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FIXING THE BLAME: INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM AND ATTACKS
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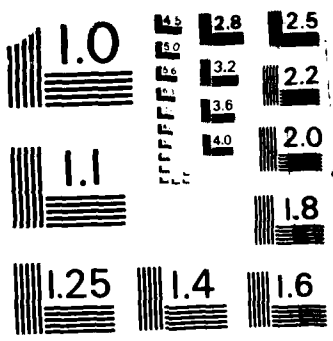
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Bruce Hoffman

April 1986

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Fixing the Blame: International Terrorism and Attacks on Americans*

Bruce Hoffman

For the eleventh time in twelve months, Americans have been the victims of unpredictable and brutal terrorist attacks. With depressing regularity, Americans--whether diplomats, servicemen, businessmen, or tourists--are increasingly seen as an ideal target: fulfilling the terrorists' need for symbolism and media attention. At the same time, however, we are increasingly inclined to look upon flamboyant figures like Libyan leader Mu'ammarr Qaddafi as the personification of the terrorist evil if only because he is the most visible target for our anger.

In the rush to assign culpability for these acts, Qaddafi is indeed an appealing culprit. His longstanding open support of terrorists and other militant groups, his unabashed and much-cultivated image as "revolutionary philanthropist" and avowed enemy of the United States--not to mention his call for retaliatory attacks against the United States following last month's Gulf of Sidra confrontation--strongly suggest his involvement in the bombings of a discotheque in West Berlin and a TWA airliner during a flight to Athens.

Yet the debate over Qaddafi's role in the attacks underscores the difficulties inherent both in combating terrorism and determining responsibility for the more than a hundred attacks annually carried out by a bewildering array of international terrorists against Americans overseas. The problem for the terrorist analyst--as for government, military, and intelligence officials--is in sorting out the welter of conflicting claims and compelling, yet circumstantial, evidence to determine who in fact might be responsible. Since terrorism is above all a clandestine endeavor, any definitive conclusion regarding the identity of the perpetrator--much less the mastermind behind him--remains elusive.

*This article originally appeared in the Sunday "Comment" section of the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* on April 13, 1986 under the title, "The danger in our obsession with lifting terrorism's mask."

As a result of American frustration, Qaddafi recently has emerged as a lightning rod for our fears and suspicions. In our efforts to identify our enigmatic terrorist adversaries, Qaddafi is repeatedly named as the most likely suspect. Ironically, by seizing on him as the embodiment of the terrorist threat, we are satisfying our own desires to have a villain we can see in the flesh and a physical, rather than fleeting, target for our anger. Seductive as this course may appear, it must be remembered that even if Qaddafi were somehow removed from power or his provocative and mercurial presence eliminated, neither terrorism in the Middle East nor attacks on Americans would cease.

Qaddafi's proclamations and activities notwithstanding, the United States has long been an appealing target for international terrorists. For a variety of terrorist groups--predominantly leftist or Third World-oriented--an attack on U.S. property, interests, diplomats, military personnel, or citizens symbolizes a blow against "Western imperialism" and alleged American political subjugation, militarism or economic exploitation.

What distinguishes the current wave of anti-American terrorism is the terrorists' apparent determination, particularly in the Middle East, to take their wars directly to the American people. With increasing frequency, Americans--whether traveling on airplanes or aboard cruise ships, at airport check-in counters or in discotheques--are being singled out by terrorists for murder.

The popularity of this strategy has increased for at least one very significant reason: a terrorist operation against any American target--especially if it results in death and injury to our citizens--is virtually guaranteed to marshal the globe's most powerful media and thus bring unparalleled attention to the perpetrator and his cause. Hence, hitherto small and otherwise inconsequential terrorist groups now find it to their advantage to target Americans.

This is a lesson absorbed since the taking of the American hostages in Iran in 1979. For 444 days the American public, and indeed much of the world, was saturated with media coverage of this traumatic and frustrating event. A worldwide television audience not only watched the drama unfold, but witnessed a superpower's agonizing inability to respond or otherwise affect the situation.

Indeed, throughout the first half of the 1980s the number of terrorist incidents annually occurring are at least four times greater than those of a decade ago. Further, it is perhaps not entirely coincidental that the birth of international terrorism in 1968--when Palestinian terrorists began to hijack airliners in Europe--took place in the same year that the first television satellite was launched linking events throughout the globe to TV sets in American living rooms.

In recent years as terrorist attacks against Americans have increased, we have embraced the notion of "state-sponsored" terrorism as the motivation behind these acts. Clearly, foreign governments are increasingly using terrorist surrogates as an inexpensive and relatively risk-free means of anonymously throwing their opponents off balance while thwarting possible reprisals.

But there is a disturbing side to this almost reflexive inclination to link states to specific terrorist acts. The tendency is to lock onto the most visible and vocal antagonist and thereby identify a target for retaliation. We attempt to overcome the basic element of terrorism--confrontation by an enigmatic adversary--by singling out a *likely* culprit simply because of his visibility.

For example, the group claiming responsibility for the bombing of the TWA airliner last week, the Arab Revolutionary Cells, is believed to be under the control of the renegade Palestinian terrorist, Abu Nidal. According to various intelligence reports, Abu Nidal's followers have received terrorist training at Libyan camps and, moreover, maintain close ties to the Qaddafi regime. But at the same time, Abu Nidal's headquarters is located in Damascus, Syria and he also enjoys the support and largesse of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad. Yet little is being said about Syria's support of Abu Nidal and few accusations are being leveled regarding Assad's possible role in his surrogate's latest bombing.

The most important issue thus appears to be that terrorism flourishes in various places at various times and under different conditions due to an idiosyncratic combination of factors. Even if Qaddafi, for example, did not provide various terrorist groups with weapons and support, there would still be Palestinians fighting for the

liberation of their homeland, Shi'a Muslims bent on eradicating Western influence from Lebanon and turning it into an Iranian-style Islamic Republic, and Irish nationalists trying to drive the British out of Northern Ireland.

By fixing our attention on flamboyant figures like Qaddafi and attempting to link terrorist acts to foreign governments, we try to compensate for the terrorists' inherent elusiveness and to divine a target for possible retaliation. But we run the risk of deluding ourselves, of possibly hitting the wrong target, aggravating an already tense situation and having little, if any, positive effect on terrorist attacks against Americans.

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