Terrorism is the use of violence and threats to intimidate and coerce for political reasons. You might object to this definition, arguing that many of the terrorist acts that you have heard about on the news recently are motivated by religion.

The original motive for a terrorist act may be rooted in some idea we don't normally think of as political – perhaps religion or ideology, for example a communist protestor plants a bomb. The intended result, however, is rooted in politics – all of the relations between people living in a society.

When Sunni Muslims use suicide bombers to attack Shiite Muslims, the goal is to win more territory and political power for the Sunnis. The cause of the conflict is religious – Sunni and Shiite belong to two different sects of Islam. Although the goals of terrorism are political, religious extremism has become a major cause of terrorism in the world.

Terrorism is most effective when it causes fear in those who weren't even there when the attack took place. This is a form of intimidation because it changes people's behavior.

Assassinations of prominent figures in society, car bombings, suicide bombers, and bombings of public places with the intent of maiming and killing any members of a particular group are typical acts of terrorism. The use or threat of violence by terrorists may have a limited impact in terms of destruction, but a high impact psychologically because it creates fear and shock.
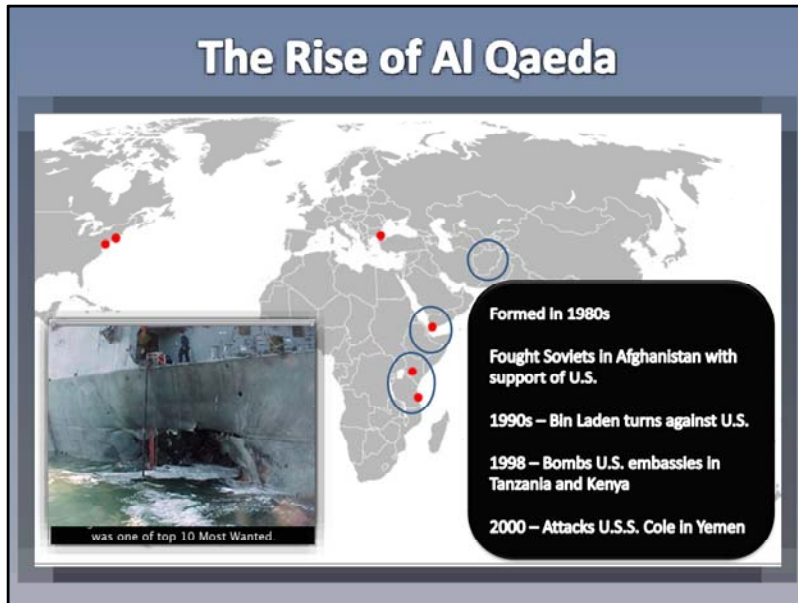
Terrorism has not been restricted to modern times; terrorist events have taken place throughout history. One of the most famous early acts of terrorism was the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand in 1914. The Archduke was the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne when he was killed by a secret society known as the Black Hand. The Black Hand was formed to liberate Serbia from Austria-Hungary's control in the early 1900s.

Later, in the 1970s, the world was shocked when Palestinian terrorists stormed the Olympic village during the 1972 Summer Games in Munich and kidnapped eleven Israeli Olympic athletes. The group demanded the release of Palestinian prisoners being held in Israel. After a tense standoff, the ordeal ended in the death of eleven Israeli athletes, one Israeli coach and one West German policeman. Five of the eight terrorists were also killed.

Israeli intelligence forces later tracked down and killed two of the remaining three perpetrators of what is now known as the Munich Massacre.

The Rise of Al Qaeda

Formed in 1980s

Fought Soviets in Afghanistan with support of U.S.

1990s – Bin Laden turns against U.S.

1998 – Bombs U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya

2000 – Attacks U.S.S. Cole in Yemen

was one of top 10 Most Wanted

Over the last decade, the United States has fought the War on Terror against Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.

Osama bin Laden, a member of a rich Saudi Arabian family, formed Al Qaeda in the 1980s. Initially, with the financial backing of the C.I.A., Bin Laden fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

In the 1990s, bin Laden worked to eliminate U.S. influence in Saudi Arabia during and after the first Persian Gulf War. Bin Laden resented American influence in the Middle East and sought to influence U.S. policy through terrorist acts. Later on, he started to attack U.S. targets outside the Middle East.

On August 7th, 1998, a series of attacks killed hundreds of people as truck bombs exploded simultaneously at the United States embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. Evidence suggested that Al Qaeda was responsible for the attacks. President Bill Clinton responded by launching missile attacks against Al Qaeda training camps in Sudan and Afghanistan.

On October 12th, 2000, the U.S.S. Cole was refueling in the Yemen port of Aden when suicide bombers in a high speed boat slammed into the side of the vessel. Through this attack, they killed seventeen U.S. sailors and injured thirty-nine others. Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attack.

On the morning of September 11th, 2001, Al Qaeda terrorists hijacked four airplanes. The hijackers crashed two of the planes into the World Trade Center in New York City and another plane into the Pentagon, just outside of Washington, D.C. Hijackers on the fourth plane were overcome by passengers and it crashed in Pennsylvania instead of hitting its intended target, the White House. The attacks resulted in the death of nearly three thousand people and over six thousand injuries.

President George W. Bush declared a War on Terrorism and Al Qaeda. The next month, the U.S. bombed sites in Afghanistan starting a war there which continues to this day. In 2003, the U.S. went to war against Iraq. The war ended in December 2011.

In addition to rooting out the terrorists and the places where they could operate freely, the goal of these two wars was to build more stable and equitable societies which would lessen terrorism in the first place.

Death of Bin Laden

Bin Laden's compound in Pakistan

On May 2nd, 2011, after a decade-long manhunt for bin Laden, U.S. special forces raided his compound in a suburb of Islamabad, Pakistan. They shot and killed bin Laden and buried his body at sea in accordance to Islamic laws. With bin Laden's death, many people are hopeful that the world can move towards creating a lasting peace in Iraq and Afghanistan.

[Image courtesy Sajjad Ali Quresh.]

Because of the 9/11 attacks, the United States and other western countries like Great Britain, have made security a top priority. The U.S. government has increased surveillance of people and groups both inside and outside the U.S. in an effort to try and stop future terrorist attacks.

In 2001, George Bush passed the Patriot Act. This law gave the government more power to investigate and review phone and email communications, as well as medical and financial records without people knowing they are being investigated. Since its inception, it has been a controversial law that started a debate over privacy rights.

Do you think citizens should give up some of their privacy in order to ensure the safety of others? Does the government's ability to conduct more surveillance help prevent terrorism? Many people have many opposing views on the subject, and it is still a widely-debated topic.

Some of the signs of greater security are more obvious than others. Anyone who has taken a trip on an airplane recently is aware of increased security at the nation's airports. You must have a valid government-issued ID, like a driver's license or a passport in order to be able to get on the plane. The security section at the airport is now the scene of people dumping bottles with liquid over the allowable amount, travelers holding their shoes in their hands for screening, and new technologies used to try and find weapons on passengers.

Some increased security measures have extended into other industries, like banking, in order to try and deter terrorism. You may find that you have to produce more official documents and complete more paperwork for different activities, like opening a bank account.

These additional security measures have costs. Hiring more people to perform surveillance or security activities requires greater taxes or fees to be collected from customers or the general public. Also, it can lead to increased costs in items, as these industries try to pay for the additional expense of more security.

There are the costs involved in the loss of privacy by individuals for the possibility of greater safety for society. While this balancing act may be relatively new to the United States, these issues have been around much longer in places like Israel and Germany, which have had a longer history of terrorist actions.

As a future voter, you will be the one determining the proper balance between safety and personal freedoms, as well as how much money we should spend to protect us from terrorists. There are no easy answers to these questions, but they have a great impact on your life.