

Their Terrorism and Ours

A review of Brigitte L. Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (2nd edition, Rowman & Littlefield, 2007) and Beau Grosscup, *Strategic Terror: The Politics and Ethics of Aerial Bombardment* (Zed, 2006).

Books on terrorism regularly fall into one of two categories—those that locate the terrorism and terrorists among the enemies and targets of the West ('their' terrorism), and those that find it (and them) at home ('our' terrorism). The former is far more common than the latter, which follows from patriotism, propaganda and structures of power. This is partially translatable into the force of market demand, as the people and groups who want information on and protection against terrorists, and can pay for this, are governments, their offshoots like the police, military and secret services, business executives, and private security firms. Afghan and Honduran peasants may be terrorized, but they do not provide an effective demand for analyses of terrorism. Those that do provide that demand have been served for many years by a veritable industry of institutes, thinktanks and individuals in the Western states, linked together by ideology and interest.¹

In accord with this structure of power and demand, the dominant narrative situates terrorism in individuals and groups that challenge and attack governments, mainly Western governments and their citizens, institutions and symbols. In its traditional usage terrorism encompassed intimidation and killings by governments as well as by non-governmental actors, but this was gradually sloughed off in large measure because of its political inconvenience—it would make Western and allied governments terrorists, whereas these governments wanted the word confined to 'retail' operations with 'wholesale' (state) actions excluded and converted into 'counter-terrorism'. It was still desirable to be able to capture some states in the terrorism business, so state 'sponsorship' of terrorism was allowed, and could be used selectively. Thus in Claire Sterling's Reagan era classic *The Terror Network* (1980), the Soviet Union was featured as a sponsor of terrorism, on skimpy evidence of its arms sales to Libya and help to other 'terrorists' like the African National Congress.² On the other hand, U.S. arms supply and training of Latin American military and police personnel—vastly larger than any Soviet effort in the Third World—or even its support of a very active Cuban refugee network regularly attacking Cuba, were somehow exempted from such 'sponsorship' by mainstream experts (e.g., Laqueur, Wilkinson; Dobson and Payne; Sterling).³

An awkward problem for the mainstream analysts who focus on non-state terrorism is that state terrorism has been vastly more important as a civilian killer than non-state terrorism, and uses even more ferocious methods than the retailers. As to the methods, only states use torture on a large scale,⁴ and their weaponry includes cluster and phosphorus bombs, napalm, and ever more flesh-

shredding and bone-shattering instruments of death, which will more than compete with the occasional (and well-featured) beheadings by non-state terrorists. As to numbers, for the twelve years up to the publication of Sterling's *Terror Network* in 1980, the CIA estimate for the aggregate killings of international terrorists was 3,368. This was vastly exceeded by state killings in Guatemala alone in the same period, and the number of 'disappeared' in Argentina 1976-1982 was some 11,000. Sanctions imposed on Iraq between 1991-1996 increased the child death rate there sharply,⁵ but as Madeleine Albright said on U.S. national TV in 1996, the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children in that period were 'worth it'. Retail terrorists are not in this league.

Brigitte L. Nacos's *Mass Mediated Terrorism* falls into the first category of books that locate terrorism in anti-Western retail terrorists. Beau Grosscup's *Strategic Terror*, falls into the second category, featuring Western (primarily U.S.) aerial warfare as the primary form of terrorism. It can be inferred from her title that Nacos solves the definition problem by focusing on terrorists' use of the media; she states that violence against civilians 'with the intent to win publicity avoids the issue of whether the terrorist label applies to political violence inflicted by governments as well' (28). She says that governments may well use such violence, but governments 'do not want to publicize such incidents but would rather limit media attention and even suppress public disclosure'. She notes that governments—she only mentions Hitler's and Stalin's—have taken the lives of millions of innocent people, and she even acknowledges that state violence is a very much larger menace to civilians than her 'mass mediated terrorism'. But to call it terrorism 'would minimize the enormity of systematic political violence', and therefore she sets it aside. She concludes this discussion by saying 'I therefore distinguish between non-state terrorism and state terror' (28).

In short, Nacos avoids the terrorism that is more important in terms of human impact, and implies that this is a creditable achievement. As governments allegedly want to keep publicity of their larger-scale killings of innocents out of the media, Nacos proposes to help them do so by focusing on the lesser terrorists that want publicity. But she helps them in several other ways. First, she calls their-own state terrorism 'counter-terrorism'. George Bush and the United States and Britain were only carrying out a 'war on terror', and presumably Israel also has only been 'retaliating', not terrorizing. Couldn't the retail terrorists be responding to earlier rounds of state terrorism and ethnic cleansing? Not in the Western model, where the causality is always that we only retaliate, they initiate, and Nacos adheres to that model. When she gets to the attack on Iraq, she never discusses the evidence that the Bush leaders planned it even before 9/11 and greeted the latter as the desired excuse (a much welcomed 'Pearl Harbor').⁶ She never mentions the prior sanctions regime as a form of terrorism, or the extensive pre-invasion bombing of Iraq, or the U.S.-Saudi-Pakistani joint sponsorship of Bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan; or the fact that Bin Laden and other jihadists considered the U.S.-supported ethnic cleansing of Palestine as terrorism to which they were retaliating.

Another awkward fact for Nacos's featuring of mass-mediated terrorism is that the Bush administration used and manipulated the media on the terrorism threat on a large and crude scale to make the public fearful and win political points for Bush-Cheney as protectors of national security. Bush-Cheney *needed* Bin Laden and terrorism to justify their own power projection policies. Nacos acknowledges and criticizes this fear-use of terrorism, but she greatly under-rates its importance, and she makes the military attacks that followed into 'counter-terrorism', which sounds defensive and responsive, not state terrorism and aggression that implemented an imperial agenda already in motion. In speaking of these massive U.S. attacks Nacos never uses the word 'aggression' or mentions 'international law'. And while she criticizes the mainstream media for playing up Bush's terrorism scares, she never suggests that this is because the media are part of an imperial system and regularly support external attacks and subversion, whether Guatemala in 1954, Brazil in 1964, Nicaragua in the 1980s, or Iraq and Iran in the current decade.

Nacos also contends that the media have 'played into the hands' of Bin Laden, which she supposedly proves with numbers showing that Bin Laden's name appears in the media as often as Bush's. This is extremely silly. If Saddam Hussein's name showed up frequently in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq did that demonstrate media favoritism, or that the media was allowing his message to get across to the U.S. citizenry? Nacos carefully avoids discussing how Bin Laden was portrayed in the media and how popular he was. She stresses that his list of grievances was sometimes aired, but the implication that this had an impact on the U.S. public is misleading. She contradictorily admits that Bin Laden was not trying to win favor in the United States but to instill fear. She fails to mention that another Bin Laden objective was to stimulate the United States into aggressive actions that would arouse the Islamic world and help Al Qaeda recruitment. Bush of course did this, but that was because this served his power projection purposes, just as 9/11 did. So the media's excesses that Nacos would like to reduce are explicable in large part by their service to Bush and his policies--that is to *state* mass-mediated terrorism, not to the lesser terrorists. The terrorism of the latter, also, being mainly derivative, will not shrink until the primary terrorism—here hidden under the rubric 'counter-terrorism' or just conveniently avoided—is terminated. That solution is not on Nacos's agenda.

Beau Grosscup's *Strategic Terror* provides an extensive discussion of the growth of aerial bombardment as the center-piece of Western military strategy in dealing with the Third World. Grosscup's emphases and agenda are almost uniformly the reverse of those of Nacos. He stresses civilian casualties in identifying terror and terrorism; he deals with ethics and the law; and he features the important racist and class underpinning of Western methods of war-fighting. He describes how the advance of Western technology, and especially aircraft and aerial bombs, reinforced Western contempt for and dehumanization of colonial and dark populations, and he has extensive (and depressing) accounts of British, French,

Italian and U.S. denigration of those backwards people and willingness, even glee, in pounding them into submission.

Grosscup describes the evolution of strategic thought on aerial bombing, where from the earliest times in the writings of the 'Prophets' (the pioneer analysts Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, William Mitchell, and Basil Liddell Hart), the use of air power to attack civilians and civilian sites was featured, only for Douhet indiscriminately, but for the others liberally. Grosscup notes how aerial bombing strategists regularly stress its use in beggaring, killing and breaking the spirit of civilian populations (he has many quotes along this line from officials for war after war, including Afghanistan, Serbia and Iraq). He describes how often strategic bombing focuses on working class housing and facilities (specifically in the cases of the bombing of Germany and Japan during World War II), with an element of class bias added to the aim of undermining worker morale.

Grosscup shows how racism and the demonization of target country populations help make bombing foreign civilians acceptable. There is also the suppression of evidence. The bombing states are not interested in 'body counts' ('We don't do body counts', said U.S. General Tommy Franks), except of the victims of the other. They claim to be 'minimizing' civilian casualties, but as Grosscup points out, this means 'inflicting' those casualties, and the killers never define the minimum, don't count the victims, regularly make 'tragic errors', and often let it slip out that those civilian deaths are intended. Grosscup notes also that there is a regular process in which aerial bombing starts out claiming care in avoiding 'collateral damage', but under the pressure to win 'any pretense of a distinction between military and civilian targets is dropped' (180).

Grosscup rejects the claim of the moral superiority of aerial bombing terrorists over retail terrorists because their intentions differ and that they don't deliberately kill civilians. They do deliberately kill them if they bomb areas that are heavily populated with civilians, and Grosscup stresses how regularly they do this using ever 'improving' bombs that kill and maim over a wide area. Also, retail terrorists often don't target civilians directly but only some military and symbolic target, so that civilian casualties for them also might be called 'collateral' (though this point is never allowed except for 'our' actions).

For Grosscup, aerial bombing is the primary terrorism, and Bush's (and now Obama's) 'war on terrorism' is actually a war 'of' terrorism. Bush's declaration of a war 'is the latest example of a bombing nation seeking to monopolize the terrorism discourse in order to give political cover to its own terrorism' (186). Nacos allows Bush (and the West) to do that monopolization. Grosscup does not, and believes that real terrorism will only come to an end if people recognize and challenge that reality.

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Endnotes

¹ For an early but full account, see Edward Herman and Gerry O'Sullivan, *The "Terrorism" Industry* (Pantheon, 1990). Interestingly, South Africa was part of the industry structure even during the apartheid years.

² The African National Congress was labeled one of the 'more notorious terrorist groups in the world' by the Pentagon in November 1988. It is also well-known that that notorious terrorist Nelson Mandela was captured by the apartheid government with the aid of the CIA.

³ On this program of training and supply, see Edward S. Herman, *The Real Terror Network* (South End Press, 1982), chapter 3. On the backgrounds and views of the establishment experts, *The Terrorism Industry*, chapter 7.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ It should be noted that these increased death rates were known to follow from U.S. bombing of water, power, and sanitation facilities. Under U.S. and UK pressure the UN continued to refuse to allow Iraq to import machinery and medicines that would have solved these problems and reduced death rates. Based on U.S. planning documents, Thomas Nagy concluded that the 'United States knew sanctions had the capacity to devastate the water treatment system of Iraq. It knew what the consequences would be: increased outbreaks of disease and high rates of child mortality ... The United States has deliberately pursued a policy of destroying the water treatment system of Iraq, knowing full well the cost in Iraqi lives'. Thomas J. Nagy, 'The Secret Behind the Sanctions: How the U.S. Intentionally Destroyed Iraq's Water Supply', *The Progressive*, September, 2001 (http://www.progressive.org/mag_nagysanctions). See also Joy Gordon, 'Economic Sanctions as a Weapon of Mass Destruction', *Harper's Magazine*, November, 2002.

⁶ 'Further, the process of transformation, even if it brings revolutionary change, is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event – like a new Pearl Harbor'. *REBUILDING AMERICA'S DEFENSES: Strategy, Forces and Resources For a New Century*, Project for the New American Century, September, 2000, p.51, col. 1.

<http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>