Anti-American Terrorism: From Eisenhower to Trump—A Chronicle of the Threat and Response, Volume I, The Eisenhower Through Carter Administration

Dennis A. Pluchinsky (World Scientific, 2020) 617, foreword, introduction, footnotes, photographs, appendix, index.

Reviewed by David T. Berg, PhD

There are few scholars better positioned to write an authoritative accounting for terrorism's growth, spread, and impact than Dennis Pluchinsky. He worked as a terrorism analyst in the US Department of State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security Threat Analysis Group/Division for 28 years, protecting US interests against many of the terrorist organizations highlighted in this volume. Pluchinsky was also twice selected for the Director of Central Intelligence Exceptional Intelligence Analyst Program and taught courses on terrorism and counter-terrorism (CT) at five universities over 26 years in the Washington, DC, area. It is with this background that Pluchinsky provides a near exhaustive accounting for terrorist activity directed against US interests, personnel, and facilities from 1953 to 2020. The first in a four-volume treatise, this book highlights patterns, trends, and activities for terrorist organizations that began to emerge in the post–World War II era through the final days of President Carter's administration.

Terrorism scholar Bruce Hoffman notes that creating a unified definition of terrorism is in part difficult because its meaning and use has changed throughout history, adapting to the political discourse in which the term is used.[a] So fraught is the debate about what activities constitute terrorism—there are almost as many definitions for terrorism as the number of authors that write about this subject in government and academic circles. Pluchinsky simultaneously acknowledges and attempts to avoid definitional controversy in his introduction. He writes: "Since there is no right or generally accepted definition of terrorism, this multi-volume work will use the U.S. Department of State definition of terrorism as it is an acceptable 'working' definition of terrorism." (xlvi) Pluchinsky notes the State Department definition is based on US Code Title 22, Section 2656f(d), in which terrorism is defined as

premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents." (xlvi)

While the Department of State's definition appears to be a logical choice for Pluchinsky to address international terrorism issues, his definition of domestic terrorism may leave readers questioning the boundaries between terrorism and other forms of political violence such as insurrection, rebellion, treason, sedition, or rioting. In defining domestic terrorism, he borrows from the FBI website writing:

This term refers to the political terrorist activity carried out in the U.S. by individuals and/or groups inspired by or associated with primarily U.S.-based grievances and movements that espouse extremist ideologies of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature. (xlvi)[b]

The qualitative differences between these two broad operational definitions are quite important: if readers are to move forward in his text, they will to be able to discern the differences between them.

Any common understanding of terrorism should begin with the premise that a latent political structure exists in defining terrorism and therefore the actions we determine to be terrorist attacks are socially negotiated.[c] At a surface level, political officials are elected or appointed to office, writing laws and leading institutions that have an anti-terrorism or CT mission focus. Moreover, a deeper analysis into the latent political structure can help explain why different agencies within the US government use distinct terminology to classify events that appear to be the same to casual observers, such as labeling some groups as "terrorists" while using terms like "insurgents,"

a. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 3rd ed. (Columbia University Press, 2017).
b. https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/terrorism. Citing Pluchinsky, accessed February 6, 2017.
c. Annamarie Oliverio and Pat Lauderdale, *Terrorism: A New Testament* (de Sitter, 2005).

"revolutionaries," or "militias" for others. Negotiation over what constitutes terrorism often takes place in politically charged and contested space. Indeed, there is power in labeling someone a terrorist, especially when seeking to marginalize, disempower, or discredit them. Finally, acknowledging this latent political structure can serve as a heuristic device explaining why legal authorities, policy measures, and enforcement mechanisms vary greatly when discussing international terrorism vice domestic terrorism.

Many beginning their studies of terrorism are surprised to learn that there is no legal mechanism in US law for designating domestic terrorist organizations, partly because freedom of speech and assembly are constitutionally protected activities, including those with extremist beliefs. In fairness, Pluchinsky never intended for this book to wade into the nuanced debate between "realist" scholars who try to define terrorism in concrete terms and "idealist" scholars who view terrorism definitions as polemical constructs.[a] He misses an opportunity in doing so, however, to explain directly to readers why "small left-wing terrorist" (110) groups like the George Jackson Brigade are treated with their own subsections, but other violent, politically motivated organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, which "murdered five African American workers in November 1979" (327) and committed other atrocities during the 1950s and 1960s, are not given similar treatment in his chapter on domestic terrorism.

Just as the meaning of terrorism has changed with time, so have the methodologies for tracking and documenting terrorist incidents within the US government. Pluchinsky adopts a positivist approach to studying terrorism that develops many discrete categories for terrorist groups and their respective activities. He provides the reader with a thorough typology and analysis for different terrorist organizations over the past six decades. His meticulous research instructs the reader how terrorist tactics, goals, strategy, and political engagement has evolved since the United States became a full-fledged superpower. The responsibilities for maintaining an accurate database have shifted from the CIA to the Department of State and were later contracted to the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (lxxx) The author's chronological presentation combining his research from

these disparate sources for lethal overseas terrorist attacks against Americans is detailed and thorough. Pluchinsky leverages information from CIA, the Department of State, other agencies within the US Intelligence Community, academic institutions, press reporting and policy institutes to verify his chronology. He notes that confirming every case in his chronology with at least two sources was often a tedious process. (lxxxv) The prodigious detail listing these attacks can overwhelm the casual reader, but it also provides a rich, encyclopedic accounting for global and domestic terrorist attacks targeting the United States and its interests.

One of the interesting trends to emerge during the 27-year time frame in this volume is the strong prevalence of what Pluchinsky describes as "left-wing terrorist" organizations conducting anti-American terrorism. According to Pluchinsky, a left-wing terrorist entity is "composed of Marxist, Maoist, and anarchist terrorists, terrorist groups, and insurgent organizations whose objective is to overthrow democratic and democratic-oriented governments." (li) Terrorist organizations from this era often focused their rhetoric on anticolonialism or social injustices—real or imagined—as means to cultivate a heroic narrative and justify their violent actions. Pluchinsky's findings strongly indicate that international and domestic terrorists from the early 1950s through the late 1970s often embraced communist ideology that targeted US interests accordingly. While support from communist nations like Cuba to violent extremist organizations during this period is a matter of public record, readers should be cautious in their judgments about the unanimity of communist state-sponsored terrorism. Sociologist Melvin Seeman argues that people lacking adequate voice or power to address grievances within their society can become alienated, ultimately separating them from the values, norms, and mores of their own culture and government.[b] Turning to terrorist ideology is often a symptom for other underlying structural problems where adequate redress is difficult, problematic, or impossible. This principle applies regardless of the terrorist organization's ideology.

CT policy has also evolved from the Eisenhower to Carter administrations based on the security challenges and political environment that each US president encountered. All administrations during this time usually considered terrorism as "a security nuisance to be occasionally

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a. David T. Berg, *The Fear of Terrorist Attacks in the Southwestern United States: A Cross Sectional Analysis* (Arizona State University, 2010).
b. Melvin Seeman, "On the Meaning of Alienation" in *American Sociological Review* 24, no. 6 (1959): 783–91.

addressed" compared to the Cold War strategic issues they also faced. (405) Although terrorism was not the pressing national security issue for this era, Pluchinsky documents the evolution of US CT capabilities and provides the reader important context for the current national security architecture the United States maintains to combat terrorist threats. CT policy was mostly ad hoc during the Eisenhower and Johnson administrations until President Nixon expanded US government capacity for addressing terrorism. These efforts included establishing the Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism (CCCT) and the Working Group on Terrorism (WGT). Pluchinsky notes that while President Carter disbanded the WGT in 1977, this organization shaped future thinking in the US government on how to manage developing terrorist threats and coordinate them with stakeholder agencies. He writes:

> *Although flawed by inexperience and misconceptions, the CCCT and its WGT was a seminal organizational step in developing and coordinating U.S. counter-terrorism policy and strategy. Every subsequent presidential administration established a similar executive-level body to address the terrorism issue. (169)*

CT policy continued to move incrementally under the Ford and Carter administrations, with President Ford largely retaining Nixon's official policies. President Carter would later discontinue many of these policies. He did, however, make a significant contribution in establishing a dedicated military unit specializing in CT operations following the disastrous mission to rescue US embassy hostages during the 1979 crisis in Tehran. Pluchinsky also documents the impact of investigations into illegal domestic security activities during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter presidencies, which set the stage for debates on CT policy weighing security, privacy, and IC responsibilities that still resonate today.

Pluchinsky's first volume focusing on anti-American terrorism is a densely packed and comprehensive look at one of the most complex US national security challenges our nation faces. It reflects the evolving nature of terrorism that has changed with the politics, technology, and media during this tumultuous period in US history. The book is also a thorough accounting of how US policymakers attempt to find solutions to address this dynamic issue. A broad spectrum of terrorism experts, policymakers, and casual readers will undoubtedly find noteworthy facts about terrorist attacks that targeted US interests abroad and at home in this volume. Pluchinsky's level of detail and strong qualitative methodology makes this work an essential desk reference for any serious terrorism scholar.

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