

**Anti-American Terrorism: From Eisenhower to Trump—A Chronicle of the Threat and Response, Volume II, The Reagan and George H.W. Bush Administrations**

Dennis A. Pluchinsky (World Scientific, 2020), 630 pages, introduction, footnotes, photographs, appendix, index.

**Reviewed by David B.**

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Terrorism is an evolving threat that changes with the politics of its era. *Anti-American Terrorism: From Eisenhower to Trump—A Chronicle of the Threat and the Response*, Volume II focuses on what author Dennis Pluchinsky refers to as “the second of the four phases of the international terrorist threat” coinciding with the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush presidencies. (xxxix) Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter faced threats mostly from left-wing and secular Palestinian terrorist organizations during their respective administrations. Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush, however, largely confronted state-sponsored and Islamic Revolutionary Terrorism (IRT) during this second phase of anti-American terrorism. Pluchinsky argues international terrorism continued to evolve with the changing geopolitical landscape of the late 20th century.

The author contends that overseas anti-American terrorism reached the high-water mark during the Reagan administration, which faced a more geographically and philosophically diverse group of terrorist threats than at any other point in American history.

*This terrorist threat was composed of left-wing, secular Palestinian, Islamic revolutionary, and state-sponsored/supported terrorist organizations. These organizations carried out over 1,600 terrorist attacks worldwide that killed over 570 Americans. This death toll was five times higher than in the 1970s. (202)*

International attacks grew as a result of a confluence of important events that would also help shape US government responses to future terrorist incidents. Left-wing and the secular Palestinian terrorist strains began to ebb during this time frame. The US government instead faced the evolving tactics and ideological messages that emerged with IRT and state-sponsored terrorist threats.

Pluchinsky works hard to classify different terrorist incidents and situate them within a discrete typology for the reader, though he freely acknowledges there is

considerable overlap when attempting to do so. He also discusses the analytic difficulties in determining whether an attack qualifies as a state-sponsored or an IRT attack. Nevertheless, he attempts to examine every terrorist incident based on the logistics and operational support a state provides, as well as trying to determine who may have benefited most from its execution. Sometimes, however, this exercise becomes nearly impossible because of reporting gaps or the complex relationships between state sponsors and their various proxies.

The emergence of Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and its attacks against US personnel and facilities in Lebanon during the early 1980s is a prime example of how difficult it can be to attribute attacks based on this analytical framework. Pluchinsky defines IRT as

*Muslims and converts who believe that it is necessary and appropriate to use political violence to redress their individual and collective grievances against the West and other enemies of their version of Islam in order to restore Islam to its rightful position in the world. (63)*

Later in the volume, he defines state-sponsored terrorism as consisting of “those states that engage in external terrorist activity aimed at other states and dissident exiles and is carried out by a state’s intelligence services or contracted non-state terrorist organizations.” (107) The author clearly documents LH’s responsibility as a terrorist organization in its early attacks. Some of the LH attacks discussed include its pioneering uses of suicide-vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs) in 1983 against the US embassy and the US Marine Corps battalion landing team headquarters and the French paratrooper barracks in Beirut. He also describes LH kidnappings of US citizens in Lebanon and its tactics in hijacking airliners. Based on these and other incidents, the author describes LH as an early example of the IRT strain. One could reasonably argue, however, that Iran enjoyed most of the long-term benefits from the LH model. It was Iran, after all, that played a critical role in creating and

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supporting LH to further its own foreign policy agenda. Once tested, Iran would use this same template in the future to fund, train, equip, and support similar organizations throughout the Middle East.

Pluchinsky's analysis concerning Washington's approach to state-sponsored terrorism will be of particular interest to readers looking for answers on the Reagan administration's national security policy calculus. Libya, Syria, and Iran occupied the attention of senior policy-makers on state-sponsored terrorism issues during this period. Pluchinsky argues that the Reagan administration made a conscious decision to aggressively target Libya with military action and chose not to follow the same policy for Syria or Iran. He writes:

*The US picked on Libya because it could. The Reagan administration needed a big "win" against terrorism to support Reagan's 27 January 1981 Rose Garden "swift retaliation" boast and to prevent any identification of Reagan with the "Carter Syndrome."* (425–26)

This policy was counterproductive in pressuring Libya to give up state-sponsored terrorism as an asymmetrical tactic against its enemies. To the contrary, Libya and the United States embraced a cycle of retaliatory violence, culminating with the bombing of Pan American Airlines Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. In a warning highlighted throughout the centuries from Carl von Clausewitz to terrorism scholars such as Ian Lustick, Pluchinsky shows the reader that armed conflict often takes on a life of its own and can lead to severe unintended consequences.<sup>a,b</sup>

Hostage-taking also had a significant influence on President Reagan's strategic thinking about terrorism. Pluchinsky argues Reagan's desire to avoid an "Iranian hostage trap" (552) was an important factor that shaped US counterterrorism (CT) policy for decades to come. While other books such as Mark Bowden's *Guests of the Ayatollah*<sup>c</sup> or David Crist's *The Twilight War*<sup>d</sup> provide more detailed accountings of the 444-day US hostage crisis in Iran, Pluchinsky highlights with equal clarity that the impact of these events on President Reagan's mindset cannot be understated. Reagan molded his political image to stand in stark contrast to President Carter's, often choosing aggressive policy measures and hardline

political rhetoric toward terrorist adversaries or state sponsors of terrorism.

Pluchinsky argues that terrorism and US CT policy were not initially top priorities for President Reagan, but terrorist events beginning in 1983, driven largely by LH and Iran, forced his administration to react as these crises developed. Despite this preoccupation with terrorism, Reagan frequently delegated operational decisionmaking to the National Security Council (NSC), leading to unforced errors in CT policy such as exchanging US hostages for weapons during the Iran-Contra affair. While readers may disagree with Pluchinsky's assertions concerning President Reagan's staff, those interested in the evolution of US CT policy will find many details about the origins of CT programs and organizations that continue to disrupt terrorism. Pluchinsky offers valuable insights to the creation of CIA's Counterterrorism Center, the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force, the Department of State's Rewards for Justice program, and several important legislative developments that remain critical tools in the US response to terrorist threats.

The Reagan administration served as an important historical benchmark on CT policy for another reason. It was the first time the US government considered terrorism to be more than a mere nuisance or a law enforcement issue and chose unilateral military force as an option to address this threat. Pluchinsky highlights that Reagan approved 10 different National Security Decision Directives (NSDDs) on terrorism, more than any other president in US history. He further argues that "NSDD-207 was the most significant NSDD created by the Reagan Administration." (278) This NSDD affirmed that the United States would not negotiate with terrorists, sought to deny terrorists safe havens, and declared that the United States "was prepared to act in concert with other nations or unilaterally when necessary to prevent or respond to terrorist acts." (279) This aggressive and far-reaching directive would serve as the blueprint for future US CT strategy, including post-9/11 CT operations in the 21st century. Volume II provides historians, political scientists, and intelligence professionals with important context to understand the origins for an approach to terrorism that would have profound and long-lasting consequences in the decades to come.

Readers interested in US domestic terrorism's evolution during the Reagan administration will find chapters

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a. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* [Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret] (Princeton University Press, 1976).

b. Ian Lustick, *Trapped in the War on Terror* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

c. Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in America's War with Militant Islam* (Grove Press, 2007).

d. David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran* (Penguin Books, 2013).

four and five to be a good baseline tracing the decline of left-wing groups and the reemergence of right-wing terrorism that would come to pose a far more significant threat during future presidencies. Pluchinsky contends that “right-wing terrorism is an umbrella term used to differentiate a type of political violence from left-wing terrorism.” (175) This term is often used to describe racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, conspiracy theory, and antigovernment extremists that adopt terrorist tactics. He writes of the Reagan-era domestic terrorism threat: “Right-wing terrorism never posed as serious a domestic terrorist threat in the U.S. as left-wing terrorism.” (174) There is evidence to support this claim, given the overall frequency of recorded right-wing attacks within the context of President Reagan’s policy priorities related to terrorism.

To his credit, Pluchinsky covers significant developments in the 1980s and 1990s in the white supremacist movement that would shape the thinking of right-wing terrorists responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing during the Clinton administration. Right-wing organizations such as The Order, Bruder Schweigen, and Posse Comitatus, plus a discussion of their various domestic terrorist campaigns in 1984—often colloquially described as “The war in 84”—are treated in this volume. Criminologist Mark Hamm has drawn similar parallels, tracing right-wing groups and their impact on what remains the deadliest domestic terrorist attack in US history.<sup>a</sup>

Only two chapters in this volume are dedicated to George H.W. Bush’s presidency. While serving as

Reagan’s vice president, Bush played a leading role in creating and implementing US CT policy.

*Given Bush’s role in the 1985 Vice President’s Task Force for Combating Terrorism, and the implementation by President Reagan of most of the task force’s recommendations, it was unlikely that Bush would make any major changes to U.S. counter-terrorism policy. (457)*

Once he became president, Bush simply tweaked the policies his working group initially created. World events did, however, shift Washington’s focus on state-sponsored terrorism in the Bush administration. Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and various threats from Saddam Hussein’s regime to launch attacks using the Iraqi Intelligence Service (IIS) were two important factors leading the Bush administration to shift focus onto Iraq as the world’s primary state-terrorism sponsor. Iraq would remain central to US CT policy concerning state-sponsored terrorism until the George W. Bush administration began Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

As with Pluchinsky’s first volume, which covers the Eisenhower through Trump administrations, this volume is densely packed with information on terrorist incidents and the US responses to these developments. The author maintains his strong methodological and a detail-oriented approach to addressing this topic. Policymakers and terrorism scholars will find Volume II to be an invaluable desk reference highlighting the changing nature of terrorism and the US approach to addressing terrorist threats.<sup>b</sup>



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a. Mark Hamm, *Apocalypse in Oklahoma: Waco and Ruby Ridge Revenged* (Northeastern University Press, 1997).

b. Volume I was reviewed in *Studies in Intelligence* 65, no. 1 (March 2021)