

A Question of Motive

It's time to make distinctions in labeling terrorism

Have you ever said a word over and over again to the point that the sound begins to separate itself from its meaning? Pick a word, like "butter," and say it 30 times in a row. Now you probably understand what I'm talking about.



For the past few weeks – since my sister, Chelsea Gerlach, was officially judged a terrorist because of her environmentally motivated actions – the word terrorism has been tumbling around in my head so much that I can't really recall what its original meaning was.

Of course, what it used to mean was the way the sky was eerily quiet on Sept. 11, 2001, as we wondered whether there was more to come. What it used to mean was the creeping dread that someone you knew was in those towers, on those streets, in those airplanes.

What it used to mean to me, and what it ought to mean to our judicial system, is the indiscriminate murder of civilians to achieve a state of widespread fear, or "terror."

Sadly, it does not.

Under the legal definition of terrorism used in these cases, no actual physical harm to human beings is required, and for this reason I don't really fault Judge Ann Aiken for her ruling. Sure, she could have used her judicial discretion to ignore key sections related to arson and destruction of government property, but she didn't, and I don't think anyone really expected her to.

The real culprit here is the broad and vague definition of terrorism devised by Congress and further expanded in the USAPATRIOT Act. I can only hope that these cases will wake our representatives up to the need for a more narrow definition – though in the current political climate, I doubt that they will.

And that, more than any burned down ski resort or destroyed poplar farm, is what scares me. Already, protesters are subject to arrest and jail time; will they one day also be considered terrorists? Will our prisons soon be filled with those exercising the very few rights left to us to display our disagreement with our government's policies?

The consequences are twofold: Not only does an over-broad definition of terrorism make it easier for those in power to quell dissension, but the crimes of murdering extremists risk being diluted in a pool of lesser crimes.

This is not to say that I agree with the defendants' actions, not at all. Apart from being illegal, these acts perpetuated a cycle of violence, anger and destruction that, I believe, only served to entrench the beliefs of their targets.

But the basic fact is that these defendants' actions were motivated by the belief that life is more valuable than property, while the actions of archetypal terrorists are motivated by the desire to inspire fear by killing as many people as possible.

Indeed, in the end, both camps are ideological and destructive, but I think there's room in our judicial system to make the distinction between ideological property damage and mass murder.

Terrorism, my fellow Americans, is far too heavy a word to be cheapened by including eco-saboteurs, and our judicial system has done us a disservice by adding their crimes to a list that previously only included the nadir of unimaginable horrors.

So is my kind, compassionate and caring sister a terrorist? Yeah. Whatever that means.

Shasta Kearns Moore is a former Eugene resident and UO journalism graduate now working as a journalist in Tillamook. Visit www.supportchelsea.org to learn more about Gerlach and her case.

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