

# Terrorism: At Home

By Jeffrey D. Simon

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Terrorism has not been a stranger to the American people. During the early days of the republic, hundreds of Americans were taken hostage off the high seas by the Barbary pirates of North Africa. Their sufferings evoked great sympathy in the country and led to the first arms-for-hostages deal and the first counterterrorist military operation in U.S. history. In more recent times, Americans have seen fellow citizens held hostage in Iran and Lebanon, planes with Americans onboard blown up in Europe, and U.S. symbols attacked by terrorists worldwide.

But although anti-U.S. terrorism has been a frequent event overseas, relatively few spectacular terrorist incidents have occurred on American soil. The majority of those happened during the anarchist and labor-management violence period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For most Americans, therefore, the threat of terrorism at home seemed quite remote. The public believed, or at least hoped, that the U.S. would be able to escape the terrorist violence that was sweeping the rest of the world.

The 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York City shattered that illusion. Six people were killed and more than 1,000 others injured when a car bomb exploded in an underground parking garage of one of the twin towers. Yet as shocking as that incident was, it had all but faded from public attention by spring 1995. Most of the perpetrators of the bombing—a small group of Islamic extremists—had been sentenced to long prison terms, and there had not been any subsequent major terrorist incidents on U.S. soil. The American public believed that the worst was behind them.

## The Oklahoma City Bombing

In the world of terrorism, however, it takes only one well-placed bomb to create new fears and reactions. That is what happened on the morning of Apr. 19, 1995, when a car bomb exploded in front of the federal building in Okla-

homa City, killing 169 people (including one rescue worker). It was the worst terrorist act ever on U.S. soil, and it struck a special nerve throughout America. This was not a major, world-famous metropolis that had been attacked, but rather a small city in the heartland of the country. Every town and city across the U.S. could now be considered a potential target for terrorism. As millions of Americans watched on television the heart-wrenching scenes of dead babies being pulled from the wreckage, they could only wonder whether their country was now catching up with the rest of the world, where terrorism was a frequent event.

The psychological shock of the bombing was magnified with the disclosure that an American was being charged with causing the carnage. The public had become accustomed to equating anti-U.S. terrorism with Middle Eastern Islamic extremists. Now America faced the increased threat of home-grown terrorism. The prime suspect in the Oklahoma City bombing, Timothy McVeigh, had ties to a right-wing American militia group and reportedly set off the bomb in retaliation for the U.S. government's final assault on the Branch Davidian headquarters in Waco, TX. The bombing occurred on the second anniversary of that raid, in which some 80 members of the religious cult, which authorities said had large numbers of illegal weapons, died when their compound burst into flames. McVeigh and Terry Nichols, both of whom had served in the same army unit at Fort Riley, KS, were indicted on 11 counts related to the Oklahoma City bombing. Michael Fortier, another member of the army unit, pleaded guilty to lesser charges and was expected to testify against McVeigh and Nichols.

The Oklahoma City tragedy brought public and media attention to the rise of right-wing militias. These groups had organized in several states following the Waco raid and a 1992 government siege at a white supremacist's cabin in Ruby Ridge, ID. In the latter incident, federal agents attempted to arrest the white supremacist, Randy Weaver, after he failed to appear in federal court on a weapons charge. An

11-day siege ensued in which Weaver's wife and son and a deputy marshal were killed before Weaver and an associate surrendered. The U.S. Justice Department agreed to pay \$3.1 million to Weaver and his 3 surviving daughters in Aug. 1995 to settle a wrongful death suit. Five FBI agents were suspended for their actions during an internal investigation after the siege. The Ruby Ridge and Waco incidents, along with gun-control legislation, had been cited by the militias as evidence that the government intended to confiscate all weapons—thereby violating the constitutional right "to keep and bear arms"—and initiate a war against the citizenry. Some militia extremists believed that the U.S. government was being taken over by foreign powers under a "One World Government" or "New World Order" controlled by the United Nations. The militias saw themselves as the last hope to save the U.S. from tyrannical rule.

The national focus on the terrorist threat posed by militias and right-wing extremists following the Oklahoma City bombing was not surprising. It mirrored the national attention given to the threat of Islamic extremism following the World Trade Center bombing. Viewing the terrorist threat mainly in terms of the latest incident, however, ignores the diversity of terrorism and the potential for any number of groups to stage future attacks. Although right-wing, anti-government extremist groups advocating white supremacy, such as the Aryan Nations, the Order, and the American Front Skinheads, pose a terrorist threat within the U.S., the federal building in Oklahoma City could just as easily have been attacked by international radical terrorists, left-wing extremists, antiabortion militants, or others had they believed such an act would have furthered their interests. The threat of terrorism in the U.S. is not the domain of any single group or cause; it crosses all parts of the political, ideological, and ethnic-religious spectrum.

### The Unabomber

The U.S. was still recovering from the shock of the Oklahoma City bombing when a new terrorist crisis erupted in June. This time a familiar name was behind the trouble: the elusive "Unabomber." Since 1978, an individual who claimed to be part of a larger group, but whom authorities believed worked alone, had terrorized people associated with universities and airlines—hence the code name Unabomber. In later years he targeted people associated with computers and other industries. His method was to send package bombs to his victims—occasionally he would leave a bomb at a university or computer store. Over a 17-year period, the Unabomber committed 16 attacks, killing 3 people and injuring 22 others. One bomb was mailed just a few days after the Oklahoma City bombing, killing a timber industry executive.

But it was a letter that he sent to the *San Francisco Chronicle* a week before the Fourth of July holiday that demonstrated how terrorism is unlike any other type of conflict. By simply threatening to place a bomb on an airliner flying out of Los Angeles International Airport, the Unabomber single-handedly increased public anxiety about terrorism; disrupted the U.S. Postal Service, as a temporary ban was placed on all air mail packages sent from California weighing more than 12 ounces; forced the authorities to increase security measures at California airports, which in turn led to major delays for travelers; and caused Secretary of Transportation Federico Peña to fly to Los Angeles to explain how the government intended to handle the crisis.

The ability of terrorists to elicit such reactions from government and the public is a key to the strategy of terrorism. Terrorists commit violent acts for a variety of reasons. The Unabomber's goal was to destroy what he called the "industrial-technological system" of modern society. In a letter to the *New York Times*, he stated that his original threat to place a bomb on a plane from Los Angeles was a hoax but

that he would resume sending package bombs to people unless the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* published a 35,000-word manifesto calling for a revolution against the industrial-technological society. The *Washington Post*—with the *New York Times* sharing the printing costs—published the manifesto in September. Most terrorists, however, do not have such grandiose, global objectives in mind. Rather, their goals can range from overthrowing a particular government to winning the release of comrades from jail.

A common thread running through many acts of terrorism is the creation of fear in the general population. Terrorism is a psychological form of warfare, with terrorists often staging their violence to reach a wider audience than their immediate target. By hijacking a plane with a few hundred passengers onboard, terrorists deliver a message to all potential air travelers that they could be the next victims. By kidnapping people in a foreign country, terrorists state that living in, working in, or visiting that country is dangerous. By blowing up a building and killing scores of people, terrorists demonstrate that they can arbitrarily take the lives of innocent people.

Throughout the 1980s, Americans watched the dramas of terrorism unfold through extensive media coverage of major anti-U.S. incidents overseas. These included the bombing of the U.S. Marine headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon (1983), the hijacking of Trans World Airlines Flight 847 from Athens and its diversion to Beirut (1985), and the midair bombing of Pan American Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland (1988). The public could thus vicariously live through the tragedies that terrorism brought to its victims and their loved ones. But terrorism on American soil has had a much deeper psychological impact on the country than anti-U.S. terrorism overseas. The terrorist threat could no longer be viewed as a distant phenomenon, but rather had to be seen as one that could surface in any city at any time. Following the Oklahoma City bombing, workers in federal buildings across the country worried about their safety. And the public, Congress, and others demanded to know what steps the government would take to protect America from future incidents.

### The Federal Government Responds

President Bill Clinton responded by announcing a broad plan to combat domestic terrorism. The proposed measures included hiring 1,000 new federal officials to investigate, deter, and prosecute terrorist activity; establishing the Domestic Counterterrorism Center, headed by the FBI; requiring manufacturers to place microscopic particles, or taggants, in explosive substances to facilitate the tracing of bombing materials after an explosion; expanding court-authorized electronic surveillance of suspected terrorists; and allowing the military to assist in terrorism cases that involve chemical or biological weapons. These and other measures were added to a bill aimed at combating international terrorism that the Clinton administration had proposed to Congress following the World Trade Center bombing. The new package, which became known as the Comprehensive Terrorism Prevention Act of 1995, was under consideration in Congress in late 1995.

Clinton also ordered heightened security at federal buildings throughout the country, including restrictions on parking; greater use of metal detectors, security guards, and closed-circuit television; and the wearing of identification badges by employees and visitors. Many private businesses also began exploring ways to protect their facilities from terrorist attacks. Increased security will undoubtedly affect the way people live and work in America. Freedom of movement in certain places will be restricted, delays in travel will be encountered, and barriers and guards at buildings will be a constant reminder to people that they live in an age of terrorism. Just as most people have ac-

cepted the fact that before they can board a plane they must pass through a metal detector, so too are they likely to adapt to the new security measures that will be implemented in public and private buildings in the coming years. The reality is that even the most stringent security measures or new antiterrorist legislation cannot ensure that a terrorist group will not be successful in launching a spectacular attack. Too many opportunities and targets are available, and too many groups are willing to use terrorism for a variety of purposes. New tactics can always be introduced, as illustrated in October 1995 when several spikes were removed from rail tracks in Arizona, causing the derailment of an Amtrak passenger train. One person was killed and about 100 injured in the incident. A note found at the scene protested the government sieges at Waco and Ruby Ridge and was signed "Sons of the Gestapo," a previously unknown group.

Terrorism has actually been on the decline in terms of the number of incidents in recent years. The FBI reported that in 1994 there were no terrorist incidents in the U.S., whereas there had been 12 the previous year, the most significant being the World Trade Center bombing. (The FBI does not currently include the Unabomber's violence in its annual statistics on terrorism because, as noted above, the Unabomber is believed to be working alone. The FBI defines domestic terrorism as the "unlawful use of force or violence, committed by a group(s) of two or more individuals, against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.") Similarly, the U.S. State Department reported that there were 431 incidents of international terrorism around the world in 1993, but only 321 incidents in 1994, the lowest annual total in 23 years. It is not, however, the total number of terrorist incidents that matters, but rather the effect that attacks can have on a government or society. In the U.S., the Oklahoma City bombing was indicative of a worldwide trend whereby terrorist incidents are becoming more deadly. Even though the number of incidents of international terrorism worldwide declined in 1994 from the previous year, the number of people killed actually increased from 109 in 1993 to 314 in 1994. The explosion of one car bomb near a Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires in July 1994 killed some 100 persons.

Terrorism in America can be affected by global events. The U.S., by virtue of its status as the world's only super-

power and its involvement in various conflicts, peace processes, and other issues, is a potential target for a variety of foreign extremists. Some of them may decide to strike within the U.S. to gain maximum publicity or revenge for their cause. The global village and telecommunications—faxes, cellular phones, computer networks—have also made it easier for foreign terrorists to establish a base of operations anywhere in the world, including the U.S.

The nature of international terrorism is changing as attacks by religious extremist groups are on the rise while attacks by secular terrorist organizations have been declining. Suicide terrorist incidents have also become more frequent. One of the most troublesome developments in terrorism is the potential for terrorists to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction. The release of the nerve agent sarin in the Tokyo subway system in March 1995 was a wake-up call that a new age of terrorism might be upon us. If chemical agents could be released in Tokyo's subway system, then any subway system in the world, including those in the U.S., could be vulnerable to similar attacks. Preventing terrorists from acquiring and using nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons will be an important challenge for the U.S. and other countries in the years ahead. This will require global cooperation in information, policy, and strategy.

Although terrorism can never be completely eliminated, the work of U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies can help reduce the risk of sustained campaigns of terrorism on American soil. For example, in 1993 the FBI uncovered a plot by Islamic extremists to bomb several targets in New York City, including the UN headquarters. The extremists and their spiritual leader, Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, were arrested and eventually convicted by a federal jury in October 1995 of seditious conspiracy. Law enforcement and intelligence personnel have long been the front-line soldiers in the battle against terrorism, and their quiet efforts in tracking down suspected terrorists and identifying plots are crucial for protecting America from terrorism.

But it is the American people who have within themselves the most powerful weapon against terrorists. While Americans cannot prevent every single incident from occurring or take away every potential bomb from terrorists, they can take away the reaction that terrorists seek, which is panic, fear, and the general disruption of daily life.