Constructing 'Terrorism': Contradictory Discourses of the Reagan Years

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In June 2011, the *Journal of American History* devoted a special issue to 'Terrorism and the American Experience.' Reflecting on the state of scholarly research, Beverly Gage noted that, especially when it came to the last decade of the Cold War, the following important questions remain unanswered: "How did the U.S. government sort out which groups might be designated as terrorist organizations? How did it attempt to avoid having such labels assigned to its own actions in proxy wars?"

In late November, President Donald Trump announced that North Korea would be put back on the State Department's list of 'State sponsors of terrorism.' That country had been designated for the first time in 1988, and taken off the list in 2008.

The following analysis compares the ways in which President Reagan, when addressing the American public, and US representatives, when speaking before the General Assembly of the United Nations, talked about the role that North Korea and other states played in 'international terrorism.' It suggests several intriguing answers to Gage's questions, highlights the role that elected officials, the press and 'terrorism experts' played in shaping the American discourse on 'terrorism' and proposes new avenues of investigation for scholars interested in the construction of 'terrorism.'

The 1980s and the Birth of the American Discourse on 'Terrorism'

Ronald Reagan was the first American president to put the fight against 'international terrorism' at the center of his foreign policy discourse. Whenever he addressed himself to the American people, that is to say in a context where he was fully in control of his own discourse, Reagan used the term 'terrorism' to refer to an extremely broad array of acts (attacks against civilian but also against military targets) and of actors (non-state and state actors). He also, unsurprisingly, focused his rhetorical attention solely on the violence (and 'terrorism') of enemies of the United States, while remaining silent about the violence (and 'terrorism') of its allies. Indeed, a central part of the American discourse on 'terrorism as it was constructed during the 1980s is that 'terrorism' is a fundamentally immoral form of political violence that only 'the other' practices. As proponents of this new discourse in the United States (and elsewhere, most notably Israel) repeatedly insisted at the time and continue to insist today, 'terrorism' was a threat posed a threat to 'the Western, civilized world' and represented precisely what separated 'us' from the 'barbarian' or 'savage' 'other.'

Reagan, North Korea and 'State-Sponsored Terrorism'

From the beginning, the role played by states in 'terrorism' was central part to Reagan's public discourse. From the moment he walked into the White House, the President made countless references to the existence of an 'international terrorist network' controlled from Moscow. Over the years, similar public statements were repeatedly made by his first Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, and his successor, George Shultz.

On 9 October, 1983, bombs concealed in the ceiling of the Martyr's Mausoleum in Rangoon, the capital of Burma,

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killed 21 people. The primary target, South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan, survived. After a few weeks, an investigation by the Burmese police revealed that the perpetrators were officers in the North Korean army who had used explosives provided them by their mission in Burma and had acted on orders from their government.

In the weeks following the Rangoon bombing, President Reagan repeatedly condemned the attack as an act of 'terrorism.' Similarly, in its annual report on 'Patterns of Global Terrorism' the State Department called the bombing '[t]he most vicious terrorist attack in Asia in 1983' and described the perpetrators as 'North Korean Government terrorists.'

On 23 October, 1983, truck bombs leveled buildings housing US Marines and French paratroopers stationed in Beirut: 241 American servicemen, as well as 58 French soldiers, lay dead. In its report into the attack, the Department of Defense noted that 'at least indirect involvement in this incident by Syria and Iran is indicated' and advised that 'the DOD definition should be *expanded to include States which use terrorism either directly or through surrogates*.'

Reagan argued that this attack showed that the United States were 'inadequately equipped to deal with the fundamentally new phenomenon of state-supported terrorism,' thus becoming the first American President to ever use the expression 'state-supported' or 'state-sponsored terrorism.' He also insisted that the problem of 'terrorism' was 'not unique to Lebanon,' referred specifically to 'the terrorist bombing in Rangoon' and called on 'civilized countries' to work together to hold accountable 'those countries which sponsor terrorism and terrorist activity.'

By the beginning of Reagan's second term, all the major elements of the discourse on 'terrorism' that would re-emerge in full force following the September 11, 2001 attacks were in place. In a famous July 1985 speech, for example, the president denounced the dangers posed by a 'confederation of terrorist states' (such as Iran, Libya, North Korea, Cuba or Nicaragua), a 'new, international version of Murder, Incorporated […] united by one simple criminal phenomenon—their fanatical hatred of the United States, our people, our way of life, our international stature.' These 'terrorist states,' Reagan insisted, were 'engaged in acts of war against the Government and people of the United States,' a threat that justified the use of military force by the United States since, 'under international law, any state which is the victim of acts of war has the right to defend itself.'

On November 29, 1987, a mid-air explosion killed the 115 passengers on Korea Airlines Flight 858. A few days later, a man and a woman were arrested in Bahrain. On January 14, the latter confessed to being a North Korean agent and to her role in the bombing.

According to the State Department, this act had marked the 'return of North Korea as an active agent of state terrorism for the first time since it bombed the Martyr's Memorial in Rangoon four years earlier.' North Korea was immediately put on the US list of 'state sponsors of terrorism,' where it joined Syria, Libya, Cuba, Iran and South Yemen.

First Answer to Gage's Question

A comprehensive analysis of the President's (as well as Secretary Haig's and Shultz's) speeches on 'terrorism' thus suggests one possible answer to Beverly Gage's questions. Reagan was able to sort out which actors would be designated as 'terrorists' while ensuring that US covert actions were not so labeled because he was, when addressing the American public, fully in control of his own discourse. Indeed, in his public speeches Reagan never had to explicitly define what he meant by 'terrorism.' He was able to make accusations against America's enemies based on a very broad (implicit) definition of 'terrorism' while simply remaining silent about the potentially 'terroristic' nature of the methods used by the US and its allies.

Importantly, Reagan's ability to control his own discourse was a direct result of the press's failure to ask the President to define 'terrorism' or have him explain his decision to use the term to refer to some actors and never to others. Said differently, the context in which Reagan expressed himself was *not intrinsically or naturally safe and non-adversarial*. It was *made so* by various actors, most importantly members of the press who systematically failed to

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propose any kind of challenge to the President's uses of the term 'terrorism.'

The United Nations General Assembly Debates on 'Terrorism'

A second, and related, answer to Gage's questions can be gleaned from analyzing the ways in which representatives of the US government talked about 'terrorism' in a very different, and much more adversarial, context, namely the United Nations General Assembly.

The question of 'international terrorism' was first discussed at the General Assembly in late 1972. As was immediately clear, member states disagreed on the proper way to understand and define such a concept and, consequently, about which actors around the world were, or were not, 'terrorists' deserving of being condemned as such by the international community. As soon as the debates started, seveal countries argued that US practices in Vietnam amounted to 'state terrorism,' and insisted that any definition of 'terrorism' (and, consequently, any condemnation of 'terrorism' in resolutions adopted by the General Assembly) that focused solely on the violence of small groups or individuals while being silent on such large-scale violence by states would be unacceptable.

For the United States, the General Assembly would be an even more adversarial forum during the Reagan years, that is to say precisely the years that saw the birth of the American discourse on 'terrorism.' Indeed, during the 1980s the United States were supporting various status quo regimes around the world (in order to 'contain' the Soviet Union) but also, and for the first time since the beginning of the Cold War, various *non-state* actors attempting to overthrow pro-Soviet governments (in order to 'rollback' 'communism.')

And indeed, throughout the 1980s countless member states accused the US of 'state terrorism' because of their policies in Nicaragua (support for the Contras or mining of the country's harbors by the CIA), Afghanistan (support for the Mujahideen) or Cuba (acts by anti-Castro exiles living in Florida and with alleged ties to the CIA), as well as for their own direct uses of military force (against Libya in 1986) or their support for countries like South Africa and Israel (who a majority of member states repeatedly accused of engaging in 'state terrorism').

In that context, US representatives developed a discourse that fundamentally contradicted the one developed by President Reagan in his public speeches at the time.

US Representatives at the UN: It Is Not 'Terrorism' If a State Is Involved

During the 1983 debates for example, most member states explicitly condemned the bombings in Burma as an act of 'terrorism,' insisting that such an attack was a clear violation of international law and demonstrated the need for the international community to focus on the role that states played in 'international terrorism.'

Two states did, however, stand fully outside this consensus.

North Korea, whose representative unsurprisingly denied any involvement in the Rangoon bombings while accusing its enemy to the south of being involved in its own campaign of 'terrorism.'

And the United States, whose representative would be *the only one* to argue that the debates on 'international terrorism' were in fact *not* the proper forum for discussing the Rangoon bombing because this attack *amounted to a state act* that was already a violation of international law and was therefore *not properly construed as an act of 'terrorism.'*

To begin with, Robert Rosenstock stated that the focus of the General Assembly discussions 'was on terrorist action by individuals or groups. Other items on the agenda dealt with State conduct and the use of force by States.' Then, speaking to the specific circumstances surrounding the Rangoon attacks, he added:

On 9 October 1983 the world had witnessed, in the Rangoon bombing that had killed Burmese citizens and South Korean government officials, *what had appeared at first sight to be an appalling outrage of the type the Committee*

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was meant to be concerned with under item 123. Incredibly enough, it had turned out that the vile deed had been *not simply an act by deranged individuals or groups but rather* […] a shocking instance of *State action* by North Korea.

For Rosenstock, the fact that state agents, as opposed to non-state actors, had been involved did not mean, however, that the General Assembly should focus its attention on the role played by states in 'international terrorism.' To the contrary:

Acts of murder by a governing regime were even more threatening to peace than terrorist acts by individuals or groups. One wondered what the régime in North Korea could be seeking to accomplish: could any régime believe that such conduct was a route to recognition? *In any case, the Rangoon bombing was a condemnable act of force by a State that, as such, was outside the scope of the agenda item under discussion.*

US representatives at the General Assembly proposed similar arguments in 1985, 1987, 1989 and 1991. In fact, their rejection of the concept of 'state terrorism' often went further than simply arguing, as in 1983, that acts *committed by state agents* were state acts and therefore not acts of 'terrorism.' In a context where other member states insisted that American support for groups like the Contras, the Mujahideens or UNITA was a form of 'state terrorism,' US representatives repeatedly argued that *acts committed by individuals or groups with support by a state* were, themselves, state acts, and should therefore *not be considered as acts of 'terrorism' either.*

Thus, in 1991 Michael Sharf explained that it was 'unnecessary to denominate State conduct as terrorism in order to establish its illegality, as a solid body of law already existed.' The American representative 'could not imagine *any State conduct* that could reasonably be called terrorism that was not already a violation of law. *State support of terrorist acts by individuals and groups,'* he added, 'was a clear violation of Article 2, paragraph 4, of the Charter.' These were state acts and, as a consequence, acts that should be outside of the scope of the General Assembly's debates. 'The term 'terrorism' was,' Sharf continued, 'of enormous utility when applied to acts of violence of a particularly heinous nature, committed by individuals or groups, that were more than common crimes for private gain *but less than action by a State.'*

The United States were *the only member state* to ever defend such a position.

Remarkably, this meant that the United States defended, throughout the Reagan years, a position fundamentally at odds with Israel's, whose representatives repeatedly insisted, since the beginning of these debates, that any discussions of 'international terrorism' should focus on the central role that played by states such as Syria, Lybia, Lebanon, Iraq or Iran in the development of this scourge.

Second Answer to Gage's Question

President Reagan (and other senior members of his administration, notably his two Secretaries of State) was able, when addressing himself to the American public, to fully control his discourse and, specifically, to denounce the 'terrorism' of America's enemies while never having to define 'terrorism' and being able to remain silent about the potentially 'terroristic' nature of some of the methods used by various US allies.

In stark contrast, US representatives at the UN expressed themselves in a context where the question of how 'terrorism' should be defined was raised all the time, and where one's definition of 'terrorism' has immediate consequences. At the General Assembly, defending a broad definition such as the one that informed Reagan's public speeches also meant opening the door to countless accusations that certain uses of forces by the United States and its allies may amount to 'terrorism.' Indeed, numerous member states explicitly referred to speeches where Reagan accused his enemies of 'state-sponsored' or 'state-supported terrorism' in order to argue that US support for the Contras or the Mujahideen, or various covert actions by the CIA, also amounted to 'terrorism.'

In such an adversarial context, US representatives completely abandonned the discourse developed by Reagan and argued for an extraordinarily narrow definition that *excluded* any act involving a state, that is to say a definition that excluded what President Reagan, the Department of Defense and the State Department (with its list of 'state

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sponsors of terrorism') as well as Haig and Shultz (in their own public statements) repeatedly condemned as 'state-sponsored' or 'state-supported terrorism.'

Indeed, reading through the UN transcripts makes for a truly surreal experience since US representatives *never* referred to acts in which a state was involved, *never* accused states like Libya, Syria, Iran, Cuba, Nicaragua, North Korea or the Soviet Nunion of engaging or supporting 'terrorism,' and *never* defended the notion that states were justified in using military force in self-defense against states that supported or sponsored 'terrorism.' Said differently, these representatives expressed themselves *as if the discourse on 'terrorism' developed by the American President at the exact same time simply did not exist.*

A second answer to Gage's query, therefore, is that in *adversarial contexts* like the United Nations representatives of the Reagan administration made sure that US covert actions were not labeled 'terrorist' by defending a definition of 'terrorism' fundamentally incomptible with the one that informed the discourse developped by the President when he expressed himself in *safe* contexts.

The Press, 'Terrorism Experts' and the Construction of 'Terrorism'

Once again, the press played an important role in constructing 'terrorism' by systematically failing to reveal the existence of these multiple, and mutually exclusive, discourses. As a result, these discourses remained compartmentalized, and their contradictions and inconsistencies fully hidden from view.

For example, in its coverage of the first General Assembly debates on 'international terrorism' in 1972 the New York Times profoundly misrepresented the nature of the disagreements surrounding the definition of 'terrorism,' the positions defended by the unaligned and Soviet bloc countries *but also* the position defended *by the American representatives themselves*. After 1972, the New York Times barely ever mentioned the General Assembly debates and, when it did, completely misrepresented the nature of the definitional disagreements while remaining completely silent about the position defended by US representatives there.

As a consequence, the American people were never told that countless countries around the world considered (and condemned) various US policies as amounting to 'terrorism,' nor about the specific arguments put forward when making such accusations. More troublingly, they were never told about the arguments that *their own representatives* developped when faced with such accusations. Indeed, the fact that the United States was the *only* member state, throughout the 1980s, to argue that debates on 'international terrorism' should focus solely on acts committed by groups and individuals without any state involvement has never once been mentioned in the US press.

Similarly, 'terrorism experts' have shown little interest in these UN debates. In the rare instances when they have, their analyses have been based not on the transcripts themselves (that is to say primary sources) but rather on inaccurate media accounts.

The US press also failed to cover debates about 'terrorism' in other adversarial contexts such as the US Congress. As a consequence, readers of the major American newspapers were never told that Democrats and Republicans were, throughout the 1980s, in complete disagreement as to how 'terrorism' should be defined and as to the identity of the 'terrorists' in conflicts like Nicaragua, El Salvador or South Africa.

These Congressional debates have also been completely absent from the writings of experts on 'terrorism,' as have the contents of countless *secret* (and now declassified) documents that demonstrate how, since at least the 1960s, analysts from the State Department or the CIA repeatedly referred to forces allied with the US in various Central and South American countries as 'terrorists.' Such silences are especially troubling since these so-called 'orthodox terrorism experts' have tended, as a group, to accept the normative claim that the United States is 'opposed to all terrorism' and engaged in a world-wide fight against 'international terrorism.'

The ways in which American politicians and the American public came to think and talk about 'terrorism' in the 1980s, and have continued to think and talk about this issue ever since, are the result of a fundamentally political and

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ideological process.

Over time, a series of actors, from politicians to 'terrorism experts' to the news media, have been able to give meaning to, or construct, 'terrorism.' They have acted as if debates that took place at the United Nations or in the US Congress, that is to say debates in *adversarial* fora, were somehow 'illegitimate' and should not inform public discussions on the topic. At the same time, they have highlighted the discourse developed by President Reagan and other powerful officials in *safe*, *non-adversarial* contexts, and presented such a discourse as self-evident, descriptive and non-ideological. These gate-keepers have organized the terms of the public debate by including various voices and viewpoints while excluding others. They have set clear boundaries beyond which the discourse was not allowed to venture and have thus played a central role in the 'construction' of 'terrorism.'

The discourse on 'terrorism' is today, and has always been, full of contradictions and inconsistencies. Its central normative claim, namely that 'we' (and our allies) are fundamentally opposed to and never engage in 'terrorism,' remains as untenable today as it was in the 1980s. Meanwhile, it is repeatedly used to de-humanize and de-legitimize the 'other' while legitimizing our uses of force against him.

It is the author's contention that further critical investigation into the constructions of 'terrorism' could greatly benefit from the development of a theoretical and methodological framework that would document and analyze the history of the multiple American discourses on 'terrorism' in relationship to the various contexts, safe or adversarial, public or secret, political and mediated, in which they were produced.

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