

3rd article

Group Terrorism

By William R. Polk

In my second article, I dealt with the individual terrorist. Here I turn to group terrorism. This kind of terrorism also involves psychopaths, but here they tend to be organized into assemblies in which otherwise healthy people also participate. Their violence often is not random but is used in pursuit of agreed, if sometimes vague, objectives. They also have been common in Europe and America.

An early American example is the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) which was formed just in the 1860s, at the end of the American Civil War to try to intimidate newly liberated blacks. Where the KKK was active, it sought to terrify the black population by actual or threatened violence. Often in the presence of law enforcement officers, mobs led or incited by the KKK whipped, “tarred and feathered,” and castrated men or lynched men and women accused of violating white codes of conduct.

Blacks tried to protect themselves by congregating in their own institutions, particularly churches, and by confining themselves to designated areas and social groups. In the 1930s, many sought to distance themselves by migrating to the north-eastern American cities. Then, during the Second World War, and particularly during the Vietnam war, large numbers of black young men were exposed to a life far different from what had typified their childhoods. When they returned home, many black soldiers refused to go back to anything like the subservient position they had formerly occupied. Some then formed themselves into groups of which the most widely publicized was the Black Panthers.

The Black Panthers, who organized themselves in 1968, were never very numerous, probably only 600 or so nationwide, and never actually seriously attempted to shape society in the way the KKK had done; they did, however, posture and talk about armed resistance. Their approach to terrorism was mainly symbolic rather than physical, but many white Americans

hearing their rhetoric, agreed with the then FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, who declared, “Without question, the Black Panther Party represents the greatest threat to the internal security of the country.”

More serious were white terrorist organizations. On the Left, the Weathermen, who were primarily reacting against the U.S. Government’s involvement in the Vietnam war, were the best known; on the Right there were a number of mainly fundamentalist religious movements whose “militiamen” were committed to resistance against a variety of “evils” including fluoridation of water, gun control and federal police powers.

What developed in America was also developing in Europe. There, terrorism also has a lengthy and bloody history. Around the turn of the Nineteenth/Twentieth century, anarchists assassinated an astonishing array of leaders: a king of Italy, an empress of Austria, a president of France and a prime minister of Spain. They almost managed to murder a king of Spain.

More recently, anarchists faded away to be replaced by a new generation of which the best known was the Italian *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades) movement. In comparison to most other terrorist organizations, they were numerous: the *Brigate Rosse* were thought to have enrolled about 500 full-time members during the 1970s. These “soldiers,” backed by perhaps as many as 4,000 or 5,000 supporters, carried out a series of spectacular attacks on government and industry and even kidnapped and murdered Italy’s then prime minister, Aldo Moro. After a long hiatus, a new generation of Red Brigades is again becoming active.

Meanwhile, in Germany, the Baader-Meinhoff gang (*Rote Armee Fraktion*), although tiny by comparison to the Italian terrorist group, similarly carried out attacks on German businesses, kidnapped prominent officials and businessmen and harassed military bases.

In the Middle East and Asia, terrorism has also had a long history. A heretical sect of Islam, the Ismailis (today led by the Aga Khan), used to send agents on suicide missions to murder enemies. Since they were virtually certain to die, the agents were allegedly drugged with hashish. These druggies (Arabic: *hashshashin*) give us the word assassin. From a comparable

Jewish religious movement we get the word *zealot* and from a violent Hindu sect, *thug*. Japanese suicide bombers in World War II give us the word *kamikazi*.

Although historically unrelated and apparently without the use of stimulants the tradition of self-sacrifice in a cause has remained intact. Witness Tamil Tigers turning themselves into human bombs in Sri Lanka, Buddhists burning themselves as a gesture of protest during the Vietnam war and Arab suicide bombers blowing themselves (and others) up in Israel today. Most of us find such conduct incomprehensible, but we also glorify our own soldiers who engage in acts that are almost certain to result in their deaths. During the Cold war, Strategic Air Command crews realized that if ordered to attack the Soviet Union, they were on one-way missions. In these quite different cases from all over the world, we can see the sort of stimulus from a group that results in violent or heroic action.

Group terrorism is common in many areas but today, at least, it is most prevalent in Africa and Asia. There, large numbers of impoverished, jobless and miserable people feel themselves to be marginal to the world. As the World Bank has pointed out, “More than 1 billion people still live in extreme poverty – on less than \$1 a day. Even more lack basic services that people in developed countries take for granted: clean water, sanitation, electricity, schooling.” Many are actually experiencing declining living standards. These are the people whom the black psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, in his electrifying book, called *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Sometimes feeling that they had nothing to lose and incited by what they regarded as their imperial or colonial oppressors, many of the people of whom Fanon wrote have concluded that the mainly Christian West is at war not only against their bodies and their societies but even against their religions. Faced by the overwhelming power of Western armies, administrations, industries, trade arrangements and even the popular tastes and attitudes introduced by the West native conservatives feel helpless but desperate. These are the perfect preconditions for terrorism because terrorism is the final choice of those who have, or believe they have, no other choice: terrorism is the weapon of the weak.

There is no simple answer, no solace easy to administer, no material comfort that will quickly ameliorate or solve this problem. For years, governments, particularly the British and French, sought to find peace through hauling down their flags, but they, and particularly the French, did not act soon enough so that the scars of colonialism have been slow to heal and are often ripped open anew by native governments. At the same time, efforts at “development” have often failed to raise standards of living significantly so that still today perhaps at least one in each four people in the world goes to bed at night hungry. Moreover, these political and material gestures, paltry as they have been, do not address the hunger felt by the “wretched of the earth” to win what they think of as a fair participation in the world in which we live.

Finding how to assuage past tribulations, how to offer real hope for a decent standard of living, how to effect a satisfactory degree of participation and how to construct an educational system that brings about a change in society that truly accords respect for difference will be among the most challenging problems of this century. We have a long way to go.

[1,245 words]

© William R. Polk, February 10, 2004

William R. Polk is the senior director of the W.P. Carey Foundation. After studies at Harvard and Oxford, he taught for several years at Harvard University. Then, in 1961, President Kennedy appointed him a Member of the Policy Planning Council of the U.S. Department of State. There, he was in charge of planning American policy for most of the Islamic world until 1965 when he became professor of history at the University of Chicago and founded its Middle Eastern Studies Center. Later he also became president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. Among his many books are *The United States and the Arab World*; *The Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century*; *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs*; *Polk's Folly, An American Family History*; and *The Birth of America*.