

"TERRORISM AND THE MEDIA"

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TO THE JONATHAN INSTITUTE

SECOND CONFERENCE ON INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

TUESDAY, JUNE 26, 1984

FOUR SEASONS HOTEL

WASHINGTON, DC

Terrorism and the Media: 1

We already have too many definitions of terrorism and terrorists, but a definition worth considering is that a terrorist is a criminal who seeks publicity. This sets him far apart from what British officials in Northern Ireland have taken to calling the ODC, or ordinary decent criminal who understandably shuns the lime-light. Indeed, it is an understatement to say that terrorists seek publicity. They require publicity. It is their lifeblood. If the media were not there to report terrorist acts and to explain their political and social significance (the motives inspiring them and so forth), then terrorism as such would cease to exist. Each terrorist act would then be seen merely as an isolated criminal event. It would not be interpreted as an integral part of a pattern of political violence, the likely prelude to other bombings and shootings, something to be seriously discussed by politicians, bureaucrats and television sociologists. As Walter Lacquer put it: "The media are the terrorist's best friend. The terrorist's act by itself is nothing; publicity is all." One might say that terrorists are simply another type of media parasite, but famous for being infamous.

There is, of course, an element of parasitism on the other side. The media find terrorism a sensational news story and are therefore inclined at first to over-report it, to write admiringly of the terrorists' "daring" even while morally condemning them, and to exaggerate their significance. But the media exploit terrorism as a good story rather than depending upon it. If it were not there, other equally newsworthy topics would be to hand -- wars, demonstrations, elections, congressional battles, the marriages of pop stars and, of course, decent ordinary crime.

What benefits does the terrorist seek from media publicity? In what ways does he hope to make the media his accomplices? There are, I think, three types of unwitting media assistance. They help the terrorist to spread an atmosphere of fear and anxiety in society; they provide him with an opportunity to argue his case to the wider public; and they bestow an underserved legitimacy on him.

Let us take the first: the spreading of fear and anxiety through society. This seems to be achieved principally through the media simply reporting the terrorist's act -- bombings, shootings, and so on. Such reports naturally arouse public concern; it would be alarming if they did not. In a free society, however, nothing is to be done about this. A regime like that in the Soviet Union can suppress all news of its occasional hi-jackings, as it does news of airline crashes and major industrial disasters. And if events do not become known, plainly they cannot influence public opinion. (Even this argument cannot be pushed too far, however. If terrorist acts were sufficiently frequent, they would become known through gossip and hearsay in the most effectively censored society.) Is panic contrived by terrorists then, simply an unavoidable price of living in a society with a free press? I don't think so.

For it is not the simple succession of terrorist acts which, when reported, arouse profound public anxiety. Statistically, these are usually a very trivial threat to the lives and limbs of anyone in particular. No, the media heighten tension much more dramatically by reporting not just terrorist acts, but their threats of future acts, by describing in often lurid colours the campaign

of terror that will ensue if the Government does not yield to their demands and in general by giving the impression that a prospect of endless violence and upheaval lies ahead.

This spreads panic and anxiety in two ways. First, directly, it increases the ordinary citizen's fear that he may fall victim to a bomb in a restaurant or a supermarket. But also, more subtly, it conveys the message that society is a moral chaos, that the laws, rules, standards and securities we have taken for granted no longer provide any protection against random violence and that, in the words of the Rumanian refugee in Casablanca, "the Devil has the people by the throat". There is an instructive comparison from the world of crime. People are murdered all the time without arousing any public feeling more profound than a prurient curiosity. But when a killer like the Yorkshire Ripper not merely kills people, but also mutilates them and then jeers at society for its inability to stop him, mocking the police for their incompetence, then a genuine fear based on moral uncertainty does grip the public. In short, the media magnify terrorist violence so that its impact on public opinion is disproportionate to the actual physical harm it does.

In these circumstances pressures grow for the Government to take action to restore public order. Awkwardly from the terrorist's point of view, this is more likely to be pressure for repressive measures than for government concessions. To take account of this, philosophers of terrorism produced a theory whereby terror would produce a repressive government which in turn would alienate the people by its repression, which would at last usher in a revolutionary government to the terrorists' taste. This has turned to be wishful

thinking. Democratic governments in Britain, Italy and West Germany have been able to reduce or eliminate terrorism without abandoning democratic institutions. And even in countries like Argentina, where a military government did take over and institute counter-terror, it has been replaced by a conventional democratic government not very different from that originally attacked by the Montoneros. Meanwhile the country has endured all the trauma of civil war.

I turn now to the second point: that the media provide the terrorist with an opportunity to broadcast his views to the wider public. This is an opportunity which he would not generally enjoy if he were to use the conventional channels of democratic politics because his support would not warrant that kind of media attention. But the use of terror gives him a platform. The reason is, once again, straightforward journalistic curiosity. Who are these people blowing up restaurants and shooting policemen? Why are they doing it? What are their aims, intentions, philosophies? And what are their demands? We assume that the public is clamouring to know the answers to such questions and seek to provide them. The terrorists themselves so arrange their affairs as to make life relatively easy for the media. They arrange press conferences, publish communiques and statements of ultimate aims, and give exclusive interviews. In Northern Ireland, indeed, the so-called Republican Movement is divided into a terrorist wing which murders people, the IRA, and a political wing, Sinn Fein, which is available to the media to explain why these murders were regrettable necessities.

We can judge the importance placed on this media platform by terrorists from the fact that, when such attention is lacking, they force the media to present their case by threatening to kill hostages, etc. In his classic essay on this topic, Professor Yonah Alexander cites a number of cases in which terrorists have secured statements of their views in the press through such tactics. In 1975, for instance, the Montoneros terrorists in Buenos Aires released a Mercedes Benz director after his company had published advertisements in Western newspapers denouncing the "economic imperialism" of multi-national corporations in the Third World.

This presents a problem for both press and politicians in a democratic society. It is our natural instinct to publish some incomprehensible verbiage which few will read and by which no-one will be influenced, in return for saving identifiable lives. We can assure ourselves what is perfectly true in another context -- that the terrorists on such occasions are falling victim to their own delusions about the power of advertising to condition people's social and political attitudes. That being so, the only effect of such advertisements will be to swell the revenues of newspapers and the salaries of journalists. But such bien-pensant reasoning ignores the long-term effects of the terrorist being seen to bargain with governments and to dictate to the media. Not only does he thereby raise his political status dramatically, but he also obtains the "Robin Hood" glamour of having triumphed, however trivially, from a position of relative weakness. Governments and media, on the other hand, by cooperating in their own denunciation, come off as somehow corrupt, certainly impotent. One answer is for

governments to announce in advance, as Edward Heath's government did in 1973, that they will not bargain if one of their number is abducted. Such a declaration strengthens their moral authority when they urge private bodies to resist a similar blackmail.

More generally, however, concentration by the media on the terrorists' "case" gives rise to the third problem: the unwitting bestowal of respectability upon terrorist groups. Talking about the aims and philosophies of terrorists inevitably conveys the impression that they are a species of politician rather than a species of criminal. We begin to think of the terrorist in relation to economic or foreign policy rather in relation to knee-capping and amputations. Yet it is what the terrorist does rather than what he thinks (or says he thinks) that makes him a legitimate object of media attention. After all, some people like killing, hurting and frightening others. That insight might be a far more reliable guide to the terrorist's "motivation" than some parroted guff about social justice and institutionalized violence. It might therefore also be a better guide to his future actions.

Television presents this problem of legitimacy in a particularly acute form. For it conveys a sort of respectability upon the terrorist simply by interviewing him. Television is a levelling and homogenizing medium by its very nature, and the process of critically interviewing someone, whether he is a terrorist or a foreign diplomat or an administration nominee in trouble before the Senate, is essentially the same process. Of course, the producer and interviewer will go to considerable lengths to show the terrorist in a

bad light. No matter how aggressive the questioner is, however, he could hardly be more aggressive than, say, Sir Robin Day interrogating Mrs. Thatcher or Mr. Dan Rather grilling Mr. Nixon. Even if the terrorist comes off badly, therefore, he will have his aim by being treated as someone whose contribution to public debate is worthy of attention. He becomes by degrees a politician.

Is there some compensating advantage that justifies such interviews? I don't believe that there is. The blunt truth is that a terrorist is an advocate of murder and that the advocacy of murder is, or should be, beyond the acceptable boundaries of public discussion. The justification commonly advanced is that "we need to know what these people think". But that is poppycock. To begin with, we invariably know what they think long before they appear on television to tell us. Is anyone here unaware of the aims and beliefs of the PLO, or of the IRA, or of the Red Brigade? Secondly, what they say on television is not necessarily what they think (which, as I have argued above, is much more accurately conveyed by what they do). It is sugared propaganda. Finally, even if we needed to know what the terrorist thought and could rely on his honesty, a straightforward journalistic report and analysis by the journalist himself would be a more efficient and reliable method of conveying such information without the side effect of conferring legitimate respectability upon murderers.

Thus far we have considered rather general examples of the media's influence in relation to terrorism. But there have also been a number of occasions on which newspaper and television reporting of specific terrorist incidents has actually hampered the

authorities. Professor Alexander gives what is unfortunately quite a long list in his essay. For instance, in the 1977 hijacking of the Lufthansa jet, the terrorist heard over public radio that the German captain was passing information to the ground authorities over his normal radio transmissions. They subsequently killed him. A similar incident which, fortunately did not have so tragic a result, occurred during the London siege of the Iranian embassy. BBC television viewers suddenly found an old movie interrupted -- appropriately enough, it was a John Wayne movie -- by live coverage of the start of the SAS operation to lift the siege. Fortunately, it seems that the terrorists were not John Wayne fans and did not therefore receive this inadvertant tip-off. If they had, some of the hostages might have perished.

Are there any attitudes in the media which contribute to both the general and specific problems I have outlined? It seems to me that there are, or at least until recently have been, three such attitudes. The first is an exaggeration of the reasonable view that press and government are necessarily antagonistic, the press bent upon exposure, defending the public's right to know, the government insisting upon its executive privacy. Whatever virtue this may have in the ordinary political rough-and-tumble, it is not an appropriate attitude when the authorities are coping with a campaign of murder. "Leaks" of government plans and ignoring official requests for a news blackout when lives are at stake represent a professional distortion of proper human priorities. Fortunately, this is changing. In the Manns-Martin Schleyer kidnapping, the media generally observed an official request for strict silence on official actions.

The second attitude is what Conor Cruise O'Brien calls "unilateral liberalism" which is quite common in the media as it is in the new professional classes in general. This is the "kind of liberalism which is sensitive exclusively to threats to liberty seen as emanating from the democratic state itself, and is curiously phlegmatic about threats to liberty from the enemies of that state." It is this attitude, surely, that is the basis of the belief that, in some sense, the terrorists have a right to have their case presented as if murder were a sort of opinion which the state should respect.

The third is the dynamic of commercial and professional competition which allows no self-restraint in pursuing a dramatic story.

Quite clearly, the most important contribution that the media could make to defeating terrorism would be changing such attitudes. All sorts of other aspects of media coverage would then change automatically. In the absence of that, however, I offer a few arbitrary and random suggestions:

1. Editors should consider very carefully the extent to which their treatment either exaggerates or minimizes the dangers of terrorism. It is my impression -- and no more than that -- that at present Western media coverage exaggerates the domestic dangers and minimizes the threat of international terrorist cooperation except when, fortuitously, the two are linked as in the London siege of the Libyan embassy. This probably reflects nothing more sinister than the usual priority for home over foreign news. But one effect is that public support has not been built up in the

Western democracies for joint action against the terrorist states and the international terror network. Once this goes beyond platitudes, there is an outcry.

2. The media should not allow itself to be used by terrorist groups. It should not seek interviews, or publish communiques, or employ terrorist vocabulary like 'execute' for murder, or the ludicrous titles that terrorists give themselves like "Chief of Staff" of the IRA. Such matters may appear trivial, but they are an important part of establishing the moral climate in which terrorism operates. Geoffrey Jackson, the British Ambassador to Uruguay, told me once that he believed he had significantly unsettled his captors by refusing to accept that he was in a "Peoples' Prison" and insisting that his presence made it the British Embassy. This challenged their version of reality.

3. In an ideal world, journalists would cooperate fully with the law enforcement authorities. They would not protect terrorist sources and they would inform the police of the time and place of any terrorist press conference. But this would mean a joint agreement among different newspapers and television stations to prevent one newspaper or television station gaining an unfair competitive advantage. I do not see the dynamic of competition allowing this at present. But there should be discussion between major news organizations and journalists' trade unions to establish guidelines for self-restraint in dealing with terrorist organizations. To object to such guidelines on the grounds that they might subsequently be used as the basis of a more general censorship is frivolous.

STATEMENT OF AMBASSADOR JEANE KIRKPATRICK
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The most difficult problem in understanding politics is, I believe, to see phenomena as they are, without confusion or mystification. Simply to observe who does what to whom. To hear what he says about his actions, and to observe their consequences. The more simply and clearly phenomena can be observed and described, the greater the possibility that their meaning and significance can be understood.

What the terrorist does is kill, maim, kidnap, torture. His victims may be children in the schoolroom, travellers like those held in Entebbe, or gathered in an airport, as at Lod, industrialists returning home from work, political leaders, diplomats in Paris, London, Los Angeles, legislators like those on whom machine guns were turned in the 1950s here in Washington.

Terrorists' victims may have no particular political identity, like the cafe-goers in Goldenberg's Jewish restaurant in Paris, or the passers-through in Lod: or they may be political symbols, like Aldo Moro or Pope John Paul II. They may be kidnapped, maimed or simply blown to bits. One defining characteristic of the terrorist is his choice of method. The terrorist chooses violence as the instrument of first resort. Yet, terrorism is distinguished from violent crime. Crime, too, is unauthorized violence against persons who are not at war.

How does terrorism differ from simple crime? The difference

lies not in the nature of the act, but in the understanding of its perpetrator, however vague, of what he is doing. Terrorism is political in a way that crime is not. The terrorist acts in the name of some political, some public, purpose. "Political man," Harold Lasky wrote, "is one who projects private assets on to public objects and rationalizes them in the name of a conception of the public. The members of Murder, Inc. acted for private purposes. John Hinckley, as I understand it, attempted to kill President Reagan for essentially private reasons. But the killers who sprayed bullets into Goldenberg's like those who attempted the murder of Eden Pastora, had a public goal in view.

Terrorism is a form of political war. We may note that while the conceptions of the actor transform the act, and that while a purpose related to a public goal makes an act political, it does not make it moral. And a public purpose does not make a terrorist who has been arrested a political prisoner. Terrorism should also be distinguished from conventional war, and terrorists from soldiers who also wield violence. A soldier wields violence in accordance with legal authorities of his society against enemies designated by legally constituted authorities. Soldiers use violence where a state of belligerence is recognized to exist. A terrorist engages in violence in violation of law against persons who are not at war with him.

Even in this century of total war, when civilian targets are

drawn into war by bombings and resistance movements, belligerency is at least a condition known to all parties to a conflict to exist in war. The Nazi occupiers occupying the streets of Paris understood that French civilians were not only conquered, but that for many the war continued. They understood that some unknown portion of the civilian population were at war and had not acquiesced in the surrender signed by France's latest government. Many civilians also understood the occupation as itself, proof of the continuing belligerence.

Terrorists use violence against people who do not understand themselves to be at war. The victims of terrorist attacks are unarmed, undefended, and unwary. They may be, in my opinion, sleeping Marines on a peace-keeping mission, or industrialists coming home from work, or school children in their schoolroom. The point is, and it seems to me crucial, that victims conceive themselves as civilians. They do not understand that they are regarded, or may be regarded, by someone else as belligerents in an ongoing war. This is the reason that one study done in our government emphasized that terrorism is politically motivated, pre-meditated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine state agents. If we listen to the terrorist we understand that he is at war against us. Terrorism is a form of war against a society and all who embody

it, and war is always, as Clausewitz emphasized, "a real political instrument, a continuation of politics by other means, an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will."

Terrorist war is part of a total war, which sees the whole of society as the enemy and all the members of a society as appropriate objects for violent actions. It is absolute war because its goal is absolute destruction of society and it accepts annihilation of persons as an appropriate means. Terrorists are the shock troops in a war to the death against the values and institutions of a society, a Western society, and of the people who embody it.

The terrorist does not necessarily possess a comprehensive doctrine or plan himself; it is only necessary that he relate his violent act to a social-political goal. In our times he is likely also to be linked to an organization of others who share his understood political interests, and to organize and assist his violent acts and relate them even to international goals.

The affinities between terrorism and totalitarianism are multiple. Both politicize the whole of society. The totalitarian--by making society, culture and personality the object of his plans, actions and tolerance. The terrorist by--taking the whole of society as the object and enemy of his violence, his war. Both conceive violence as appropriate means for their political ends, and use violence as an instrument of first resort aggressively.