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The Next Great Enemy?

The Framing of “Terrorism” by the Reagan Administration

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Ronald Reagan was the 40th President of the United States but the first to mention “terrorism” in an inaugural address. And only few days later, at a meeting with the American hostages that had finally returned from Iran after being held for 444 days, Reagan announced: “Let terrorists beware that when the rules of international behavior are violated, our policy will be one of *swift and effective retribution*.” Accounts of that event generally emphasize that the announcement of *swift and effective retribution* was a spontaneous and surprising move by Reagan and his advisors. In fact, the formulation is a symbolic example how the Reagan administration, during its first term, adopted the rhetoric of a seminal conference on international terrorism that was held in Jerusalem in July 1979. At that conference, George Bush, now the Vice President, had made the exact same promise, *swift and effective retribution* towards terrorists, using the exact same words.

The aim of the Jerusalem conference is outlined in a letter by Benjamin Netanyahu, the organizer of the event and today Israeli Prime Minister, to Brian Crozier, one of the key speakers: “Our purpose in holding the Conference was to deepen, and alter, the public perception of the problem of terrorism, and how to deal with it. [...] Above all we wanted to underscore the support [for international terrorism] offered by the Soviet Union, its allies and agents.” The American delegation to the Jerusalem conference was dominated by members of the *Committee on the Present Danger*. The activists of the CPD, who had been trying to kill détente since the re-launch of the group in the mid-1970s, had recognized that it was difficult to convince the public that the Soviet Union still aimed for world domination, and to sell a new Cold War with the ideological concepts and ideas of the old one. Fears about the military threat posed by the Soviet Union and monolithic communism had somewhat become out of fashion. Therefore, the CPD protagonists started promoting the new political construction explored at the

Jerusalem conference: “international terrorism”, a term which functioned essentially as a synonym for communism and the Soviet Union but was sufficiently new and vivid that it could carry a great deal of political freight, unlike the by then widely discredited anticommunism of Truman-era politics.

A Cold War Tale

In early 1981, more than 30 members of the CPD received influential posts in the Reagan administration, most of them in the national security realm, and became main architects of its political ideas. In a canonical article in the January issue of *Commentary*, Jeane Kirkpatrick, the new Ambassador to the United Nations, proposed the idea of Soviet-directed terrorism in Latin America as an opportunity to reinterpret the East-West conflict in ideological terms, reconstruct the Soviet Union as present danger, and to bring back the lost fear of communism. That way, Kirkpatrick argued, a political basis for a military buildup, foreign interventions – and, more specifically, military and economic aid for dictatorships in Latin America – could be created on the domestic front. At the same time, Harvard professor Richard Pipes, who joined the staff of the National Security Council, outlined “international terrorism” as a discursive power strategy for the Reagan administration. Pipes recommended that the new government exposed as widely as possible the Soviet Union’s support for terrorism because terrorism was, according to Pipes, a handy and relatively cheap weapon in their arsenal to destroy Western societies.

Accordingly, the incoming administration used “terrorism” essentially as a synonym for communism and started employing the term as an ideological construct to build a new domestic consensus to re-launch the Cold War. During its first term, the Reagan administration generally framed international terrorism as a global network directed by the Soviet Union and exploited by the KGB as a strategic instrument to subjugate the West and to reach communist global domination. In short, terrorism was integrated into a Cold War narrative. Until his resignation in July 1982, the loudest voice in the administration’s terrorism rhetoric was Alexander Haig. At the first meeting of the National Security Council on January 24, 1981, the new Secretary of State claimed that the roots of all state sponsored terrorism were without a doubt in the Soviet Union. The United States, he explained, were therefore moving into a new era of uncertainty with Soviet directed terrorists challenging the new government. Haig went on to

promote this interpretation of terrorism in public. Already at his first press conference as Secretary of State on January 28, 1981, Haig justified the announcement that terrorism would be the top priority of the administration's foreign policy by drawing the image of a Soviet-controlled terror network. Haig's terrorism rhetoric would culminate in a major public speech on April 24, 1981, when he illustrated the relationship between the Soviet Union and terrorism with a medical metaphor: the USSR represented the disease, the invisible virus, while outbreaks of terrorism were only the "visible symptoms".

From the Soviet Terror Network to Murder, Inc.

From 1983 through 1986, Haig's successor George Shultz and President Reagan himself would be the main Cabinet members to frame terrorism for the public. Reagan had already drawn attention to the scourge of terrorism and singled out the Soviet Union and international communism as its main sponsors in the nationally syndicated radio addresses he gave after his period in office as Governor of California had ended in January 1975. During his first term as President of the United States, Reagan repeatedly portrayed terrorism as a global network, ultimately masterminded by the Soviet Union. This rhetoric culminated in a presidential speech in fall 1983 – at the height of Cold War tensions.

On October 25, Newt Gingrich, then the Republican minority leader in the House of Representatives, sent a memo to Ken Duberstein, Reagan's Assistant for Legislative Affairs, under the impression of two current events: the occupation of Grenada by US forces, which had started on the same day, and a deadly attack in Lebanon, where Shiite extremists had rammed a truck bomb into the headquarters of the U.S. Marines two days before. In his memo, Gingrich proposed to blame the Soviet Union for all international terrorism, whenever and wherever it broke out, and to link together the Soviet Union, surrogates such as Grenada or Nicaragua and the various terrorist groups around the world, "which threaten the very survival of freedom and civilization". Such a rhetoric, Gingrich predicted, would give Reagan considerable political advantages: "If in fact we are faced with Soviet trained, financed and guided terrorists, guerrilla and military coups, then it is Andropov rather than Reagan who is the real cause of all the problems. Then the American people can focus their anger on Andropov, the KGB, and the Soviet Union."

A group of White House officials, which included Duberstein, Counselor to the President Edwin Meese, and Reagan's speechwriter Ben Elliott, implemented Gingrich's framework in a presidential address to explain the crises and American policy in Lebanon and Grenada – probably Reagan's most important foreign policy speech. The President addressed the nation out of the oval office, broadcast live in radio and television during prime time on October 27, 1983: *“Two hours ago we released the first photos from Grenada. They included pictures of a warehouse of military equipment – one of three we've uncovered so far. This warehouse contained weapons and ammunition stacked almost to the ceiling, enough to supply thousands of terrorists. Grenada, we were told, was a friendly island paradise for tourism. Well, it wasn't. It was a Soviet-Cuban colony, being readied as a major military bastion to export terror and undermine democracy. We got there just in time. [...] The events in Lebanon and Grenada, though oceans apart, are closely related. [!] Not only has Moscow assisted and encouraged the violence in both countries, but it provides direct support through a network of surrogates and terrorists.”*

The beginning of Reagan's second term marked a discursive fault line in the administration's terrorism rhetoric. At a time Cold War tensions eased, the White House adjusted its approach towards the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the Reagan Gorbachev summits, Glasnost and Perestroika appeared on the horizon, the Reagan administration started framing terrorism as a threat largely independent from the slowly thawing Cold War and as one that was not connected to the Soviet Union. Terrorism was now portrayed as a global network that was controlled by a group of Islamic and socialist state-sponsors. Probably the most defining text of this new image of international terrorism is a widely covered speech Reagan gave to the American Bar Association on July 8, 1985, in which the President identified a confederation of terrorist states that was running the international terrorist network: *“So, there we have it -- Iran, Libya, North Korea, Cuba, Nicaragua -- continents away, tens of thousands of miles apart, but the same goals and objectives. I submit to you that the growth in terrorism in recent years results from the increasing involvement of these states in terrorism in every region of the world. This is terrorism that is part of a pattern, the work of a confederation of terrorist states. Most of the terrorists who are kidnaping and*

murdering American citizens and attacking American installations are being trained, financed, and directly or indirectly controlled by a core group of radical and totalitarian governments -- a new, international version of Murder, Incorporated. And all of these states are united by one simple criminal phenomenon -- their fanatical hatred of the United States, our people, our way of life, our international stature.”

Terrorism Public Diplomacy

But the years 1985 and 1986 not only marked the climax of the Presidential terrorism rhetoric, and a new conceptualization of terrorism by the Reagan administration. Within the same two years, the process of framing terrorism for the public has been institutionalized within the US government. For the first time, “terrorism” became a specifically designated sector of the public diplomacy architecture. The birth of “terrorism public diplomacy” is closely linked to National Security Decision Directive 179, which Reagan signed in July 1985 – the same month he had addressed the American Bar Association. Stating that “terrorists are waging a war against, not only the United States, but all civilized society”, NSDD 179 appointed Vice President Bush to establish a *Task Force on Combatting Terrorism*. During the second half of 1985, the Vice President’s task force conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the policies, capabilities, and resources of the U.S. government to fight the terrorist threat.

In 1985, the counter-terrorism program of the Reagan administration was mainly coordinated by an Interdepartmental Group on Terrorism (IG/T). Chaired by the State Department, the IG/T brought together representatives from more than a dozen departments and agencies. One of the 44 recommendations of the *Task Force on Combatting Terrorism*, whose implementation Reagan ordered by signing National Security Decision Directive 207 on January 20, 1986, mandated the IG/T to develop a long-range strategy “to improve public understanding of international terrorism and the policies required to combat it”. The IG/T was ordered to do this job through a newly established Public Diplomacy Working Group operating under its auspices. In the secret version of the Task Force’s report, this recommendation was discussed at length and specified: “It is imperative to develop an aggressive program to focus national and international attention on the actual nature of the terrorist threat”, the report stated and further claimed that it was a national requirement to create a new public image of the nature of the threat that terrorism constituted for the United States. One of the projects

by which the Public Diplomacy Working Group would try to reach this objective was a high-level panel composed of representatives of media organizations, religious and ethnic groups, organizations of the civil society, of federal, state, and local legislatures, bar associations, and law enforcement agencies. The role of this panel was to “to sensitize the American public to the dangers of terrorism and reinforce public preparedness and will to deal with the risks necessary to combat this threat.”

How the Reagan administration attempted to frame terrorism is maybe best illustrated by a closer look at the *Interagency Counterterrorism Public Diplomacy Committee*, which was established under the IG/T in 1985. This public diplomacy committee, which was composed of representatives of the NSC, the State Department, the USIA, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Justice, was also responsible to the International Information Committee and its overriding body, the Special Planning Group, and therefore an element of the public diplomacy apparatus centralized in the NSC from 1983 on. The strategy of the *Interagency Counterterrorism Public Diplomacy Committee* was to plan and coordinate activities to frame terrorism as the ultimate threat and “dangerous destabilizing force of urgent global concern”, „which is threatening the fundamental order and structure of nations and society“.

One of the most interesting aspects of the *Interagency Counterterrorism Public Diplomacy Committee* was the envisaged cooperation with the “private sector”. The plan was to ensure systematic and continuous access to the research and expertise outside the government. Moreover, the Reagan administration was supposed to recommend new research initiatives, organize and finance conferences, publications, as well as the development of new media products, and identify potential authors for the placement of material collected by the intelligence agencies. To frame terrorism for the US public, the exploitation of US media, influential think tanks such as CSIS, and interest groups such as the *Coalition for Peace through Strength* and the *American Conservative Union* was suggested. To frame terrorism for foreign audiences, it was proposed to encourage think tanks and research institutes to publish articles in influential magazines overseas, particularly in center-left journals. Many of the envisaged ideas were never implemented. But the strategy of the counterterrorism public diplomacy committee demonstrates that in the mid-1980s the defining elements

of US Cold War propaganda and public diplomacy were now planned to be systematically used in the war against terrorism.

The Next Great Enemy?

During its first term, the Reagan administration had equated “terrorism” with “communism”, framed terrorism as a global network ultimately directed by Moscow, and portrayed it as a strategic instrument of the Soviet Union to reach global domination. The rationale was to bring back the lost fear of communism, as Kirkpatrick explained, and reconstruct the Soviet Union as *great enemy* to re-launch the Cold War. The concept of the *great enemy* was introduced by George Kennan in an interview on the causes of the Cold War in 1996. During the experience of World War II, Kennan argued, the United States had accustomed itself to face a *great enemy*, an anti-god, who had to be considered capable and desirous of doing everything that was evil and bad for America. After the war, the Soviet Union had inherited from Nazi Germany that role in public awareness and Americans had begun to project these extremist views onto the Soviet Union. “We like to have our enemies in the singular”, Kennan analyzed. This singular enemy “must always be a center, he must be totally evil, he must wish all the terrible things that could happen to us [...]” Carrying wartime extremisms into a period which was nominally one of peace is for Kennan one of the great fundamental causes of the Cold War.

In 1985 and 1986, when the Cold War was finally thawing, it seemed for about two years that the Reagan administration would construct terrorism as the next *great enemy*. While inheriting the ideological projections attached to that role in public awareness, international terrorism was about to replace the Soviet Union and communism, and the Cold War transforming into a War on Terror. The final report of the Vice President’s *Task Force on Combatting Terrorism*, completed at the turn of the year 1985/1986, begins tellingly: “During the course of United States history, there have been *major threats* to the principles of our nation’s nearly 200-year-old charter. *Today, the uniquely sinister threat is terrorism.*”

But the outbreak of the Iran-Contra affair at the end of 1986, which almost brought about the downfall of the Reagan administration, put a sudden and almost complete end to the terrorism rhetoric of the U.S. government. Frank Carlucci, who succeeded

John Poindexter as National Security Advisor, quickly established new guidelines for how the administration framed international terrorism effecting a second fundamental change of the President's rhetoric on terrorism in 1987. The Reagan administration toned down its rhetoric and framed terrorism no longer as a "war" but instead – just like drug trafficking – as a "crime". Terrorism has thus not replaced communism as *great enemy* when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. In the 1990s, the United States would see the world, to use the imagery of Clinton's CIA director James Woolsey, as a jungle that was free of a large dragon but filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes. Only after the attacks of September 11, 2001, would terrorism become the *great enemy*, the prime *raison d'état*, against which society has to mobilize all its resources in an infinite fight.