The University of Chicago

From Words to War:
A Discourse Analysis of Covert and Overt United States Counterterrorism Policy

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A thesis submitted for partial fulfillment

of the requirements for a Bachelor of Arts degree in

Public Policy Studies

Paper presented to:

Public Policy Studies Preceptor, Karlyn Gorski

Second Reader, A'ndre Gonawela

April 2021

Abstract

The formation of counterterrorism policy in the United States historically has been highly secretive and only discussed by policymakers behind closed doors. Counterterrorism policy is then simplified and presented to the public using preconstructed framing techniques. The manner in which policymakers frame terrorism impacts the public's perceived threat level, desired counterterrorism response, and overall approval. Thus, there are political incentives to frame terrorist events and counterterrorism responses in a way that improves public reception.

How does public portrayal of terrorist incidents and counterterrorism strategy differ from internal discussions within the United States government? In this paper, I compare public speeches and declassified internal government directives regarding terrorist events and counterterrorism efforts from President Ronald Reagan through President George W. Bush's administrations. I use archival research and discourse analysis of these primary source documents to determine that public and private counterterrorism discussion rarely contradict one another. Rather, private discussion of counterterrorism is used to actively construct how it is discussed in public forums. Through the lens of securitization theory, I find that war-based rhetoric and existential threat framing are used to justify militant and reactionary responses to terrorism that could be perceived to violate democratic norms.

Based on these findings, I offer recommendations for American leaders and national security officials. I argue that policymakers should reduce militant rhetoric and operate with greater transparency in order to improve public trust and protect American civil liberties. These findings can inform future counterterrorism efforts that are simultaneously effective and accountable. This study is significant in today's threat environment due to continued relevance of the War on Terror in American society, ongoing public concerns about surveillance, and the rise of domestic terrorism.

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Introduction

The concept of terrorism is notoriously difficult to define across states and international organizations, and even within states themselves. Different agencies within the United States government vary across key aspects of the definition, especially the inclusion of state-sponsored terrorism and attacks against non-civilians.[1] [2] Therefore, the definition can be inconsistently applied across various actions and threats, and can even be used to best suit a specific actor's interests. The fact that *terrorism* is an imprecise and highly politicized term allows political leaders to implement ambiguity as a tool for justifying counterterrorism policy. Perhaps more startlingly, politicians can also leverage emotional rhetoric surrounding terrorism to support funding, gain legitimacy, and achieve other tactful objectives.

Fear can be stoked not only by terrorists, but also by the governments that seek to contain them. Public fear swells when an issue is framed as an existential threat to a nation's values or survival. Political leaders use such threat framing strategies to defend the need for strong counterterrorism policy. Heightened fear provides legitimacy to security policies that could ordinarily be regarded as extreme, such as protracted use of force or the reduction of civil liberties.[3] Understanding the consequences of terrorism threat framing has relevant implications for both policymakers and theorists. How governments manage and present fear impacts public trust and global response, which can result in either increased conflict or productive cooperation.[4] Discerning the differences between threat framing strategies can help policymakers deliver information more effectively and prompt stronger counterterrorism decisions. Applying the psychological lens of issue framing is important because terrorism is a strategy predicated on

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[1] Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington D.C.: The Joint Staff, 2021).
[2] Bruce Hoffman, "Defining Terrorism," in *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
[3] Johan Eriksson, "Threat Framing," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford University Press, February 28, 2020).
[4] Eriksson.

fear. Including the emotion of fear as a psychological element of decision making in mainstream international relations theory contributes deeper comprehension of the processes driving political behavior.[5]

Government leaders can intentionally frame terrorist events in order to suit state interests and legitimize counterterrorism policy. Internal state communications provide insight into terrorism framing strategies and threat construction that may differ from how leaders portray terrorism in public forums. Furthermore, declassified secret communications impart an even closer look at how government leaders perceive terrorist attacks, determine how attacks will be framed, and plan the presentation of counterterrorism policy.

Given the process of threat construction and the political impact of threat framing, how has the United States government's public portrayal of terrorism differed from private directives? How is terrorism rhetoric structured to shape public response, both in public speeches and behind the scenes? This paper seeks to identify the difference between internal discussions of terrorist attacks and the presentation of terrorism in public discourse in order to analyze the politics of counterterrorism strategy. A new perspective on the politicization and justification of counterterrorism measures can be obtained through the comparison of public statements and declassified government documents.

I answer this question using a comparative discourse analysis of two types of data within each case study. In this paper, I compare public speeches and internal government directives regarding terrorist events and counterterrorism efforts from President Ronald Reagan through President George W. Bush's administrations. I use archival research and discourse analysis of these primary source documents to determine rhetorical style and threat construction across a

[5] Jonathan Mercer, "Rationality and Psychology in International Politics," *International Organization* 59, no. 01 (January 2005).

series of case studies. These cases consist of acts of terrorism during President Ronald Reagan, President George H.W. Bush, President Bill Clinton, and President George W. Bush's administrations to permit an uninterrupted focus on terrorism rhetoric over a continuous period of time. This scope allows for the examination of multiple terrorist attacks across different presidential styles. Additionally, this scope permits the comparison of terrorism rhetoric before and after the major repercussions of September 11, 2001. I emphasize acts of transnational terrorism by foreign perpetrators, as counterterrorism policy during the studied time period prioritized this style of terrorist attack.

One data source consists of private discussions of terrorist attacks that had been classified in the interest of national security. This language can be found in memorandums, speaking notes, reports, and other documents that were declassified at a later date. The other data source consists of the public framing of terrorist attacks in presidential speeches. These speeches include descriptions of terrorist incidents, characterizations of terrorists, and planned counterterrorism strategy. I find that private and public sources rarely contradict one another in matters of terrorism rhetoric. Rather, private discussion of terrorism is used to actively construct how it is discussed in public forums. War-based rhetoric, existential threat framing, and emotive framing structures are used in public discourse to justify militant and reactionary responses to terrorism that could be perceived to violate democratic norms. Private directives also discuss aims to broaden policy options, win public approval, and project positive leadership. Though these framing strategies were intensified after September 11, American presidents had been utilizing such tactics long before Bush Jr.'s administration.

I begin by providing general historical background on transnational terrorism in the United States to provide context for American management of terrorist attacks. Next, I survey

existing literature on terrorism, political rhetoric, and securitization to establish a theoretical framework for my research. After explaining my research design and methodology, I deliver my findings through a series of detailed case studies. Finally, I conclude by describing the implications of these results and offering recommendations for policymakers and national security officials. I argue that political leaders should reduce militant and emotive rhetoric and operate with greater transparency in order to improve public trust and protect American civil liberties. Doing so will result in future counterterrorism efforts that are simultaneously more effective and more accountable. Even though this study concludes with the events of Bush Jr.'s administration, the findings remain relevant to today's threat environment due to continued impact of the War on Terror on American society, ongoing public concerns about surveillance, and the rise of domestic terrorism.

Literature Review

There is a wealth of scholarly work on terrorism studies, how terrorism is defined, and the use of terrorism as a political tool. Transnational terrorism in the United States is also conceptually different from extremism in other conditions. First, I provide context for the secrecy and complexity of United States counterterrorism policy. Next, I survey the contentious debate on the definition of terrorism from the perspectives of both academics and policymakers. I also overview the use of threat framing and emotional rhetoric as political strategies, and explain why these tools can result in counterterrorism tactics that are problematic for democratic states. Finally, I situate terrorism rhetoric within the field of securitization theory.

Though existing literature acknowledges the roles of secrecy and rhetoric in terrorism studies, scant research considers the discursive process of securitization from private discussion

to public presentation. Scholars have yet to investigate the confidential construction of presidential speech acts concerning transnational terrorism in the United States. While my study draws from highly scrutinized historical events, I am able to gain a surreptitious view of threat construction by analyzing previously classified documents. Throughout the rest of this paper, I will utilize securitization theory's constructivist approach to terrorism in order to examine rhetoric as an underlying mechanism between security event and policy response. Additionally, I will apply the political psychology lens of issue framing through the use of fear and emotions as political tools in order to analyze the impact of specific rhetoric.

United States Counterterrorism Policy

American counterterrorism doctrine has changed significantly in the last half century as types of terrorist threats have changed over time. The United States was most concerned with state sponsors of terrorism prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union.[6] More recently, the United States grew increasingly threatened by independent terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and Hezbollah.[7] Counterterrorism policy usually begins with the issuance of confidential presidential directives to national security leadership. Later, public executive orders are released to explain broad security objectives.

Different federal agencies are assigned various roles in executing counterterrorism policy. For example, intelligence agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) aim to preemptively detect and prevent future terrorist attacks. Other agencies including the Department of Defense (DOD) execute military operations to offensively counter terrorists. United States defense and intelligence

[6] "The United States and Terrorism, 1968–2002: Threat and Response," *Digital National Security Archive*, 2002.
[7] Donald J. Trump, "National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America" (The White House, October 2018).

spending must be proposed and authorized by the president and Congress, but the true quantity of counterterrorism spending is unknown.[8]

It is impossible to derive a precise number for American counterterrorism spending because it spans the classified budgets of many different offices.[9] Additionally, counterterrorism spending is inclusive of foreign aid, dual-use military programs with the DOD, and other homeland security operations. Nevertheless, independent research groups such as the Stimson Center have been able to estimate governmentwide counterterrorism spending. The Stimson Center ran a study group in 2018 which found that total spending from 2002-2017 came to approximately $2.8 trillion. The relative share of counterterrorism spending as a proportion of total discretionary spending (annually appropriated funding from the federal government) has risen from under two percent in 2001 to a peak of twenty-two percent in 2008, though that proportion has since declined slightly.[10] Still, the counterterrorism industry has expanded so rapidly that it has been recognized as the primary growth industry in the United States since the early twenty-first century.[11]

The specific targets of counterterrorism spending remain unclear. The opacity of counterterrorism in the United States as a whole makes it difficult to build proper structures for transparency and accountability. Counterterrorism policy also lacks transparency because there is no clear government-wide definition for what constitutes terrorism. There is a well-documented debate on why terrorism is so difficult to define, and the repercussions it may have for public discourse and counterterrorism policy.

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[8] Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 8th ed. (Thousand Oaks: CQ Press, 2020); 64.
[9] Laicie Heeley et al., "Counterterrorism Spending: Protecting America While Promoting Efficiencies and Accountability" (Washington D.C.: Stimson Center, 2018).
[10] Heeley et al.
[11] Joseph Masco, *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); 198.

Defining Terrorism

There is no singular definition for terrorism that is agreed upon at the international level. The United Nations famously does not have a published definition for terrorism despite numerous attempts to establish a singular meaning.[12] Even at the national level, federal agencies in the United States also all have different formal definitions for terrorism. For example, the Department of Defense (DOD) defines terrorism as:

> The unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce individuals, governments or societies in pursuit of terrorist goals.[13]

Alternatively, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) defines terrorism as:

> Any activity involving a criminally unlawful act that is dangerous to human life or potentially destructive of critical infrastructure or key resources, and that appears intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, to influence government policy by intimidation or coercion, or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.[14]

These definitions share key words, including references to illegality, coercion, and influencing government policy. The definitions also vary significantly depending on whether they emphasize terrorist targets or methods. These variations are due to the different goals of each agency. The DOD is focused on offensive military action against terrorist groups, while the DHS aims to prevent terrorist attacks on home soil through defensive behavior. These goals explain why the DHS may choose to emphasize destruction of infrastructure while the DOD is more concerned with identifying terrorist groups based on their motivations. The differences between these

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[12] United Nations General Assembly, "The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy," Resolution, Sixtieth Session (New York: United Nations, September 20, 2006).
[13] Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*.
[14] "Department of Homeland Security Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence," September 2019; 40.

definitions also demonstrate how actors may frame terrorism in distinct ways in order to shape, justify, and carry out different goals and policies.

Despite confusion and lack of consensus on the definition for terrorism, it can still be clearly distinguished from other forms of illegal violence. Terrorism is nearly universally acknowledged to be rooted in political motives with the goal of achieving political change.[15] Terrorist groups or lone actors must have an organized ideological motivation to be classified as terrorists. Additionally, terrorism is meant to deliberately strike intimidation and fear into its target population. In short, terrorism involves generating power for a political outcome through publicity and mass psychological impact.[16]

Historically, evolving strategies for terrorism have also made it difficult to settle on a stable definition. Before the 1930s, terrorism primarily referred to revolutionary movements and violence against government institutions.[17] For example, there was significant popular dissatisfaction with European systems of empire before the World Wars. Representative cases include militant Armenian nationalist movements and Bosnian Serb intellectual groups that aimed to overthrow their prevailing systems of government. Later, terrorism was used to refer to totalitarian repression in countries such as Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Stalinist Russia.[18] The word *terror* did not have as negative of a connotation as it does today because it was primarily used to describe government abuses of power.

After World War II, many previously colonized states began to experience independence. Additionally, former communist-bloc countries began to develop their own systems of government. This period of instability gave rise to a popular new term for members of these

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[15] Luis de la Calle and Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Terrorism," *Politics and Society* 39, no. 3 (2011): 451–72.
[16] Hoffman, "Defining Terrorism."
[17] Hoffman.
[18] Hoffman.

national political movements: the freedom fighter. These individuals had more sympathizers and greater popular support because people considered them to be fighting for worthy and just causes. Thus, there was some controversy over their proper designation. The Palestine Liberation Organization's former chairman Yasir Arafat famously stated in a 1974 speech before the United Nations General Assembly that "the difference between the revolutionary and the terrorist lies in the reason for which each fights. For whoever stands by a just cause and fights for the freedom and liberation of his land from the invaders, the settlers and the colonialists cannot possibly be called terrorist."[19] Arafat's speech clarified public perception of the distinction between righteous revolutionaries and terrorists by introducing the element of morality. Finally, the September 11 attacks shifted global perception of terrorism once again. Al-Qaeda's attacks on the United States drew unprecedented international attention and made terrorism a highly prevalent global problem for all states.

The debate surrounding terrorism's definition is controversial in and of itself. Some scholars argue that a single coherent definition for terrorism is not necessary. They contend that debate over the inclusion or exclusion of certain aspects of terrorism's definition is irrelevant to practical discussion.[20] When we focus on defining terrorism, we miss the interesting point that we consistently recognize the occurrence of terrorism even across these heterogenous contexts. Still, it is important to examine why the definition of terrorism is so difficult to pin down. Since terrorism is a behavior predicated on emotional influence, terrorism-related language can also be used by political leaders to emotionally influence citizens and justify state behavior.[21] Definitions reflect the interests and moral assumptions of the actors who create and apply them.

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[19] Yasir Arafat, "Question of Palestine" (United Nations General Assembly Twenty-Ninth Session, New York, November 13, 1974).
[20] Gilbert Ramsay, "Why Terrorism Can, but Should Not Be Defined," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8, no. 2 (May 4, 2015): 211–28.
[21] Alex P Schmid, "The Definition of Terrorism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 39–157.

Threat Framing and the Politicization of Fear

Descriptions of terrorism become politicized when states frame their counterterrorism strategies. States may use metaphorical frameworks to simplify and present counterterrorism strategies to their citizens. Two of the major models used in the United States are the law enforcement metaphor and the war metaphor.[22] The law enforcement model is focused on the unacceptable and unlawful action of terrorism, rather than the terrorist actor. This model is limited in that it does not address terrorist recruitment and radicalization. It also does not acknowledge the political motivations behind terrorism. The war metaphor for counterterrorism is a totalistic and extreme model that was primarily implemented after September 11, but has roots from President Ronald Reagan's administration. It labels terrorists as an identifiable enemy with fundamentally opposing interests from the targeted state. The war model requires a zero-sum outcome. The state's ultimate goal is to reach an unequivocal victory against the terrorist group. The war narrative self-evidently encourages greater military spending, and invokes morality by framing counterterrorism as the fight for good over evil.[23] The war model is still heavily in use and is readily identifiable in American discourse on terrorism, particularly in light of the explicitly designated War on Terror.

Psychological models show that politicians can use such metaphors to justify the overuse of military force by politicizing the language of fear.[24] Politicization is especially likely when policymakers have committed themselves to controversial policies.[25] Fear broadens the base of support for policies that would ordinarily be seen as violations of democratic norms. Fearful

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[22] Arie Kruglanski et al., "What Should This Fight Be Called? Metaphors of Counterterrorism and Their Implications," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 8, no. 3 (December 2007): 97–133.
[23] Krista de Castella and Craig McGarty, "The War/Crime Narrative and Fear Content in Leaders Rhetoric About Terrorism," in *The Political Psychology of Terrorism Fears* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 85–106.
[24] Arthur Lupia and Jesse O Menning, "When Can Politicians Scare Citizens Into Supporting Bad Policies?," *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 1 (January 2009): 90–106.
[25] Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); 36.

voters are more likely to support aggressive security policy at home and hawkish security policy abroad.[26] Since September 11, extensive research has been published outlining the psychological and sociological impact of terrorism on the general public. Fear of terrorism has become normalized and widely accepted through the media, institutionalized security measures, and political discourse.[27] The culture of fear behind terrorism can be exacerbated by politicians and the media in a manner that actually results in less effective counterterrorism policies.[28] Politicians use rhetoric, or discourse designed to influence a public audience, to politicize preexisting fear and shape public opinion.[29] This process is known as threat inflation.

Threat inflation results in inconsistent and less productive counterterrorism policies. Ethan Bueno de Mesquita's celebrated game theory model of varying government, voter, and terrorist preferences demonstrates that secrecy requirements and missing information drive this inconsistency, particularly in regard to funding. Voters prefer observable and verifiable counterterrorism policies (e.g. airport security), which incentivizes politicians to overallocate resources towards observable counterterrorism measures for political expediency.[30] Observable counterterrorism can be productive, but its high visibility eventually makes it less effective compared to secret unobservable measures because terrorists can easily substitute novel methods.

Fearmongering by politicians and the media also creates a "terrorism industry" that imposes considerable economic and psychological penalties.[31] The terrorism industry

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[26] Daniel Byman, "Terrorism and the Threat to Democracy," in *Democracy and Disorder* (Brookings Institution, 2019).
[27] Richard Jackson, "The Politics of Terrorism Fears," in *The Political Psychology of Terrorism Fears* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 271.
[28] John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006).
[29] Debra Merskin, "The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-September 11 Discourse of George W. Bush," *Mass Communication and Society* 7, no. 2 (May 2004): 157–75.
[30] Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, "Politics and the Suboptimal Provision of Counterterror," *International Organization* 61, no. 01 (January 2007).
[31] Mueller, *Overblown*.

encompasses a large number of public and private actors, ranging from government agencies to private security companies, that all have a material interest in proliferating the cycle of fear.[32] American politicians are specifically motivated to promote expensive and exaggerated counterterrorism policies due to the country's expansive military-industrial complex, which further fuels the terrorism industry.[33] The terrorism industry's inordinate presence and escalating nature contributes to the normalization of fear, which increases citizen tolerance for extreme counterterrorism measures that may limit individual liberties and freedoms without improving public safety.

Civil Liberties in Liberal Democracies

Terrorism is especially complicated in the context of liberal democracies because democratic states are popular targets for terrorist attacks, but they face additional constraints in their counterterrorism responses. Robert Pape's seminal study on suicide terrorism finds that every modern suicide terrorist campaign since 1980 has targeted a democratic state. Suicide terrorist campaigns occasionally succeed in achieving limited territorial goals and striking fear at their target states. Nonetheless, they fail to reach their major political and ideological goals because liberal democracies refuse to concede on critical matters of national wealth or security.[34] Democratic states are generally less likely to use force against civilians, so democracies are perceived to be softer when it comes to retaliation. Democracies are placed in a precarious position of balancing preventative defensive measures with permissible offensive action. Democratic states may try to increase the range of permissible counterterrorism policy by

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[32] Richard Jackson, "The Politics of Terrorism Fears," 274.
[33] Benjamin H. Friedman, "Managing Fear: The Politics of Homeland Security," *Political Science Quarterly* 126, no. 1 (March 2011): 77–106.
[34] Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 03 (August 2003).

manipulating public fear to justify actions that would otherwise be unacceptable by democratic standards.

According to Franz Neumann's work in democratic political theory, manipulating fear to be the driving force of a political system invalidates liberal democracy.[35] Political power in liberal democracies relies on a careful balance between rule of law, political leadership, and the will of the people.[36] Maintaining civil liberties and rule of law is acutely vital for liberal democracies, as upholding these values is imperative to their very democratic identities.[37] The relationship between counterterrorism legislation and civil liberties repression varies across regime type. Countries with low to moderate levels of initial civil liberties repression (based on the Civil Liberties Dataset), were most likely to see liberties infringements in counterterrorism legislation.[38] The strongest democracies and most repressive regimes saw less of an effect.

But fearful manipulation is easily feasible during crisis situations.[39] When exceptionally fearful events like terrorist attacks take place, political leaders are granted the discretion to take emergency measures to defend national security. This discretion skews power into the hands of executive political leaders at the expense of legal procedures and public will. Thus, external fear of the terrorist enemy and internal fear driven by the government are both used to justify the suspension of legal rights central to democracy.[40] September 11 is one of the most frequently cited examples of a crisis that suffered the effects of threat inflation. Even though the United States is a democratic country, democratic public debate (or the "marketplace of ideas") failed to

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[35] Franz L Neumann, "The Concept of Political Freedom," *Columbia Law Review* 53, no. 7 (November 1953): 901–35.
[36] Jef Huysmans, "Minding Exceptions: The Politics of Insecurity and Liberal Democracy," *Contemporary Political Theory* 3, no. 3 (December 2004): 321–41.
[37] Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger, "The Consequences of Counterterrorist Policies in Israel," in *The Consequences of Counterterrorism*, ed. Martha Crenshaw (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010), 335–66.
[38] Shor et al.
[39] Benjamin Page and Marshall Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect: What Americans Want From Our Leaders but Don't Get*, American Politics and Political Economy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).
[40] Huysmans, "Minding Exceptions."

temper threat inflation.[41] The politicization of intelligence is actually more likely in democracies because leaders are incentivized to retain domestic support.[42] Given his presidential status, President George W. Bush had the advantages of authority and credibility to effectively manipulate issue framing. Additionally, Bush Jr.'s administration had control over what classified intelligence information was released. This manipulation of threat framing contributed to the rushed passage of restrictive laws, including the USA PATRIOT Act. The PATRIOT Act has been heavily criticized for its violation of the rights to privacy, free speech, free assembly, and free movement purportedly justified by the new crisis environment, such as the expansion of surveillance over American citizens.[43]

Human rights discourse has generally evolved past the view that national security must stand in direct opposition to civil liberties. In contrast to war-based threat framing, the balance of human rights and national security is not necessarily a zero-sum game. Instead, human rights scholars argue that security strategies should aim to minimize harm reduction by exercising proportionality.[44] In the new field of coercive human rights, states view the provision of national security as its own obligatory civil right, and human rights discourse is used to enhance security instead of limiting its execution.[45]

Regardless, most surveyed Americans are willing to suffer some reduction of civil liberties for improved national security. Some are even willing to voluntarily give up their freedoms in exchange for protection against terrorism, but the greatest harm tends to fall on

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[41] Charles Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security* 29, no. 1 (2004): 5–48.
[42] Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence*; 198.
[43] Eran Shor et al., "Counterterrorist Legislation and Respect for Civil Liberties: An Inevitable Collision?," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 5 (May 4, 2018): 339–64.
[44] Benjamin Goold and Liora Lazarus, eds., *Security and Human Rights*, 2nd ed., Hart Studies in Security and Justice (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2019).
[45] Goold and Lazarus; 6.

minority groups with less say in security policy.[46] Minorities are disproportionately likely to suffer from discriminatory practices and rights violations, including greater surveillance and crackdowns on free speech.[47] War-based terrorism rhetoric has specifically harmed Arabs and Muslims in the United States by drawing on stereotypes in enemy construction.[48] Stringent policing and limiting human rights in the name of counterterrorism reduce institutional trust and state legitimacy. These policies may then ultimately backfire, as their alienating effects have been found to contribute to increased violence and radicalization.[49]

Securitization Theory

Securitization theorists view the concept of security through a process-driven constructivist approach instead of as an objective condition. In the field of securitization theory, a security situation is constructed using rhetorical descriptions of security through "speech acts."[50] In other words, any type of threat can be framed as a security threat if it is verbally described as an "existential threat" against a group or society.[51] Framing an issue as an existential threat securitizes the issue by establishing an enemy "other" and raising the issue's level of urgency. Countering the threat becomes a matter of survival. The securitization of an issue is linked to its politicization because the use of emotional and existential rhetoric is central to the framing of a security situation.

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[46] Nadine Strossen, "Terrorism's Toll on Civil Liberties," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 9, no. 3–4 (April 18, 2005): 365–77.
[47] Strossen.
[48] Merskin, "The Construction of Arabs as Enemies."
[49] Hasisi, Perry, and Wolfowicz, "Counter-Terrorism Effectiveness and Human Rights in Israel."
[50] Michael C. Williams, "Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (December 2003): 511–31.
[51] Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Pub., 1998).

The main branch of this theoretical approach to international security is known as the Copenhagen School and originates with the work of Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. The theory was developed to accommodate a broader view of security after the Cold War to account for non-traditional threats, such as technological hacks, pandemics, and climate change. Political actors can choose to make any issue a security threat. The decision to frame an issue using threat construction in public discourse thereby creates the threat.[52] Much like threat manipulation during crisis situations, securitization is achieved by using rhetoric that signifies a crisis and calling for extraordinary measures to be taken in response. Critics of securitization theory cite the exclusionary nature of defining a society by a common enemy, and argue that prescribing a country's identity based on who is not a member of that society invites hateful behavior and the formation of structural inequalities.[53]

Since securitization theory is still an emerging discipline, the field has continued to evolve since its origins in the Copenhagen School. For example, Thierry Balzacq agrees with Buzan and Waever that the politics of security has a strong discursive component, but Balzacq does not find it possible to determine causality between rhetoric and security through speech acts alone.[54] Balzacq promotes a methodology that assesses levels of congruence between an actor's securitizing strategy, the audience's frame of reference, and the situational context to assess whether a situation has been securitized. Other scholars have supported Balzacq's call for a context-sensitive approach that takes a more nuanced view of threat construction and acknowledges power dynamics between actors.[55] In my own research design, I take a similar

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[52] Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde.
[53] Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit, "Is Securitization Theory Racist? Civilizationism, Methodological Whiteness, and Antiblack Thought in the Copenhagen School," *Security Dialogue* 51, no. 1 (February 2020): 3–22.
[54] Thierry Balzacq, "The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context," *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2005): 171–201.
[55] Dagmar Rychnovska, "Securitization and the Power of Threat Framing," *Perspectives: Central European Review of International Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2014): 9–31.

approach to Balzacq by assessing the context-dependent relationship between threat construction and audience in the use of terrorism rhetoric.

Methods

I conducted archival research to extract a range of primary source documents and speeches that highlight four qualitative case studies of critical terrorism-related events in American history. They range in time from President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), President George H.W. Bush (1989-1993), President Bill Clinton (1993-2001), and President George W. Bush's (2001-2009) administrations. The Reagan era was a notable time period to begin with because it is associated with the first formalized United States policy directives on terrorism. Reagan was also the first American president to call for a "war on terrorism."[56] Though American counterterrorism policy has continued to evolve since Bush Jr.'s administration, my research was limited to this time period because there is insufficient declassified documentation after this date.

In order to compare the two data components of declassified secret information and openly public information, I collected many types of primary sources. In the former category, these sources consist of officially declassified documents released by intelligence agencies and executive government offices. They include internal memorandums, briefing points, reports, and policy directives that authenticate covert action and provide insight into rhetoric construction. Leaked information could also be found in newspapers and other media outlets from the time of the events. Oftentimes, this information was later confirmed by documents that were declassified years later. The latter category of sources consists of public speeches and statements made by

[56] Richard Jackson, "Security, Democracy, and the Rhetoric of Counter-Terrorism," *Democracy and Security* 1, no. 2 (July 2005): 147–71.

presidents that were published through collections of public papers and accessed through their respective presidential libraries. Many of these speeches were addressed to the American public through television or radio broadcasts. A full list of cited primary sources can be found in Appendix A.

Declassified Document Collection

In the United States, national security documents are declassified in a few different processes. Presidential Executive Order 13526, which was signed by President Barack Obama in 2009, defines the classification system and safeguarding practices of all national security documents.[57] Documents are classified by level of sensitivity as either confidential, secret, or top secret. Some documents are automatically declassified after a specific amount of time has elapsed, typically either ten or twenty-five years. Other documents can be declassified upon request through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) if the document's secrecy is no longer deemed necessary to protect national security.[58] Despite this rigorous and systematic declassification process, there is no single repository that stores and organizes all declassified government documents in the United States. Instead, a nonprofit research foundation known as the National Security Archive independently files FOIA requests, and also operates and manages the largest archive of government documents outside the federal government.[59] The National Security Archive is operated under The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and receives no government funding. I chose to utilize the National Security Archive's repository because it contains the largest unbiased collection of digitized declassified documents. While

[57] Barack Obama, "President Executive Order 13526," Classified Security Information (The White House, December 29, 2009).
[58] "FOIA Improvement Act of 2016," Pub. L. No. 114–185 (2016).
[59] "About the National Security Archive," accessed March 9, 2021, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/about.

declassified documents can be obtained from other sources and collections, the National Security Archive is comprehensive, nonpartisan, and carefully indexed by topic instead of by physical box location. Due to the limitations of COVID-19, I was unable to travel or request physical copies of the archived documents. I gained access to the Digital National Security Archive database through ProQuest and the University of Chicago Library.

Following the attacks on September 11, 2001, the National Security Archive created a collection titled "Terrorism and U.S. Policy: 1968-2002." The collection contains documents on terrorism and United States policy from sources including FOIA reading rooms, congressional reports, and various federal agencies (including the Department of State, Department of Defense, Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Council, and more). Furthermore, the National Security Archive's briefing book contains pieces of journalism and other reports that are not official government documents, but contain uncovered information that had been intentionally unconfirmed. The scope of this collection runs from the years 1968 to 2002, but the Digital National Security Archive also contains a limited number of declassified documents after 2002. Declassified documents from after this date are still heavily restricted based on declassification procedure and to protect national security. The total number of documents in the collection totals over 1500. I narrowed the search to documents that explicitly pertain to terrorism by searching for the keywords terror, terrorism, and terrorist. This allowed me to maintain a focus on terrorism-related rhetoric and the implications of the word *terror* itself. A breakdown of the number of available documents per presidential era can be found in Table 1.

President	Document Year Range	Number of Documents	Documents Referring to Terror OR Terrorism OR Terrorist
Ronald Reagan	1981-1989	320	204
George H.W. Bush	1989-1993	100	50
Bill Clinton	1993-2001	184	140
George W. Bush	2001-2002	247	134

Table 1: Declassified Document Breakdown

Public Document Collection

Presidential speeches and statements have always been public information. The National Archives and Records Administration manages the Presidential Library System. Each of the most recent fifteen presidents have a presidential library. The libraries serve as repositories of each president's records, documents, and other historical information for research purposes and general public appreciation.

To access these public documents, I repeated the same search terms for terror, terrorist, and terrorism in the public papers database of each presidential library. Since the Presidential Library System is not consistently indexed like the National Security Archive, I constructed my own list of relevant speeches and records based on the time period of the terrorist attack that I selected for each case study.

Case Selection

Instead of conducting a general analysis of each president's terrorism rhetoric, I chose to conduct specific qualitative case studies within each presidential period. I carried out a word-level discourse analysis to assess the relationship between internal strategy and public

rhetoric in the context of each case. Using case studies allowed me to highlight language choice in individual speeches and texts while accounting for the temporally extended effects of terrorist attacks. The effects of each terrorist attack are not constrained to a specific time period. For instance, even though the 1998 East African embassy bombings took place on a single date, ensuing counterterrorism policies were implemented at numerous points in the future. Additionally, the bombings were referred to in speeches for years afterwards. Focusing on each case at the event-level permitted a more extensive accounting of each event and provided greater historical context.

I determined my case selection based on the availability of declassified documents. I selected the case that was mentioned the most times in the National Security Archive's collection during each presidential administration for two reasons. First, there is still a limited number of declassified documents related to terrorism. Terrorism remains a major threat to national security in the United States, so many documents still have not been released or are heavily redacted. Attacks with greater documentation were more valuable for my research because there was a greater selection of language to analyze. Second, attacks with greater documentation also indicate greater concern, salience, and importance. Minor attacks are rarely addressed at the presidential level, while major attacks are more likely to see direct White House involvement. Major attacks are also more likely to be of public concern, which is relevant for my inquiry into public framing and presentation. To access additional relevant documents on each case that may not have been included in the original "Terrorism and U.S. Policy, 1968-2002" collection, I also searched for documents on each event within the broader Digital National Security Archive database.

I chose to analyze one major case from each presidential period in order to track the change in terrorism rhetoric over time while accounting for variations in each president's rhetoric and communication style. One limitation of this method is that the quantity and severity of terrorist attacks varied significantly between administrations. For example, Clinton's presidency from 1993 to 2001 was marked by several major attacks. They included (but were not limited to) the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 1998 East African embassy bombings, and the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole. On the other hand, there were no major transnational terrorist attacks against Americans during Bush Sr.'s presidency from 1989 to 1993. Rather than skip Bush Sr.'s administration, I accounted for this limitation by analyzing continued concern about American hostages in Lebanon from the Reagan administration. This was also a logical choice due to Bush's work on the hostage situation as Reagan's vice president.

Another limitation of conducting case studies is the risk of cherry-picking case selection. The initial stage of data collection helped me mitigate this risk. I avoided using preconceived notions of each president's counterterrorism policies by basing case selection solely on available documentation from an independent database. For example, the Iran-Contra scandal during Reagan's administration received significant public attention and is related to terrorism policy, but the majority of available private documentation is centered on legality rather than terrorism rhetoric. Since the focus of my research is on terrorism rhetoric comparison, the available data self-selected against this otherwise significant case. Additionally, the case study method allowed me to analyze the full scope of the data. The available number of documents was sufficiently limited, so I was able to manually read every text.

Findings and Analysis

Based on a comparison of private and public language on terrorism, has the United States government's public position towards terrorism differed from private directives? What accounts for these similarities and dissimilarities? In this section, I analyze the construction of public rhetoric through internal counterterrorism strategy across these four case studies. I use discourse analysis to compare internal government discussions of terrorist attacks with their public presentation. I also examine the political impact of these framing strategies and explain the resulting implications for the American public.

My research finds that public statements rarely differed from private directives and discussion. Based on the available documents, private and public statements did not directly contradict one another. Rather, covert counterterrorism discussion was frequently used to prime public response for more forceful counterterrorism measures and justify tactics that are controversial by democratic standards. Threat inflation was amplified using fear-based rhetoric, war-based language, and existential threat framing.

The overarching counterterrorism strategy in response to each event was generally consistent with its presentation to the American public. Occasional divergence between overt and covert counterterrorism policies indicated intentional ambiguity or lack of transparency to allow for a broader range of policy options. The most significant variance occurred when covert operations violated standard democratic norms or would be perceived negatively by the public. For example, President Ronald Reagan publicly banned assassinations in a 1981 directive, yet carried out lethal air strikes against Libyan terrorists in 1986. This was not a customary counterterrorism response at the time and went against public expectations. Additionally, President George H.W. Bush contended with a lack of public trust when handling the Lebanon

hostage crisis following his association with the Iran-Contra scandal, which involved secretive negotiations with Iran (a state sponsor of terrorism). However, September 11 marked a shift in public acceptance of harsh counterterrorism tactics. Enhanced war-based rhetoric and more intensive framing of terrorism as an existential threat to the United States and American values increased demand for militant and pervasive counterterrorism. Language in controversial policies, such as the PATRIOT Act, was openly publicized. Criticism of the policy only reached its apex after the public fully realized the scope of its implementation.[60] Finally, President George W. Bush justified the use of military force and expanded securitization by constructing an ambiguous anti-American enemy.

Some quotations have been altered from the original text through bolded emphases. These emphases have been added in the analysis to highlight salient portions of the original documents. A comprehensive list of all primary sources, including their original classifications, can be found in Appendix A in order of citation. Sample images of noteworthy documents and those with handwritten components can be found in Appendix B.

Ronald Reagan (1981-1989): Action Against Libya

Libyan state-sponsored terrorism was a major overarching terrorist threat in the 1980s during President Ronald Reagan's administration. Led by Muammar Qadhafi, Libya encountered intense hostilities with other states due to military interventions and global assassinations of political critics. Libya also harbored and supported terrorist and guerilla organizations, ranging as disparately from the Irish Republic Army to Abu Nidal.[61] Reagan anticipated Libya's threat to American national security early in his presidency. He issued the top secret document *National*

[60] Shor et al., "Counterterrorist Legislation and Respect for Civil Liberties."
[61] "The United States and Terrorism, 1968–2002: Threat and Response."

Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 16: Economic and Security Decisions for Libya to his senior officials on December 10, 1981. This directive preliminarily advised Reagan's cabinet members to begin developing embargos and military measures against Libya. The directive also created a task force on Libya between the State Department and White House to manage future decision-making.[62] Notably, military steps and responses did not yet allude to any use of force. At this point, the United States did not consider the Libyan threat to require military intervention.

By 1984, Reagan's administration became increasingly concerned by state-sponsored terrorism and attacks on American citizens and infrastructure. Top secret NSDD 138 charged the Director of Central Intelligence, coordinator of all United States intelligence activities, with increasing intelligence gathering and analysis against state-sponsored terrorist organizations. The Director of Central Intelligence was told to:

> Provide a new finding on combatting terrorism which includes, inter alia, lawful measures to…: Unilaterally and/or in concert with other countries **neutralize or counter terrorist organizations and terrorist leaders**… This plan shall be fully consistent with all provisions of **Executive Order 12333**.[63]

Executive Order 12333 was a publicly released order by Reagan in 1981 that included a prohibition on assassination, stating that "no person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, assassination."[64] Since the terms of assassination were not explicitly defined, the specific circumstances under which political use of force would be permitted in non-war situations remained unclear.

In 1985, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich sent a private memorandum to Reagan advising him to "apply the **classic art of war** to planning American strategies against

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[62]"Economic and Security Decisions for Libya," National Security Decision Directive 16 (The White House, December 10, 1981).
[63] Ronald Reagan, "Combatting Terrorism," National Security Decision Directive 138 (The White House, April 3, 1984).
[64] "United States Intelligence Activities," Executive Order 12333 (The White House, December 4, 1981).

terrorism."[65] Gingrich believed that existing counterterrorism measures were too focused on short-term matters, and that the rising threat of state-sponsored terrorism required stronger measures that could only be adopted with updated institutional permissions. Gingrich questioned,

> What **institutional and legal changes** are necessary to enable the United States to effectively **wage war on terrorism?** Now is the time to **repeal the liberal welfare state prohibitions on intelligence agencies**, on police training in the third world, etc… Our first goals should be mobilizing American power, **educating the American people** and passing decisive changes in our national security laws. Then, if we still have not achieved success… we will be at a **peak of political, military, and diplomatic readiness** to use **overwhelming force with overwhelming public support** to achieve a **clearly stated strategic goal.**[66]

Gingrich's memorandum explicitly mentioned the intelligence prohibitions in Executive Order 12333. He argued that intelligence agencies should be granted greater discretion over covert use of force. Additionally, Gingrich pushed Reagan to consider "educating" the American public on the severity of the terrorist situation to prepare them for forceful measures in case they ultimately became necessary. This would allow Reagan to have a broader range of policy options outside of economic sanctions if the United States needed to take retaliatory measures after a Libyan attack.

Just a few weeks after receiving Gingrich's memorandum, Reagan spoke at the Annual Convention of the American Bar Association. Reagan heeded Gingrich's advice on applying war rhetoric and principles, as evidenced by Reagan's first open comparison of terrorist attacks to acts of war. Reagan publicly described Libya as a terrorist state and affirmed:

> Yes, their real goal is to **expel America from the world**. And that is the reason these terrorist nations are arming, training, and supporting attacks against this nation. And that is why we can be clear on one point: these terrorist states are now engaged in **acts of war** against the government and people of the United States. **And under international law,**

[65] Newt Gingrich, "Lessons of the Art of War; Attached to Cover Letter Dated June 27, 1985; Includes Memorandum Entitled The 1985 Hostage Crisis and the Lessons of Desert I and Past Lebanon Insurrections," June 27, 1985.
[66] Gingrich.

any state which is the victim of acts of war has the right to defend itself.[67]

Reagan utilized existential threat framing by stating that Libya's goal was to "expel America from the world."[68] As described in securitization theory, Reagan's statement used emotive language to set the United States in opposition to Libya. Reagan stated that the rationale for Libyan antagonism was to wipe American people and institutions from existence. This was a departure from previous vague and imprecise depictions of the Libyan threat environment.[69]

Furthermore, Reagan's decision to begin using the war metaphor for Libya's terrorist activities had immediate legal and military implications. When Reagan defined Libyan terrorism as an explicit act of war rather than a more subjective display of violence, he identified Libya as a clear enemy that the United States could permissibly target. Reagan made reference to international law to emphasize that acts of self-defense are subject to different permissions for force than offensive action. This sent a distinct message to both Libya and the American public. Reagan's speech informed Libya that any attack on the United States or its citizens would be met with a swift, forceful, and justified response. It also motivated and prepared Americans to support the use of physical force against Libya. In Gingrich's words, Reagan would be prepared to use "overwhelming force with overwhelming public support."[70]

The following year brought multiple strong displays of violence from Libya and Libyan sponsors. Terrorists attacked airports in Rome and Vienna on December 27, 1985, which resulted in the deaths of nine Americans and ten others. Over one hundred additional people were injured. Though intelligence connected Libya with funding the attack, Libya praised the attack without

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[67] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the American Bar Association" (Washington D.C., July 8, 1985).
[68] Reagan.
[69] Ronald Reagan, "Interview With Representatives of the Washington Times."
[70] Gingrich, "Lessons of the Art of War; Attached to Cover Letter Dated June 27, 1985; Includes Memorandum Entitled The 1985 Hostage Crisis and the Lessons of Desert I and Past Lebanon Insurrections."

claiming responsibility.[71] Reagan chose to impose economic sanctions against Libya, but he was not immediately prepared to take openly offensive military measures. Still, Reagan covertly introduced military operations in international waters near Libya. In top secret NSDD 205, he stated:

> I have determined that the policies and actions in support of international terrorism by the Government of Libya constitute an **unusual and extraordinary threat** to the national security and foreign policy of the United States...
>
> Near-term **military deployments** shall signal U.S. resolve, reduce the potential risk to American citizens in Libya, **heighten the readiness of U.S. forces to conduct military action**, and **create uncertainty regarding U.S. intentions.**[72]

This private directive reaffirmed Libya as an existential threat to the United States. The covert military operation also intentionally raised strategic ambiguity while preparing forces for more forceful future action.

On April 5, 1986, compelling intelligence showed that Libyan terrorists under Qadhafi were directly responsible for bombing the La Belle Club in Berlin. The nightclub was popular with American servicemen. An American soldier was killed, and over 75 of the 230 injured individuals were American citizens.[73] This event finally provided the impetus for Reagan to take decisive forceful action because he could invoke the right to self-defense. The following week, the United States engaged in offensive air strikes against terrorist facilities and military assets inside Libya.[74] Qadhafi and his family were located in the Azizia barracks compound, one of the targeted sites. The family successfully escaped, besides Qadhafi's reported adopted daughter.[75]

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[71] Judy G Endicott, "Raid on Libya: Operation El Dorado Canyon," in *Short of War: Major USAF Contingency Operations 1947-1997*, ed. A. Timothy Warnock (Washington D.C.: Air University Press, 2000), 145–56.
[72] Ronald Reagan, "Acting Against Libyan Support of International Terrorism," National Security Decision Directive 205 (The White House, January 8, 1986).
[73] Steven Erlanger, "4 Guilty in Fatal 1986 Berlin Disco Bombing Linked to Libya," *The New York Times*, November 14, 2001.
[74] Ronald Reagan, "Counter-Terrorist Operations Against Libya," National Security Decision Directive 224 (The White House, April 12, 1986).
[75] "The United States and Terrorism, 1968–2002: Threat and Response."

Reagan clearly expressed his goal to minimize casualties among civilians, but thirty-seven Libyan civilians were killed.[76] The plan for this operation can be found in the declassified document *NSDD 224: Counter-Terrorist Operations Against Libya*, but significant portions of this security directive are redacted. Immediately following the execution of the air strikes, known as Operation El Dorado Canyon, Reagan addressed the retaliatory attack in a public speech with members of the American Business Conference. He stated:

> Yesterday the United States won but a single engagement in the **long battle against terrorism**. We will not end that struggle until the free and decent people of this planet unite to **eradicate the scourge of terror** from the modern world…
>
> Yesterday we demonstrated once again that doing **nothing is not America's policy; it's not America's way. America's policy has been and remains to use only force as a last result - or resort**, I should say. We would prefer not to have to repeat the events of last night. What is required is for Libya to end its pursuit of terror for political goals. The choice is theirs.[77]

Reagan recognized that using force was not a popular policy option, but justified it based on the existential threat posed by Libya. Talking points provided to administration spokespeople following the attack stressed the "repeated warnings" Reagan gave Qadhafi before resorting to force.[78] Reagan emphasized the use of force as a last resort once more in a national television and radio broadcast where he stated, "We Americans are slow to anger. We always seek peaceful avenues **before resorting to the use of force** - and we did. We tried quiet diplomacy, public condemnation, economic sanctions, and demonstrations of military force."[79] The American air strikes were presented to the public as a retaliatory tactic following the La Belle bombing, but Reagan's war-based reference to a "long battle against terrorism" implied the additional use of force in the future.

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[76] Endicott, "Raid on Libya: Operation El Dorado Canyon."
[77] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a White House Meeting With Members of the American Business Conference" (The White House, April 15, 1986).
[78] Tom Gibson, "Talking Points on U.S. Action in Libya" (The White House, April 16, 1986).
[79] Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the United States Air Strike Against Libya" (The White House, April 14, 1986).

In all, Reagan's approach to public terrorism rhetoric marked a shift from past presidents based on his invocation of the war metaphor. War framing was recommended by Gingrich in internal directives, indicating an agreement between declassified internal documents and publicized counterterrorism strategy. Reagan openly acknowledged the use of American air strikes against Libyan targets. However, private directives also show that Reagan's administration took advantage of ambiguous existing policy to expand the use of covert action by intelligence agencies and military strikes involving human targets. Reagan's eventual use of force as a last resort came about after multiple efforts to inform the public about the threat's severity. Reagan used existential threat framing in order to justify future military action, even before it was considered to be necessary.

George H.W. Bush (1989-1993): The Continued Lebanon Hostage Crisis

During President George H.W. Bush's administration, there were no major transnational terrorist incidents on American soil or against American citizens. Furthermore, only one known counterterrorism-related presidential directive was published. To this day, it has not been declassified.[80] Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for its release have been denied, and even its title is unverified. Updates on United States policy towards Libya during Bush's administration have also not been declassified. Nevertheless, as President Ronald Reagan's vice president and the leader of his counterterrorism task force, Bush was highly familiar and experienced with counterterrorism policy and implementation.

References to terrorism in public records and available declassified documents primarily center around the ongoing Lebanon hostage crisis that began during Reagan's administration. Throughout the 1980s, numerous American citizens were taken into captivity in Lebanon by the

[80] "The United States and Terrorism, 1968–2002: Threat and Response."

terrorist organization Hezbollah, which had ties to Iran. In 1986, during Reagan's second term, news broke to the public that the United States had been transferring "small amounts of defensive weapons and spare parts for defensive systems to Iran" in indirect exchange for the return of American hostages.[81] Iran had been designated as a state sponsor of terrorism since 1984, so this directly conflicted with American policy against conceding to terrorists during negotiations. Reagan's administration initially denied the extent of this relationship, but a report by the Tower Commission (a presidentially commissioned special review board) determined that the United States had been selling weapons to Iran in an arms-for-hostages exchange.[82] After the report's release, Reagan admitted in a public address to the nation that:

> Your **trust** is what gives a President his powers of leadership and his personal strength, and it's what I want to talk to you about this evening… A few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that's true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not. As the Tower board reported, **what began as a strategic opening to Iran deteriorated, in its implementation, into trading arms for hostages.** [83]

As Reagan's vice president and counterterrorism task force leader, Bush was also directly implicated in the scandal. American hostages still remained in Lebanon, but the scandal's impact continued into Bush's presidency. In his final days as president, Bush pardoned six individuals who had been charged in the affair.[84]

Some knowledge of the Iran-Contra affair is critical for understanding Bush's approach to the hostage crisis during his presidency, but the remainder of this section will focus on how Bush's administration responded to specific incidents of the Lebanon hostage crisis. At the time

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[81] Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy" (The White House, November 13, 1986).
[82] John Tower, Edmund Muskie, and Brent Scowcroft, *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the President's Special Review Board* (New York: Random House, 1987).
[83] Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy" (The White House, March 4, 1987).
[84] Lawrence E. Walsh, "Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters" (United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, August 4, 1993); 473.

of Bush's inauguration in 1989, nine known Americans remained in captivity in Lebanon. Bush acknowledged the continued crisis in his inaugural address by stating, "There are today Americans who are held against their will in foreign lands and Americans who are unaccounted for. Assistance can be shown here and will be long remembered. **Goodwill begets goodwill**."[85] Bush repeated this sentiment to reporters after one American hostage, Colonel William Higgins, was executed by his Hezbollah captors on July 31, 1989:

> I'm not talking about terms; I'm talking about talking to get people out that are held against their will. And I think I covered that pretty well in my inaugural address when I said **goodwill will beget goodwill**. And if ever there was a clearer signal, in my view, that's it… And my view is to make the **statements unconflicting**, and my view is to do **nothing that will be seen as a quid pro quo for hostages**.[86]

Higgins had been captured while serving on a peacekeeping mission for the United Nations. Three days before Higgins' execution, Israeli soldiers had captured South Lebanon Hezbollah's second-in-command Abdel Karim Obeid. Israel alleged that Obeid had been involved in Higgins' initial kidnapping. Higgins' death was reported as a response to Obeid's capture.[87] Bush was careful to affirm that no direct deals or concessions would be made for the remaining hostages, and that efforts towards their return to the United States would depend on international diplomacy. This was corroborated in secret memorandums on planned retaliation that state, "We make no concessions to terrorists holding official or private American citizens hostage. This policy is the **firm position** of our government and is **strongly supported by the American public**."[88] But during private planning of how Higgins' murder would be presented to the press, State Department legal advisor Abraham Sofaer suggested that:

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[85] George H.W. Bush, "Inaugural Address" (The Capitol, January 20, 1989).
[86] George H.W. Bush, "Informal Exchange With Reporters" (The White House, August 9, 1989).
[87] Riad Kahwaji, "American Hostage's Life Threatened in Retaliation for Israeli Kidnapping," *Associated Press*, July 30, 1989.
[88] Abraham Sofaer, "U.S. Reaction to Israeli Action Against Obeid" (Department of State, August 2, 1989).

> Allowing the media and others to lump all these actions together as 'hostage-takings' obscures the difference between a crime and the seizure of a criminal, and will make **justification of any future action** which involves a 'snatch' on foreign territory difficult… Capture and interrogation of an individual engaged in criminal terrorist activities against the citizens and territory of a state may be proper and appropriate under **international law**, from both a **self-defense** and law enforcement perspective. We need to **protect these legitimate options**, and must therefore make the distinctions known at the appropriate time.[89]

Sofaer wanted to ensure that terrorist hostage-taking and Obeid's capture were presented very differently to the public so that future counterterrorism action involving terrorist capture would not be met with public backlash. The State Department decided against explicitly including Sofaer's suggestions in the final talking points, as the United States was still awaiting details from Israel on Obeid's capture and did not want to jeopardize the lives of other American hostages. Still, Bush chose to speak with ambiguity on Obeid. Future attempts by Iran and Hezbollah to leverage Obeid's release for the release of American hostages failed. The United States privately informed Israel that "we will not make any deals, nor will we let Iran maneuver us into the position of pressuring you [on Obeid]."[90]

Bush continued to assert this consistent policy against making deals with terrorists both in public and in private, including in an exchange with reporters after the release of hostage Robert Polhill:[91]

> I'm not making gestures. **I don't trade for hostages**. I don't go 'ante up' one step and one another. I rejoice at this release. And the **American policy is sound, and it's not going to change**. And I will thank those who facilitated the release, and that's exactly the way it's going to stay.[92]

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[89] Sofaer.
[90] E.A. Wayne, "Terrorism and Hostages Background Talking Points" (U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Counter-Terrorism, April 5, 1991).
[91] Kamal Beyoghlow, "Q's and A's Hizballah and Iran" (Department of State, January 1990).
[92] George H.W. Bush, "Remarks on the Release of Former Hostage Robert Polhill and an Exchange With Reporters" (The White House, April 22, 1990).

In a private memorandum to Bush, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft continued to express caution against overstepping in discussion with Iran "lest we find ourselves negotiating and accepting conditions despite our many assertions to the contrary."[93] Instead, Bush spent the remainder of the Lebanon hostage crisis working with United Nations Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar and Assistant Secretary-General Giandomenico Picco to resolve the matter through international diplomacy. The final American hostage, Terry Anderson, was finally released in December 1991.[94]

Following Bush's affiliation with Reagan's Iran-Contra scandal, both public and private records of his management of the continued hostage crisis indicate Bush's efforts to gain public trust. High consistency between public and private documents demonstrates greater transparency from the previous administration. Additionally, both internal directives and public statements indicate attempts to improve the consistency of American counterterrorism policy as a whole. Bush's establishment of a firm public American policy position against terrorism would continue into future administrations. Despite this bid for consistency, internal directives still discuss the need for ambiguous public language to limit future backlash against contentious policies.

Bill Clinton (1993-2001): East African Embassy Bombings

In contrast to President H.W. Bush's term, President Bill Clinton's administration was marked by multiple severe terrorist attacks. Additionally, the extremist terrorist organization al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden began to pose a demonstrable threat to the United States for the first time. In 1993, only a month after Clinton took office, a truck bomb was detonated under the World Trade Center that killed six people and injured over a thousand. Other

[93] Brent Scowcroft, "Possible Release of Hostage Frank H. Reed" (The White House, April 29, 1990).
[94] George H.W. Bush, "Statement on the Release of American Hostages in Lebanon" (The White House, December 4, 1991).

significant attacks include the 1998 bombings of United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole by al-Qaeda.[95] Given the relationship between these attacks, it can be difficult to untangle precisely where private discussion of one terrorist event ends and the other begins. Most declassified documents consisted of reports and secret policies, compared to a relatively limited number of letters and memorandums. Nonetheless, the most documented case during Clinton's administration was the simultaneous United States embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.

Due to the prevalence of terrorist attacks early in Clinton's presidency, Clinton conducted a considerable overhaul of United States counterterrorism policy to expand existing programs and strengthen coordination. In 1995, Clinton issued the secret *Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 39: U.S. Policy on Counterterrorism.* Though the directive begins by prioritizing the deterrence of terrorism through law enforcement and diplomatic activity, it notably maintains that "we [the United States] also reserve the option to act unilaterally, when necessary, to **preempt**, or **punish** terrorist attacks."[96] Clinton followed up this directive with two more PDDs on May 22, 1998 that acknowledged growing fears of unconventional terrorist capabilities, such as technological attacks and terrorist acquisition of weapons of mass destruction.[97] Once again, these directives stressed the ability of the United States to use "**preemption and disruption**" abroad, as opposed to only defensive or retaliatory measures.[98]

On August 7, 1998, al-Qaeda operatives simultaneously bombed the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The attacks killed a total of over 300 people, of which most were

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[95] "The United States and Terrorism, 1968–2002: Threat and Response."
[96] William J Clinton, "U.S. Policy on Counterterrorism," Presidential Decision Directive 39 (The White House, June 21, 1995).
[97] William J Clinton, "Critical Infrastructure Protection," Presidential Decision Directive 63 (The White House, May 22, 1998).
[98] William J Clinton, "Protection Against Unconventional Threats to the Homeland and Americans Overseas," Presidential Decision Directive 62 (The White House, May 22, 1998).

Kenyan and thirteen were American.[99] Clinton emphasized that his response would involve severe and long-term measures towards retaliation and justice. He stated in his initial remarks, "We will use all the means at our disposal to bring those responsible to justice, **no matter what or how long it takes**."[100] During Clinton's radio address to the nation the next day, he reaffirmed that "**no matter how long it takes or where it takes us**, we will pursue terrorists until the cases are solved and justice is done."[101] These statements primed the public for long-term use of force.

On August 20, 1998, Clinton took multiple public measures against Osama bin Laden. First, he updated his 1995 Executive Order on *Prohibiting Transactions With Terrorists Who Threaten to Disrupt the Middle East Peace Process* to include restrictions on bin Laden and al-Qaeda. This measure aimed to block terrorist financing by freezing any financial holdings by United States citizens and residents with terrorists on the "Specially Designated Terrorists" (SDTs) list.[102] The Department of Defense also conducted a series of missile strikes known as Operation Infinite Reach. The missiles targeted al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan and a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan that was believed to be involved in chemical weaponry. Clinton's administration invoked self-defense through international law under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, and justified the attack under United States law by claiming to target infrastructure.[103] Still, declassified materials from the Central Intelligence Agency and verification from the later published 9/11 Commission Report corroborate that the goal had been

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[99] "The United States and Terrorism, 1968–2002: Threat and Response."
[100] William J Clinton, "Remarks on Signing the Workforce Investment Act of 1998" (The White House, August 7, 1998).
[101] William J Clinton, "The President's Radio Address" (The White House, August 8, 1998).
[102] William J Clinton, "Prohibiting Transactions With Terrorists Who Threaten to Disrupt the Middle East Process," Executive Order 13099 (The White House, August 20, 1998).
[103] Raphael Perl, "Terrorism: U.S. Response to Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania: A New Policy Direction?," CRS Report for Congress (Congressional Research Service, September 1, 1998).

to kill bin Laden in the process.[104] [105] After the missile strikes, Clinton addressed the public by stating:

> I ordered this action for four reasons: first, because we have convincing evidence these groups played the key role in the Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania; second, because these groups have executed terrorist attacks against Americans **in the past**; third, because we have compelling information that **they were planning additional terrorist attacks against our citizens** and others with the inevitable collateral casualties we saw so tragically in Africa; and fourth, because they are seeking to acquire **chemical weapons and other dangerous weapons**.[106]

This statement demonstrated a visible and active shift in counterterrorism policy because Clinton confirmed that the strikes were intended both to retaliate against the embassy bombings and to preemptively prevent future attacks. Clinton's reference to "additional terrorist attacks" recalls the private PDDs from May 22 that called for "preemption and disruption."[107] In his remarks immediately after the embassy bombings, Clinton pronounced the strikes as the first major "extraordinary" military step in what would likely become a long and ongoing series of many such measures:

> America has **battled** terrorism for many years. **Where possible, we've used law enforcement and diplomatic tools** to wage the fight.... We've worked to build an international coalition against terror. But there have been and will be times when law enforcement and diplomatic tools are simply not enough, when our very **national security** is challenged, and when **we must take extraordinary steps** to protect the safety of our citizens...
>
> My fellow Americans, our battle against terrorism did not begin with the bombing of our embassies in Africa, nor will it end with today's strike… This will be a **long, ongoing struggle** between freedom and fanaticism, between the **rule of law and terrorism**. We must be prepared to **do all that we can for as long as we must**.[108]

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[104] CIA Briefing Materials, "Bombings in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam - An Update" (Langley, August 14, 1998).
[105] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report" (Washington D.C., 2004).
[106] William J Clinton, "Remarks in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, on Military Action Against Terrorist Sites in Afghanistan and Sudan" (Massachusetts, August 20, 1998).
[107] Clinton, "Protection Against Unconventional Threats to the Homeland and Americans Overseas."
[108] William J Clinton, "Address to the Nation on Military Action Against Terrorist Sites in Afghanistan and Sudan" (The White House, August 20, 1998).

Clinton's response to the East African embassy bombings effectively forewarned the American public of the later formalized War on Terror. Though Clinton did not explicitly use the word "war," he made use of war rhetoric by alluding to America's "battle" and "fight" with terrorism.[109] Clinton contrasted this battle against previous efforts at a "law enforcement" approach. Even upon the successful arrest of one of the terrorists implicated in the bombing, he repeated that there would be a likely need for further military engagement by stating that "[this arrest] is an important step forward in our struggle against terrorism, but there is a **long road ahead**… We have and we will continue to use all the tools at our disposal - law enforcement, diplomacy, and when necessary, **America's military might**."[110]

Internal reports and memorandums circulated through Congress and federal agencies to alert government staff of a new terrorism policy that would be based in preemptive deterrence. Due to "new terrorism" that was leading to more mass attacks and could eventually result in biological or nuclear attacks, Clinton's new counterterrorism strategy would be "(1) more global, less defensive, and more proactive; (2) **more national security oriented and less traditional law enforcement oriented**; (3) **more likely to use military force** and other proactive measures."[111] Clinton was able to inform the public of this paradigm shift in counterterrorism, from a law enforcement emphasis to a military emphasis, through similar security rhetoric in his speeches and remarks. Clinton also warned the public about al-Qaeda's efforts to acquire chemical weapons to justify the new policy of preemption.[112]

Private directives during Clinton's administration show the early stages of preemptive war logic in American counterterrorism policy. Internal documents indicated a formal shift

[109] Clinton.
[110] William J Clinton, "Statement on the Arrest of Mohammad Rashid for the Terrorist Attack on the United States Embassy in Kenya" (The White House, August 27, 1998).
[111] Perl, "Terrorism: U.S. Response to Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania: A New Policy Direction?"
[112] Clinton, "Remarks in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, on Military Action Against Terrorist Sites in Afghanistan and Sudan."

towards militarism and the use of force. Public statements supported this policy shift, but took a more simplified approach in communicating this message through use of the war metaphor and war-related language. Clinton's public speeches emphasized the long future of offense-focused counterterrorism. He rationalized the need for preemptive force based on previous failed attempts at diplomacy and law enforcement. Even though Clinton's public speeches used different language than private directives, both acknowledged that counterterrorism strategy was progressing towards the greater use of military power.

George W. Bush (2001-2009): September 11

September 11 marked the most significant shift in American counterterrorism policy. It also led to greater public acceptance of harsh counterterrorism tactics during President George W. Bush's administration. On September 11, 2001, nineteen al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four United States passenger airlines. Under the leadership of Osama bin Laden, two of the aircraft struck the World Trade Center in New York City and one aircraft struck the Department of Defense (DOD) headquarters at the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. The attacks resulted in nearly three thousand deaths, and over twenty-five thousand people were injured.[113] The events of September 11 resulted in the most casualties of any terrorist attack in human history. Significant damage to infrastructure and a newfound culture of fear also resulted in a long-term economic and cultural impact on the United States and the rest of the world. Immediate policy changes included the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act, which were both aimed at preventing future attacks. September 11 also marked the beginning of the official War on Terror, or the global United States military campaign against terrorism.

[113] "The United States and Terrorism, 1968–2002: Threat and Response."

Al-Qaeda had been recognized as a rising threat to national security long before September 2001. Declassified documents indicate a clear link between the terrorist attacks during President Bill Clinton's administration and the ongoing threat into Bush's administration. By the summer of 2001, United States intelligence had gathered information that demonstrated bin Laden was planning a high profile "catastrophic" attack.[114] Based on bin Laden's attacks since the 1990s, mounting evidence pointed to a serious attack on United States soil. On August 6, 2001, the president received an intelligence briefing that stated:

> Although Bin Ladin has not succeeded, his attacks against the **U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998** demonstrate that he prepares operations years in advance and is not deterred by setbacks… FBI evidence since that time indicates patterns of suspicious activity in this country consistent with preparations for **hijackings** or other types of attacks, including recent surveillance of federal buildings in **New York**.[115]

Presidential Daily Briefs (PDBs) are significant because they summarize the few most important items of intelligence for the president across all agencies of the intelligence community (including the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigations, etc.). According to the 9/11 Commission Report, the August 6 briefing was the thirty-sixth PDB in reference to bin Laden or al-Qaeda, and the first that indicated a likely threat in United States borders.[116] The PDB was leaked to the press in 2002 and has been criticized for representing a lack of government action to prevent September 11 despite prior knowledge of a real and credible threat.

On the evening of September 11, Bush addressed the nation for the third time following the attacks. He highlighted American values and preliminary plans for retaliation by stating, "America was targeted for attack because we're the **brightest beacon for freedom and**

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[114] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report" (Washington D.C., 2004), 257.
[115] "Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in US," Presidential Daily Brief (The White House, August 6, 2001).
[116] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report" (Washington D.C., 2004), 260.

opportunity in the world… America and our friends and allies join with **all those who want peace and security in the world**, and we stand together to win the **war against terrorism**."[117] This speech was the first time Bush would frame the United States response as a war. The next day, after a meeting with his national security team, Bush continued to foreground the war aspect of terrorism by proclaiming that "the deliberate and deadly attacks which were carried out yesterday against our country were **more than acts of terror. They were acts of war.** This will require a country to unite and steadfast determination and resolve. **Freedom and democracy are under attack.**"[118] Through both of these statements, Bush framed both terrorist action and future American counterterrorism response through the context of war. He also emphasized that the United States was under attack from more than a physical standpoint. On top of significant loss of life and damage to physical infrastructure, the terrorist attacks had caused damage to the American way of life and fundamental democratic values. Past presidents had utilized existential threat framing, such as President Ronald Reagan's claim that Libya's goal was to "expel America from the world."[119] Additionally, President Bill Clinton had stated that al-Qaeda targeted the United States due to its support for freedom and democracy.[120] But this was the first time a president explicitly claimed that intangible American values were directly under attack.

Like Clinton, Bush continued to emphasize that the war against terrorism would take a series of many military actions over a long period of time. Following security meetings at Camp David, he stated that:

> Victory against terrorism will **not take place in a single battle** but in a series of decisive actions against terrorist organizations and those who harbor and support them. We are

[117] George W. Bush, "Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks" (The White House, September 11, 2001).
[118] George W. Bush, "Remarks Following a Meeting With the National Security Team" (The White House, September 12, 2001).
[119] Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the American Bar Association."
[120] Clinton, "The President's Radio Address."

> planning a **broad and sustained campaign** to secure a country and **eradicate the evil of terrorism**. And we are determined to see this conflict through.[121]

Bush also informed press reporters that "this **crusade**, this **war** on terrorism is going to take a while, and the American people must be patient."[122] His use of the word "crusade" insinuated a religious angle to the conflict. In his next major address to the public on September 20, Bush reaffirmed the global nature of the war. Instead of targeting a specific terrorist organization or leader:

> Our **war on terror** begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. **It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated**… Americans are asking, how will we fight and win this war? We will direct every resource at our command - every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary **weapon of war** - to the disruption and to the defeat of the global terror network.[123]

Past presidents typically identified a specific terrorist target at which to aim retaliatory action, such as the states of Libya and Iran. The War on Terror was directed at the more abstract target of terrorism as a whole. Bush's rhetoric unified the terrorist enemy by their target of American values, instead of just retaliating at the specific perpetrators of September 11. Setting an ambiguous target would permit greater latitude for preemptive action.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld quickly identified himself as a key contributor to Bush's counterterrorism operations. Many personal memorandums between Rumsfeld and Bush have been declassified. In the first message after the attacks, titled "Strategic Thoughts," Rumsfeld identifies the importance of public opinion and public expectations for the War on Terror. He advises Bush to avoid immediate and impulsive military strikes in order to achieve long term success, particularly to avoid publicized images of violence or military failures.

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[121] George W. Bush, "The President's Radio Address" (Camp David, September 15, 2001).
[122] George W. Bush, "Remarks on Arrival at the White House and an Exchange With Reporters" (The White House, September 16, 2001).
[123] George W. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11" (The Capitol, September 20, 2001).

Rumsfeld specifically cautioned Bush about the religious implications of waging war against a general terrorist image:

> We should avoid as much as possible creating **images of Americans killing Moslems** (sic) until we have **set the political stage** that the people we are going after are the enemies of Moslems themselves. **Public expectations** still are shaped by conventional thinking rooted in recent history. It is therefore widely assumed that the U.S. will strike soon and exclusively at Al-Qaida in Afghanistan. It would instead be surprising and impressive if we built our forces up patiently…
>
> A **key war aim** would be to persuade or compel states to stop supporting terrorism. The regimes of such states should see that it will be fatal to host terrorists who attack the U.S. as was done on September 11. **If the war does not significantly change the world's political map, the U.S. will not achieve its aim**.[124]

Rumsfeld acknowledged that there is a fine line between waging war against a terrorist ideology that invokes religious extremism and waging war against a religion. Bush foregrounds the broad fight against "evil" in statement in many of his speeches, with assertions such as, "Americans understand **we fight not a religion;** ours is not a campaign against the Muslim faith. Ours is a campaign **against evil**."[125] He also states that:

> As we round up the **evildoers**, as we look for those who might harm our fellow Americans, we must remember not to violate the rights of the innocent. **Our war is against evil**. There are thousands of **Muslim Americans who love America** just as much as I do. And we will respect their rights. **We will not let the terrorists cause decay of the fundamental rights that make our nation unique**.[126]

The discursive use of the word "evil" is an example of both war rhetoric and existential threat framing because it casts a binary image of the United States against a single ambiguous enemy. The Bush administration often discussed the separation of religion and war rhetoric in both

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[124] Donald Rumsfeld, "Strategic Thoughts," Memorandum for the President, September 30, 2001.
[125] George W. Bush, "Remarks to Airline Employees in Chicago, Illinois" (Chicago, September 27, 2001).
[126] George W. Bush, "Remarks Announcing the Most Wanted Terrorists List" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, October 10, 2001).

private and public directives. However, Bush's constant need to clarify that Muslim Americans were not under attack indicates that they were constantly cast as an enemy in the War on Terror.

Rumsfeld was also responsible for other aspects of public framing. Rumsfeld sent an internal memorandum to his staff at the DOD to call attention to the "Important Accomplishments" of the last year that should be stressed in public briefings. Critically, he states that the DOD had already "set the stage" for military policy in terms of shifting the focus of counterterrorism efforts from Osama bin Laden towards a more conceptual target of the "global terrorist." He also emphasized the importance of offensive preemption that began during Clinton's administration. Rumsfeld's memorandum calls attention to a series of main points, including:

- 'Broad and sustained' - all elements of national power will be engaged - economic, diplomatic, financial, law enforcement, intelligence, overt/covert, etc...
- The **war will take a long time**...
- **Shifting focus from UBL [Usuma bin Laden] personally towards Al Quaeda/Taliban (sic) Global Terrorist.**
- The concept that to defend against terrorism **requires preemption**. One cannot defend every place, at every time, against every technique; **the only defense is to take the war to the terrorists**.[127]

These stated accomplishments align with the messaging already presented by the president and his administration, and would continue to be used in future speeches.

As Bush's staff worked to concurrently develop new counterterrorism policy and messaging, Bush issued a series of classified National Security Presidential Directives (NSPDs) for his cabinet and National Security Council. The first three NSPDs released after September 11 remain classified, but *NSPD 9: Defeating the Terrorist Threat to the United States* has been declassified in part. NSPD 9 emphasizes the existential nature of the terrorist threat. The key stated security goal is to "eliminate terrorism as a **threat to our way of life** and to all nations that

[127] Donald Rumsfeld, "Important Accomplishments," Memo to Paul Wolfowitz et al., October 16, 2002.

love freedom." Though the first objective is to "respond forcefully" to the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks, the overall strategy involves "eliminating the threat from other terrorist groups that attack Americans or American interests."[128] Bush's first publicized step towards this goal was the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act, which stands for Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required To Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism. The act is now best known for its influence on surveillance and privacy rights, especially after Edward Snowden disclosed in 2013 that mass surveillance was being conducted against American citizens.[129] Even then, civil liberties advocates expressed concern that the act was an alarmist response that could infringe on Americans' privacy and constitutional rights.[130]At the time, Bush publicly announced that "we're changing the laws governing information sharing. And as importantly, we're **changing the culture** of our various agencies that fight terrorism. **Surveillance** of communications is another essential tool to pursue and stop terrorists."[131] The bill easily passed through Congress, though some legislators complained that they did not have time to read the act in its rush for approval.

Bush also created the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with the singular purpose of coordinating counterterrorism defense policy under one agency. Bush argued that the existing federal structure of national defense was outdated and inefficient. Terrorism was now a constant and ongoing threat, which required an enduring response. While presenting the proposal for the creation of DHS to Congress, Bush stated:

> Our nation faces a new and changing threat unlike any we have faced before - the **global threat of terrorism**… We must recognize that the **threat of terrorism is a permanent**

[128] George W. Bush, "Defeating the Terrorist Threat to the United States," National Security Presidential Directive 9 (The White House, October 25, 2001).
[129] Lowenthal, *Intelligence*.
[130] Robin Toner and Neil Lewis, "A Nation Challenged: Congress; House Passes Terrorism Bill Much Like Senate's, but With 5-Year Limit," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2001.
[131] George W. Bush, "Remarks on Signing the USA PATRIOT ACT of 2001" (The White House, October 26, 2001).

> **condition,** and we must take action to protect American against the terrorists that seek to kill the innocent.[132]

The restructuring and funding of DHS was justified on the basis of terrorism as a "permanent" condition, which supports the description of terrorism as an ongoing existential threat instead of an acute but isolated incident. DHS may be viewed primarily as a defensive response to the terrorist threat, but it also increased domestic securitization and public visibility of counterterrorism measures.

Even years into the War on Terror, the Bush administration prioritized consistent messaging to the American public. As the war went on, secret internal directives continued to assess the impact of war messaging on the public and American allies. In 2004, Rumsfeld reiterated to Bush that characterizing the attacks as a war was critical for the justification of militaristic counterterrorism policy:

> **How we describe and set up the problem determines how we will deal with it** - what priorities we establish and, in short, what we and our allies do to deal with the problem. Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. has moved from addressing terrorism as a '**law enforcement,**' where we must find and arrest the terrorists, casting it as a **'war' against terrorism**, where we need to use our **military might** against the terrorist networks and their safe havens. That was an important and useful advance, **freeing us and our coalition to use more vigorous responses.** The question now, however, is should we refine the problem further?[133]

Rumsfeld candidly acknowledged that using the war metaphor permitted a greater range of policy options and justified the use of force. Rumsfeld's memorandum emphasized the importance of rhetoric in the actual implementation of counterterrorism policy.

The Bush administration implemented enhanced war-based rhetoric and existential threat framing to increase public demand for forceful counterterrorism tactics. Bush also posed

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[132] George W. Bush, "Message to the Congress Transmitting Proposed Legislation To Create the Department of Homeland Security" (The White House, June 18, 2002).
[133] Donald Rumsfeld, "Global War on Terror" (Department of Defense, June 18, 2004).

terrorism as a direct threat to American values, and not just American infrastructure or human lives. This rhetorical strategy enhanced existential threat framing by exacerbating a fearful response. Private and public statements both consistently discussed terrorism in general terms, instead of focusing overwhelmingly on the actions of a singular terrorist or terrorist organization. The ambiguous manner in which the Bush administration framed the terrorist enemy meant that Muslims suffered negative discriminatory effects from this framing. Despite criticisms for some rushed policies, such as the PATRIOT Act, new counterterrorism legislation was generally unobstructed in the crisis environment following September 11. Though specific details of military operations remained covert, Bush's speeches informed the American public that the ongoing use of military force should be expected.

Discussion

These four cases demonstrate the ongoing evolution of terrorism rhetoric. Since some terrorist threats remained continuous across distinct presidential administrations, terrorism rhetoric did not abruptly shift between presidents. Rather, terrorism rhetoric grew increasingly emotive and militaristic over time as terrorist threats grew more severe. President Ronald Reagan began using war-based rhetoric to expand his counterterrorism policy options and justify the potential use of force as a last resort. Since terrorism was not considered a major threat between 1989 and 1993, war-based rhetoric was not used significantly during President George H.W. Bush's administration. President Bill Clinton began to draw upon war-related language when it became apparent that al-Qaeda would pose an ongoing threat to the United States for the foreseeable future. President George W. Bush made war rhetoric explicit once again following the September 11 attacks in order to justify the expensive and militaristic War on Terror.

The style of terrorism rhetoric also evolved over time. American counterterrorism policy became more overtly militaristic between Reagan and Bush Jr.'s administrations. This may be due to greater public support for more intensive counterterrorism tactics, which increased due to a combination of greater terrorism severity and existential threat framing. The use of war-based rhetoric and existential threat framing increased when the perceived terrorist threat increased. Preemptive military counterterrorism tactics also generally rose over time (with the exception of Bush Sr.'s administration). As war-based terrorism rhetoric solidified, militaristic counterterrorism strategy followed. Though terrorism rhetoric grew more emotive and militaristic, the context of the evolving threat environment should also be noted. The physical severity of September 11 and al-Qaeda's growing strength played a key role in increased public acceptance. Even considering the gravity of September 11, it is noteworthy that the increase in counterterrorism occurred through the expansion of preemptive military force and securitization instead of through the continued use of law enforcement-based counterterrorism strategies.

Secret internal discussion of counterterrorism rarely conflicted directly with public messaging. However, counterterrorism policy was often publicly presented using ambiguous language. Reagan only publicized the use of military force against Libya after Newt Gingrich privately directed Reagan to securitize the issue by "educating" the American public on the severity of the terrorist situation.[134] Similar private discussion on the formation of public messaging was found across all administrations. Since each successive president built upon the existing precedent for force, future administrations were more open about the need to use military force against terrorist groups. Bush Sr. also became more transparent and consistent with his public messaging due to his experience with the Iran-Contra affair. The scandal demonstrated

[134] Gingrich, "Lessons of the Art of War; Attached to Cover Letter Dated June 27, 1985; Includes Memorandum Entitled The 1985 Hostage Crisis and the Lessons of Desert I and Past Lebanon Insurrections."

the importance of public trust for presidential leadership and highlighted the impact of American norms and expectations. September 11 marked another shift towards open discussion of forceful counterterrorism because the public demanded an expansion of observable security measures.

This study covers a long period of time and a wide range of cases. As a result, it was not possible to exhaustively cover every terrorist event and the political nuances of every presidency. A general understanding of each administration's security situation and management style is sufficient to understand the impact of discursive patterns on counterterrorism strategy and public understanding. This time span was necessary to account for an analysis of Reagan's early stages of the war metaphor, and the inclusion of each subsequent presidential administration was needed in order to trace terrorism rhetoric over time. Additionally, it was not possible to conduct a comparison between covert and overt terrorism statements after Bush Jr.'s administration because more recent covert documents have yet to be sufficiently declassified.

The limited availability of declassified sources may qualify the claim that private and public directives align with one another, especially in more recent administrations. The Freedom of Information Act exempts the disclosure of "information that is classified to protect national security."[135] Recent internal documents likely remain relevant for current national security interests. Thus, even though declassified documentation from later presidential administrations appear to align with public narratives, they may tell an incomplete story. This is further complicated by lack of access to physical archive collections during the COVID-19 pandemic and related delays with responses to FOIA requests.

The findings from this study can mostly be generalized to today and are still relevant to American national security policy. The formation of government policy in any time period involves internal discussion to which the public is not originally privy. Even though it was not

[135] "FOIA Improvement Act of 2016," Pub. L. No. 114–185 (2016).

possible to study more recent administrations, the general federal structures for counterterrorism policy remain the same. Counterterrorism policies from past administrations leave lasting changes for many years, such as the War on Terror and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. Matters of national security will always require a careful balance between secrecy and transparency. Though it is impossible to know with certainty how the United States government is conducting covert counterterrorism policy today, the fundamental principles of government transparency and accountability remain highly salient.

Overall, the studied primary source documents provide illuminating insight into the process of terrorism rhetoric construction. Based on the comparison between private and public directives, each presidential administration made public framing decisions in order to increase the range of counterterrorism policy options, justify the use of military force, and establish a common enemy against the American people.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The United States conducts counterterrorism policy through a vast system of security and intelligence agencies. Since September 11, this system has been expanded even further through the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security and the National Counterterrorism Center.[136] Additionally, the 9/11 Commission requested the creation of the Director of National Intelligence position to support integration across the intelligence community.[137] At least twenty-two federal agencies coordinate on matters of national security. As past presidents repeatedly mentioned in their public speeches, American counterterrorism policy has encompassed components as varied as law enforcement, diplomacy, and military force.[138]

[136] Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 8th ed. (Thousand Oaks: CQ Press, 2020); p. 254.
[137] "ODNI Fact Sheet" (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 24, 2017).
[138] Clinton, "Address to the Nation on Military Action Against Terrorist Sites in Afghanistan and Sudan."

Due to the complexity of the United States counterterrorism system, there is no singular policy or actor responsible for counterterrorism policy as a whole. Since my research is centered on counterterrorism language and rhetoric, I will not recommend a singular actionable or strategic policy. Instead, I offer a series of overarching recommendations based on the political implications of presidential rhetoric, securitization, and document secrecy. These recommendations are directed at current leaders in the counterterrorism sphere, including the President, Secretary of Defense, Director of National Intelligence, and members of the National Security Council. I will therefore reference the long-term impact of securitization on recent events. First, I advise these actors to improve the way that terrorism is framed to the American public by reducing fearful war-based rhetoric. Next, I advise these actors to increase transparency between public and private directives to improve public trust and accountability. Finally, I warn counterterrorism leaders about the impact of militarized and securitized counterterrorism rhetoric and policy on civil liberties in the United States.

Reduce Securitization and War Rhetoric

Counterterrorism rhetoric that uses sensational and war-related language is inadvisable because it propagates fear, which actually results in less effective counterterrorism policies.[139] The securitization of terrorism through war-based rhetoric and existential threat framing causes threat inflation and creates an unnecessary long-term culture of fear. Threat inflation through these framing strategies negatively impacts American society by increasing racial and religious stereotyping and stoking a costly and politicized terrorism industry. Furthermore, the war metaphor for terrorism sets up a security situation that is unwinnable for political leaders. Instead, political leaders should educate the public on terrorist threats through objective threat

[139] Mueller, *Overblown*.

evaluations based on environmental context. The risk of terrorism should be framed in proportion to other legitimate threats. Reducing inflammatory war-based rhetoric is beneficial for both political actors and democratic institutions.

War-based terrorism rhetoric leads to xenophobia and in-group bias. Rhetoric during the War on Terror specifically harmed Arabs and Muslims in the United States by drawing on stereotypes in the construction of the terrorist enemy.[140] Even though President George W. Bush's administration aimed to avoid "creating images of Americans killing Moslems (sic)" and emphasized that "there are thousands of Muslim Americans who love America," the simplification of al-Qaeda into an abstract enemy "other" contributed to the conflation of religion and terrorism.[141] [142] In this binary rhetoric where "evil" terrorists were set directly against morally virtuous Americans, ethnic and religious minorities were subsumed into the anti-American category.[143] This was further amplified by waging war against the concept of the "global terrorist" rather than specific perpetrators.[144]

Additionally, war-based rhetoric allowed politicians to easily pass expensive and militant counterterrorism policies that may breach typical ethical standards. Securitization through war rhetoric heightens the existing crisis environment following a terrorist attack. This made reduced ethical standards in the name of national security more publicly permissible. For example, after the 1986 La Belle bombing in Berlin, Newt Gingrich urgently called on President Ronald Reagan to loosen restrictions on covert operations by emphasizing that "now is the time to repeal the liberal welfare state prohibitions on intelligence agencies."[145] Later, heightened urgency in

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[140] Merskin, "The Construction of Arabs as Enemies."
[141] Rumsfeld, "Strategic Thoughts," September 30, 2001.
[142] Bush, "Remarks Announcing the Most Wanted Terrorists List."
[143] Bush, "Remarks to Airline Employees in Chicago, Illinois."
[144] Rumsfeld, "Important Accomplishments," October 16, 2002.
[145] Gingrich, "Lessons of the Art of War; Attached to Cover Letter Dated June 27, 1985; Includes Memorandum Entitled The 1985 Hostage Crisis and the Lessons of Desert I and Past Lebanon Insurrections."

the post-September 11 threat environment resulted in the rushed passage of controversial and restrictive laws like the USA PATRIOT Act. Even though legislators complained that they did not have time to read the bill, it was hastily passed through Congress.[146] Fearful rhetoric also drives public demand for a cyclical and self-serving terrorism industry. When proposing the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to Congress, Bush Jr. characterized terrorism as a "new and changing threat unlike any we have faced before."[147] DHS was supported because it increased public visibility of domestic securitization. Bush Jr.'s language legitimized the need to overtly fund and restructure the entire federal structure of national security by inflating terrorism's physical threat.

Finally, framing counterterrorism through the metaphor of war sets the United States up for failure. War-based terrorism rhetoric is self-conflicting because it is temporally and spatially ambiguous, yet implies a zero-sum situation that must end in one side's victory.[148] President George W. Bush described the threat of terrorism as a "permanent condition," but he also stated that the war "will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated."[149] [150] This conflicting logic creates a system of perpetual war with no clear end, especially since preemptive attacks incite further retaliation.[151] And once political leaders have publicly committed themselves to such assertive positions, these policies and military interventions are even harder to break.[152] Multiple administrations have failed to withdraw the

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[146] Toner and Lewis, "A Nation Challenged: Congress; House Passes Terrorism Bill Much Like Senate's, but With 5-Year Limit."
[147] Bush, "Message to the Congress Transmitting Proposed Legislation To Create the Department of Homeland Security."
[148] Joseph Masco, *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); 197.
[149] Bush, "Message to the Congress Transmitting Proposed Legislation To Create the Department of Homeland Security."
[150] Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11."
[151] Masco, *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*.
[152] Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); 36.

American troops that were sent to Afghanistan after September 11. President Joe Biden finally announced intentions to "end the forever war" by withdrawing all troops a full twenty years after the September 11 attacks.[153] Doing so would signal the end of a long and costly military presence that did not have a clearly negotiated end in sight.

Increase Transparency to Improve Public Trust

Recognizing that some elements of national security inherently involve the use of secrecy, government leaders should aim to operate with as much transparency as possible when implementing counterterrorism policy. Tactical or operational elements of intelligence collection and covert operations may need to remain secret to ensure their success, and there are existing mechanisms for Congressional and executive oversight of intelligence and covert affairs.[154] Additionally, governments benefit from having some privacy over internal matters in order to facilitate open policy debate and diplomatic negotiations.[155] It is not necessarily problematic for internal discussion of a terrorist threat to differ slightly from public framing, but internal directives should not directly conflict with public statements. Honest, consistent, and transparent public messaging is critical for accountable democratic governance. First, politicians should feel incentivized to be open and consistent with security policy because there are high political risks to being uncovered. Second, there are political benefits to actively engaging the public in the formation of counterterrorism policy. Finally, transparent policy is critical for ensuring

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[153] Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, and Eric Schmitt, "Biden to Withdraw All Combat Troops From Afghanistan by Sept. 11," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2021.
[154] Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 8th ed. (Thousand Oaks: CQ Press, 2020); 277.
[155] Jamie Gaskarth, "Accountability and Intelligence," in *Secrets and Spies: UK Intelligence Accountability after Iraq and Snowden* (London: Chatham House, 2020), 19–49.

government accountability. As stated in the September 11 Commission's report, "democracy's best oversight mechanism [is] public disclosure."[156]

Lack of transparency erodes public trust when controversial practices are uncovered. Even internal government documents recognize that "the United States is not especially competent at secret-keeping."[157] President Ronald Reagan and President George H.W. Bush suffered the consequences of opaque and dishonest counterterrorism practices after the Iran-Contra affair was revealed. The independent report of the investigative Tower Commission stated that "concern for preserving the secrecy of the initiative provided an excuse for abandoning sound process."[158] As discussed in the findings, Reagan addressed the nation after Tower Commission's report was released by stating, "Your trust is what gives a president his powers of leadership and his personal strength."[159] Once Bush Sr. became president, he spent his administration defending the consistency and legitimacy of his policy with American standards in an effort to regain public trust. The Iran-Contra affair illustrated a clear discrepancy between covert behavior and officially stated American policy. Without transparency, the Reagan administration violated American norms and lost public support.

Political leaders also benefit from greater support when the public is transparently informed about counterterrorism policy. When the Clinton administration was pivoting towards a more offensive approach to counterterrorism, the internally-circulated report emphasized that "an informed, involved, and engaged public is critical to sustain an active anti-terrorism response. The American public will be more likely to accept casualties if they understand why they will be

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[156] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report" (Washington D.C., 2004); 103.
[157] Perl, "Terrorism: U.S. Response to Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania: A New Policy Direction?"
[158] John Tower, Edmund Muskie, and Brent Scowcroft, *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the President's Special Review Board* (New York: Random House, 1987); xvii.
[159] Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy," March 4, 1987.

sustained."[160] Transparency is an important means of building and maintaining public opinion, which is especially pertinent in democracies where public support is required for politicians to be elected.[161]

Secrecy is inherent in activities such as intelligence gathering or international negotiations, but at a certain point a lack of transparency risks obstructing democratic norms.[162] Democratic policy should ideally be supported by the general electorate. Representative government requires some degree of transparency in order to hold policymakers accountable, but the public cannot evaluate policies that are kept entirely secret.[163] After the Iran-Contra affair came to light, Bush Sr. recognized the full extent of what policies were publicly permissible and improved the consistency and transparency of his counterterrorism policy. Political leaders in democratic states should not secretly go against public will to evade negative consequences. Informing citizens does require some degree of simplification, and some information may need to be redacted, but transparent messaging that has not been reshaped by inflammatory rhetoric allows the public to assess policies honestly.

Protect Civil Liberties and Democratic Norms

Threat inflation exacerbates the urgency and fear associated with crisis environments. Crisis situations permit politicians to call for extraordinary measures that extend beyond the confines of standard democratic norms.[164] These extraordinary measures may extend long past the time of the initial crisis. As discussed in the preceding recommendations, such measures can negatively impact fundamental civil liberties, including rights to speech, privacy, and movement.

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[160] Perl, "Terrorism: U.S. Response to Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania: A New Policy Direction?"
[161] Lowenthal, *Intelligence*.
[162] Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 8th ed. (Thousand Oaks: CQ Press, 2020); p. 19.
[163] Joshua Rovner, *Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); 203.
[164] Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*.

Minority groups are disproportionately likely to lose their civil liberties and face discriminatory practices.[165] Political leaders like President George W. Bush have emphasized American values and freedoms to defend urgent military action, such as by describing the United States as the "brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world."[166] This rhetoric is inconsistent with practice when American freedoms are limited in the name of national security.

The rushed political process during crisis situations can lead to restrictive and intrusive policies. A democratic political process relies on a series of checks and balances.[167] Congress passed the PATRIOT Act, which was aggressively supported by Bush Jr.'s administration, with less rigorous debate than would ordinarily be expected for such broad-sweeping legislation.[168] Even in 2001, the act was criticized for potentially violating American rights to privacy, free speech, free assembly, and free movement.[169] After Edward Snowden disclosed the program of mass surveillance against American citizens in 2013, the act became best known for its infringement of surveillance and privacy rights.[170] Proper democratic policy should ideally align with public values and collective public preferences, but public preferences are either altered or ignored in extraordinary crisis situations.[171] Securitization is dangerous when threat inflation makes these extraordinary environments the new perpetual norm.

Conclusion

In this study, I compared public presidential speeches and private internal documents to evaluate how counterterrorism rhetoric and strategy is constructed within the United States

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[165] Strossen.
[166] Bush, "Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks."
[167] Strossen, "Terrorism's Toll on Civil Liberties."
[168] Toner and Lewis, "A Nation Challenged: Congress; House Passes Terrorism Bill Much Like Senate's, but With 5-Year Limit."
[169] Toner and Lewis.
[170] Lowenthal, *Intelligence*.
[171] Page and Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect: What Americans Want From Our Leaders but Don't Get*.

government. I determined that public and private language on terrorism rarely contradicted each other, but private discussion of counterterrorism is used to actively construct how it is discussed in public forums. American presidents have generally portrayed terrorism as an existential threat using fearful war-based rhetoric in order to broaden their policy options, win public approval, and project positive leadership. Furthermore, war-based rhetoric and existential threat framing are used to justify militant and reactionary responses to terrorism that could be perceived to violate democratic norms.

Government leaders intentionally frame terrorist events in order to legitimize counterterrorism policy. Internal state communications provide insight into terrorism framing strategies and threat construction that may differ from how leaders portray terrorism in public forums. This conclusion supports existing research in securitization theory that highlights the rhetorical construction of security threats through threat inflation and manipulation. Securitization is a particularly salient problem in the United States because multiple policies that have been passed in the name of national security have been found to infringe upon standard civil liberties.

I addressed a gap in the literature by investigating the private process of rhetorical construction using declassified documents in order to analyze how language contributes to the securitization of terrorism. Given that existing literature predominantly focuses on incidents of transnational terrorism, future research would do well to investigate the rhetorical construction of domestic terrorism. The Department of Homeland Security posted its first advisory on domestic terrorism in January 2021.[172] This style of terrorism is becoming an increasingly significant threat in the United States.

[172] Department of Homeland Security, "National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin," January 27, 2021.

There have been political efforts to revert from the war model for terrorism since the September 11 attacks. After Osama bin Laden was killed in 2013, President Barack Obama stated that the United States "must define our effort not as a boundless 'global war on terror,' but as a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists."[173] However, the last National Strategy for Counterterrorism released by President Donald Trump in 2018 begins with the sentence, "We remain a nation at war."[174] The War on Terror has not officially ended. Most recently, President Joe Biden announced on April 13, 2021 that he will be withdrawing all American combat troops from Afghanistan by the twentieth anniversary of the September 11 attacks in 2021 to finally end "the nation's longest war."[175]

In future counterterrorism policy, political leaders with a public platform should be specific and transparent about terrorist threats instead of resorting to abstract fearful rhetoric. When political leaders mitigate fear, they foster public trust in the activities that do need to take place in secret. These findings can inform future counterterrorism efforts that are simultaneously effective and accountable. Political leaders should also reduce militant rhetoric to avoid imposing policies that impose upon American civil liberties. Today, we are seeing a surge in incidents of domestic terror. Politicians have a responsibility to dissuade such attacks by avoiding reactionary and emotional psychological tools.

[173] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the National Defense University" (Washington D.C., May 23, 2013).
[174] Trump, "National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America."
[175]Cooper, Gibbons-Neff, and Schmitt, "Biden to Withdraw All Combat Troops From Afghanistan by Sept. 11."

Appendix A: Primary Sources in Order of Citation

Date	Title	Author or Speaker	Description	Classification	Quoted Page
December 10, 1981	NSDD 16: Economic and Security Decisions for Libya	Ronald Reagan	Directive for NSC and senior officials	Secret	
April 3, 1984	NSDD 138: Combatting Terrorism	Ronald Reagan	Directive for NSC and senior officials	Top Secret	4
December 4, 1981	EO 12333: United States Intelligence Activities	Ronald Reagan	Executive Order	Public	Section 2.11
June 27, 1985	Lessons of the Art of War	Newt Gingrich	Memorandum for Ronald Reagan	Unknown (Private)	2; 4
July 8, 1985	Remarks at the Annual Convention of the American Bar Association	Ronald Reagan	Public speech	Public	
November 27, 1984	Interview With Representatives of the Washington Times	Ronald Reagan	Press interview	Public	
January 8, 1986	NSDD 205: Acting Against Libyan Support of International Terrorism	Ronald Reagan	Directive for NSC and senior officials	Top Secret	1; 3
April 12, 1986	NSDD 224: Counter-Terrorist Operations Against Libya	Ronald Reagan	Directive for NSC and senior officials		
April 15, 1986	Remarks at a White House Meeting With Members of the American Business Conference	Ronald Reagan	Public speech	Public	
April 16, 1986	Talking Points on U.S. Action in Libya	Tom Gibson	Talking points for speaking with press	Unclassified (Private)	2
April 14, 1986	Address to the Nation on the United States Air Strike Against Libya	Ronald Reagan	Public speech	Public	

November 13, 1986	Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy	Ronald Reagan	Public speech	Public	
February 27, 1987	The Tower Commission Report	Tower et al.	Presidentially commissioned report	Public	xvii
March 4, 1987	Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy	Ronald Reagan	Public speech	Public	
August 4, 1993	Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters	Lawrence Walsh	Investigatory report	Public	473
January 20, 1989	Inaugural Address	George H.W. Bush	Public speech	Public	
August 9, 1989	Informal Exchange With Reporters	George H.W. Bush	Press interview	Public	
August 2, 1989	U.S. Reaction to Israeli Action Against Obeid	Abraham Sofaer	Memorandum for Robert Kimmitt	Secret	9; 1
April 5, 1991	Terrorism and Hostages Background Talking Points	E.A. Wayne	Background for private discussion with foreign states	Secret	2
January 1990	Q's and A's Hizballah and Iran	Kamal Beyoghlow	Briefing paper for Department of State	Unknown (Private)	2
April 22, 1990	Remarks on the Release of Former Hostage Robert Polhill and an Exchange With Reporters	George H.W. Bush	Public speech	Public	
April 29, 1990	Possible Release of Hostage Frank H. Reed	Brent Scowcroft	Memorandum for the president	Top Secret	2
December 4, 1991	Statement on the Release of American Hostages in Lebanon	George H.W. Bush	Public speech	Public	
June 21, 1995	PDD 39: U.S. Policy on Counterterrorism	William Clinton	Directive for NSC and senior officials	Secret	3

May 22, 1998	PDD 63: Critical Infrastructure Protection	William Clinton	Directive for NSC and senior officials	For Official Use Only	
May 22, 1998	PDD 62: Protection Against Unconventional Threats to the Homeland and Americans Overseas	William Clinton	Directive for NSC and senior officials	Secret	3
August 7, 1998	Remarks on Signing the Workforce Investment Act of 1998	William Clinton	Public speech	Public	
August 8, 1998	The President's Radio Address	William Clinton	Public speech	Public	
August 20, 1998	EO 13099: Prohibiting Transactions With Terrorists Who Threaten to Disrupt the Middle East Process	William Clinton	Executive Order	Public	1
September 1, 1998	Terrorism: U.S. Response to Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania: A New Policy Direction?	Raphael Perl	Congressional Research Service report	Confidential	6; 3
August 14, 1998	Bombings in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam - An Update	Central Intelligence Agency	CIA briefing material	Unknown (Previously classified)	12
July 22, 2004	The 9/11 Commission Report	National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States	Report commissioned by Congress and the president	Public	116
August 20, 1998	Remarks in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, on Military Action Against Terrorist States in Afghanistan and Sudan	William Clinton	Speech	Public	

August 20, 1998	Address to the Nation on Military Action Against Terrorist Sites in Afghanistan and Sudan	William Clinton	Public speech	Public	
August 27, 1998	Statement on the Arrest of Mohammad Rashid for the Terrorist Attack on the United States Embassy in Kenya	William Clinton	Public speech	Public	
July 22, 2004	The 9/11 Commission Report	National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States	Report commissioned by Congress and the president	Public	257; 260
August 6, 2001	Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in US	Intelligence Community	Presidential Daily Brief	Top Secret (President's Eyes Only)	1-2
September 11, 2001	Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks	George W. Bush	Public speech	Public	
September 12, 2001	Remarks Following a Meeting With the National Security Team	George W. Bush	Public speech	Public	
September 15, 2001	The President's Radio Address	George W. Bush	Public speech	Public	
September 16, 2001	Remarks on Arrival at the White House and an Exchange With Reporters	George W. Bush	Public speech	Public	
September 20, 2001	Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11	George W. Bush	Public speech	Public	
September 30, 2001	Strategic Thoughts	Donald Rumsfeld	Memorandum for the president	Top Secret	1-2

September 27, 2001	Remarks to Airline Employees in Chicago, Illinois	George W. Bush	Public speech	Public	
October 10, 2001	Remarks Announcing the Most Wanted Terrorists List	George W. Bush	Public speech	Public	
October 16, 2002	Important Accomplishments	Donald Rumsfeld	Memorandum for Department of Defense	Unknown (Classified)	2
October 25, 2001	NSPD 9: Defeating the Terrorist Threat to the United States	George W. Bush	Directive for NSC and senior officials	Secret (with Top Secret annex)	
October 26, 2001	Remarks on Signing the USA PATRIOT ACT of 2001	George W. Bush	Public speech	Public	
June 18, 2002	Message to the Congress Transmitting Proposed Legislation to Create the Department of Homeland Security	George W. Bush	Public speech	Public	
June 18, 2004	Global War on Terror	Donald Rumsfeld	Memorandum for the president	Unknown (Classified)	

Appendix B: Sample Images of Original Declassified Documents

TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE TOP SECRET

SYSTEM II
91377

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

National Security Decision Directive 138

April 3, 1984

DECLASSIFIED
Authority
BY NARA DATE 3/17/10

COMBATTING TERRORISM (U)

U.S. citizens and installations, especially abroad, are increasingly being targetted for terrorist acts. These attacks result from activities by state-sponsored terrorist movements, international terrorist organizations and groups, and individual terrorists operating without obvious support. Terrorist activities not only endanger our citizens and interests, but result in the destabilization and polarization of democratic and friendly governments. Of particular concern is the possibility that international terrorist movements and some of those which enjoy state sponsorship are receiving support and perhaps guidance directly or indirectly from the Soviet Union. International terrorist activity, as referred to in this directive, includes conspiring about planning for or conducting terrorist acts by trans-national groups, whether the activity occurs in the U.S. or abroad. (S)

The U.S. Government program to prevent, counter, and combat terrorism must be significantly enhanced to reduce the threat to U.S. citizens and foreign nationals in the United States who enjoy our protection. We must also seek to ameliorate the subversive effect of terrorism on foreign democratic institutions and pro-Western governments. Our program must include measures which will deter terrorist attacks, improve protection for those threatened, and reduce the effectiveness of those attacks which do occur. Domestic programs to deal with terrorist activities in the United States must be continuously reviewed and assessed in order to identify useful improvements. This policy must be supported by improved intelligence, by political and diplomatic actions, and by improved response capabilities. (TS)

This NSDD provides guidance for developing a long-term, two-phased program for achieving these objectives in accord with the provisions of Executive Order 12333 of December 4, 1981, and other applicable laws and statutes. Phase I will commence immediately and conclude December 31, 1984. Phase II will consist of those measures to be taken after January 1, 1985. The following principles will guide implementation in both phases: (S)

- The U.S. Government considers the practice of terrorism by any person or group in any cause a threat to our national security and will resist the use of terrorism by all legal means available. (U)

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Declassify: OADR

TOP SECRET

SENSITIVE

COPY 1 OF 12 COPIES

Image 1: NSDD 138 - Combatting Terrorism (April 3, 1984)

NEWT GINGRICH
SIXTH DISTRICT, GEORGIA

COMMITTEES:
PUBLIC WORKS AND TRANSPORTATION
HOUSE ADMINISTRATION

WASHINGTON OFFICE:
1005 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BLDG.
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-4501

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
June 26, 1985

6351 JONESBORO ROAD
SUITE E
MORROW, GA 30260
(404) 968-3219

POST OFFICE BOX 848
GRIFFIN FEDERAL BUILDING
GRIFFIN, GA 30224
(404) 228-0389

CARROLL COUNTY COURTHOUSE
CARROLLTON, GA 30117
(404) 834-6398

COUNTY OFFICE BUILDING
22 EAST BROAD STREET
NEWNAN, GA 30263
(404) 253-8355

The Honorable Ronald Reagan
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

The attached memorandum applies the lessons of the art of war as developed by Clausewitz and Sun T'zu to the problem of terrorism and "the war against Americans."

I hope you find it useful and would be delighted to discuss the technical details of applying the classic art of war to planning American strategies against terrorism.

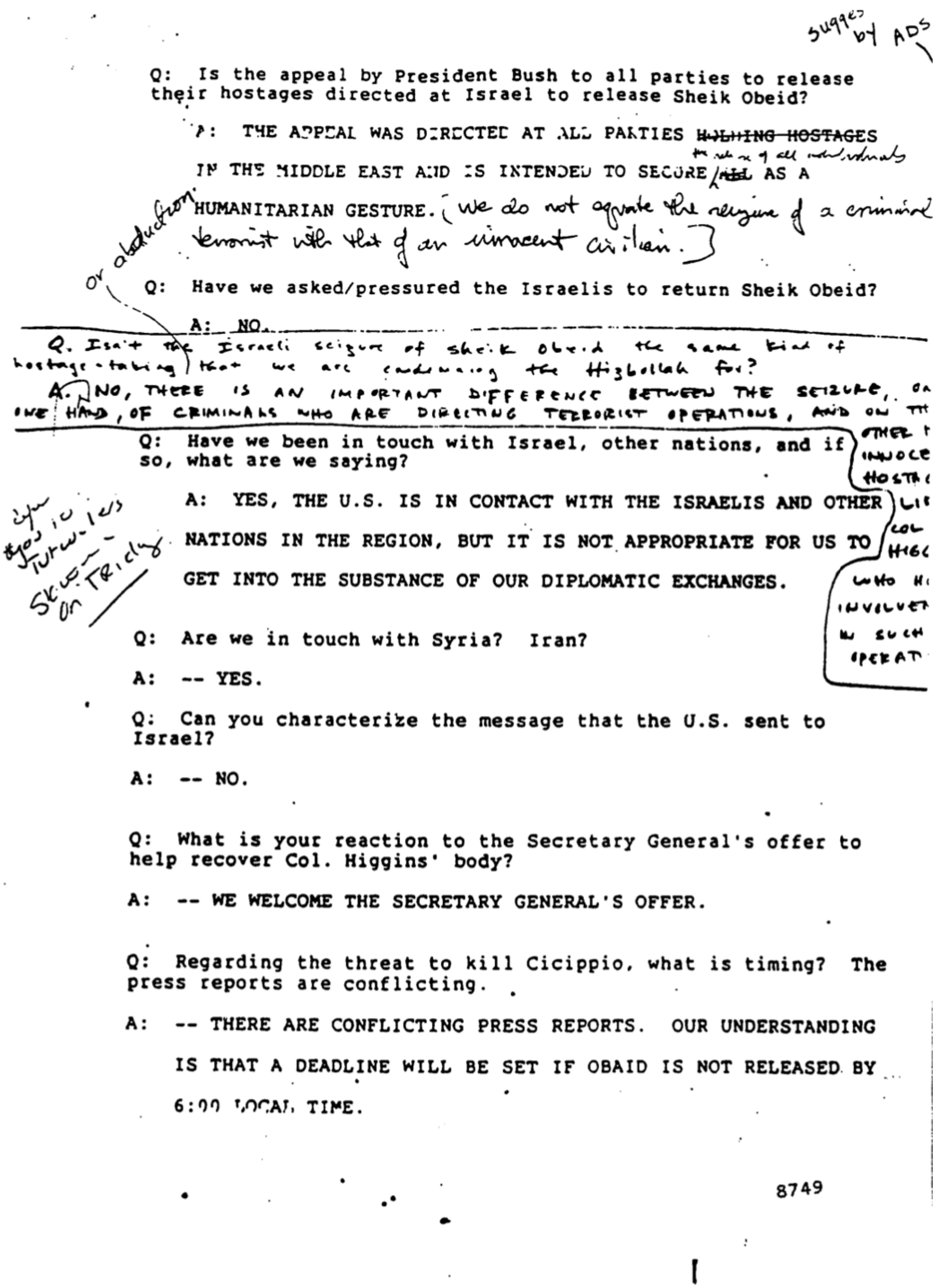
Sincerely,

Newt

Newt Gingrich

NG/gw

Image 2: Lessons of the Art of War (June 27, 1985)



suggested by ADS

Q: Is the appeal by President Bush to all parties to release their hostages directed at Israel to release Sheik Obeid?

A: THE APPEAL WAS DIRECTED AT ALL PARTIES ~~HOLDING HOSTAGES~~ IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND IS INTENDED TO SECURE ~~ALL~~ the release of all individuals AS A HUMANITARIAN GESTURE. [We do not equate the seizure or abduction of a criminal terrorist with that of an innocent civilian.]

Q: Have we asked/pressured the Israelis to return Sheik Obeid?

A: NO.

Q. Isn't the Israeli seizure of Sheik Obeid the same kind of hostage-taking that we are condemning the Hizballah for?

A. NO, THERE IS AN IMPORTANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE SEIZURE, ON ONE HAND, OF CRIMINALS WHO ARE DIRECTING TERRORIST OPERATIONS, AND ON THE OTHER INNOCENT HOSTAGES ... WHO ... INVOLVED IN SUCH OPERAT...

Q: Have we been in touch with Israel, other nations, and if so, what are we saying?

A: YES, THE U.S. IS IN CONTACT WITH THE ISRAELIS AND OTHER NATIONS IN THE REGION, BUT IT IS NOT APPROPRIATE FOR US TO GET INTO THE SUBSTANCE OF OUR DIPLOMATIC EXCHANGES.

Q: Are we in touch with Syria? Iran?

A: -- YES.

Q: Can you characterize the message that the U.S. sent to Israel?

A: -- NO.

Q: What is your reaction to the Secretary General's offer to help recover Col. Higgins' body?

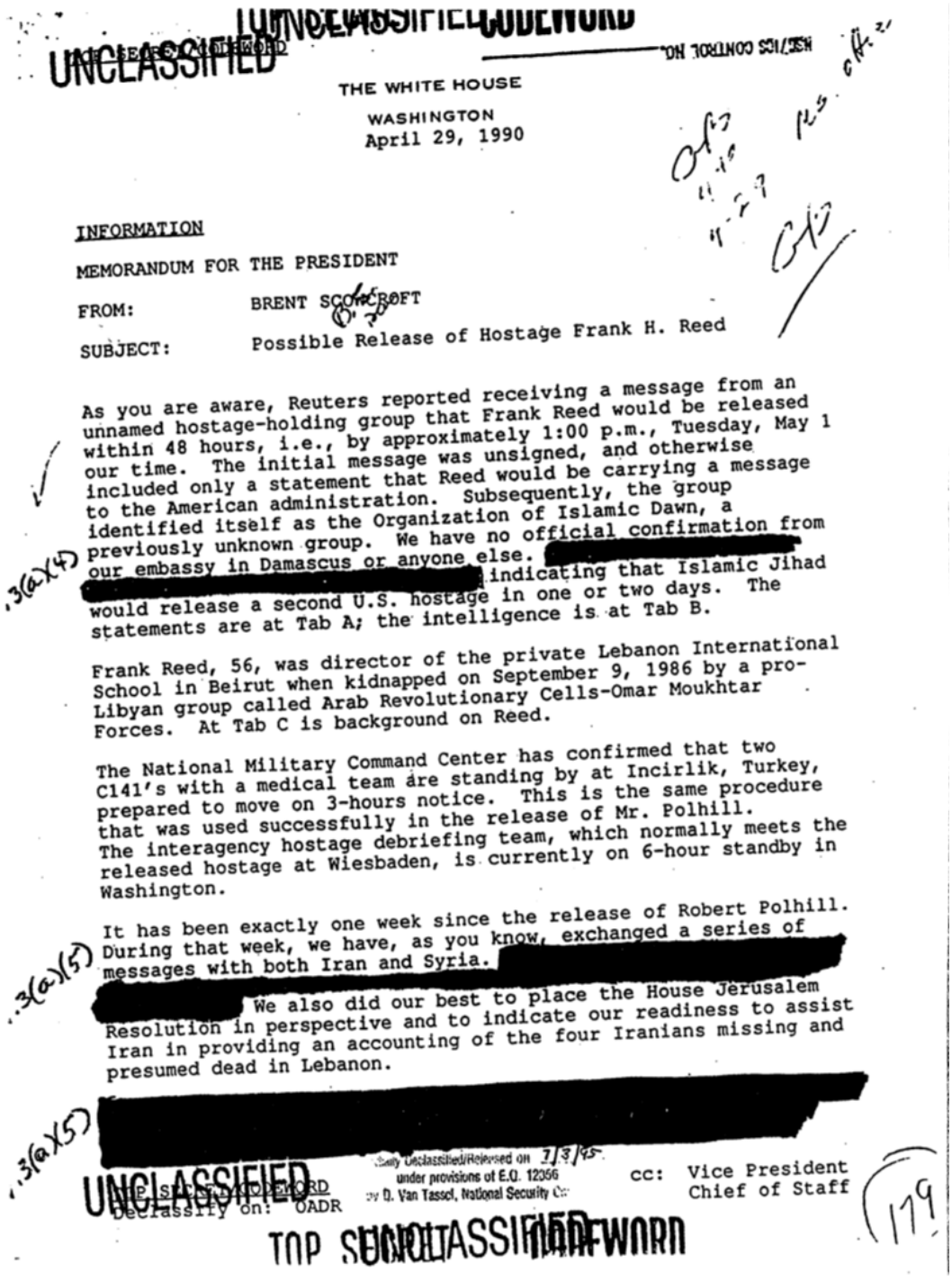
A: -- WE WELCOME THE SECRETARY GENERAL'S OFFER.

Q: Regarding the threat to kill Cicippio, what is timing? The press reports are conflicting.

A: -- THERE ARE CONFLICTING PRESS REPORTS. OUR UNDERSTANDING IS THAT A DEADLINE WILL BE SET IF OBAID IS NOT RELEASED BY 6:00 LOCAL TIME.

8749

Image 3: U.S. Reaction to Israeli Action Against Obeid (August 2, 1989)



UNCLASSIFIED

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON
April 29, 1990

INFORMATION

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: BRENT SCOWCROFT

SUBJECT: Possible Release of Hostage Frank H. Reed

As you are aware, Reuters reported receiving a message from an unnamed hostage-holding group that Frank Reed would be released within 48 hours, i.e., by approximately 1:00 p.m., Tuesday, May 1 our time. The initial message was unsigned, and otherwise included only a statement that Reed would be carrying a message to the American administration. Subsequently, the group identified itself as the Organization of Islamic Dawn, a previously unknown group. We have no official confirmation from our embassy in Damascus or anyone else. [redacted] indicating that Islamic Jihad would release a second U.S. hostage in one or two days. The statements are at Tab A; the intelligence is at Tab B.

Frank Reed, 56, was director of the private Lebanon International School in Beirut when kidnapped on September 9, 1986 by a pro-Libyan group called Arab Revolutionary Cells-Omar Moukhtar Forces. At Tab C is background on Reed.

The National Military Command Center has confirmed that two C141's with a medical team are standing by at Incirlik, Turkey, prepared to move on 3-hours notice. This is the same procedure that was used successfully in the release of Mr. Polhill. The interagency hostage debriefing team, which normally meets the released hostage at Wiesbaden, is currently on 6-hour standby in Washington.

It has been exactly one week since the release of Robert Polhill. During that week, we have, as you know, exchanged a series of messages with both Iran and Syria. [redacted] We also did our best to place the House Jerusalem Resolution in perspective and to indicate our readiness to assist Iran in providing an accounting of the four Iranians missing and presumed dead in Lebanon.

[redacted]

UNCLASSIFIED

Declassified/Released on 7/3/95
under provisions of E.O. 12356
by D. Van Tassel, National Security Co

cc: Vice President
Chief of Staff

TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE

Image 4: Possible Release of Franklin H. Reed (April 29, 1990)

20631

THE PRESIDENT HAS SEEN
6-21-95

SECRET

6/22 Discussed. OK to go forward.

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

June 21, 1995

MR. PRESIDENT:

The attached is a proposed PDD on U.S. counterterrorism policy.

It covers five main topics: (i) reducing U.S. vulnerability to terrorism at home and abroad; (ii) deterring terrorism; (iii) responding to terrorism, with specific agency responsibilities assigned for preventing, handling and managing the consequences of attacks; (iv) weapons of mass destruction; (v) deadlines for the AG's report on vulnerability and readiness reports from FEMA and DOD.

NSC resolved one significant interagency dispute in the preparation of the PDD. Treasury wanted a seat on the Coordinating Sub-Group (CSG), which coordinates our counterterrorism policy. FBI resisted, for reasons Tony spells out, and Treasury was left off the CSG, though the PDD makes clear that Treasury (including the Office of Foreign Asset Control, Secret Service, ATF and Customs) will be included where its expertise or jurisdiction is involved.

Treasury is not happy about being left off the CSG, but has agreed to support the PDD in light of the language spelling out when it will be invited to CSG meetings. All other relevant agencies have cleared the PDD. Leon concurs.

If you approve, please sign the PDD.

Todd Stern

Presidential Decision Directive on U.S. Counterterrorism Policy

SECRET

Image 5: PDD 39 - U.S. Policy on Counterterrorism (June 21, 1995)

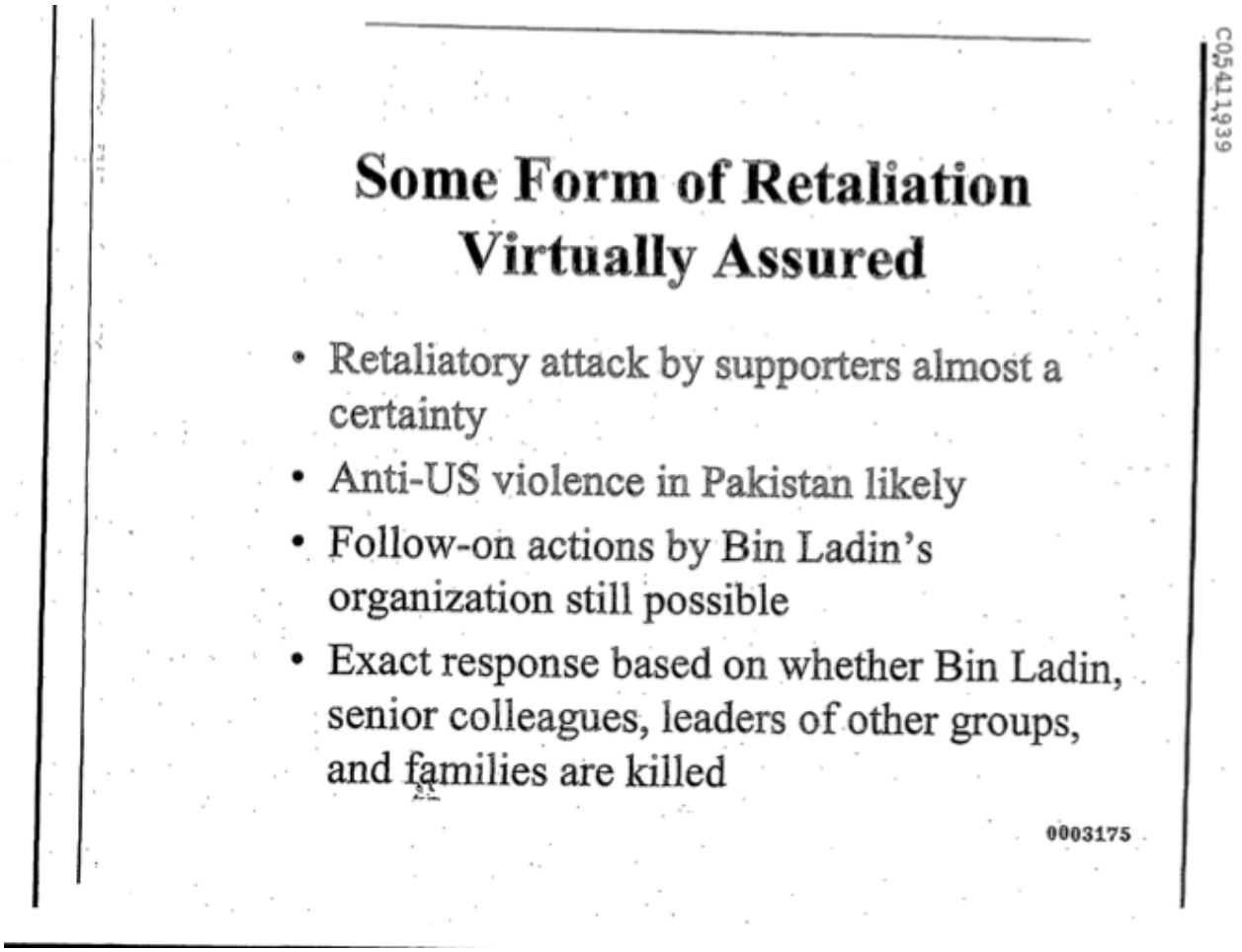


Image 6: Bombings in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam - An Update (August 14, 1998)

Bin Ladin Determined To Strike in US

Clandestine, foreign government, and media reports indicate Bin Ladin since 1997 has wanted to conduct terrorist attacks in the US. Bin Ladin implied in US television interviews in 1997 and 1998 that his followers would follow the example of World Trade Center bomber Ramzi Yousef and "bring the fighting to America."

After US missile strikes on his base in Afghanistan in 1998, Bin Ladin told followers he wanted to retaliate in Washington, according to a [redacted] service.

An Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) operative told an [redacted] service at the same time that Bin Ladin was planning to exploit the operative's access to the US to mount a terrorist strike.

The millennium plotting in Canada in 1999 may have been part of Bin Ladin's first serious attempt to implement a terrorist strike in the US. Convicted plotter Ahmed Ressam has told the FBI that he conceived the idea to attack Los Angeles International Airport himself, but that Bin Ladin lieutenant Abu Zubaydah encouraged him and helped facilitate the operation. Ressam also said that in 1998 Abu Zubaydah was planning his own US attack.

Ressam says Bin Ladin was aware of the Los Angeles operation.

Although Bin Ladin has not succeeded, his attacks against the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 demonstrate that he prepares operations years in advance and is not deterred by setbacks. Bin Ladin associates surveilled our Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam as early as 1993, and some members of the Nairobi cell planning the bombings were arrested and deported in 1997.

Al-Qa'ida members—including some who are US citizens—have resided in or traveled to the US for years, and the group apparently maintains a support structure that could aid attacks. Two al-Qa'ida members found guilty in the conspiracy to bomb our Embassies in East Africa were US citizens, and a senior EIJ member lived in California in the mid-1990s.

A clandestine source said in 1998 that a Bin Ladin cell in New York was recruiting Muslim-American youth for attacks.

We have not been able to corroborate some of the more sensational threat reporting, such as that from a [redacted] service in 1998 saying that Bin Ladin wanted to hijack a US aircraft to gain the release of "Blind Shaykh" 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman and other US-held extremists.

continued

Declassified and Approved
for Release, 10 April 2004

Image 7: Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in US (August 6, 2001)

~~TOP SECRET CLOSE HOLD~~

THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1000

SEP 3 0 2001 OCT -1

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Strategic Thoughts

The U.S. strategic theme should be aiding local peoples to rid themselves of terrorists and to free themselves of regimes that support terrorism. U.S. Special Operations Forces and intelligence personnel should make allies of Afghanis, Iraqis, Lebanese, Sudanese and others who would use U.S. equipment, training, financial, military and humanitarian support to root out and attack the common enemies.

Some air strikes against Al-Qaida and Taliban targets are planned to begin soon. But, especially in the war's initial period, I think U.S. military action should stress:

- indirect (through local, non-U.S. forces) action, in coordination with and in support of opposition groups;
- direct use of U.S. forces initially primarily to deliver logistics, intelligence and other support to opposition groups and humanitarian supplies to NGOs and refugees; and subsequently
- on-the-ground action against the terrorists as individuals--leaders and others--

rather than focusing too heavily on:

- direct,
- aerial attacks on
- things and people.

The U.S. should exercise care and restraint regarding initial air strikes until intelligence develops to permit impressive (worthwhile) strikes against Al-Qaida and other targets, strikes that in some instances can be coordinated to provide effective support to the opposition. We should avoid as much as possible creating images of Americans killing Moslems until we have set the political stage that the people we are going after are the enemies of Moslems themselves.

Public expectations still are shaped by conventional thinking rooted in recent history. It is therefore widely assumed that U.S. will strike soon and exclusively at Al-Qaida in Afghanistan.

DECLASSIFIED IAW E.O. 12958
MAY 7, 2009
CHIEF RDD WHS

Classified by: USDP, D.J.FEITH
REASON: 1.5(d)
DECLASSIFY ON: 29SEP10

~~TOP SECRET CLOSE HOLD~~

COPY 6 OF 6 COPIES

09-M-1810

30Sep01

Image 8: Strategic Thoughts (September 30, 2001)

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