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The Use of Terrorism by American Social Movements

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Terrorism has generated a great deal of intellectual controversy in the past decade. There have been frequent debates among scholars, government officials, and the public on the morality and efficacy of terrorism. This chapter addresses the use of terrorism by American social movements with the intention of answering the following question: In what circumstances has the use of terrorism furthered (or not furthered) the aims of American social movements?

The topic of terrorism is so surrounded by controversy that getting agreement on a definition of the term is difficult. Besides, terrorism does not lend itself to simple definitions. Rather, terrorism must be seen as a political phenomenon having a number of characteristics:

1. Terrorism is violence intended to produce an effect on a group larger than the immediate victims of the violence. Perpetrators of such violence hope that the effect it produces will enable them to attain their political goal. This intended effect on others distinguishes terrorism from ordinary criminal violence. Any act of criminal violence may terrify people besides the victims of the act, but terrorizing others is not the purpose of most ordinary crimes.¹

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2. One effect of terrorism is fear on the part of those who witness the act, whether directly or through the mass media. Hence the word "terrorism" to describe such acts. Those resorting to terrorism hope that the fear and terror their acts generate will enable them to coerce those who would otherwise oppose their policies.
3. Terror is not the only effect the practitioners of terrorism hope to produce. A terrorist group may believe that spectacular acts of violence will publicize its cause. Various Palestinian terrorist organizations hope that acts of terrorism will aggravate relations between states sufficiently to prevent an international outcome that harms their interests.² Acts of terrorism have been motivated by a desire to attain material rewards for terrorist movements. The perpetrators of political kidnappings have usually included among their demands the payment of ransom money and the release of captured terrorists. And, very often, terrorist movements hope to provoke a government into adopting repressive measures in response to their acts of violence.³
4. Terrorism can be resorted to by groups that want to initiate changes in the social and political order and by groups that want to prevent such changes. In other words, terrorism can be used by counterrevolutionaries seeking to prevent societal change and by revolutionaries seeking radical changes in society.
5. Terrorism can be used by both state and by nonstate groups. Currently terrorist activities are usually engaged in by groups that are out of power. It is often forgotten that the origin of "terrorism" was the Reign of Terror, which took place in 1793-94 during the French Revolution, and witnessed the execution of thousands of the enemies of the revolution by Robespierre and the Committee on Public Safety. The word "terror" has been applied to government activities in later eras, perhaps most notably during Stalin's Great Terror in 1936-38 when Stalin executed millions of Soviet citizens in a successful effort to destroy opposition to his rule.

The foregoing attributes of terrorism can be summarized in the following definition: Terrorism is the use of violence to produce certain effects, including fear or terror, on a group of people so as to advance a political cause; such terroristic violence can be employed by movements seeking changes in the status quo and movements opposing changes in the status quo, and by both nonstate groups and states.

One final point should be noted about the problem of defining terrorism. There has been an unfortunate tendency by participants in debates over terrorism to try to define the subject in such a way that one's own nation, cause, or movement is not guilty of participating in terrorism, while one's opponents are guilty of being terrorists. To this end a vast array of political phenomena are characterized as terrorism. In other words, the only general agreement on the definition of terrorism seems to be that whatever it is, it is a deplorable practice that only the other side engages in. These attempts to

absolve one's own side from the charge of being terrorists results in a twisting of reason and logic that in turn leads to convoluted and confused definitions of terrorism.⁴

This manipulation of definitions of terrorism is unnecessary because it rests on a false premise: that terrorism is never morally justified and that hence the case for one's position in a given dispute is weakened if one is guilty of terrorism. While this chapter does not address moral issues of political violence, neither does it accept the premise that all terrorism is morally wrong. On the contrary, in certain circumstances a resort to terroristic violence can be as morally justifiable as any other use of force, such as the protection of public order within domestic society and the defense of one's country in international society, widely accepted as morally legitimate.

While terrorism has frequently been resorted to by states and social movements, the efficacy of its use has often been disputed. Leaders of a number of movements and causes have argued that the use of terrorism is not an effective means of achieving goals. For example, around the turn of the century, Bolshevik leaders V. I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky attacked the rival Social Revolutionaries for engaging in terrorism. Lenin and Trotsky had no moral objections to terroristic violence, but both felt that what was needed to bring down the czarist government was a disciplined mass movement rather than small cells of terrorists.⁵

Debates over the efficacy of terrorism have also taken place within the context of American politics. The escalation of the Vietnam war that began in 1965 and the acceleration of the struggle for civil rights that began in 1963 led to major debates within the antiwar and black movements on the use of violence, including terroristic violence, as a means of achieving their aims. Each of these debates is sufficiently important to warrant some discussion.

The antiwar movement was a diverse collection of people. It included pacifists like the Quakers and the Catholic Worker movement, believers in the politics of realism like Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan who felt that American national interests were not being served by the Indochina war, members of the liberal wing of the Democratic party like Senators Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy, individuals with a long history of involvement in radical causes like Norman Thomas and Howard Zinn, and members of New Left groups like the Students for a Democratic Society. Thus, when one generalizes about the attitudes of the antiwar movement toward terrorism, it must be recognized that such generalizations are oversimplifications of the views of a diverse movement. Keeping this caveat in mind, let us look at the debate in the late sixties and early seventies within the antiwar movement over the use of terrorism.

The first major action of the antiwar movement was a demonstration in Washington, D.C., in April 1965 to protest the Johnson administration's escalation of the Indochina war.⁶ For the next few years the antiwar movement, including its most militant New Left elements such as the SDS, pursued a policy of nonviolent opposition to American involvement in Indochina.⁷ However, under the pressures of the traumatic events of 1968 (the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the Democratic National

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Convention in Chicago, and the election of Richard Nixon), certain elements within the New Left wing of the antiwar movement began to advocate using violence. During the Christmas holiday season in 1969 the Weatherman faction of the SDS (SDS had broken up into several factions during the summer of 1969) announced that it was going underground to wage a campaign of terrorist violence against the American government.⁸

The Weatherman faction, which later changed its name to the Weather Underground so as to eliminate the sexism inherent in the use of the term "Weatherman," justified its decision to resort to terrorism with the argument that nonviolent efforts at social and political change were ineffective. A member of the Weather Underground made the following statement to a Chicago audience:

Non-violent marches have their place, but they won't bring about the changes necessary for freedom. Capitalism won't crumble because of moral protest. It didn't in India, where only the color of the agents of the oppressors changed. Once again: revolution, liberation and freedom must be fought for.⁹

The first public communique of the Weather Underground argued:

Ever since SDS became revolutionary, we've been trying to show how it is possible to overcome the frustration and impotence that comes from trying to reform this system. Kids know that the lines are drawn; revolution is touching all of our lives. Tens of thousands have learned that protest and marches don't do it. Revolutionary violence is the only way.¹⁰

The decision of the Weather Underground to resort to terrorism was sharply criticized by other leftist and antiwar groups. The Trotskyist Socialist Workers party, which played a key role in organizing mass demonstrations against the Indochina war, argued that the resort to terror by groups like the Weather Underground would be ineffective. The introduction to a collection of Trotsky's writings on terrorism that was put out in 1974 by the SWP argued that the terrorism practiced by the Weather Underground would not be effective in promoting revolutionary change:

Trotsky's opposition to individual terrorism did not flow from any pacifistic, moralistic, or ethical aversion to violence under any circumstances, or from reformist illusions about the possibility of peaceful social revolution. Rather it flowed from an understanding of the basic ineffectiveness of individual terrorism as a strategy for social change.¹¹

A debate on the use of violence similar to that which took place within the antiwar movement began within the black movement in the 1960s and has continued to the present. Just as the failure of peaceful marches to bring a quick end to the Indochina war pushed a number of people in the antiwar movement toward violence, so too the failure of the peaceful civil rights movement to achieve immediate racial equality, coupled with the emergence of a white backlash against black demands, led a number of blacks to advocate violence, including terrorism, as a means of ending the inferior position of blacks in American society.¹² In the years since the mid-1960s there have been several shootouts between police and the Black Panthers (established in 1966) and

the Black Liberation Army (established in 1971); a number of police officers and black militants have been killed.¹³

Debates among members of the radical left and the black movement on the use of violence to attain their ends have continued into the 1980s, although with the ending of the domestic turmoil of the late sixties and early seventies the saliency of such debates to American public life is less. These debates on the efficacy of the use of violence were necessarily inconclusive because there is no simple answer to the question whether violence, including terroristic violence, is effective in promoting social change in America. The answer is at best conditional: Terroristic violence has been successful in certain circumstances in American history and unsuccessful in others. Specifically, a review of American history shows that revolutionary movements that resort to terrorism do not thereby succeed in furthering their causes, while status quo movements have in certain circumstances successfully used terrorism to further their aims.

Recent American history offers numerous examples of the futility of the resort to terrorism by movements seeking radical changes in American society. The Weather Underground has no significant achievements to show for its decade of clandestine existence; a number of its members have either surrendered to the authorities or dropped out of the organization. The Symbionese Liberation Army's members are either dead or in jail. The emergence in the late sixties and early seventies of militant black groups such as the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army has done little to advance the cause of racial justice in America; on the contrary, these groups merely gave rightist demagogues an issue on which to arouse a white backlash against the civil rights movement. And the FALN (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional Puertorriquena, or Armed Forces for the National Liberation of Puerto Rico) has had little success in mobilizing Puerto Rican opinion in favor of independence; the overwhelming majority of Puerto Ricans continue to be in favor of either statehood or a continuation of Puerto Rico's commonwealth status.

The failure of revolutionary violence in America stems from a key fact about American society: There have never been any mass-based movements of the extreme left in the United States. In America movements of the extreme left, whether Moscow-line parties such as the Communist party, USA, or Trotskyists such as the Socialist Workers party, or Maoists such as the Progressive Labor party, have remained very small organizations.

Mass-based extreme left movements in America would bring two vitally needed sources of support to revolutionary terrorism. First, such movements would provide a pool of potential recruits for groups engaging in terrorism. Terrorist groups need a constant stream of recruits because of the high turnover rate resulting from arrests, deaths, and desertions. It is of course true that not all members of extreme left groups believe in terrorism (*vide* the quotation cited from Trotsky's writings and put out by the Socialist Workers party). The point is that in countries with large extreme left movements there is a ready-made organizational structure that terrorists can tap for recruits; witness, for example, the success of the Red Brigades in Italy in recruiting disaffected members of the Italian Communist party.¹⁴ Similarly, the Provisional Irish Republican Army has had little difficulty in recruiting members from large

segments of the Catholic population of Ulster radicalized by sectarian violence. Second, the lack of mass-based extreme left movements in America means that few are willing to rationalize and apologize for revolutionary violence; thus, in the United States there is little legitimacy accorded to such violence.

A key to understanding the use of violence in America is the fact that, as Richard Hofstadter argued, most American violence has been in defense of the established social order:

... one is impressed that most American violence—and this also illuminates its relationship to state power—has been initiated with a “conservative” bias. It has been unleashed against abolitionists, Catholics, radicals, workers and labor organizers, Negroes, Orientals, and other ethnic or racial or ideological minorities, and has been used ostensibly to protect the American, the Southern, the white Protestant, or simply the established middle-class way of life and morals. A high proportion of our violent actions has thus come from the top dogs or the middle dogs.¹⁵

There has clearly been a lot of pro-status-quo violence in America, including a great deal of terroristic violence. And much of this violence has been successful in achieving the goals of those who initiated it. The key reason why violence by movements in favor of the status quo has been more successful than violence by revolutionary groups is that there have been a number of American mass-based movements of the extreme right.¹⁶ The 1850s saw the antiimmigrant American party (also known as the Know-Nothings) emerge as a major electoral force.¹⁷ In the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan experienced a nationwide revival; its membership reached a peak of 5 million in 1925.¹⁸ And in the 1968 presidential election George Wallace received almost 10 million votes, some 13 percent of the total vote cast.¹⁹

Not all extreme right organizations have endorsed terrorism, but the existence of such mass movements helped rightist terrorists in two ways. First, these movements gave rightist terrorist groups a clearly identifiable pool of potential recruits; and second, the existence throughout much of American history of mass-based movements of the extreme right has meant that members of the extreme right who engaged in violence, including terroristic violence, have had people willing to rationalize and apologize for their actions. Hence the legitimacy in American society of pro-status-quo violence is higher than that of revolutionary violence.

In the Reconstruction period after the Civil War, federal government efforts to establish racial equality in the South were thwarted by the Ku Klux Klan.²⁰ The revived Klan of the 1920s was so powerful that it was the dominant force in the politics of a number of states.²¹ American radical movements such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Socialist party were dealt crippling blows after World War I when these movements were subjected to frequent incidents of violence orchestrated by right-wing groups.²² And the wave of bombings of abortion clinics in the years since the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion has hindered efforts to make abortions available.

STRATEGY

Rightist terrorism is not always successful. Specifically, for a campaign of status quo terrorism to be successful, the following condition has to be met: Local authorities and the federal government have to be either unwilling or unable to take repressive measures against the movement engaging in terrorism in defense of the established social order. To illustrate the importance of governmental complicity and/or indifference to the success of a campaign of rightist terrorism, consider two cases of such terrorism, one of which was successful one of which was not. Both cases involve the Ku Klux Klan. The first concerns the successful efforts of the Klan to thwart the aims of the federal government during Reconstruction and the second concerns the unsuccessful attempt by the Klan in the 1960s to prevent the achievement of civil rights movement goals in the South.

In the aftermath of the South's defeat in the Civil War, the federal government sought to force the southern states to guarantee the political rights of newly freed slaves. The majority of white southerners was in no mood to accept blacks as their political equals. Almost immediately, white southerners began to use violence to intimidate blacks. In Texas, a U.S. attorney estimated that a thousand blacks a year were killed from 1868 to 1870. In Louisiana, Union General Philip Sheridan estimated that from 1866 to 1875 thirty-five hundred people, almost all of them black, were killed or wounded.²³

The most important organization behind this violence was the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan was founded in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1865 by a group of Confederate veterans. Initially intended as a secret society of war comrades, it soon evolved into a political organization dedicated to white supremacy. By the middle of 1868 the Klan was organized in all of the former states of the Confederacy.²⁴

The two Presidents during Reconstruction, Andrew Johnson and Ulysses Grant, were reluctant to take action against the Klan. Johnson was basically out of sympathy with the aims of Reconstruction, and Grant preferred that southern officials "exhaust their own military resources first" before asking for assistance from the federal government.²⁵ Even had the federal government been determined to use force to implement the goals of Reconstruction, its ability to do so would have been limited by the small size of the U.S. Army: By 1867 this force numbered only 20,117 men.²⁶

State and local governments in the South were also unable or unwilling to take action against the Klan. Authorities who tried to implement Reconstruction had only weak and poorly trained militias at their disposal. And as Reconstruction progressed an increasing number of state and local governments in the South came under the control of white southerners determined to maintain white supremacy. White supremacist authorities turned a blind eye toward Klan violence.²⁷

In the end the Klan succeeded in defeating the attempt by Republicans to achieve political equality for blacks in the South. Northerners grew weary of trying to coerce the South and finally agreed to end Reconstruction as part of the settlement of the disputed presidential election of 1876.²⁸

In the 1960s the Klan's various branches used violence in an attempt to prevent the civil rights movement from achieving its goals in the South. In the

summer of 1964 three civil rights workers were murdered in Mississippi by the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Several members of this Klan faction were later convicted of violating the constitutional rights of the three civil rights workers and were sent to prison. In early 1965 a civil rights worker named Viola Gregg Liuzzo was murdered by the Klan while driving on the Selma to Montgomery highway; three Klansmen were convicted of violating Liuzzo's constitutional rights.²⁹ This campaign of violence failed to prevent the ending of white supremacy in the South because neither the federal government nor state and local authorities were prepared to tolerate Klan violence.

The history of the use of terrorism by social movements in America clearly shows that terrorism does not necessarily help such movements to achieve their aims. Two preconditions must be fulfilled for a terrorist campaign to achieve the goals of the social movement sponsoring the campaign: (1) the social movement must have a significant degree of mass support; and (2) federal, state and local authorities must be unwilling or unable to take repressive measures in response to the campaign of terroristic violence. When these preconditions have not been present, terrorism has not succeeded in furthering the aims of American social movements.

NOTES

1. Brian Jenkins, *International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Crescent Publications, 1975), p. 1.
2. For example, in December 1973 a group of Palestinian *fedayeen* machine-gunned passengers and firebombed a parked airliner at the Rome airport, killing thirty-two people. The terrorists then hijacked another airliner and flew to Kuwait. The *fedayeen* were apparently trying to raise tensions in the Middle East in the hope of sabotaging the Geneva Peace Conference. See *New York Times*, 18 December 1973.
3. For a discussion of the various objectives of a campaign of terrorism, see Ernest Evans, *Calling a Truce to Terror: The American Response to International Terrorism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), Chap. 3.
4. See, for example, the wide variety of definitions of terrorism offered in the speeches by various countries during the 1972 United Nations debates on international terrorism. *Official Records of the General Assembly*, 6th Committee, 27th sess., passim. Brian Jenkins has noted that there are severe difficulties in defining terrorism because of the tendency to use the word to describe a large and varied range of political phenomena. See *International Terrorism*, pp. 1-2. For a good discussion of the various characteristics of terrorism, see Chap. 1 of Paul Wilkinson's *Political Terrorism* (New York: Wiley, 1974). In Chap. 2 of this book Wilkinson uses the definition offered in Chap. 1 to develop a typology of terrorism.
5. V. I. Lenin, "Why the Social Democrats Must Declare Determined and Relentless War on the Socialist Revolutionaries" (1902) and "Where to Begin" (1901), cited in *Lenin Reader*, ed. Stefan Possony (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1966), pp. 470-72; Leon Trotsky, "The Marxist Position on Individual Terrorism," in *Leon Trotsky: Against Individual Terrorism*, ed. Will Reissner (New York: Pathfinder, 1974), pp. 5-9.
6. See Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Vintage, 1974), pp. 173-91, for a description of the events leading up to this demonstration and the demonstration itself.