

Act of War: Reagan, Thatcher, and Counterterrorism Strategy during the American Bombing of Libya, 1986

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Abstract:

Underneath the headline-grabbing transformations in U.S.–Soviet relations in the final decade of the Cold War lurked many of the central challenges that would dominate the post–Cold War world, particularly the escalating threat of terrorism and political violence. Looking at the 1980s as not the final decade of the Cold War world but rather the beginning of the post–Cold War world, this paper examines the formation of counterterrorism strategy in the Reagan administration, with significant input from Margaret Thatcher’s government in Britain, during the bombing of Libya in 1986. The essay traces how the American perception of national and international security evolved during the Libya crisis and set precedents for the use of military force against states sponsoring terrorism.

Contrary to its common historiographical depiction as a one-off aberration, the bombing of Libya in 1986 marked a seminal moment in the development of American counterterrorism strategy. Indeed, it represented the culmination of a months-long effort to develop the first coherent strategy to combat state-sponsored terrorism in American history. By shifting away from the conventional means of countering terrorism as a matter of criminal law enforcement and by redefining terrorism as an act of war, the Reagan administration brought the terrorist threat into the geopolitical arena, where the United States could employ its decisive preponderance of military power.

With an escalating series of steps to isolate “rogue regimes,” the resulting strategy aimed to preempt imminent terrorist threats, build a strong deterrent against future attacks, and create conditions inside an offending country that would prove conducive to regime change. The British, under the strong influence of Prime Minister Thatcher, provided crucial input to square the American strategy with international law and set the precedent of backing American actions rather than face a split in the transatlantic alliance. For the British as well as the Americans, the bombing of Libya marked the point when terrorism was recognized as “a fundamental long-term security threat.”