

Left-Wing Terrorism in the United States*

by
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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of left-wing terrorism in the northeastern United States. Issue-oriented groups, dormant since the end of the Vietnam War, have reemerged to champion new causes, and new groups have formed. These new groups have claimed responsibility for sixteen bombings in the New York and Washington, D.C., metropolitan areas during the past four years. In New York, multinational corporations, military facilities, and government offices have been the primary targets. Attacks have been carried out against branch offices of IBM, Honeywell, Motorola, Union Carbide, and General Electric, as well as the local FBI office, a Navy recruiting station, a Naval Reserve Center, and a National Guard armory. In Washington, D.C., the Senate wing of the U.S. Capitol was bombed, as were the Navy yard and a Navy recruiting station.

Although the exact composition of the new groups is not known, law enforcement personnel believe that all of these organizations are in some way related to the Black Liberation Army (BLA). They base this conclusion on several facts:

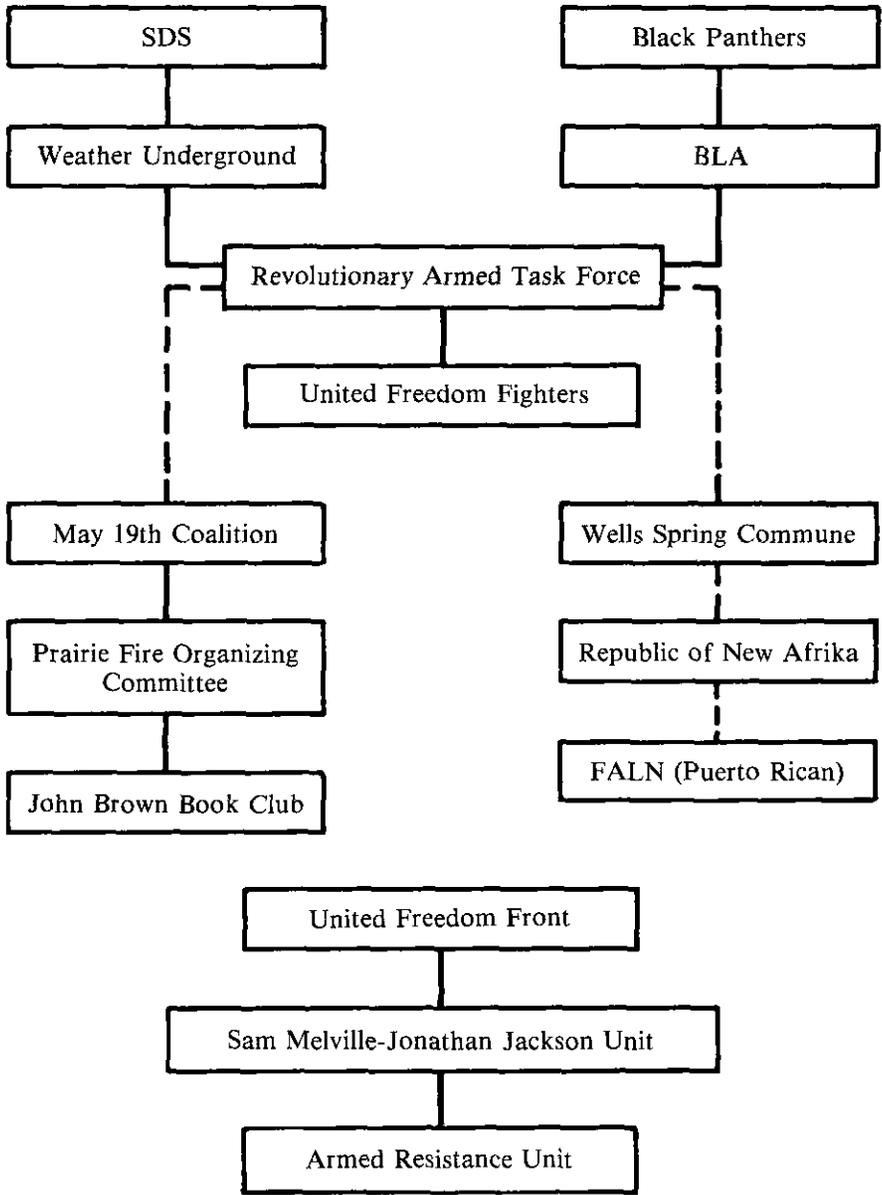
- 1) the wording of communiques issued by the new groups is extraordinarily similar to that used by the BLA;
- 2) identical types of weapons are employed by the groups; and
- 3) the new groups and the BLA generally select targets of similar symbolic significance.¹

The major indigenous left-wing terrorist groups are shown in Fig. 1.

The leftist terrorists can generally be described as “uniformly anti-U.S., anti-imperialist organizations that believe that the root causes of the world’s ills lie in America’s exploitation of non-White Third World peoples.”² Their targets — banks, corporate offices, and military facilities — are chosen to publicize the terrorists’ cause and existence, as well as to symbolize their anti-imperialist/anti-capitalist ideology. Operations are staged to generate what the terrorists refer to as “armed propaganda.”³ The rationale behind this use of terrorism is explained by Thomas Manning, a member of the United Freedom Front:

A few years back, somebody bombed the South African airlines office. Not long after, somebody bombed a South African building. That draws a lot of attention to those kinds of places. It wasn’t long after that that people started demonstrating in front of the South African embassy — now that’s popular.⁴

Other types of operations, designed to acquire operational funds, include armed robbery of banks and armored cars as well as narcotics



— splinter group or offshoot
 - - - similar or associated group

Fig. 1 — Major left-wing terrorist groups

trafficking.⁵ Bank robbing appears to be the leftists' principal, and most lucrative, source of income.⁶

THE REVOLUTIONARY ARMED TASK FORCE

The abortive holdup of a Brinks armored truck in Nyack, Rockland County, New York, in October 1981 furnished the first evidence of the cooperative bonds that had been forged between white radicals and black extremists.⁷ Until that time, police and federal authorities had assumed that the variety of small, radical leftist groups that had periodically surfaced since the end of the Vietnam era were wholly separate and distinct, with no connection to other terrorist organizations in this country. The Brinks robbery, however, brought to light evidence that two of America's most notorious revolutionary groups, the largely white Weather Underground and the exclusively black BLA, had formed an alliance known as the Revolutionary Armed Task Force (RATF).⁸ Although the exact date of this merger is unclear, it is believed that the two groups established formal relations sometime after BLA leader Joanne Chesimard's escape from a New Jersey prison in 1979.⁹

The RATF was responsible for the Brinks robbery, and police raids on safehouses used by the robbers uncovered documents that revealed the merger of the Weather Underground and the BLA. In itself, the merger was unprecedented. During the era of the Vietnam War, white leftist radicals and black militants with similar ideological orientations were unable to establish cooperation. Despite the radicals' efforts, their black counterparts tended to resent the whites' affluent suburban backgrounds and disparaged them for exhibiting "revolutionary pretensions" and for lacking a true commitment to achieving political change by whatever methods, specifically, violent methods, were necessary.¹⁰

The inability to conclude an agreement eventually spawned a series of internal disputes within the Weather Underground which finally compelled one faction to break away from the aboveground support apparatus, known as the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, in 1975 and form a new group called the May 19th Coalition (sometimes referred to as the May 19th Communist Organization).¹¹

The May 19th Coalition perceived its mission as the development and strengthening of links between politically militant blacks and Hispanics and their white ideological counterparts. It has largely become the aboveground political support apparatus of the RATF and the BLA. Its spokesperson, Judith A. Clark, participated in the Brinks robbery and is presently serving a sentence in New York's Woodbourne penitentiary. Clark is also alleged to have represented the May 19th Coalition at a conference sponsored by the PLO in Beirut, Lebanon, a month before the bank robbery.¹²

The May 19th Coalition actively pursues its aims in America's prisons, recruiting black criminals in the prisons and recently paroled convicts. The Coalition typically establishes contact by offering black inmates free legal services and counseling. The prisoners who accept this

offer are gradually drawn into "consciousness raising" meetings and seminars run by other inmates, where they receive rudimentary political indoctrination into the terrorists' ideological beliefs. Those who start to recognize their "victimization" by a "racist" and "unjust" society are earmarked for recruitment into the RATF or BLA upon their release.¹³

The May 19th cadres also function as couriers for the RATF and BLA, running a tight clandestine communications network among the imprisoned terrorists and their peers on the outside. This has enabled the BLA to maintain cohesion. The RATF network appears to extend across the United States. Ties have been established with the Mississippi chapter of the Republic of New Afrika groups (a militant black organization that advocates armed struggle to establish an independent black country in the American south¹⁴) and with the Wells Spring Commune (a group of paroled black prisoners operating in the San Francisco area). A van used in the Brinks robbery was traced to the Republic of New Afrika group, while an RATF member who participated in the robbery reportedly was a guest of the Wells Spring Commune during a visit to San Francisco. These groups share arms and intelligence, provide safehouses, and assist in the planning and execution of operations, including prison escapes. William Morales, an FALN bomber, was aided in his escape from prison in 1979 by the BLA and the May 19th Coalition. However, although the RATF supports the creation of an independent Puerto Rico, no formal cooperation between the Puerto Rican terrorists and the RATF has been detected beyond that of fraternal political support.¹⁵

There are believed to be fewer than 50 active RATF members.¹⁶ However, the group is highly disciplined and its limited membership makes it virtually impossible to infiltrate. Evidence uncovered in connection with the Brinks holdup reflected the security precautions, organizational skill, logistical support, and operational expertise of the group.

In 1976, several small cells, each of which contained black, Hispanic, and white members, were established throughout the country. The New York cell, which participated in the Brinks' robbery, was headed largely by blacks but was supported by a "secondary team" of politically radical white women. The women transported messages among safehouses and cells, surreptitiously surveyed possible targets, and did odd jobs such as renting cars and apartments and buying weapons. The black members of the cell apparently carried out the terrorist operations themselves, although the women sometimes drove the getaway cars. Respectably dressed and looking like housewives or commuters, the women were an essential component of the cell's escape plans and operations.¹⁷

The New York cell is thought to have accumulated an estimated \$1 million from bank robberies between 1976 and 1981. The money was used for safehouses, food, and other living expenses, as well as weapons and drugs; \$100,000 was used to lease a three-story building in Harlem that ostensibly served as an acupuncture clinic but in fact concealed an arms warehouse and a narcotics distribution center.¹⁸

When police raided a network of RATF safehouses in New York, they discovered detailed documents on several private companies and multinational corporations that were doing business with South Africa. It appears that the group was planning a terrorist campaign against American businesses involved in such dealings.

Apartheid in South Africa has long been an important issue among black militants and white activists in the United States, one that provides a common cause cementing the sometimes tenuous bonds that unite them. A few weeks before the Brinks robbery, a May 19th Coalition member had organized a violent demonstration at New York's JFK Airport to protest the arrival in the United States of the South African rugby team. During the team's nationwide tour, bombs exploded at the American Rugby Union offices in upstate New York and in Indiana. In December 1981, simultaneous bombings hit the South African Airways freight offices at JFK and an IBM office in Harrison, New York. The bombings were claimed by the hitherto unknown United Freedom Fighters, a name that may have been just a cover for RATF operations against or concerning South Africa. IBM was claimed to have been bombed because of its extensive investments in that country.¹⁹

Exactly a month later, a bomb exploded at the FBI office in New York. This attack was claimed by the Revolutionary Fighting Group, probably another pseudonym used by the RATF.²⁰ Terrorist groups often use different names in claiming responsibility for attacks, both to give an exaggerated impression of strength and numbers and to inhibit federal authorities from bringing charges against the terrorists. Under current laws, individuals linked to one group cannot be indicted for a bombing committed by another group unless they can be directly tied to that group — and this is not possible if the group exists only on paper.

On May 11, 1985, federal authorities arrested Marilyn Jean Buck, one of the Brinks robbery suspects who had been still at large. A search of Buck's apartment in Baltimore and other safehouses in Pennsylvania, New York, and Connecticut uncovered explosives, timers, weapons, cash, and false identity papers, and stolen vehicles were found in nearby garages. In addition, according to the FBI, "very detailed" plans to bomb at least a dozen federal offices in Washington — including the Old Executive Office Building where Vice-President Bush's office is located and a building at the U.S. Naval Academy — were found in a file drawer marked "in progress." The evidence linked Buck and two accomplices to sixteen bombings that had occurred in New York and Washington since 1982, including the bombing of the U.S. Capitol.²¹

UNITED FREEDOM FRONT

The United Freedom Front (UFF), a group apparently formed to protest U.S. involvement in Central America (not to be confused with the United Freedom Fighters), first came to public attention on May 12, 1983, when it claimed responsibility for bombing an Army Reserve Center in Uniondale, New York. The following night, the group struck again, bombing the Naval Reserve Center in Queens. Two more

bombings of military facilities were carried out in 1983, one against a National Guard Armory in the Bronx and the other at a Navy Recruiting Center in East Meadow. In December 1983, the group claimed responsibility for two bombs that exploded in front of the Honeywell offices in Queens. A caller stated that the Honeywell bombs were set off to protest U.S. policy in Central America.

On January 12, 1984, a spokesperson for the UFF called UPI and directed federal agents to a mailbox in Brooklyn, which contained a communiqué that explained the group's mission to "protest U.S. imperialism around the world" and promised future bombings.²² The Pentagon later warned 22 top defense contractors about the possibility of bombing attacks by terrorist groups.²³ On March 19, 1984, the UFF exploded its tenth bomb in the New York metropolitan area, this one at an IBM facility in the town of Purchase. This was the third attack by the group against IBM. Literature was left at the site of the blast, decrying the relationship between the United States and South Africa. The most recent operation claimed by the group took place on September 27, 1984, when the offices of Union Carbide in Tarrytown, New York, were bombed. An FBI agent explained that the group was attacking, "what they perceived as the injustice of imperialism around the world and specifically Union Carbide for business dealings in South Africa."²⁴ Less than 24 hours earlier, a group calling itself *Guerrilla Resistance* took credit for a bomb that wrecked part of the South African consulate in New York City.

On March 13, 1985, seven members of the UFF were indicted on charges of bombing a total of ten businesses and military installations in the New York area. Five of the defendants had been arrested in Ohio in November 1984, including Raymond Luc Levasseur, a member of the Sam Melville-Jonathan Jackson Unit,²⁵ who was wanted for the 1981 murder of a New Jersey state trooper. The Sam Melville-Jonathan Jackson Unit and the United Freedom Front are now believed to have been the same group.

THE ARMED RESISTANCE UNIT

On November 6, 1983, the Armed Resistance Unit (ARU) claimed credit for the bomb that exploded in the Senate wing of the U.S. Capitol. An anonymous telephone caller explained that the blast was in retaliation for the U.S. invasion of Grenada a few days earlier and for the American presence in Lebanon. Investigations of the bombing and of two other Washington-area attacks against U.S. Navy targets, also claimed by the ARU, established a number of similarities between those operations and the bombings perpetrated by the UFF.²⁶ An FBI spokesman stated, "There is a possibility that the ARU and the UFF are one and the same. The communiqués issued by the ARU had language very similar to the communiqués issued by the UFF. Furthermore, there is consistency in their target selection and bomb construction."²⁷

Speaking at a press conference shortly after the Capitol bombing, FBI Director William Webster said that the bomb detonated at the

Capitol had a dual firing mechanism similar to the devices used in ten or eleven other bombings during the previous two years. However, he conceded that the FBI had no basis for concluding that all of the bombings came from "the same source." Webster noted that calls from people claiming responsibility for the bombing contained "the same type of words we experienced with the older dissident groups that have become dormant and which in a way have metamorphosed through other organizations we've been watching closely in light of the Nyack [Brinks] robbery." He emphasized that "the inferences we are drawing result not only from the rhetoric of claims but also the nature of the explosives which were used in all of these cases and the manner in which they were put together".²⁸

In any event, the UFF bombings motivated many corporations to bolster security. The Grumman Corporation, for example, built a three-foot-high concrete wall around its Bethpage, Long Island, plants to protect against truck or car bombs similar to those used in the Middle East. Moreover, federal bomb experts have been warning suburban police forces around the New York metropolitan area that they may be the next targets of terrorists. As Arostegui notes:

At a time when security has been tightened around corporate and governmental facilities located in inner city areas, the suburbs have also come to offer softer targets for terrorists. During the past ten years many large corporations have moved their headquarters and main offices to suburban areas for the purpose of minimizing the risk of terrorist or criminal harassment. Corporate security directors admit that such facilities in the suburbs generally [have] less security than those in the inner city.²⁹

CONCLUSION: FUTURE PROSPECTS OF LEFT-WING TERRORISM

Left-wing terrorist organizations have operated in the United States for nearly 20 years. The new leftist groups that have emerged in recent years have embraced controversial, popular causes such as U.S. involvement in Central America and South Africa's apartheid policy in an attempt to broaden their base of support. Because nuclear disarmament is one of the most emotional and controversial domestic issues, it is not inconceivable that these groups might turn their attention to nuclear facilities and weapons.

However, no attempt has ever been mounted against any target as well-defended as a nuclear weapons facility. Left-wing terrorist operations have been confined to bombings of symbolic targets and armed robbery. Bombings ("armed propaganda") are calculated to appeal to the terrorists' perceived constituency, the leftward-leaning, politically concerned, nonviolent activists. Almost all the bombings occur at night and in public areas; they are planned to avoid inflicting casualties or widespread destruction; they are announced ahead of time, to allow the evacuation of the target site.

This is not intended to imply that U.S. left-wing terrorists may not attack defended targets in the future. Clearly, few terrorist acts would be more symbolic than an attack on a nuclear weapons facility or the detonation of a small nuclear explosive. However, on the basis of past *modus operandi*, targeting patterns, and the general mindset of particular terrorist organizations, leftist terrorists seem unlikely to drastically alter their strategy or tactics.

Admittedly, as noted above, there is evidence that at least one left-wing group, the Sam Melville-Jonathan Jackson Unit, has entertained the idea of bombing a Department of Energy nuclear weapons research laboratory. And the June 1983 Prairie Fire Organizing Committee book³⁰ of communiqués issued over the years by the Red Army Faction (RAF) in West Germany, *War on the Warmakers*, stated:

We believe that the experience of the movement against imperialist war in West Germany is of great importance to all people who want to build an effective struggle against imperialism inside the U.S. As war grows, the limitations of the mainstream leadership of the anti-nuke, anti-war organizations are becoming obvious....

We support the people in the anti-nuclear movement who are taking up solidarity with El Salvador and are beginning to address the broader issue of U.S. Militarism. This process needs to be advanced and the movement must become more militant.³¹

However, the terrorists' attempt to link their goals and *raison d'être* to broader political issues is less a direct threat to the security of U.S. nuclear weapons facilities than a public relations gambit. Of course, terrorist operations could escalate to include nuclear targets, but this seems unlikely, since an assault on a nuclear site is inconsistent with the basic beliefs of most left-wing terrorists. One disquieting possibility, however, is that of some foreign power enlisting indigenous left-wing terrorists to carry out an operation against a nuclear weapons facility.

Because many members of militant black and radical white organizations have been arrested during the past two years, the level of terrorism carried out by leftist groups may in fact have peaked. Only one recent act of violent terrorism has been linked to the left: the bombing of the Police Benevolent Association in New York City on February 23, 1985. The attack was claimed by the Red Guerrilla Defense, which had taken responsibility for the April 1984 bombing of the Israeli Aircraft Industries offices in New York and an explosion five months later at the South African consulate in New York.³²

The RATF was effectively neutralized following the abortive holdup of an armored car in 1981 and has suffered further setbacks since then as the group's remaining members have been rounded up by police. Accordingly, it does not pose a credible threat to nuclear weapons facilities. Although the RATF is skilled in clandestine tradecraft, the use of disguises, and the use of firearms and explosives, its operational capacity

is severely limited. The group has never attempted to attack a well-defended target, and although members have been involved in shootouts with police, they have generally tried to avoid armed confrontation.

Left-wing terrorist groups in the United States have long found it difficult to recruit succeeding generations of terrorists. They have had to rely on the same "hard core" of individuals, many of whom went underground more than a decade ago. Accordingly, unless these groups are able to reverse their dependence on the old guard and recruit a new generation of members, it appears that they will continue to lose strength and momentum, as the few remaining terrorists on the outside become increasingly preoccupied with avoiding arrest rather than with staging new operations.

Endnotes

*This article is excerpted from the author's *Terrorism in the United States and the Potential Threat to Nuclear Facilities*. (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation, January 1986), R-3351-DOE.

1. *Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 1984.
2. International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), *Terrorist Trends: The Quarterly Intelligence Reporter* (1985), p. 11.
3. IACP, *Clandestine Tactics and Technology*, Vol. IX, issue 2, p. 2.
4. *USA Today*, July 15, 1985.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5; and Martin C. Arostegui, "Terrorism and the United States," *Clandestine Tactics and Technology: Group and Area Studies*, Vol. IX, p. 4.
6. Statement made by FBI agent Manuel Marquez, Jr., *USA Today*, July 15, 1985.
7. Unpublished draft report by the Policy Study Group on Terrorism of the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, 1984.
8. *Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 1984.
9. *CTT*, Vol. IX, issue 2, p. 6.
10. Arostegui, "Terrorism in the United States," p. 1-2.
11. *Ibid.*, The name was chosen to commemorate the birth dates of North Vietnam's Communist leader and founder, Ho Chi Minh, and American Black Muslim leader Malcolm X.
12. *CTT*, Vol. IX, issue 2, p. 4.
13. Arostegui, "Terrorism in the United States," p. 2.
14. The Republic of New Afrika has also been linked to a newer militant black organization called the New Afrikan Freedom Fighters (NAFF). Nine members of the NAFF were arrested by police in New York City on October 18, 1984, and were charged with planning the robbery of an armored car and the prison escape of a black radical. A 1984 Risks International report observed: "The breakup and identification of the NAFF confirms previous speculation about an expanding underground network concentrated in the New York area. The various cells appear to be self-sufficient but plugged into common above ground support organizations." (*Quarterly Risk Assessment*, July-September, 1984).
15. *Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 1984.
16. *CTT*, Vol. IX, issue 2, p. 2.
17. *Ibid.*; and *Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 1984.
18. *Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 1984; and Arostegui, "Terrorism in the United States," p. 4.

19. Arostegui, "Terrorism in the United States," pp. 2-3.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
21. *New York Times*, June 2, 1985.
22. *CTT*, Vol. X, issue 1, p. 3.
23. The contractors were Boeing Military Airplane Co., Wichita, Kansas; Hughes Aircraft plants in Tuscon and Los Angeles; the Rockwell Corp., Anaheim, California; Northrup, Los Angeles; Douglas and Rockwell Rocketdyne, Los Angeles; U.S. Air Force Plant #42, Palmdale, California; Lockheed, Sunnyvale, California; Martin-Marietta, Denver; Pratt and Whitney plants in East Hartford, Connecticut, and West Palm Beach, Florida; Lockheed-Georgia, Marietta, Georgia; Avco Systems Division, Wilmington, Massachusetts; and Westinghouse, Baltimore, Maryland. Plants operated by Fairchild Republic, General Electric, General Dynamics, and Thiokol were also warned.
24. *New York Times*, September 28, 1984.
25. This group was formed in the mid-1970s in the New England area. It took its name from Sam Melville, a white 1960s radical who was killed during the uprising in Attica Prison (New York) in 1971 and Jonathan Jackson, who was killed in a 1970 shootout with police after kidnapping a judge. The group is closely linked to the May 19th Coalition and the BLA.
26. *Washington Times*, June 26, 1984.
27. *CTT*, Vol. X, issue 1, p. 3.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
29. Arostegui, "Terrorism in the United States," p. 4.
30. *War on the Warmakers* (John Brown Book Club, 1983).
31. IACP, *Terrorist Trends*, p. 11.
32. Risks International, *Weekly Risk Assessment*, Vol. 2, no. 9, March 1, 1985.