israel is in an enormously difficult position and surrounded by enemies who, especially in the case of Hamas, are completely unwilling to accept any of the norms of rules, behaviors in warfare.

So, they are in an enormously difficult position. But I revert to what I keep saying, which is that ultimately, this is a political, not a military problem. And ultimately, these issues have to be resolved, will only be resolved politically, not militarily.

LT: What have been some successful strategies against terrorism, and what are the strongest political weapons then?

LR: One of the iron rules of counterterrorism, I have found, is that countries never learn from the experience of other countries. Many countries, many democracies have faced terrorism, and usually their initial response is pretty incompetent and costly. And usually, they get much better at it.

They learn from their own mistakes, and one of the great tragedies is they never learn from others' mistakes. So, in the case of, say, Britain and Northern Ireland, initially, it was a military response, eventually realizing the military can fight the IRA to a standstill, but they can't eliminate them because this is ultimately a political issue. So, that creates space, if you like, for politics.

And we mark this year the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, where President Clinton and Senator George Mitchell played a very positive, constructive role in bringing the parties together, ultimately, slowly, painstakingly, at a glacial pace, but ultimately, they forged an agreement.

Depending on the type of terrorist you're dealing with, there's another approach, which is to isolate them as far as possible from the community they claim to represent, and then use the police, because these people are committing appalling crimes, and we've got a justice system. They can be brought to justice using the criminal justice system, and they help them.

So, I tend to see all terrorist groups on a two-by-two quadrant, where you have, on the one hand, the relationship of the goals they seek. So, whether they're seeking political goals like independence or secession, or transformational goals like eliminating capitalism, bringing about a caliphate, or introducing Sharia law globally, whatever, on the one hand. And then, on the other, the nature of their relationship with the communities they claim to represent, whether they have a broad base of support or a narrow base of support.

So, ultimately, you'd like your terrorists to have political objectives that can be negotiated, and a narrow base of support. If they have a broad base of support, you can still negotiate with them and effect a resolution. If they have transformational goals and a broad base of support, that's the nightmare scenario, where they are enormously difficult to defeat.

If they have transformational goals and a small base of support, then, again, one can pursue them with the criminal justice system. So, the goal of counterterrorism policy, I feel, should be to ensure that terrorists do not have a broad base of support in their communities, and especially groups with transformational goals are never in a position to build a broad base of support in their communities. So, that's what we should have in mind when we think about our counterterrorism strategy.

Are we actually producing more recruits for the terrorists than we are eliminating the bad guys? How do we make sure that terrorism doesn't spread to the broader community? It's very difficult. One has to understand how it spreads.

If you look at the growth of organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah, they were actually extremely responsive to the social needs of their communities.

That's how they end up growing, which is not to say, at this point, who knows how much support they have in their communities, or it's different between Hezbollah and Hamas. But they were able to grow by being, initially, so close to their communities, they understood their social needs, and they took care of them, and thereby won support. With the state's far greater resources, the state should be in there addressing those social needs, so they're not recruitable by the bad guys.

LT: What are the 3 takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

LR: The first is the old Augustinian precept, “audi alteram partem”, listen to the other side. I think that's a very good approach to life. Always listen, not just here, but listen to what your opponent is saying.

The second one you alluded to, actually, is beware binary thinking. Beware the tendency to see the world in black and white terms, good and evil, that you and your people are the good guys, and the bad guys are the others. The world is not a world of binary, it's a much more complex, diverse ecosystem, and we should always beware of being pulled into one of two sides.

Finally, I would say, never underestimate the power of education, the power of education to transform lives for the better, and to be the antidote to so many of the more nefarious things we've been talking about today.

LT: Thank you. I love to end on an optimistic note. This has been wonderful. Thank you so much.

LR: Thank you, Lynn.

LT: Today's guest was Dame Louise Richardson. If you're interested, you can sign up for the 3 Takeaways newsletter at 3takeaways.com where you can also listen to previous episodes. You can also follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [Facebook](#), and if you're enjoying the podcast, and I hope you are, please review us in [Apple Podcasts](#) or wherever you get your podcasts. It really helps to get the word out. I'm Lynn Thoman, and this is 3 Takeaways. Thanks for listening.

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