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## **Terrorism Debacles in the Reagan Administration**

**by James Bovard**

Many Americans are unaware of the dark side of U.S. foreign policy's past. Some conservatives think that Ronald Reagan's foreign policy began and ended with the thwarting of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, there were many other U.S. actions during his reign that did not reflect favorably on the U.S. government's devotion to human rights.

There were few common-places that offended Reagan more than the old saying that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" — a delusion that he said "thwarted ... effective anti-terror action." As he explained,

Freedom fighters do not need to terrorize a population into submission. Freedom fighters target the military forces and the organized instruments of repression keeping dictatorial regimes in power. Freedom fighters struggle to liberate their citizens from oppression and to establish a form of government that reflects the will of the people.

In contrast, "Terrorists intentionally kill or maim unarmed civilians, often women and children, often third parties who are not in any way part of a dictatorial regime," he declared. He especially admired the "Nicaraguan freedom fighters ... fighting to establish respect for human rights, for democracy, and for the rule of law within their own country." Similarly, Secretary of State George Schultz declared in a June 24, 1984, speech, "It is not hard to tell, as we look around the world, who are the terrorists and who are the freedom fighters."

A few weeks before the 1984 presidential election, news broke that the CIA had financed, produced, and distributed an assassination manual for the Nicaraguan Contras fighting the Marxist Sandinista government. The manual, entitled "Psychological Operations in Guerrilla War," recommended "selective use of violence for propagandistic effects" and to "neutralize" (i.e., kill) government officials. Nicaraguan Contras were advised to lead

demonstrators into clashes with the authorities, to provoke riots or shootings, which lead to the killing of one or more persons, who will be seen as the martyrs; this situation should be taken advantage of immediately against the Government to create even bigger conflicts.

The manual also recommended

selective use of armed force for PSYOP [psychological operations] effect.... Carefully selected, planned targets — judges, police officials, tax collectors, etc. — may be removed for PSYOP effect in a UWOA [unconventional warfare operations area], but extensive precautions must insure that the people “concur” in such an act by thorough explanatory canvassing among the affected populace before and after conduct of the mission.

This was not the CIA’s first Nicaraguan literary project. In 1983, it had paid to produce and distribute a comic book entitled “Freedom Fighter’s Manual,” a self-described “practical guide to liberate Nicaragua from oppression and misery by paralyzing the military-industrial complex of the traitorous Marxist state without having to use special tools and with minimal risk for the combatant.”

The comic book urged readers to sabotage the Nicaraguan economy by calling in sick, goofing off on their jobs, throwing tools into sewers, leaving lights and water taps on, telephoning false hotel reservations, dropping typewriters, and stealing and hiding key documents (sage advice later followed by numerous high-ranking Reagan administration officials). The comic book also included detailed instructions on making Molotov cocktails, which, it suggested, could be thrown at fuel depots and police offices.

At the time when news of the assassination manual leaked out, the Contras had a sordid human-rights record. A human-rights group, Americas Watch, accused the Contras in early 1985 of atrocities against unarmed women and children as part of its “deliberate use of terror.” In March 1985, the International Human Rights Law Group submitted a report based on 145 sworn statements from Nicaraguans showing the Contras guilty of “a pattern of brutality against largely unarmed civilians, including rape, torture, kidnappings, mutilation and other abuses.” The Marxist government was also up to its elbows in blood and oppression and may have killed more innocent people than did the Contras.

Reagan administration officials quickly conceded that the CIA manual was “clearly against the law” and violated Reagan’s 1981 executive order banning political assassinations. In the final presidential campaign debate, Reagan promised that “whoever is guilty [of preparing the manual], we will deal with that situation and they will be removed.” CIA director William Casey sang a different tune, insisting that the goal of the manual was to help guerillas be persuasive in “face-to-

face communication” and that the manual’s “emphasis is on education, not on turning a town into a battlefield.”

In a news conference the day after his reelection victory, Reagan dismissed the entire controversy as “much ado about nothing.” Reagan administration officials stressed that the manual did not specifically call for assassinations. However, as a confidential 1954 CIA assassination manual warned, “No assassination instructions should ever be written or recorded.”

A few weeks later, the White House announced that several “lower level” CIA employees were receiving letters of reprimand or suspensions for “poor judgment and lapses in oversight” because of the manual. Word later leaked out that Casey blocked any punishment of the two senior CIA officials involved with producing and distributing the manual, including one who admitted he was “fully responsible” for the document. In closed testimony to a congressional committee, Casey declared, “There’s no reason to discipline them for one little slip-up.”

In an era when Reagan denounced terrorists as “uncivilized barbarians,” U.S. government policies were not always over enlightened. The CIA provided other helpful publications to its Latin American friends, including its 1983 torture instruction classic, “Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual.” This CIA manual stressed that when a “new safehouse is to be used as the interrogation site ... the electric current should be known in advance, so that transformers or other modifying devices will be on hand if needed.” An intelligence source later explained to the *Baltimore Sun*, “The CIA has acknowledged privately and informally in the past that this referred to the application of electric shocks to interrogation suspects.”

### **A license to kill**

In late 1984 Reagan authorized the CIA to covertly train and equip anti-terrorist operations and groups in the Middle East. The *Washington Post* later reported that he signed an order on November 13, 1984, that was widely perceived by intelligence officials as a “license to kill” — providing U.S. agents with “go-anywhere, do-anything” authority, according to one former White House official. The *Post* reported that “any actions under the orders would be ‘deemed lawful’ if conducted in ‘good faith.’”

On March 8, 1985, a massive car bomb detonated near the Beirut suburban home of a radical Muslim leader, killing 80 people — mostly women and children — and injuring 200. The bomb failed to kill the Muslim cleric. Supporters of the cleric strung a giant “MADE IN USA” banner across the blast site. A few weeks after the bombing, one U.S. government official bragged to the *Washington Post* that CIA and U.S. military training of anti-terrorist units in Lebanon had “been very successful.” National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane, in a speech entitled “Terrorism and the Future of Free Society,” announced, “We cannot and will not abstain from forcible action to prevent, preempt, or respond to terrorist acts where conditions merit the use of force.”

In mid May 1985 news broke in Washington that the car bomb attack had been carried out by people hired by a CIA-trained group of Lebanese intelligence personnel. The news set off a firestorm of CIA denials and foreign denunciations. *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward later wrote that CIA director William Casey told him that he had arranged the bombing through the Saudi government.

## **Bombing Libya**

In March 1986, U.S. and Libyan forces clashed off the Libyan coast, with Libyan patrol boats getting hammered. On April 5, a bomb exploded in a West Berlin discotheque, killing an American soldier and wounding 50 others. U.S. officials stated that intelligence intercepts identified Qaddafi as the source of the attacks. Pentagon counterterrorism chief Neal Koch later noted that other circumstances leading to a U.S. attack on Libya included

the persistent and irritating posturing of Libyan strong-man Moammar Gadhafi; growing public and congressional disenchantment with the Reagan administration's failure to deal with terrorism — especially Middle Eastern terrorism; intra-governmental pressures, with elements within the administration at war with each other; and finally, the fact that Libya was simply considered the easiest target among terrorist-supporting nations.

On April 14, 1986, Reagan ordered the U.S. Air Force and Navy to attack Libya. He announced hours after the bombing began that the United States had launched strikes against the “terrorist facilities” and other “military assets” and headquarters of Qaddafi. He declared, “Self-defense is not only our right, it is our duty. It is the purpose behind ... a mission fully consistent with Article 51 of the UN Charter.”

One F-111 bomber dumped its load on a residential neighborhood, also damaging the French embassy. The Pentagon postponed admitting responsibility for several days even though a weapons officer on the F-111 immediately sent word about the mistake. Libya said the raid killed more than 30 people and wounded almost 100. One F-111 crashed during the operation, resulting in two American deaths.

On the night of the attack Reagan proclaimed in a televised address, “The Libyan people are a decent people caught in the grip of a tyrant.” But, while the U.S. government insisted that the killing of civilians was an accident, a Voice of America broadcast that night warned the Libyan people,

The people of the U.S. bear Libya and its people no enmity or hatred. However, Colonel Qaddafi is your head of state. So long as Libyans obey his orders, then they must accept the consequences.

Colonel Qaddafi is your tragic burden. The Libyan people are responsible for Colonel Qaddafi and his

actions. If you permit Colonel Qaddafi to continue with the present conflict, then you must also share some collective responsibility for his actions.

When asked by a reporter whether Qaddafi was “losing his grip” on Libya, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger replied,

There may well be some of the people ... unhappy with him who are trying to take matters into their own hands. In other words, people who have read the lesson that this attack was supposed to administer.

The U.S. portrayal of Qaddafi as a near all-powerful dictator — at the same time it did not hesitate to punish his victims for the sins of their leader — set precedents for the treatment of the Serbian and Iraqi people in the 1990s.

Though the bombing was supposed to teach Qaddafi a lesson, it apparently did not stop him from sending agents to blow up Pan Am 103 in December 1988, killing 270 Americans, British, and others. Though Reagan spent his entire time in office warring against terrorism, far more American civilians died in terrorist attacks at the end of his reign than at the beginning. Yet terrorism lost none of its political value as a hobgoblin. The Reagan administration almost totally escaped bearing responsibility for its failures to deliver promised protection to Americans.

*James Bovard is author of the forthcoming [The Bush Betrayal](#) as well as [Lost Rights](#) (1994) and [Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace to Rid the World of Evil](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.*

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