

1986

Responding to Terrorism: What, Why and When

William R. Farrell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Farrell, William R. (1986) "Responding to Terrorism: What, Why and When," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 39 : No. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol39/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Responding to Terrorism: What, Why and When

Lieutenant Colonel William R. Farrell, US Air Force

When one speaks of terrorism it is not always clear just what one has in mind. The man in the street has a sense of what it means, and like pornography, one knows it when one sees it. It is a phenomenon that is much more easy to describe than define. In some respects we may be better served by doing just that, rather than by trying to force the attributes into an arbitrary grammatical construct which will satisfy lawyers. This conclusion is not reached without some effort and justification.

A review of efforts by the United Nations since its inception has disclosed that the international organization has been unable to reach any mutually acceptable definition of the term. In such a body of diverse cultures and races, when the question, "What is terrorism?" is raised, there is always present some form of answer—though it is often colored by the purposes of those who raised the question initially. Where the United Nations has been successful is in dealing with manifestations of terrorism, i.e. hijacking, hostage-taking, etc., and not the phenomenon itself.

Related to the above is the fact that terrorism may be carried out for many different purposes. First, individual acts of terrorism may aim at wringing specific concessions, such as the payment of a ransom or the freeing of prisoners. Second, terrorism may also attempt to gain publicity. Third, terrorism may aim at causing widespread disorder, demoralizing society and breaking down the social order. Fourth, terrorism may target the deliberate provocation of repression, hoping to have the government self-destruct. Fifth, terrorism may be used to enforce obedience and cooperation. Sixth,

Lt. Col. Farrell earned his Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Michigan, is a specialist in counterintelligence and recently authored *U.S. Government Response to Terrorism* (Westview Press). He is currently on the faculty of the Naval War College.

terrorism is frequently meant to punish. Terrorists often declare the victim of their attack is somehow guilty.*

Other aspects also hinder the efforts to fully understand terrorism. The term itself is emotive and pejorative in its application. No one seems to readily call him or herself a terrorist. They refer to themselves as a revolutionary, a liberator, a freedom fighter. The term is just too negative. Even if we were to arrive at an acceptable definition, the application to a particular group would cause counterclaims and disclaimers. It is not by accident that both President Reagan and Qaddafi have called each other terrorists while denying the applicability of the term to themselves.

The physical manifestations of an act do not necessarily make it terrorism. There has been a tendency to label bombings, hijackings, kidnappings and hostage situations as terrorism just because, "that's what terrorists do." But this overlooks the fact that bank robbers, homesick Cubans looking for a free trip home, extortionists and others engage in these acts too. The outward manifestations are not the only gauge of what is and is not a terrorist act. More often it is more the "why" behind it than the act itself. Having said all this, it may be best to describe the attributes of terrorism without claiming to define it; the objective being to achieve comprehension of the phenomenon while allowing policymakers enough flexibility in developing their responses independent of confines of a legalistic definition.

Terrorism should be viewed as *purposeful* activity. It is a conscious policy choice of one group of people toward another. This activity is designed to create "a climate of fear which is intense and overriding." This creation of fear is central to the activity itself and not incidental. If one were to examine the crimes of rape or robbery, the use of force to create fear is not the purpose of the act. Monetary gain or physical domination is primary, the fear is incidental. In terrorism the fear is the prime purpose of the act. The fear is pervasive and continuing, such as that experienced by those flying planes in the early 1970s, those living in Belfast, Ireland, and those Turkish and Israeli diplomatic officials serving abroad, not to mention our own State Department personnel in certain Middle Eastern nations.

This purposeful fear-generating activity is seeking to resolve some form of political struggle and arrogate to the terrorist the powers of the state or authority. A belief in the justification of the end allows the harshest of means and permits no innocent bystanders. There are really no victims, only those who are with the terrorist or against him.

*Brian Jenkins of the Rand Corporation made this point most clearly with an illustration from the massacre at Lod Airport in 1972. He states that with terrorism there is a stronger connotation of guilt and punishment than in other forms of warfare or politics and a narrower definition of innocent bystanders. The victims of the Lod incident, many of whom were Christian pilgrims from Puerto Rico, were said by the terrorists to be guilty because they had arrived in Israel on Israeli visas and thereby had tacitly recognized the state that was the declared enemy of the Palestinians and, by coming to Israel, they had in effect entered a war zone. The organization was saying that those who happened to get shot, just because they were there, were nonetheless guilty or they would not have been shot.

While terrorism may appear to be a new activity, it has been going on for hundreds of years. It can be practiced by groups and governments—domestically as well as internationally. What makes it appear to be “modern” is more the result of the tools employed than the act itself. This coupled with the nature of the target is what should be of concern to governments. This should be viewed as the real threat and it is to this aspect that we now turn our attention.

Why Governments Must Respond

Terrorism is an affront to society and threatens the very foundation upon which it rests. Often the targets of terrorist attacks are the institutions and the personages holding power within a society. The strength of a society and its government depends in part upon the ability of agencies to provide for the safety and security of its people. In democratic states there is a need for public support, or at a minimum, acceptance of the activities undertaken by a government to insure the public welfare.

Based upon numbers alone, one might be tempted to argue that terrorism does not represent a great threat to the United States. Since the late 1960s there have been less than 500 Americans killed as the result of terrorism. Should you not count the loss of the 241 Marines and other servicemen in Beirut, the number is almost halved.* During each long holiday weekend, more Americans are killed on the highways in a matter of days than in the nearly twenty years since statistics concerning terrorism have been maintained.

One must focus on the nature of the target rather than the numbers. What is under attack is the sovereignty of the nation; the right to maintain embassies abroad; the right to have government representatives safely carry out their assigned duties; and the right of free democracies to provide for their populations. Terrorists have not sought out just any target. They seek those

*The incident at the Marine Headquarters in Beirut does not necessarily equate to an act of terrorism. It is more in line with a hostile surprise attack in a war zone for which the victims were ill prepared. A careful review of the Long Commission Report published in December 1983 provided a good deal of information which supports this view. At the time of the attack there were two occupying armies, four contingents of multinational forces, seven contributors to the United Nations peacekeeping force, and some two dozen extra legal militias operating in a country about the size of Connecticut. Over 100,000 people had been killed in the past eight years as a result of the violence. The government that received US support was viewed by many as yet one other faction of the many seeking power. Our siding with the government was seen as entry into factional warfare on the side of one of many participants. The shelling by the Navy at Suq-Al-Gharb in support of the Lebanese Armed Forces confirmed this in the minds of many engaged in the battles. What has been called in this country an act of terrorism may have rather been a warring faction, surprising and successfully penetrating the defenses of an enemy. The incident is easier to digest, however, if the victims are described by their leaders as having suffered at the hands of terrorists. Somehow the heavy responsibility for the lack of defense becomes more tolerable. The Long Commission Report has much value for the military individual if one reads beyond the talk of terrorism and focuses on poor intelligence, unclear chains of command, clarity of mission, communications, perceptions and organizational problems.

who represent what the government or democratic institutions seem to foster. Ambassadors, educators, military personnel, business people and members of the media all have been targets over the years.

It is no coincidence that Western societies have borne the bulk of terrorist attacks over the years. These are the nations that are most open, affording the terrorist fairly free movement, as well as the guarantee of media coverage for any significant event. To create and maintain the climate of fear described above, the nature and consequences of the terrorist act must be widely publicized. Further, the industrialized democracies of the West have achieved great technological advances which, while bettering society, have also made them much more vulnerable. Whole cities can be immobilized with the loss of key power grids and the ensuing disruption could be catastrophic. Centralized computer data bases pose an additional target for a terrorist group. The loss of records by a large bank or multinational corporation would have ramifications far beyond the dollar loss of the material itself.

The nature of the international environment today lends itself to the violence represented by terrorism. In a world faced with the real potential for nuclear conflict and the subsequent devastating aftermath, lesser, "safer" forms of warfare are desirable. These indirect means of conflict by various powers take on an attractive appearance and present an affordable choice. The once credible threat of massive retaliation proffered in the late 1950s and early 1960s for any transgression, however slight, has generally lost credibility. The United States has shown that it is very tolerant of violence directed against it. Terrorists, through the mid-1980s, were literally guaranteed no retaliation for attacks which kidnapped people, assassinated government representatives in the street, leveled US embassies and killed its occupants. However, the patience of the American people is showing signs of waning and the Government may take a different tack in the future.

One additional reason for concern regarding terrorism is that there are numerous deprived people in the world today. Some, such as the PLO, have sought the addressal of grievances through peaceful and violent means. Similar groups and causes have become tired of waiting for their needs to be met and have sought to take action on their own behalf. Populations such as these, and those who would aid or exploit their cause, will resort to terrorism when such is seen as meeting their needs.

How Should We Respond?

Having determined that there is a legitimate requirement to meet the terrorist challenge in some way, just what does the United States do? Do we go to the source if there is sponsorship by some government? Do we attack training camps where the terrorists learn their trade? Do we seek out the terrorists through undercover operations and strike them no matter where

they are on a given day? Questions such as these are of paramount interest to the policymaker and could well determine the methods of response—diplomatic, economic or military—to be employed.

There is general agreement that the nation has a right to defend itself when threatened by an aggressor. Beyond this one could say that a nation has a moral obligation to do just that and not allow its people to suffer unnecessarily. The policymaker realizes that the choices which confront him will not always be clear and readily discernible. What is legal may not always be moral and vice versa. Beyond this, what is considered both moral and legal may not be politically feasible. There needs to be an evaluation of all three factors as policy is formulated. However, there should be no response without some strong moral justification at its foundation. The populace in a democracy will not view as legitimate, immoral activities which are on a par with those of the terrorists. Claiming justifiable defense in the protection of democratic values while employing tactics which are similar to those practiced by the terrorists undermines public confidence. While there may be some immediate emotional release no matter what the response, thoughtful reflection over the long term will only tolerate action based on moral grounds.

While there may be strong inclinations to employ military force as the first and only response to a terrorist incident, care should be taken lest one acts too swiftly. Diplomatic action, alone or in concert with allies, which could conceivably impact successfully upon a terrorist group and/or its sponsor, should be considered and employed initially. Political or economic sanctions are also alternatives which demand consideration before military force is employed. Should these be insufficient or not feasible, the stronger option may then be employed. It is the perception of employing force as a last resort which helps ensure that popular support remains when all the shouting subsides.

Further complicating the decision process are the concerns for success, proportionality and discrimination. Actions undertaken more as a reflex action than as thoughtful calculation may lead to long-term consequences which will impact adversely on the nation or its people. Escalatory acts on the part of the terrorists against innocent Americans may well be the result of any action. Other groups may act in sympathy with the "injured" terrorists and either attack US assets or those of our allies. Therefore, when policymakers think in terms of success the thought processes must take a long-term view and be willing to endure potential consequences and ramifications.

Having suffered a series of terrorist attacks over a period of years, there is concern that a nation may respond to a particular act and that the response may be geared to the emotion and force built up during years of doing little or nothing. As such the response may not be proportionate to the act perpetrated. A large nation such as the United States must demonstrate the

restraint demanded of a superpower. While some may applaud the forceful actions of the small embattled nation of Israel, our position on the world's stage does not allow us that solution. Additionally, we must be sure to discriminate between the terrorist and those among whom he may take refuge. Every effort must be taken to insure that noncombatants are left uninjured, or in the worst case that their casualties are kept to a minimum. At some point the President or the Secretary of State may need to address a concerned nation or a skeptical Congress justifying a response to a terrorist act. Not all will agree to the arguments proffered in terms of degree of success, justification or scale (such as the US Government's forcing of the Egyptian aircraft carrying PLO terrorists to land on Italian soil). But any rationale that has as its basis plausible moral considerations coupled with a credible plan of action will at a minimum be condoned, if not fully approved.

Fully understanding just what terrorism is—and what it is not—is an initial step in the development of a government's policy of response. This done, a democratic nation is capable of determining the extent of the threat to itself and to similar sovereignties around the globe. It is upon this that the particulars of any action are built. Forming essential supports for its foundation are the legal, political and moral elements considered by the decision makers. When the leadership goes before the people and presents its justification for actions against terrorism, these three pillars will be evaluated to some degree of sophistication by all. While there will not be complete agreement on all aspects of the act there has to be acceptance that the evidence was credible and the response was fundamentally moral. The latter should be able to withstand the rigors of debate. If not, the terrorists will have scored the victory they sought.

