

1981

Studies in Nuclear Terrorism

Robert A. Friedlander

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

Recommended Citation

Friedlander, Robert A. (1981) "Studies in Nuclear Terrorism," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 34 : No. 1 , Article 26.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol34/iss1/26>

This Book Review 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.

the Corps—especially his description of combat and men under fire—is superb: sensitive, realistic, moving. Unfortunately, it represents only about a third of his book. An unbalanced, error-marred history of the Matines' war and a sort of travelogue of the author's recent visit to the Pacific constitute the bulk of the volume. His history suffers from the same sort of exaggeration, misrepresentation, and shortsightedness that afflicted his MacArthur biography, while the account of his return to the war's arena is less impressive for the reader than it may have been for Manchester.

One must accept this in order to get at the fascinating personal material interspersed throughout the volume—and it is well worth the trouble. But it would have been a far better book if written simply as a reminiscence.

STANLEY I. FALK
U.S. Army Center of Military History

Norton, Augustus R. and Greenberg, Martin H., eds. *Studies in Nuclear Terrorism*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1979, 465pp.

As we enter the decade of the 1980s, the basic question relating to the threat of nuclear terrorism is no longer *if*, but rather *when* an episode of mass destruction will occur. In September 1976 a British Royal Commission admitted that potential terrorist nuclear incidents had become credible, and British security agencies have since adhered to that view. Although American governmental experts remain more skeptical, at least publicly, several best-selling novels here and abroad have stirred the popular imagination by carefully detailing acts of terrorist nuclear blackmail and the increasing likelihood of their success.

The recent revelation of an existing U.S. Nuclear Emergency Search Team (NEST), and its investigation of over 50 nuclear threats during the past decade,

means that the U.S. Government also takes potential nuclear terrorism far more seriously than it has been so far willing to admit. Almost every contribution to this impressive volume indicates that the principal issue in potential nuclear events is one of credibility. Catastrophe theory cannot permit a single miscalculation when governments are required to think the unthinkable.

In 1978 the Chairman of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) informed the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee that terrorist nuclear incidents were indeed possible, and that the NRC was concerned about the safety of domestic nuclear installations and power plants. The National Security Council has encouraged several Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between Federal Agencies on the subject of potential terrorist activity that include a working agreement between the FBI and the Department of Energy (DOE) on nuclear threats and between DOE and the Department of Defense on incidents involving radioactive material or nuclear weapons. Expert testimony before congressional committees has dramatically demonstrated that future terrorist nuclear threats may well have operational capability.

As of this writing there are 235 nuclear power reactors located in 22 different countries that have produced approximately 100 tons of plutonium capable of making 20,000 nuclear bombs. And if this is not sufficient attraction for terrorist mischief, then what is one to say of the alleged 2,300 incidents (mainly operational error and mechanical failures) that Critical Mass, a Ralph Nader-affiliated antinuclear group, claims occurred during 1979? In such circumstances, even if the actual number of incidents is reduced by two-thirds, the potential for theft, sabotage, and destruction is not exactly minuscule.

The Rand Corporation has documented several instances of uranium thefts, although customers for this illicit material have mainly been governments rather than ideological or criminal groups. Much more disturbing, when viewed in the overall context, are the appendixes provided by Norton and Greenberg that reveal 285 threats of violence made against U.S. licensed and unlicensed nuclear facilities between 1969 and 1977. Outright attacks on nuclear plants in foreign countries have already occurred, cited by a number of contributors to this fascinating volume, but thus far the damage to human life and property has been minimal. Nevertheless, as Louis René Beres warns, "the safeguarding of nuclear materials must be carried out internationally, steps must be taken to limit the spread of nuclear technology and nuclear materials throughout the world, and to tighten up international inspection safeguards."

The editors have divided their large volume into four different parts: Part I consists of articles by Roberta Wohlsterter and Thomas Schelling that attempt to relate the historical perspective of terrorist practice to future prospects for nuclear terrorism. The latter author, as well as a number of other contributors to this compendium, emphasizes problems of nuclear proliferation taking precedence over credible threats of nuclear terrorism. Part II deals with the possibilities or likelihood of the terrorist acquisition of nuclear weapons. Part III is in fact a debate between those who fear the potentialities of nuclear terrorism and those who discount its probability. The microtheorists have the clear edge over the macrotheorists in the material presented. Part IV centers on coping with terrorist threats both real and imagined, and the potential consequences relating to specific policy

choices. In a well-documented introductory survey, Norton dryly concludes that "[f]or the foreseeable future... the nuclear terror problem is more likely to engage intellectuals than terrorists."

Almost every significant American expert in the fields of nuclear terrorism and nuclear proliferation is represented in this important study, and the editors have diligently attempted to present all sides of the picture. The result is at best unsettling with the majority of authors indicating their belief that sooner or later in one form or another the threat of nuclear terrorism will become credible if not inevitable. R.W. Mengel, in the book's longest article, is skeptical about terrorists' capabilities and their desire to employ high-risk technologies of mass destruction. But he, too, admits that "[n]ew technology terrorism represents an unknown, realized threat." No expert included by the editors has shied away from zero-minus security assessments.

Analyses of terrorist theory and descriptions of terrorist practice can be found throughout this study, and not the least of the book's contributions is a wide-ranging discussion of terrorist motivations and techniques. There is more agreement among commentators than one would ordinarily suppose, and this magnifies rather than diminishes the importance of the subject matter. A need to get priorities in order, and the urgency of the task, are the dominant themes of the selections presented. And well they might be, for as the London *Economist* warned in September 1979: "The alternative, as terrorists eventually turn nuclear, is going to be to see the world blown up."

This book is must reading for anyone concerned with the preservation of world public order.

ROBERT A. FRIEDLANDER
Ohio Northern University