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Terrorism and Propaganda: Problem and Response

by

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INTRODUCTION

Propaganda is defined by the North Atlantic Alliance as any information, ideas, doctrines or special appeals disseminated to influence the opinion, emotions, attitudes or behaviour of any specified group in order to benefit the sponsor either directly or indirectly.1 Terrorism, in Grant Wardlaw's definition, is the use, or threat of use, of violence by an individual or a group, whether acting for or in opposition to established authority, when such action is designed to create extreme anxiety and/or fear-inducing effects in a target group larger than the immediate victims with the purpose of coercing that group into acceding to the political demands of the perpetrators.2

Propaganda and terrorism are identical insofar as they both seek to influence a mass audience in a way that is intended to benefit the sponsor. Yet while terror has a singular purpose — inducing fear and uncertainty — propaganda can and does serve every imaginable purpose from religion to politics to commerce. Terrorism is, as the nineteenth century anarchists claimed, 'propaganda by deed'; in Brian Jenkins more recent formulation, it is theatre.3 Terrorism may be other things as well, but there is no doubting the very close links between these subjects. Indeed, terror might be seen as a sub-species of propaganda.

Terrorism is also a sub-species of revolution, which is a struggle for power. The key to that power is popular allegiance, whether given voluntarily or out of fear. Allegiance is transferred from regime to revolutionaries by shifts in the popular conception of relative credibility and legitimacy. Credibility rests on demonstrated ability to control events by being in command, running a government or an alternative power structure, or perhaps by winning small battles, while legitimacy is the public's conception of a right to rule based on whatever values the public may associate with that right. The legal definition of legitimacy, which sides with the incumbent regime, ceases to apply once the government's credibility is eroded. Consequently the fight for allegiance consists of myriad small battles over credibility and legitimacy, in which the two issues become inextricably mixed.

Clearly, in its revolutionary context, terrorism is very much more than a series of front page stories. The direct and obvious link between terrorism and propaganda is merely the visible tip of an iceberg. Whether terrorism is part of a wider campaign of revolution or a free-standing conflict form, its political objectives can only be reached by a complex psychological-military process in which propaganda and violence can be compared to a boxer's two fists. It is operational propaganda that needs to be better understood and countered, for without it terrorism would...
be fighting with one hand tied behind its back, and ought, therefore, to be more easily defeated.

REVOLUTION

Revolution's three key ingredients are leadership, organization and inspiration. Michael Elliott-Bateman calls the last ingredient the "cultural-spiritual," and regards it as the foundation of the struggle. Terrorism, as a sub-species of revolution or as a component, also relies on these essential ingredients; it too elevates the cultural-spiritual element to pride of place.

The cultural-spiritual inspiration goes far beyond normal political persuasion. The latter is concerned with concrete issues; it is the stuff of ballot boxes and activities within the existing political and social dispensation. Revolutionary inspiration transcends conventional politics and demands the overthrow of the existing order, existing laws, existing beliefs and ways of thinking, and their replacement by some higher truth. Of course concrete issues may feature in this vision of the future, but they are reinterpreted within the new cultural-spiritual value system.

Revolutionary inspiration may come from religion, nationalism, racism or political ideology, or from a mixture of these and other sources. Whatever the cause, the cultural-spiritual element must fire the imagination by revealing the beauty of the promised land. It must justify the resort to violence by depicting the incumbent regime as deaf to reason and incapable of reform. It must cast the regime and its institutions as the incarnation of evil, because they stand between the people and the promised land. Finally, it must assure audiences that, with good on their side, they will surely overcome. These three themes of virtue, evil and inevitable victory dominate terrorist propaganda aimed at the convinced activists.

Because the regime and its institutions are evil, true believers are not bound by its laws, customs and moral codes, only by the higher truths and laws of the cause. This inspiration distinguishes the revolutionary, including the political terrorist, from the criminal. Whereas the profit-motivated activist may be amoral, and may commit crimes knowing them to be immoral, he or she expects to be judged by conventional standards. The true revolutionary, however, insists that violent crimes committed for the cause are just, and argues that he or she is answerable only to the revolutionary leadership, or to some higher authority such as God or history.

Revolutionary propaganda's first priority is to create such a circle of true believers. The objective is total, unquestioning loyalty. There is, therefore, a need for the totalitarian propaganda described by Jacques Ellul, which he insists can exist only within a tightly disciplined organization:

Without organization, psychological incitement leads to excesses and deviation of action in the very course of development. Through organization, the proselyte receives an overwhelming impulse that makes him act
with the whole of his being. He is actually transformed into a religious man in the psycho-sociological sense of the term; justice enters into the action he performs because of the organization of which he is a part.\(^3\)

Ellul explains how action makes propaganda's effect irreversible, how he who acts in obedience to propaganda can never go back. To justify his past action, the recruit must now believe the propaganda because he has broken old rules, values and friendships. The deeper his actions carry him into the world of reversed morality, the more dependent he becomes on propaganda to sustain him.\(^4\)

Baruch Hazan suggests that propaganda must first attract an audience's attention by penetrating the 'absorption screen,' a relatively easy task, and that, to be effective, it must then penetrate the 'personality screen.' During the latter process the beliefs, values, attitudes, concepts, expectations, etc. of individuals in the audience relate to the propaganda message, simplify, classify and label it, and produce an opinion. The individual acts because he has been influenced by the message and not because of his previous views. Eventually his personality is changed.\(^7\) Families that have lost members to exotic religious cults will recognize this process. Clearly, Ellul's initiation of true believers, the terrorist's first priority, penetrates the personality screen. Without organization, such penetration is presumably rare.

A second task of revolutionary propaganda is to influence the general public and even the international audience. Although terrorists regard the regime, its institutions, and its agents as evil enemies to be destroyed without mercy, they look upon the general public as an audience whose allegiance is required. The purpose of all revolutionary activity is conversion. Elimination is reserved for symbolic or vengeance targets, those who threaten the movement, and those who refuse conversion. The objectives for this wider audience are complex. Because the target is not yet incorporated within an organization, complete allegiance is unlikely to be achieved, nor will the personality screen be penetrated. However, provided the absorption screen is pierced — and acts of terrorism are particularly effective in attracting attention — a climate of opinion can be created in which the cadre of true believers can increase in number and effectiveness, the government is restrained and hampered in its response, and the public is made confused, ambivalent, fearful and vulnerable.

The concept of organization may tend to conjure up an image of a physically compact group, isolated from society. This would be misleading. The group is psychologically compact but physically dispersed, infiltrating institutions, the media, even the armed forces and police. Some members may establish fronts or redirect existing ones. Only in the covert cells might a degree of isolation exist. Thus, in the physical sense, the two audiences are mixed. True believers dedicated to extreme objectives, who have secretly rejected the norms of society within the covert organization, may be seen and heard by the public arguing within the existing norms for seemingly reasonable objectives. Their agenda is hidden behind tactical reasonableness.
THEMES OF TERRORISM

Whether terrorism is a component of a wider revolutionary strategy or stands on its own, the themes aimed at the general public seem fairly constant. These are some of the most common.

**Guilt Transfer.** Terrorists blame the consequences of all violence on the regime they are opposing. Naturally, all that the police and military do is presented in the worst possible light, and casualties are made into innocent victims or martyrs, regardless of whether or not such terms are appropriate. Having associated the regime with violence and death, this theme then goes an important step further, blaming terrorist violence on the authorities as well. This technique follows that of Napoleon Bonaparte, who, according to Clausewitz, insisted that his aggression was peaceful, war being the responsibility of victims who resisted. 8

The El Salvadoran terrorists and rebels have been particularly successful in this theme. Western observers frequently attribute blame for the entire death toll to the regime, as if the FMLN had neither contributed nor participated. 9 Martin McGuinness, a senior Provisional IRA leader, explicitly blamed Britain for every death in Northern Ireland, including the deaths of his own victims. 10

Guilt transfer frequently involves the rejection of the term 'terrorist' by the violent group and the transfer of the term to the regime. State-sponsors of terrorism are particularly adept in this regard.

**Invulnerability.** Whereas true believers accept the inevitability of victory as part of their ideological conditioning, the ‘invulnerability’ theme tries to rationalize the same message for the general public. It is said that liberal government is powerless in the face of clandestine attack, that security forces are ill-equipped to deal effectively with terrorism, that time is on the side of the revolutionaries. The purpose of this theme is to demoralize the government and its supporters and to neutralize the mass, counting on the fact that no one wishes to back a loser.

The notion that time is on the terrorists’ side dresses a terrorist campaign in the clothes of full-scale revolution. It argues that, for the regime to win, the authorities must eliminate every last terrorist and extinguish the cultural-spiritual inspiration — which is obviously impossible. So long as one terrorist survives, the struggle continues. Eventually, protracted war will undermine the regime. Robert Taber wrote:

> Time works for the guerrilla both in the field — where it costs the enemy a daily fortune to pursue him — and in the politico-economic arena. Protracted internal war threatens all of this [political and economic credibility], for no investor will wish to put his money where it is not safe and certain to produce a profit, no banks lend without guarantees, no ally wishes to treat with a government that is on the point of eviction. 11
Latin American terrorists have often employed this technique.

The Provisional IRA exploited this theme in a novel way after their terrorists had bombed a Brighton hotel, narrowly missing the British Cabinet. In their communiqué, the Provisionals boasted: "Today we were unlucky. But remember, we have only to be lucky once. You will have to be lucky always."12

The invulnerability theme, of course, depends for its credibility upon the armed actions of the terrorist group. Daring acts, appropriately publicized, make authority appear powerless and the terrorists, invulnerable. The two fists must work together to accomplish desired psychological results.13

Spurious Justification. While the campaign as a whole endeavours to accumulate legitimacy for the organization, at a lower, day-to-day tactical level spurious justifications are devised to protect terrorists from the full force of public wrath — wrath which might find expression in tougher anti-terrorism laws and procedures. Perhaps the commonest ploy is to justify murder by reference to alleged and sometimes real political or social injustices. The apparent intention is to confuse ends with means and to produce an ambivalent or even supportive public attitude.

After the Provisionals killed 10 army bandsmen and cavalrymen in London in July 1982, their spokesman explained that "Britain's interference" in Ireland's affairs "makes bringing the war to Britain inevitable."14 Sheik Mohammad Hussein Fadhallah, a senior Iranian official, spoke of "an open-ended war between the impoverished and deprived against the United States, Israel and all the enemies of Islam."15 FALN, a Puerto Rican group, justified a spate of bombings in December 1982 with a long communiqué speaking of "fascist repressive actions of the FBI, U.S. courts and police" and the use of Puerto Rico as "a base of operations which will be used as a springboard to protect its interests in the Caribbean, Latin America...."16

Sometimes the appeal is much more seductive. When young Canadian terrorists fire-bombed pornographic video stores in Vancouver, it would have been easy for this writer to have said: "I cannot condone the violence, but I do understand why some people feel compelled to act." Yet, to have said this would have amounted to an attempt to profit from terrorism while evading moral responsibility. This is the reaction desired by terrorists, and confusion of ends and means arguably does more to keep terrorism alive than any other theme.

Television appearances by terrorist leaders and spokesmen also provide occasions for justification. On this medium, the 'presence' of the speaker influences audiences more than his or her words. By all accounts Josef Mengele was 'charming.' Had he been interviewed by BBC in 1944, would he have persuaded some allied viewers that his actions were justified?
Another argument within this theme explains that violence by the terrorists is a reluctant but inevitable reaction to violence by the state. Costa Gravas's film *State of Siege* (1973) portrayed Tupamaro violence as a justified reaction to United States political and economic domination of Uruguay, a domination which, the film alleged, introduced torture to that country. Reinhard Hauffs film *Stammheim — The Trial* (1986) reportedly grants legitimacy to Baader-Meinhof atrocities by portraying the suicides of convicted terrorists as 'state terrorism.' In both cases the justification theme merges with guilt transfer, because audiences are required to see authority in a worse light than the terrorists.

**Disarming Themes.** Here the aim is to discredit and destroy any method, individual, police or military unit, weapon or policy that, because of its potential effectiveness, threatens the terrorists' integrity and freedom of action. Unlike spurious justification, which usually advances from the upside-down morality of terrorist logic, disarming themes are often argued within the norms of conventional morality. Consequently fronts are extensively used, and they appear to advance their causes *pro bono publico,* to save the government from blundering into error. Consequently this is a very difficult area, because many pressure groups operating in this field will be devoid of sinister motive. Moreover, public input is valuable to government decision-making. It would be extremely dangerous to label all appeals for restraint as terrorist propaganda. This difficulty is exploited by the terrorists through infiltration of innocent pressure groups and by burying demands of operational importance within a program of reforms assembled in good faith by concerned citizens.

Northern Ireland in the early 1970s provided a host of examples where government security measures drew fire from loyal critics and terrorist fronts alike. Internment, deep interrogation, rubber bullets, the 'paras,' army 'black propaganda,' CS smoke, the Ulster Defence Regiment, and many other real or imagined targets were made the subjects of investigations, exposés, legal actions and public agitation. Some were justified, many were understandable, some were parts of systematic disarming propaganda. It seems at least possible that a fearful anticipation of this type of propaganda deterred British governments from deploying units of the Special Air Service in Northern Ireland for about five years. In another setting, but contemporaneously, the United States 'Office of Public Safety' program for Latin America was destroyed by this form of propaganda, of which Costa Gravas's film was a part.14

**Terror.** It is easy to overlook that terror is itself a theme of propaganda. To every member of its audience it says: "oppose us, and you die!" The effect is hard to measure, because it is slow and unacknowledged. If someone begins to sympathize with the terrorist cause, he or she will seldom admit that fear is the reason. Many critics have alleged that Western reporting from Lebanon before
and during the Israeli invasion was distorted by PLO intimidation tactics. Journalists who decide to ‘report from the other side’ are almost inevitably going to slant their copy accordingly. Unless they are seeking martyrdom, how could they do otherwise? Terror can isolate the police and other security forces, because the judiciary, bureaucracy and general public fear to commit themselves to the fight. Frequently, police are singled out as targets, until they too cease to operate effectively.

Combined with a violent campaign, these themes can be instrumental in deflecting government responses until it is too late to reverse the shift of popular allegiance from regime to terrorist. That, at least, is the terrorist hope. Where terrorism is only a component of a wider revolutionary strategy, as in the decolonization campaigns of the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, rebel objectives have often been met. Success also crowned the efforts of Shia fundamentalists in Iran, Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and other movements where terrorism was a subordinate means. Free-standing terrorist campaigns have, however, been much less successful. It is as though the strategic component of their propaganda — their spiritual-cultural code — was unable to fire sufficient imaginations. The true believers remained a small group and mass mobilization never succeeded.

Yet many terrorist campaigns endure for decade after decade. A lack of strategic success does not seem to deter true believers whose commitment to the cause and the violent road cannot easily be rejected. Indeed, their whole reason for existing seems to be bound up in the struggle, which becomes an end in itself. Tactical success proves sufficient reward and the game continues. Survival themes such as guilt transfer, spurious justification, disarming and terror are often brilliantly deployed and their success may be a key reason why so many ill-starred campaigns seem capable of indefinite prolongation.

COUNTERING THE PROPAGANDA OF TERRORISM

If propaganda is half the terrorist’s armory, and perhaps the decisive half in terms of survival, there is surely a strong case for government counter-terrorist measures to contain a psychological component. The problem, of course, is public unease at any form of propaganda, and politicians’ consequent unwillingness to touch the subject. This understandable squeamishness seems to have effectively deterred democracies from competing in the war of ideas and ideals on any front.

The question is too important, however, to be shunned much longer. Western publics are also becoming squeamish about massacres in airport terminals. If the subject were handled intelligently, informed publics might agree that in a choice of evils, terrorism was worse than government publicity to help control it.

In place of repressive state terror which for centuries provided the standard government response to challenges to its authority, and still does in many Third World and all Marxist-Leninist states, democratic countries have developed doctrines of counter-insurgency and counter-
terrorism. These doctrines confine government, police and military to lawful reactions. No one likes such processes, but they are not necessarily regarded as a threat to democracy and are accepted as a counter-terrorism tool. What is needed, surely, is an acceptable doctrine of counter-propaganda to complement counter-insurgency.\(^{20}\)

The controls suggested are that government counter-propaganda should operate within the accepted norms of publicity or public relations. It would reject 'black' and 'grey' operations, disinformation, deliberate untruth and all the manipulative characteristics associated with propaganda. Indeed, it would differ from publicity and public relations mainly in its operational aims and its close coordination with all other aspects of counter-terrorism.

Much of this coordination would be connected with the collection and analysis of terrorist propaganda. Another function of the counter-propaganda (CP) staff would be the provision of advice to all concerned with the planning and execution of counter-terrorist operations on what might be called the 'public opinion factor.' The grist for the terrorists' propaganda mill is always provided by blunders of policy or execution, by poorly briefed soldiers or policemen and by nonsensical, aggravating procedures. Proper attention to the public opinion factor could minimize this source of raw material. Another task would be to insure that the news media had access to all levels of responsibility, from the chief to the man on patrol, and that these individuals knew what they were doing, and why, and therefore were able (with training as necessary) to explain their functions convincingly to television, radio and newspaper audiences. If the media found the terrorists and their front spokesmen available, relaxed, articulate and seemingly well-motivated, and authority tight-lipped, tense, monosyllabic and seemingly paranoid, reporting would reflect the contrast. By no means should law-and-order people become excessively garrulous. Instead they should be, and be seen to be, in command, quietly confident, and on the side of the angels.

Only when authority's house was in order would CP staffs address the outside world. Existing PR staffs handle this function already, if they are doing their jobs properly, by providing accurate information and the government viewpoint. CP staffs would assist this process by their analysis of the terrorists' psychological strategy, by recognizing hostile themes and provocations as they emerged, so that they could be preempted or exposed, and by uncovering the topic of propaganda as a news story in its own right. Terrorist fronts could be challenged by being asked questions publicly over affiliations and motives. Naturally, CP's liaison with the intelligence staff would allow controlled release of 'hot' material damaging to the cohesion and esteem of terrorist groups. Driving wedges between hardcore terrorists and their circle of sympathizers and fronts is essential to success. Terrorist themes of guilt-transfer, spurious justification and disarmament could command priority attention by CP staffs, since these are the notions which permit even the most discredited and hard-pressed groups to survive.

To a large extent, contact with the public would be through the
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media. Media coverage of terrorism, while a subject for separate study, is closely linked to propaganda. CP's major challenge would be to persuade the media to recognize the role and importance of terrorist propaganda and the way that the media are often used as transmission belts.

CP could also go directly to the public by purchasing advertising space and time, through ministerial and other speeches, conferences, seminars, film production and other means. If saving fuel, driving safely, avoiding drugs and moderating sex are appropriate subjects for publicity of this kind, so, one might think, is saving innocent life.

Remarkably, however, many may not agree. Opposition political parties are likely to object on the grounds that these measures are political and therefore improper topics for publicly-funded advertising. In a democracy, counter-terrorist measures of all kinds as a rule have to be introduced slowly, at times when public opinion and opposition parties will tolerate them. All that has been suggested about CP, therefore, relates to a certain stage in a terrorist campaign when public and media are disillusioned with the groups and sickened by their violence. At this stage, a bi-partisan publicity policy can possibly be agreed between ruling and opposition parties. Indeed, if a government attempts to move too fast in this field it may polarize public opinion, providing the terrorist with a ready-made constituency of sympathizers.

CONCLUSION

Above and beyond the minor tactics of countering terrorist propaganda, the West must endeavour to arm itself psychologically to defend democracy. This is not a non sequitur. Terrorism directed at the democracies is an attack on democracy itself, because terrorism by its very nature proclaims that elected governments and their laws are subordinate to demands backed by violence or the threat of violence. Academics sensibly separate method from cause in their analysis of terrorism. Nevertheless, in endeavours to exclude value judgement, one ought not to overlook the method's inherently anti-democratic character, and this caution applies equally to politicians and opinion-formers.

Jorge Nef recognized the West's moral dilemma in respect of terrorism as early as 1979, when he wrote:

There is an alarming psycho-cultural aspect to contemporary terrorism. This is the growing acceptance of violence as inevitable and legitimate. In an echo of "the war to end all wars," we have even glorified violence as the solution to violence. It is this trend in our culture that makes the human tragedy of terrorism acceptable — tactically expedient in the short run, morally justifiable in the long run.

The West's ambivalent attitude towards terrorism may be a manifestation of a wider spiritual-cultural malaise. Symptomatic are the notions that nothing in the Western heritage is worth defending, that the
use of force to defend democracy is illegitimate, and that any amount of violence is justifiable in the hands of 'progressive' forces, because history is on their side, making victory inevitable. It is as though the totalitarian lurking inside each and every one of us is busy rationalizing and compromising, hoping that the human half of our being will capitulate.

Henri Bergson argued that time spent refuting a rival philosophy was time wasted. Instead, the good philosophy was "of itself able to displace the erroneous idea" becoming, "without our having taken the trouble of refuting anyone, the best of refutations." At this cultural-spiritual level the battle against terrorism merges with the battle against totalitarianism. Political, spiritual and cultural leadership are in the end even more important than intelligence, response teams and firepower. Without surrendering objectivity and independence, scholars who value democracy may have a duty to help launch the ideas that will displace the erroneous philosophy.

Footnotes

An earlier version of this paper was given at the University of Aberdeen's April 1986 conference: Research on Terrorism, an International Conference.

1. NATO Glossary of Military Terms, p. 2-205.
6. Ibid.
9. In El Salvador the theme was given credibility by the brutal government and right-wing repression of the early 1980s. The notion that all deaths were attributable to the regime was therefore made easy to promulgate. See Liisa North, Bitter Grounds: Roots of Revolt in El Salvador (Kitchener, Ontario: Between the Lines, 1981), p. 108; Tommie Sue Montgomery, Revolution in El Salvador: Origins and Evolution (Boulder, Co: Westview, 1982), p. 191; Marcel Niedergang, "Death Squads back on the rampage in El Salvador," Washington Post, January 22, 1985.
10. Stated explicitly by Martin McGuinness, Provisional IRA leader in an interview during BBC television documentary Northern Ireland: At the Edge of the Union (Broadcast in U.K. in 1985 and in USA on Public Broadcast Service, February 18, 1986).
13. For an example of violence supporting propaganda, see Maria McGuire, To Take Arms (London, 1973), p. 75.
16. Text of FALN communiqué, reissued by the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee (a Weather Underground front), January 8, 1983.
20. This section is developed from Maurice Tugwell, Revolutionary Propaganda and Possible Counter-Measures (unpublished doctoral thesis, King's College, London, 1979), pp. 318-335.