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Reagan's Selective Aversion to Terrorists

The poor, naive Carter administration thought you could build a foreign policy around human rights. The Reaganites laughed that one out of town. But the Reagan administration has a sentimental obsession of its own: terrorism. Alexander Haig said in his first week as secretary of state: "International terrorism will take the place of human rights in our concern because [terrorism] is the ultimate abuse of human rights."

This is fatuous nonsense, reminiscent of those doctors who analyze nuclear war as

Viewpoint

by Michael Kinsley

a public-health problem. But human rights and terrorism are actually quite similar as foreign-policy obsessions. Both are attempts to assert universal standards of conduct that override the usual considerations of geopolitics. "Terrorist acts . . . can never be legitimate," said the current secretary of state, George Shultz, last October. "And legitimate causes can never justify or excuse terrorism."

The State Department defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine state agents." The kind of terrorism that most excites the Reagan administration is so-called "state-sponsored" terrorism through "intelligence services" and the use of "surrogates." This refers to such matters as the alleged KGB hiring of Bulgarians to kill the pope and Iranian support for the Shiite lunatics in Lebanon.

But there's another obvious example: the contras in Nicaragua. Two recent articles in The Wall Street Journal by reporters David Ignatius and David Rogers make clear that the contras are a virtual creation of the Central Intelligence Agency. It assembled their leaders from among alumni of Anastasio Somoza's National Guard, hired professional thugs from Argentina's military dictatorship to train them, and "repackaged" the leadership (as the authors nicely put it) with some democratic elements when criticism began to mount.

The articles also make clear that the U.S.'s purpose in this is the classic terror-

ist one of social and economic subversion. To bring down the regime, we are attempting to derange and impoverish the country by destroying its infrastructure and scaring off trade. Compare this to the administration's mock horror over the effects on South African blacks of a mere American investment ban.

We already have spent \$80 million "sponsoring" the contras, and President Reagan wants \$14 million more because they are "the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers." Obviously our goal of a democratic Nicaragua is more admirable than goals of other sponsors of terror such as the Soviets and Iranians. But the premise of all the fuss about "terrorism" is that the goal doesn't matter. "Terrorist means discredit their ends," as Secretary Shultz says. So what makes the contras different?

Secretary Shultz likes to quote the late Sen. Henry Jackson on the difference between terrorists and freedom fighters. Freedom fighters, Jackson said, "don't blow up buses containing noncombatants" or "set out to capture and slaughter schoolchildren" or "assassinate innocent businessmen, or hijack and hold hostage innocent men, women and children. . . ." According to Americas Watch, a nonpartisan human-rights group, the contras have kidnapped, tortured, raped, mutilated and murdered many unarmed civilians including women and children "who were fleeing." No doubt there are nastier groups around, but this is an impressive record. Yet an unnamed State Department official told the New York Times, "It seems to be what you would expect to have in a war." Another administration official conceded, "The contras . . . have a tendency to kidnap young girls." Oh well.

It's sometimes said that these freedom lovers are hard to control and that "abuses," while deplorable, are not officially sanctioned. Sure. But any terror expert will tell you that random, out-of-control violence is part of the method. It creates a desirable sense of anarchy. What's more, the U.S. does not accept the "hard to control" excuse from rival sponsors. Only last week, National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane declared that we will feel free to retaliate against states that sponsor terrorism without troubling to "prove beyond all reasonable doubt" that the object of our wrath is responsible for any particular terrorist act.

The regime the contras are attacking is not a democracy. Is that the crucial distinction? If so, why does the State Department highlight episodes in Kuwait, South Korea and South Africa in its most recent

summary of terrorist activities? Terrorism, of course, makes democracy harder. "Where the terrorist cannot bring about anarchy," says Secretary Shultz, "he may try to force the government to . . . impose tyrannical measures of control, and hence lose the allegiance of the people." Mr. Shultz explained the "disappearances" (i.e. murder by the military) of thousands in Argentina during the 1970s as "a deliberately provoked response to a massive campaign of terrorism." The Sandinistas explain their own increasing repression (though nothing on the Argentine scale) the same way. But in this case the U.S. is not so understanding. "I don't think the Sandinistas have a decent leg to stand on," says President Reagan. "What they have done is totalitarian. It is brutal, cruel." And so on.

"It is in the objective interest of the Soviets to see the destabilization of regimes not friendly to them," wrote the editors of this newspaper in April 1981. ". . . Moreover, the Soviets . . . don't have hanging about them any silly Western liberal doctrines about the will of the majority, the unacceptability of violence, or the difference between military agents of the state and presumptively innocent civilians." I took this at the time as a criticism. But apparently not. More recently the Journal has said: "The objective of the Reagan administration's policy toward Nicaragua is to bring about a democratic government. . . . If [critics] are against the Nicaraguan democrats and in favor of the Sandinistas, we hope they will tell us that as forthrightly as the administration has now proclaimed its purposes." The end justifies the means, unless (as another Journal editorial put it) you're some kind of "Common Cause lawyer" hung up on "international law."

Obviously it's hard to be good in a world where others are bad. When Mr. Reagan brings up the French Resistance, he makes the best possible case against his own conceit that terrorism is indefensible in all circumstances. But the Sandinistas are not Nazis. They are not so monstrous a regime that we have to abandon all hope of maintaining our own civilized standards in dealing with them. We are not so powerless that we must resort to mayhem and the murder of innocents. International law does not leave us with the choice of doing nothing or doing anything. Or does terrorism just mean "what the other side does"?

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