I. What is Terrorism?
   A. The use of violence, usually to achieve social or political goals, with the following frequently conjoined characteristics:
      (1) violence is designed to create terror, fear, or panic in a population.
      (2) the use of violence is usually random or arbitrary.
      (3) non-combatants or “innocents” are often the target.
         (a) this feature is more controversial given that terrorists often claim that their victims are not innocent. This gives rise to an interesting question, namely, what does it mean for people to be innocent or not responsible for the actions of, for example, their government?

II. Can Terrorism Ever Be Justified?
   A. Act Utilitarianism: in principle could condone the use of terrorism on occasion, if the act of terrorism maximized the well-being of all those affected by an act of terrorism over some peaceful alternative. So, groups broader than those sponsoring and benefitting from the terrorism would have to be considered.
      (1) Necessary questions to ask
         (a) Is the terrorist’s means the most effective and efficient way to achieve the desired goal? Here we would have to compare terrorism with other peaceful means to achieve socio-political ends, such as non-violent civil disobedience and passive resistance, boycotts etc. These alternative means seem more likely to be efficient and effective, given that they do not tend to harden the resistance of the targeted group as much as terrorism, and given that they often bolster sympathy from outsiders and make it more difficult for aggressors to continue their aggression.
         (b) Is the goal desirable enough to justify the terrorists horrible methods? For example, is the reunification of Ireland worth the suffering and loss inflicted by the IRA? The key for consequentialists, is that the party we have to consider is not just the IRA but those who are affected by their acts of terror.
      (2) Rectifying Injustice: given the difficulty of justifying acts of terrorism by appeal to achieving socio-political goals, such as the reclamation of territory or the elimination of unwanted cultural influence, terrorists often try to justify terrorism by claiming that their acts are concerned with rectifying or eliminating injustice. This is problematic for two reasons:
         (a) One problem, of course, is that there is usually something to be said to support both sides of the conflict, hence the parties do not fall so neatly into the “just” and “unjust” categories. This makes the endeavor to rectify injustice through terrorism different from using legal punishment to rectify the injustice of a murder.
         (b) Moreover, can we rectify one injustice without perpetrating another?
      (3) Conclusion: Although it is theoretically possible to justify terrorism using consequentialist reasoning, doing so in practice seems to be quite difficult.

B. Non-Consequentialist Theories
   (1) The Intentional Killing of Innocents: the Kantian tradition will impose an indefeasible prohibition against the intentional killing of the innocent. Calling this prohibition “indefeasible” means that an innocent person can never be intentionally killed, regardless of how favorable the
consequences may be. (Think, for example, of Kant’s second categorical imperative: if one were
to blow up a cafe as a means to obtain some political goal and to strike fear in a population,
innocent human lives would be used merely as a means to achieve such ends). Such an
indefeasible prohibition against the intentional killing of innocents would oftentimes condemn
terrorist acts.

(a) constraints on responses to terrorism: the Kantian tradition would place constraints
on how we may respond to terrorists. For example, we could not indiscriminately carpet bomb a
city to deter terrorists from striking again, since we too would be targeting innocents to achieve a
similar end, namely striking fear in the heart of people—in our case, the terrorists.

i. natural rights: some non-consequentialist thinkers appeal to the notion of natural
rights, or entitlements we have for no other reason than that we are human. Since we retain our
humanity until death, these rights are inalienable and cannot be forfeited regardless of one’s
actions. So, while such theorists would condemn terrorism, terrorists themselves would also
retain their moral standing, in which case we would be limited in our capacity to respond to
them.

III. Who is Innocent?

A. Two Approaches: Most non-consequentialist moral theories prohibit the intentional
targeting of the innocent, which is why they often condemn acts of terrorism. However, terrorists
often claim that their victims are not really innocent.

(1) Moral or Juridical Sense of Innocence: someone is not innocent in this sense if he has
committed some moral or legal transgression. Terrorists who are concerned with targeting those
who they believed were not innocent in this sense might target certain political figures or
nationalities who they think violated some moral or legal standard.

(2) Causal Innocence: someone can lack innocence in this sense so long as he poses a treat,
even if he does not have culpability. A terrorist concerned to target those who are not innocent in
this sense might target who financially or electorally support a repressive regime. The September
11th terrorists might have believed that inhabitants of the World Trade Center lacked this type of
innocence.

B. Analogies Between Terrorism and other Indiscriminate Killing: there is a clear similarity
between terrorism and other indiscriminate acts of killing, such as the bombing of Dresden and
Tokyo, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These bombings were designed to create terror in a
population and intentionally targeted innocents as a means to do so. Moreover, like terrorism, the
use of force was random or arbitrary, since people and buildings with little or no political or
social significance were targeted. This analogy is significant, I think, because people of our
country tend to think that our preferred type of violent behavior is usually markedly different
from that of so-called “terrorists”. Moreover, in the case of Dresden and Tokyo, our
indiscriminate killing was as ineffective in achieving its goals as more paradigmatically terrorist
acts are. Moreover, if Dresden and Tokyo are actions of which one approves, it is difficult to
broadly claim that all acts of terrorism are impermissible.

IV. What are the Ideological Roots of Terrorism? Robert L. Philips contends that the intellectual
sources of terrorism spring from three Western ideas, popular sovereignty, self-determination,
and consequentialism. How so?

A. Popular Sovereignty: this is the view that human beings are born free and equal and have a
right to an equal share of political power. They exercise this power either by becoming
politicians themselves or, more commonly, by voting. Hence, the doctrine of popular sovereignty
identifies the state with “the people”. So how is this idea behind terrorism? Well, if the people
are identified with the state, then they are responsible for the actions of the state of which they are a part. And if that state commits an injustice in the eyes of a particular group, then that particular group can hold the ordinary citizens of that state responsible. Or so they believe.

B. Self-Determination: this is the view that “a people” has the right to determine its own destiny and the disposition of the land on which it lives without intervention from a third party. This idea lends support to terrorism since terrorists often give it as the principle justification for their actions (think of the IRA and Palestinian terrorists). The idea itself is dangerously vague and is often exploited by both sides. For instance, Protestants in N. Ireland claim that they have a right as “a people” to determine their own destiny, which is to remain part of the UK, while Catholic nationalists identify “the people” with the island of Ireland as a whole.

C. Ethical Consequentialism: in general, this can make permissible acts leading to great harm for the ultimate purpose of achieving some good. Hence, non-combatants may be killed for the sake of obtaining some social or political objective. This way of thinking stands in marked contrast with categorical moral principles which prohibit the intentional killing of innocents regardless of the consequences.

D. Putting the pieces together: a terrorist organization believes are entitled to determine its own destiny and the disposition of the land on which they live (self-determination). If a third party interferes with that right, then the citizens of that third party should be held responsible (popular sovereignty). Finally, those non-combatants may be killed for the sake of achieving the ultimate goal of self-determination.

E. The Solution: Philips suggests that we should jettison ethical consequentialism as a solution to the problem of terrorism. The principles of popular sovereignty and self-determination seem like notions that are worth preserving over the doctrine of ethical consequentialism.