

COMBATTING TERRORISM BECOMES A WAR

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In 1972, three weeks after the terrorist attack at the Munich Olympics, President Richard Nixon created the Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism. For the past 12 years, the United States has "combatted" terrorism. Now we are to fight it--with military force--but can we do it?

On April 3, President Ronald Reagan signed a new National Security Directive dealing with terrorism. On that same day, Secretary of State Shultz delivered a major foreign policy address. His immediate audience was the Trilateral Commission, but his speech was an exhortation to all Americans that if we are to effectively combat state-sponsored terrorism we must be prepared to use force. The National Security directive orders the government to develop the options. Together they constitute a declaration of war against an unspecified terrorist foe, to be fought at an unknown place and time with weapons yet to be chosen.

The Secretary's speech and the National Security Directive represent a major development with important policy and organizational implications. To understand how government officials arrived at this point, we have to back up to the bombing of the U.S. Marine headquarters in Beirut on October 23.

The attack conformed to several trends in international terrorism. It was calculated to cause heavy casualties. It involved the use of a vehicle loaded with explosives. It is highly probable that the attack was instigated by a government.

A growing number of governments are using terrorist tactics, employing terrorist groups, or exploiting terrorist incidents. These governments see in terrorism a useful capability, a "weapons system," an alternative to open armed conflict. For aggressive nations unable to mount a conventional military challenge against a militarily superior foe, terrorists provide an "equalizer."

These trends went largely unnoticed at the higher levels of government until October 23. Before then, the U.S. government had not paid serious attention to the problem of terrorism, despite the strong rhetoric emanating mainly from the White House. Most regarded terrorism

as a kind of nuisance. Terrorist attacks provoked occasional outrage. The deaths they caused were, of course, considered tragic. But the United States government still considered terrorism tolerable. On October 23, it became a war.

It was not simply the colossal size of the bomb that destroyed the Marine headquarters, although explosives experts said it was the largest nonnuclear explosion they had ever seen. It was not simply the casualties, although they rendered the bombing the deadliest incident in the annals of international terrorism. Nor was it simply that high-ranking military officials were publicly rebuked for neglecting their command responsibilities by the Long Commission, a distinguished panel of general officers appointed to investigate the incident, although that was embarrassing. And it was not simply fear that terrorism of this type would spread to the United States, although that clearly caused concern evidenced by the dump trucks and concrete barriers that surrounded buildings in Washington.

Much more than that, the attack clearly demonstrated how governments could effectively use terrorism to achieve their goals. It provoked an intense debate in the United States, it curtailed the deployment of the U.S. Marines in Lebanon, and it undermined U.S. policy in the Middle East. Moreover, the bombing demonstrated American vulnerability to this form of attack, and more importantly, its inability to retaliate.

There was a powerful appetite for action in this country as the bodies of American Marines were pulled from the rubble in Beirut, only partially sated by the invasion of Grenada. It grew as the intelligence began to indicate, but could never satisfactorily prove, that Syria or Iran, or both, were behind the attack. On the basis of good circumstantial evidence, the United States might still have done something. The French, after all, did not have any better intelligence, and they bombed Baalbek. "In this part of the world, if you don't strike back," one French officer admonished visiting American officials, "you are despised."

Certainly something should be done, but what? The cupboard of options was bare. As days turned into weeks, the public ardor for immediate reprisal against anyone connected with the attack cooled, and

as it did the requirement increased for better proof, and a more precise target. Time passed. The moment was lost.

The intense frustration in Washington congealed into a fear that the United States would be seen by its often reluctant allies and always aggressive foes as impotent, and expect it to fold when faced with terrorist attack. Officials feared that this perception would encourage the governments sponsoring the attacks to continue their course of action, and might inspire others to adopt this form of warfare. In an age when perceptions have power equal to reality, terrorism that has these results is intolerable.

It is against this background that we must read the recent public statements made by government officials, particularly those of Secretary Shultz, and the recent, widely discussed but still secret, presidential directive on terrorism.

The Secretary's April 3 speech addressed the changing nature of power and diplomacy in the 1980s and the particular threat posed by state-sponsored terrorism, a topic that had been very much on his mind for some weeks. He had been candid in his concern about terrorism, ardent in his advocacy of more forceful response. In his address, he spoke of the "grey area" that falls "between major war and millennial peace" and the contemporary weapons of state-sponsored terrorism which he described as a new form of warfare. He said it was "increasingly doubtful that a purely passive strategy can even begin to cope with the problem."

The United States could not simply stand there and take terrorist punches. It needed an active defense. He underlined the words. An active defense meant the use of military force. The former professor lectured the retired generals on the Long Commission on the error of separating "diplomatic alternatives" from "military options," pointing out that diplomatic success often rests upon perceptions of military power.

The Secretary's point may be applied to the confrontation at the Libyan embassy in London. Diplomacy rather than force may have resolved the crisis, although many in Britain are unhappy at the solution. But with a British embassy surrounded by crowds in Tripoli and 9,000 British subjects in Libya, potential hostages all, things could have become much

worse. Even a mercurial leader like Qaddafi had to consider British will and British skill in using force against terrorists in London four years before and against Argentine military forces in the South Atlantic two years ago. That gave British diplomats undeniable authority however softly they spoke.

The National Security directive addressed a different audience-- the national security apparatus. It is the White House's comment on the paucity of options served last autumn. For months after the Beirut bombing, officials in Washington debated the use of force in response to terrorism, while, some would add, the chance of sending any message to the perpetrators grew smaller, public support evaporated, and U.S. credibility crumbled. The April 3 directive signals that this debate is over. Henceforth, force will be considered, and the national security planners are directed to get on with the thinking and the planning.

Although the directive does not, and ought not, oblige the United States to use force, it does make a response to terrorist provocation with force easier and more likely; and it firmly places the armed forces in the role of combatting terrorism--a task for which they are inadequately prepared, according to the Long Commission.

But the definition of terrorism as a kind of war also raises other problems. The current administration has shown a tendency to define terrorism in extremely broad terms, encompassing within the term both suicide drivers in Lebanon and Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador. But if the United States treats terrorism as a component of its global contest with the Soviet Union, or of its involvement in regional conflicts in the Middle East or Central America, it risks alienating allies who might be willing to cooperate in combatting terrorism but who differ with U.S. policy and methods for dealing with Marxist guerrillas, or who, for political or economic reasons, are reluctant to participate in America's battles.

So long as combatting terrorism remained a purely rhetorical exercise, it provoked little debate in government. Everyone declared himself against terrorism and that was the end of it. Not surprisingly, the contemplation of military action in response to terrorism has aroused debate. Many in government see the public statements and the directive as useful prerequisites to serious action against state-sponsored terrorism. Others are less certain of their utility.

No one yet speaks for the terrorists, but dissenting voices can be heard. Those who are concerned about individual liberties worry that the tough talk will produce domestic fallout in the form of expanded domestic intelligence activities or an assault on dissent. Congressmen are wondering how to reconcile preemptive or retaliatory military force with the War Powers Act.

Even within the Executive Branch some are very critical of the new directive saying that it represents the bellicose instincts and naive ambitions of dilettantes who ignore or overlook the problems of applying military force to terrorism, and hence offers merely another layer of rhetoric, raising expectations that are bound to be unmet, and thus further eroding American credibility.

Some tough questions are being asked. If U.S. intelligence was unable to provide adequate warning of the terrorist attacks on our embassy and the Marine headquarters in Beirut, how do we expect to have the intelligence necessary to support preemptive military operations? State-sponsored terrorism presents a different kind of problem. Here the target is not the terrorist group, which may exist only as a voice on the telephone, but the patron state. To justify the use of force against another country, intelligence must prove the connection between the patron state and the terrorist perpetrators, a difficult task that takes time.

Assuming we know who did it, what do we attack? Terrorist groups field no regular armies. They seldom hold territory. They have no regular economy. Sometimes they have headquarters or training camps at known locations; which are sometimes in the middle of a city or a refugee camp. More often, we are uncertain of their whereabouts.

In sum, terrorists provide few lucrative targets for conventional military attack. For the most part then, the goal of any retaliatory operations would be to force a hostile government into abandoning its use or support of terrorism.

Here again, what is to be attacked? Actions against specific individuals may violate the prohibition against assassination, which President Reagan has reaffirmed. Ironically, in the interest of morality, U.S. operations must be to a certain degree indiscriminate.

But military operations that cause civilian casualties are unacceptable and will provoke public backlash. Economic targeting may cause unintended problems for the United States and its allies. Bombing Iran's oil terminals might punish it for supporting terrorism but may also cause difficulties for those countries that depend on Iranian oil. That leaves military targets--but if we preserve the principle of symmetry in reprisal, will a limited attack on a well-defended military target suffice to alter the behavior of the state?

How many incidents are likely to warrant a military response? Very few, judging by the historical record. The United States is not likely to engage in preemptive or retaliatory operations on the territory of its allies. If Italian terrorists blow up the American embassy in Rome, we will not send American commandos to Italy. Nor is the United States likely to carry out military operations on the territory of the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. And U.S. military action hardly seems appropriate in a country whose government is willing to meet its international obligations but cannot provide absolute protection of foreign diplomats or immediately apprehend the perpetrators of terrorist crimes (any more than the United States can).

Military operations in response to terrorism are likely to involve a handful of hostile countries in the Third World where the United States has incontrovertible evidence that agents in the employ of a government have carried out a terrorist attack, that a government has instigated a terrorist attack or permitted one to occur through willful negligence, or that a government is able to bring the perpetrators to justice but refuses to do so.

If we apply these criteria to the hundreds of terrorist attacks directed against the United States in the last decade, a military response might have been contemplated in only a handful of episodes--less than one percent: the holding of American hostages in Teheran, but none of the other takeovers of American embassies; if it had come about, the assassination of American officials by hit teams from Libya; the bombings of the American embassy and the American Marine headquarters in Beirut.

Finally, the critics point out, the conflict does not end if and when we strike back. Retaliatory operations may only generate further terrorist attack, requiring further military action. Would this not divert us from whatever original foreign policy goal being pursued? If the American role in the pursuit of peace in the Middle East provokes terrorist attack by those who reject any sort of compromise, do we serve our goals or theirs by joining the fray militarily? Isn't this how the United States became a participant in Lebanon's factional fighting? Is the United States willing to enter a terrorist war that the public may be unwilling to suffer or support?

The difficulties in implementing the policy outlined in the National Security Directive and the Secretary's speech ought not cause us to retreat in despair behind concrete barriers and wait for the next attack. Terrorism indeed has become a new mode of warfare, one increasingly used by aggressive and ruthless governments who may understand only force. Military force has to be an option. It is by no means the sole solution.

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