Learning from the Past:
US Domestic Counterterrorism from 1970 to 1985

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August 2021

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Though tens of thousands of pages have been written about terrorism and counterterrorism since 9/11, the history of counterterrorism in the United States has received relatively little analytical attention. The 1970s and early 1980s have become almost forgotten in the history of America's struggle with domestic terrorist violence. That period, though, was part of a long wave of terrorism that occurred across the developed world. In the United States, during that era, terrorist groups—including ethno-nationalists, separatists, and Marxist-Leninists—conducted a remarkable number of attacks, some of which resulted in significant injuries and deaths. In response to this threat, the US developed and deployed a robust repertoire of strategies appropriate for countering domestic terrorism. In 2014, CNA published a report that examined this forgotten history in order to identify what lessons learned from that era might be most appropriate to confronting the challenges posed by contemporary domestic terrorism. This short paper updates that report, and captures what is most important for responding to domestic terrorism today.

Admittedly, today's challenges are different. Our current approach to countering terrorism has been irrevocably shaped by 20 years spent combating Islamist terrorism both at home and abroad. The technological landscape being exploited—both by terrorists and by those aspiring to thwart terrorists—would be unrecognizable to the intelligence analyst or law enforcement professional of the 1970-1985 period. And even the term *terrorism* is beginning to sound dated, as government agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security (which did not exist during this era) shift to the language of domestic violent extremism (DVE). Yet, despite these differences, the eras have much in common and the challenge—that of protecting the homeland—remains largely the same.

Unfortunately, many of the lessons learned fighting Islamist terrorism are neither applicable nor appropriate to the threat posed by violent extremists. Moreover, the threat does not appear to be waning. In fact, acts of right-wing domestic terrorism have increased steadily in recent years.[1] DHS has obviously worked ceaselessly and successfully to protect the homeland over the last few decades, but recent shifts presage a likely escalation in DVE that will necessitate the development and articulation of even more robust and nuanced strategies.

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[1] Seth Jones and Catrina Doxsee, *The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States,* CSIS Brief, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 17, 2020, https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states.

Movement in this direction has already occurred, with the Department of Justice publishing—in summer 2020—the first-ever National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism.[2]

Much work remains to be done, and one of the most significant questions on the table is where to begin. The strategies developed and refined over the past 20 years—while successful in some ways—were not designed to deal with the problem of DVEs today. The very framework in which these approaches have been embedded—the War on Terror—is fundamentally inimical to operations in a domestic environment. We should, of course, mine our existing range of techniques and frameworks for those that are appropriate to a domestic challenge. We should also, however, take care to learn from the past. It can be difficult to remember that terrorism posed a national security threat before 9/11; the scope and horror of that attack were such that it immediately dominated the landscape. And yet, terrorism in the homeland—domestic terrorism—did not begin that day. As we argue in our paper on the history of domestic counterterrorism efforts—*The "First War on Terrorism?" U.S. Domestic Counterterrorism During the 1970s and Early 1980s*—we have been in this place before. Thus, before we finalize our strategy or settle on an approach, it seems prudent to consider some of the most critical lessons learned from our not-too-distant past as we think about the future.

Parallels to the Past

Combating terrorism has been a US national security priority since 9/11, and serious acts of domestic terrorism have occurred over the past 20 years. As a result, attention has been slowly shifting to this growing national security threat. The January 6, 2021, attacks on the Capitol, however, have escalated this shift and increased attention to this pressing issue. Importantly, though this threat may feel new after nearly two decades spent fighting Islamist extremists, the challenges of today have a clear parallel in the relatively recent past.

Scale of the challenge. Though it is easy to forget, the reality is that a long and violent wave of domestic terrorism gripped the US during the 1970s and 1980s. There were no incidents on the scale of 9/11 during this era, but the terrorists' violent repertoire was astonishing, including political kidnappings, the murder of police officers, the ambush of US Navy personnel, the assassination of diplomats, and million-dollar armed robberies. In fact, according to the University of Maryland's widely respected Global Terrorism Database (GTD), 1,355 terrorist incidents took place in the United States during the 1970s—and though incident numbers dropped considerably in the 1980-1985 period, the rates remained relatively high.[3]

Comparing GTD data from the 1970s to data from a comparable period following 9/11 is similarly illuminating: during the 1970s, nearly an order of magnitude more incidents (1,475) occurred in the United States than in the decade after 9/11 (203) (Figure 1).

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[2] US National Security Council, "National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism," June 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf.

[3] Global Terrorism Database (GTD), National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, accessed Aug. 20, 2021, http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/.

Figure 1. Domestic Terror Attacks & Fatalities, 1972-1992[a]

Domestic Terror Attacks & Fatalities, 1972-1992 (GTD data)
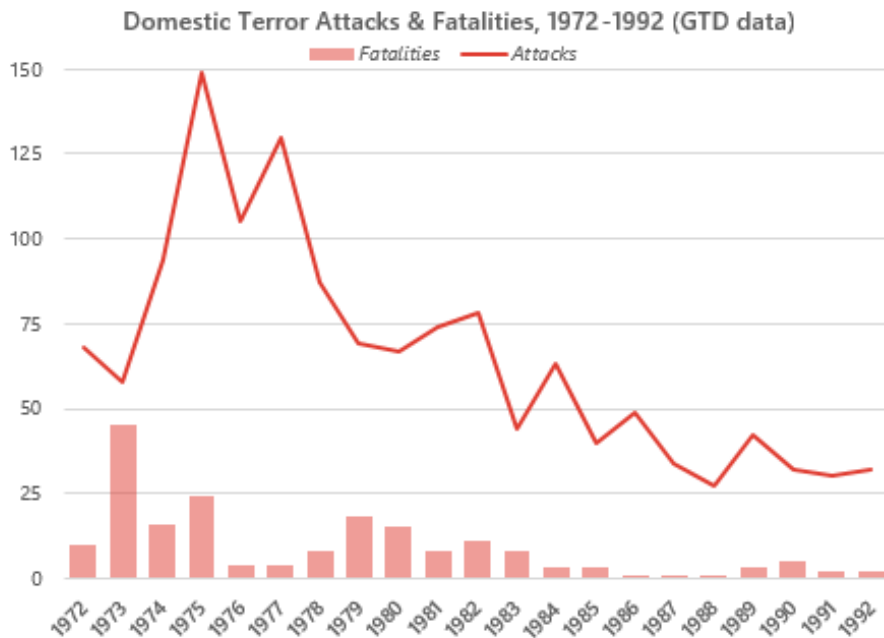
Source: CNA based on Global Terrorism Database (GTD), National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, accessed Aug. 20, 2021.
[a] GTD lost data from 1993; thus, attack event data from that year are unavailable.

This downward trend, however, did not persist and recent years have seen a marked increase in acts of domestic terrorism (Figure 2).[4] In 2020, incidents of domestic terrorism actually reached a level not seen since the late 1970s, making this era all the more appropriate for comparison.

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[4] Robert O'Harrow Jr., Andrew Ba Tran, and Derek Hawkins, "The Rise of Domestic Extremism in America," *Washington* Post, Apr. 12, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/domestic-terrorism-data/; see also *Washington Post Investigative,* GitHub page, accessed Aug. 20, 2021, https://github.com/wpinvestigative/csis_domestic_terrorism. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Transnational Threats (TNT) Project compiled the original dataset that the *Washington Post* enriched by using the following sources: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (2020-2021); ADL Hate, Extremism, Anti-Semitism, and Terrorism (H.E.A.T.) Map, the Anti-Defamation League (2002–2021); *Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events* (2009–2021); START GTD (1994–2017); and press releases and reports from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Department of Justice (DOJ).

Figure 2. Domestic Terror Attacks & Fatalities, 1994-2020[b]

Domestic Terror Attacks & Fatalities, 1994-2020 (CSIS-WAPO data)
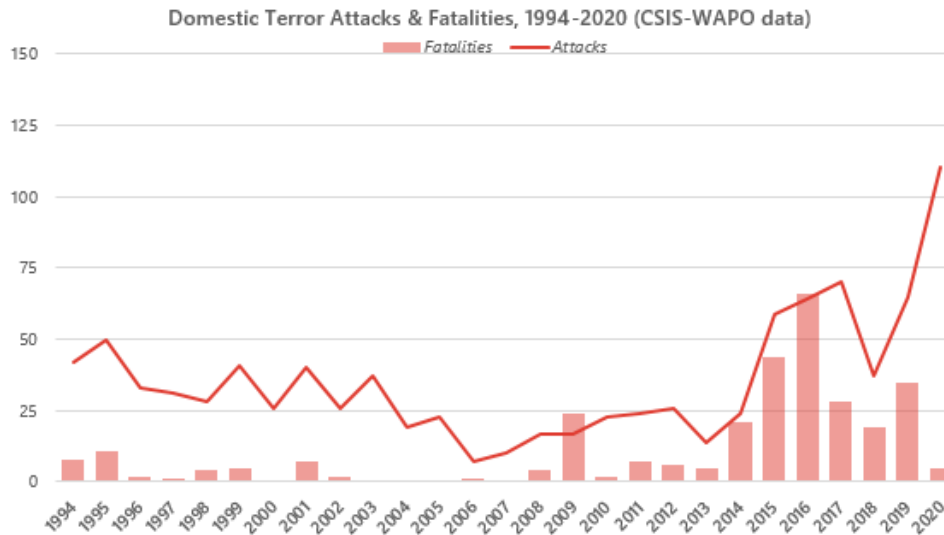
Source: CNA, based on the *Washington Post* and Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Transnational Threat (TNT) Project.
[b] Fatalities for the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 (168) and the 9/11 attacks in 2001 (2,977) have been removed to demonstrate/reveal the trend of increasing cumulative fatalities from more common attack events with <100 fatalities that would otherwise be obscured in the visualization scale by these outlier events. Partial data for 2021 (only collected for January) were also excluded.

Though it may be tempting to view the era's terrorism as a series of featureless data points, the reality is that many of the era's cases achieved a degree of notoriety that has endured to the present day. It was during this period that The Weather Underground bombed the US State Department, the US Capitol, and the Pentagon. In 1975 alone, the group claimed responsibility for 25 separate bombing incidents. But as recently as 2008, the Weather Underground was in the news as Barack Obama (then a presidential candidate) was accused of having a close relationship with the group's co-founder Bill Ayers (then a professor in the College of Education at the University of Illinois Chicago). It was also during this decade that Patty Hearst was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army. Hearst ultimately came to sympathize with the group to such a degree that she adopted a new name and participated in armed robberies with other group members. Though this happened decades ago, it contributed to making the phrase *Stockholm Syndrome* (coined just months before she was kidnapped) a permanent part of the public discourse. These events may not have been on the scale of 9/11, but they dominated the decades in which they occurred and their impact is still evident today.

Law enforcement. Another similarity between this historical era and the contemporary moment is seen in attitudes towards law enforcement. When domestic terrorism peaked in the 1970s, the country was in a state of tumult, with citizens expressing distrust of law enforcement and engaging in regular protests and riots. The Watergate scandal (and subsequent revelations about police intelligence operations directed against American citizens) contributed to a climate that was profoundly hostile to law

enforcement activities that appeared to be politically oriented.[5] State and local police intelligence units across the country were closed and their files destroyed.[6] The FBI lost popular and congressional support, and its budget remained essentially flat over the course of the decade.[7] Though the parallel is by no means exact, law enforcement agents today are operating in a surprisingly similar environment—one that is distrustful of law enforcement activities and in which seemingly straight-forward national security threats are often politicized. In fact, some of the very same concerns that dominated public discourse 50 years ago are being raised again today. As one example, civil libertarians of the era warned of the possible chilling effects that counterterrorism could have on the exercise of first amendment rights, and the *Washington Post* wondered whether the government "needs to spy on its own citizens."[8]

Public concern. Another clear point of parallel relates to public concern with the terrorist threat. A superficial analysis of these data suggests a clear difference between the two eras, but a closer examination suggests there is considerable overlap. According to a nationwide poll conducted in 1977, 60 percent of Americans considered terrorism a "very serious" domestic problem. Terrorists, according to one nationally syndicated columnist, were "more feared than rapists."[9] By contrast, in March 2021, a Gallup poll found that only 36 percent of Americans felt a "great deal" of worry about "the possibility of future terrorist attacks in the U.S."[10] This suggests that those working to prevent terrorism today are dealing with a lack of concern that simply did not exist in the past. And yet a superficial analysis can be misleading. Despite considerable public unease about terrorism, and considerable evidence of widespread terrorist mayhem in the United States in the 1970s and early 1980s, no one seemed quite prepared to declare that the country was facing a terrorist crisis. According to Philip Jenkins, "Terrorism as such—as opposed to particular movements—was the subject of no presidential commissions or congressional hearings, no television documentaries or even true crime books."[11] Jenkins likely overstates his case. Congress held a considerable number of hearings on terrorism, and the subject did seep into the country's cultural landscape. But he is surely correct when he notes that Americans "paid strikingly little attention to terrorism as a phenomenon, as a systematic threat to political order."[12] In contrast to the months and years after 9/11, terrorism was not viewed as an existential threat requiring a fight for national survival during the 1970s and early 1980s. This aligns with the current

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[5] Accounts of "political policing" in the United States include Frank Donner, *Protectors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression in Urban America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Seth Rosenfeld, *Subversives: The FBI's War on Student Radicals and Reagan's Rise to Power* (New York: Picador, 2013); and Tim Weiner, *Enemies: A History of the FBI* (New York: Random House, 2013).

[6] Richard E. Morgan, *Domestic Intelligence: Monitoring Dissent in America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), pp. 83-87.

[7] Tony Poveda, *Lawlessness and Reform: The FBI in Transition* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1990), p. 129; and Athan G. Theoharis (ed.), *The FBI: A Comprehensive Reference Guide* (Phoenix, Ariz: Oryx Press, 1999), p. 5.

[8] Mitchell S. Rubin, "The FBI and Dissidents: A First Amendment Analysis of Attorney General Smith's 1983 FBI Guidelines on Domestic Security Investigations," *Arizona Law Review* 27 (1985): 456; and Kathy Sawyer, "Brink's Shoot-Out Rekindles an Old Debate," *Washington Post*, Nov. 2, 1981, p. A1.

[9] Kevin Phillips, "Terrorists More Feared Than Rapists," *Arizona Republic*, Jan. 22, 1978.

[10] Gallup, "Terrorism," https://news.gallup.com/poll/4909/terrorism-united-states.aspx, accessed Aug. 20, 2021.

[11] Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 58.

[12] Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares,* p. 58.

mood today, despite the fact that many of the groups committing these acts were—and today are— openly dedicated to the overthrow or demise of the US government and the American way of life.

Critical Lessons

When we look back at the 1970s and early 1980s, we must acknowledge that it is difficult to identify, with any certainty, the precise causes for the decline in terrorist violence that ultimately occurred. Still, identifying what was done right is an important component of developing a sound response to today's DVE threat. Our analysis, predicated on an examination of the historical record, suggests that there are four critical features of the era's counterterrorism effort that are worth remembering and replicating.

- ***It is possible to counter terrorism while ignoring ideology.*** The FBI, during this period, remained committed to "depoliticizing" terrorism. Rather than treating extremists as ideological threats to the security of the state, the FBI leadership insisted that only the *criminal* acts carried out by terrorists—e.g., bombings, assassinations, and bank robberies—would be investigated and prosecuted.[13] Indeed, the FBI director, William H. Webster, rejected the claim that a general law against terrorism was needed; he told Congress that existing statutes covering specific crimes were perfectly adequate.[14] As similar debates occur today, it is worth remembering not only that the US has already had many of these conversations, but also that the US chose not to create new laws and still saw a decline in domestic terrorist violence.

- ***War is not the only viable framework for countering terrorism.*** Despite the intensity of domestic violence, the US government never seriously considered, let alone conducted, the kind of counterterrorism effort that emerged post-9/11. Policy-makers did not attempt to mobilize the population as they did during the Second World War. Despite the highly ideological nature of the terrorist groups then operating (and the milieus from which they emerged), the US government did not mount a wide-scale campaign to eliminate domestic terrorism altogether or consider waging a "war of ideas," or explicitly promote a counter narrative. In making these choices, the government avoided the pitfalls of picking ideological "winners" and "losers" and protected itself from charges of propaganda-peddling.[15] Decision-makers largely ignored incendiary terrorist rhetoric and exhortations. The framing of counterterrorism strategy during the 1970-1985 period suggests that the war analogy—widely used after 9/11—is not the only one available to government officials.

- ***Having the right structures and policies in place is critical to success.*** Understanding this particular era in US history is especially important given that a number of the structures and initiatives that first arose during this turbulent period remain prominent components of today's counterterrorism ecosystem. As one example, it was during this era that the Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTF) were initiated. Today, both this structure (i.e., the JTTF model), and the impetus to strengthen cooperation between the FBI and state and local

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[13] Arjun Chowdhury and Scott Fitzsimons, "Effective But Inefficient: Understanding the Costs of Counterterrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 6, no. 3 (2013): 448.

[14] See, for example, Oliver B. Revell, "U.S. Perspectives on Terrorism," in *Proceedings of the 10th Annual Symposium on the Role of Behavioral Science in Physical Security* (Washington, DC: Defense Nuclear Agency, 1985), p. 81.

[15] Jerome P. Bjelopera, *Countering Violent Extremism in the United States*, Congressional Research Service, R42553, May 31, 2012, p. 27.

police agencies, are major features of domestic counterterrorism efforts. Similarly, it was during the 1970-1985 period that the FBI began to develop networks of informants inside terrorist organizations. This improved intelligence—along with aggressive investigations and greater cooperation with state and local police—formed a pillar of the FBI's emerging counterterrorism strategy. Thus, the FBI director informed Congress in 1983 that "through the increased use of court authorized surveillance techniques and increased emphasis on the development of human sources, the FBI has increased its intelligence base on both domestic and international terrorist groups."[16] Undercover operations, he recalled later, allowed the FBI to "get inside terrorist groups and to predict, to learn what their activities were so that we could thwart them."[17] However, without these innovations—that is, without the work critical to ensuring that necessary and proportional structures, practices, and authorities were in place—the US government almost certainly would have been less effective. Some of these structures will continue to serve the US well in the current crisis, but others may also be needed. Identifying what necessary and proportional adjustments might be required at the system level will consequently be critical to avoiding both under-preparation and overreaction.

- *Law enforcement can lead an effective domestic counterterrorism effort.* Finally, and perhaps most critically, in the 1970s and early 1980s, Americans clearly considered terrorism to be a serious national menace. But few people considered it an existential threat requiring draconian new legislation, militarization, or mass surveillance. Instead, decision-makers conceptualized domestic terrorism as a threat to public safety and security that required a law enforcement response. Investigating and prosecuting suspected terrorists lay at the heart of the US approach to countering domestic terrorism during this period. Using a law enforcement approach, authorities were able to point to a number of successes against a number of highly capable and dangerous groups. For policy-makers today, it is worth remembering that attacking terrorist groups as criminal enterprises can be an effective way to counter the threat of violent domestic extremism.

In many ways, the work of countering terrorism in the 1970s and early 1980s occurred in an environment markedly similar to today's environment. Domestic attacks were on the rise; law enforcement agencies had lost the trust of the public and were seen as political actors; the public did not feel that domestic terrorism was an issue of significant concern; debates over the balance between liberty and security were public and passionate; and competition between federal, state, and local police agencies undermined success. There are, of course, important differences between the two eras, but there is undeniable value in looking to the past for critical lessons learned and best practices suitable to countering terrorism in a domestic environment. Understanding not only what worked in the past, but also why it was effective and how we might replicate it, may be essential in charting a successful path forward. As important, though, is the tangible reminder that the national response to domestic terrorism need not include a politicized battle of ideas, a declaration of war, or the compromise of civil liberties.

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[16] U.S. Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, *FBI Oversight and Authorization*, 98th Cong., 1st sess., Feb. 2, 1983, p. 78; FBI, *Analysis of Claimed Terrorist Incidents in the U.S., 1981* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 1981), pp. 20-24.

[17] William H. Webster, interviewed by William M. Baker, March 9 and 11, 2006, transcript, Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI, p. 37.