

Pointing the Finger: Terrorism, Dissent, and US Foreign Policy

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Counter-terrorism. It's a word we hear more and more. But it's been in the intelligence community's lexicon for decades, a standard practice used against "extremists" ever since the Counterintelligence (COINTEL) program mounted against the "new left." At the time, the FBI reasoned that a terrorist potential existed in almost any dissident group, justifying strong measures against a wide range of targets.

Near the end of 1970, shortly after President Nixon circulated a plan for expanded spying, FBI field offices received word to "immediately institute an aggressive policy of developing new productive informants who can infiltrate the ranks of terrorist organizations, their collectives, communes and staffs of their underground newspapers." Even after the "new left" COINTEL effort officially ended, recommendations for specific programs were submitted and approved on an individual basis.

By mid-decade, however, the FBI was no longer alone in the field of domestic spying. The private sector had made a strong entry into this growth industry. Early reports of a new "secret war" leaked out in 1974 when the Berkeley Barb published the details of IBM's master plan to combat terrorism, developed in collaboration with the International Association of Chiefs of Police. It was a high-tech information program focused on the "radical left."

According to the plan, which was later disavowed by IBM, the corporation felt vulnerable "as a symbol of post-industrial technological oppression." Along with other large businesses that also had established intelligence units, IBM had been spurred on by the CIA, which predicted an increase in domestic terrorist activity. Their rationale was contact with foreign groups, and they claimed that potential targets included offshore drilling rigs, nuclear reactors, computer systems, and pipelines. There had been a few symbolic bombings, of course. But this "counter-terrorist" program was clearly aimed also at nonviolent groups.

Activists as Terrorists

The War in Vietnam brought moral defeat to the US military, congressional hawks, and corporations that had profited during the debacle. The country had been wounded by revelations of atrocities, corporate bribery, and murder. Trust in government and business plummeted as a new political opposition gained momentum. The anti-war movement had been shattered, mainly by covert government operations, but a drive to halt nuclear construction and arms proliferation was beginning to coalesce.

New dissent required new analysis. The post-Vietnam "threat" was defined as nuclear

terrorism, and an overall battle plan was devised, the Federal Response Plan for Peacetime Nuclear Emergencies. Over 30 government agencies would have roles, but most would rely on the FBI for direction. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission and Department of Energy also launched studies and developed dossiers.

Policy debates emerged among energy bureaucrats and their intelligence experts concerning the civil liberties problems posed by surveillance and infiltration of those opposing nuclear power. But such second thoughts didn't hamper the private sector, unhindered by regulations, congressional oversight, and public skepticism. The Georgia Power Company, for example, recruited former government agents to establish its own security apparatus. Almost \$1 million was spent spying on members of the region's anti-nuclear groups, in concert with local police and right-wing groups. When criticized, the company labeled as subversive "anyone who spoke out against Georgia power."

Spooks and anti-nukes were heading toward a confrontation. Philadelphia Electric had its security crew photograph activists. Potomac Electric Power Company built up an "anti" file on environmentalists. Pacific Gas and Electric even sponsored burglaries. And finally, there was the case of Karen Silkwood, a union activist who died in a suspicious car crash on her way to meet a New York Times reporter about serious hazards at the Oklahoma Kerr-McGee nuclear facility.

By 1976, federal energy agencies had their own counter-terrorist programs, consolidated in an Information Assessment Team under the NRC. The Team would compile and evaluate data in cooperation with other agencies. On May 27, 1976, the day it was launched, the new unit declared a Memorial Day alert. Police and security forces near all nuclear plants were told that "two groups may have plans to take over or occupy one or more nuclear power plants on Memorial Day weekend."

Nothing happened that weekend. Yet, despite the basic nonviolence of the new social movement against nuclear power, terrorism was fast becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. The FBI had established its justification years earlier: the propensity for violence, rejection of law and order, and revolutionary activity exists in almost any dissident group. This was Hoover's Law. Any form of dissent therefore triggered an offensive response, and some responses were clearly against the law.

The violation of civil liberties was not inadvertent. The Rosenbaum Report, a 1974 NRC study, had outlined a strategy that made infiltration an integral part of government anti-terror efforts. Intelligence was seen as the key to defense against nuclear power opponents, and "such intelligence may involve electronic and other means of surveillance, but the most important aspect is infiltration of the groups themselves."

In 1977, the US Department of State opened an Office to Combat Terrorism, headed by Heyward Isham, a career diplomat who had just finished a tour as ambassador to Haiti. Isham articulated what was fast becoming international anti-terrorist policy — no concessions and tighter communication between all levels of government.

Increased demand for sophisticated anti-terror equipment — computers, surveillance devices and crisis management teams — made counter-terrorism a commercial proposition. The cost of admission for one security conference was \$4750, a price that included instruction in intelligence techniques. One of the 12 classes featured "the use of external published sources; the use of embassies and paid informants; what information should be

gathered at the local level and what at headquarters; and how this information should flow within the overall company.”

By this time, the distinction between an activist and a terrorist had become quite blurred. The popular theory was that protest could provide a cover for terrorism. Therefore, anyone who participated in a protest showed some potential to become a political criminal. Association was more than enough. Members of a terrorist conspiracy, much like participants in the “international communist conspiracy,” might be conscious enemies or unwitting dupes. Their plots might be masterminded by criminal geniuses or Soviet commisars.

In April, 1977 the terrorist label was handy for New Hampshire Governor Meldrim Thomson when the anti-nuclear Clamshell Alliance organized a massive occupation of the Seabrook nuclear site. Reports that the occupation was a “cover for terrorism” were provided by the pro-nuclear arm of the extremist US Labor Party. Despite the prediction, fed by the Party to the State Police — and from there to the private utility, Thomson, and the conservative Manchester Union Leader — no hint of violence surfaced during the occupation or arrest of over 1,400 people.

By the end of the year, however, nonviolent strategies were eclipsed by a real “international terrorist” scare. An ex-Nazi industrialist, Hans Martin Schleyer, had been kidnapped and killed. Supporters of the kidnappers hijacked a Lufthansa flight, resulting in a bloody rescue by German commandos. This was followed by the unexplained “suicide” of three Baader-Meinhof leaders in a maximum security prison. Anti-terrorist preparedness had truly come of age.

In March, 1978 FBI Director Webster told the press that the Bureau was girding itself for outbreaks of urban terrorism at home. Some politicians felt that even infiltration of suspicious groups wouldn’t be sufficient. After all, the whole world was watching the latest melodrama — the kidnapping of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades. In an atmosphere of anger and anxiety, Congress considered an “omnibus anti-terrorism” bill. At one Senate hearing, the FBI response to date was called “weak” by several experts.

But the US public still wasn’t convinced that the threat was imminent. In recent years, people had witnessed more government misconduct than terrorist violence. The Red Brigades seemed far away. US spooks hadn’t yet substantiated the claim that terrorism was gaining a foothold at home. Yet, the intelligence community did have other “assets” that could help to make the threat look real — namely, a time-tested network of “reliable media sources.” In other words, they had journalists, some unwitting and working legitimately for news media, others on the government payroll. They cultivated their insider ties and, in turn, were cultivated as “friendly media.”

This was nothing new. The FBI had been using the media for years, placing unfavorable stories and leaking lies. A tight bond had been built with large dailies like the San Francisco Chronicle and Examiner. In Chicago, “friendly media” helped to smear black nationalist groups on the radio and in print. Sometimes reporters were exploited, but sometimes they knew what they were doing. They wrote stories that made FBI speculation sound like fact. If challenged, they protected their sources.

These “friendly” journalists understood the power of words to shape public opinion. In particular, they knew that a word like “terrorist” would sell newspapers and TV time, plus

strike a deep emotional chord and perhaps even generating fear that could be harnessed. Predictably, the word has been used with gusto ever since.

A Pretext for Aggression

By the mid-1980s, US citizens were being roused by President Ronald Reagan, ready to face Libya, Nicaragua, and any other “enemies” at high noon. At the same time, the transparency of the attempt to assassinate Muammar Quaddafi and topple his government in 1986 brought the ruthlessness of the administration into focus. But the worst was yet to come. With public opinion temporarily captured, the regime sought to turn the new “Reagan Doctrine” into law.

Terrorism became the excuse for a wide-range of repressive tactics, both abroad and at home. The most heinous were proposed changes in the much discussed but little used War Powers Act. US Senators Robert Dole and Jeremiah Denton, prime sponsors of the initiative, wanted to give the administration carte blanche to use “deadly force” against virtually any enemy classified as a terrorist. Denton, who chaired the reincarnation of the old Un-American Activities Committee — known as the Subcommittee on Terrorism and Security (SST) — freely offered that if Quaddafi “became deceased as a result of our counter-strike, that would have been within the intent of the bill.”

In short, the Republican administration, with tacit Democratic support, hoped to make political assassination a “legal” part of US foreign policy.

And what was terrorism? According to the bill, it was “violent action by a foreign individual or group, directed against Americans and intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population” or to influence government policy through intimidation, coercion, kidnapping or assassination. Although this was only the most recent attempt to create an enormous blanket for “counterterror” activities, it was instructive. First, violence toward those not privileged to be US citizens didn’t qualify as terrorism, even though many more might die. Second, it was “terrorist” to respond to the systematic violence of the US military, or to attempt to influence this policy through any form of force.

For years Americans had been told that a collection of crazed Arabs and revolutionaries, under the shadowy influence of the Kremlin, were hell bent on the slaughter of US citizens. By the late 1970s more than half of US citizens were ready to sentence convicted “terrorists” to death and grant broad authority to an international police force of terrorist exterminators. Countless television programs, documentaries, and books etched the common myth about the terrorist threat: these were irrational, power-mad maniacs, “mad dogs” to be hunted down and killed.

At home, the law enforcement and intelligence “communities” operated as if urban terrorism in middle America was inevitable. One might not notice the new security measures unless taking a plane or entering the country; and, at the time, that was the point. This was another secret war. But the targets this time were mainly American, all those classified as “sympathizers” or “potential terrorists.”

Denton’s Terrorism Committee was an early warning sign of the new crackdown. It helped spread fear of “Soviet-orchestrated terrorism,” and was combined with new presidential orders unleashing the CIA to conduct covert operations in the US, and reducing access to government information. Reagan’s favorite think-tank, the Heritage Foundation, summed it

up this way in a report to the administration; "It is axiomatic that individual liberties are secondary to the requirement of national security and internal civil order." Its advice, followed scrupulously through most of the 1980s, was to investigate "clergymen, students, businessmen, entertainers, labor officials, journalists and government workers who may engage in subversive activities without being fully aware of the extent, purpose or control of their activities."

To a large extent, terrorism was a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the case of Libya, the Reagan administration identified the Arab republic as a target of opportunity through which the president could prove his willingness to "take one of their pieces" off the geopolitical board. A dogfight over the Gulf of Sidra was an early step, followed by Reagan's warnings that "terrorist attacks" would be answered by actions against Libya, Nicaragua, North Korea, Cuba, or the PLO. He later added Syria and Iran to the list.

Meanwhile, the FBI continued to use terrorism as the justification for covert actions directed against social movements. According to Bureau and Reaganite logic, the propensity for violence, rejection of law and order, and revolutionary activity still existed in almost any dissident group. Thus, any dissent could trigger offensive responses. In the past, such activities had been against the law; under Reagan they were largely "legalized."

Terrorism ultimately became a household word, emblazoned across newspapers and newscasts on a daily basis. After the Berlin Disco bombing, major media disseminated the claim of Libyan involvement with the same uncritical attitude that marked a so-called Nicaraguan "invasion" of Honduras. Each claim served the administration's short-term needs: to create a temporary climate of public opinion in support of aggression. Repetition of the official line successfully convinced millions that Arab and Latin American "terrorists" should be bombed into surrender.

So pervasive was the terror scare that even Vermont's generally dovish congressional delegation unanimously endorsed the Libyan bombing. Patrick Leahy blamed it on European inaction, Sen. Robert Stafford, a moderate Republican, said circumstances made it necessary, and Rep. James Jeffords, a GOP maverick at the time, argued that "when the President takes these kinds of actions we have to support him." Even Burlington's socialist mayor, Bernie Sanders, was halfway on the bandwagon, calling Quaddafi an "evil manipulator" while questioning mainly whether the attack would reduce terrorism.

Selective Memory

Certainly, there's much political violence in the world, and some of it is what Edward Herman has called "retail terror." But once you penetrate the rhetoric, it emerges that US surrogates have been the primary retail and state terrorists. Orlando Bosch and his anti-communist Cubans, trained and supported by the CIA, were responsible for hundreds of bombings and murders in the 70s and 80s. Authoritarian regimes in Chile, Argentina, South Africa and elsewhere, all with at least tacit US support, were also responsible for systematic murder and torture. But these regimes were never labeled "terrorist."

Nor were attacks by US agencies on the Black Panthers, Native Americans, and leftists ever acknowledged as applications of "state terrorism" at home. The Orwellian nature of US life prohibits the establishment from calling state violence by its real name.

And let's not forget how so-called terrorists get their start. Before Iraq invaded Kuwait, for

example, the US considered Saddam Hussein a reasonable partner. As Reagan's National Security chief for the Middle East put it, "We knew he was an SOB, but he was our SOB." Thus, the US prevented UN action against Iraq's war with Iran, supporting it for eight years. Reagan even removed Iraq from the list of terror states, advancing export credits and increasing oil imports. In 1986, strains of anthrax and botulinum were shipped to the University of Baghdad with US Commerce Department approval.

Both Reagan and Bush also blocked congressional censure of Iraq's human rights abuses, opposing anything that would interfere with business deals or its military buildup. Bush approved billions in loan guarantees, even though they were obviously being used on missile projects. US ballistic missile technology was secretly provided, along with export licenses for "dual-use items," raw materials for mustard gas, and chemicals needed for weapons. Computers were supplied for the Saad 16 research center, later bombed as a rocket and poison gas development site. The favors continued up to the moment when Bush declared Saddam the new Hitler.

In short, the US and others not only supported Iraq but also armed it, providing precisely the weapons used later as the justification for war and murderous sanctions. Even after Gulf War I, the US watched quietly as rebelling Kurds were slaughtered. The continued regime of a brutal dictator was apparently preferable to a popular revolution. After all, the region might be "destabilized" if the Kurds won their autonomy, inspiring Kurdish communities in Turkey and Syria.

Later, of course, the US was hot to inspect every nook and cranny of Iraq for signs of the weapons it helped create. Meanwhile, Congress considered legislation to prevent similar inspection of its own chemical weapons stockpiles. The idea was to let the president deny access to "sensitive" sites and inspectors from hostile countries. When the same argument was used by Baghdad, it was "an outrage." Many US officials even considered a Chemical Weapons Treaty an intrusion on national sovereignty.

Although much is said about the deadly potential of "rogue states," the US clearly holds some records for mass destruction. It began with the nuclear weapons used on Japan, and continued in the Persian Gulf with the first-time use of more than 300 tons of depleted uranium shells. In all, over 140,000 tons of explosives, the equivalent to seven nuclear bombs, were used to destroy Iraq's environment and infrastructure. After that, a suffocating blockade claimed the lives of over a million civilians, mostly children.

To paraphrase an old saying: those who live in glass houses shouldn't start wars.

Greg Guma new novel, [Dons of Time](#), will be released in October by Fomite Press. This essay was originally posted to IndyMedia websites on Sept. 18, 2001.

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