

“There’s Very Little We Can Do:” Gerald Ford and Counterterrorism

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Richard Nixon’s resignation on August 8, 1974 thrust Vice President Gerald R. Ford instantly into the Presidency. Most top-level members of Nixon’s domestic staff had already left, charged with Watergate crimes. Some of his foreign policy team had also gone. Secretary of State Rogers had resigned in 1973, disgusted with Watergate and tired of the ceaseless battles with Henry Kissinger. Defense Secretary Melvin Laird was gone, too. For a year the Office of the Secretary of Defense had been a revolving door. After a few months in the job, Laird’s replacement, Elliot Richardson, was quickly replaced by James Schlesinger. Henry Kissinger, who had replaced Rogers and now carried both the title of Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, remained to serve the new President and to carry on Nixon’s foreign policy initiatives.

At first US policy toward international terrorism remained the same. The Ford administration continued the effort to form an international coalition against terrorism and was committed to sustaining the Middle East peace process, including the backchannel relationship with the PLO, begun by Nixon. With one important exception, the Ford administration saw no reason to move beyond the domestic security measures initiated by the Nixon administration in reaction to the spate of hijackings between 1968 - 1972. The one exception was a Ford initiative in November 1974 to create the capability to deal with “lost or stolen nuclear weapons and special nuclear materials, nuclear bomb

threats, and radiation dispersal threats.”¹ The new administration did not intend to replace the Cabinet Committee for Combating Terrorism as the principal decision-making body in terrorism matters, though it would had no plans for it to meet. The Committee’s mid-level Working Group would continue to convene every two weeks to discuss terrorism trends and review federal anti-terrorist activities.

By 1975, Ford had placed his stamp on his national security team. He kept Kissinger at State but gave the national security position to General Brent Scowcroft, who had served as Kissinger’s deputy. At Defense Ford placed the precocious Donald Rumsfeld, who had served Nixon in a number of domestic advisory positions and had become Ford’s first chief of staff. Richard “Dick” Cheney succeeded Rumsfeld as Ford’s chief of staff. From his Vice Presidential staff Ford tapped former Democratic congressman John O. Marsh, Jr. to be his Counselor to the President for National Security Affairs.

As the Ford administration settled in, a sharp divergence was developing between the growing counterterrorism community consisting of mid-level officials at State, Treasury, DOJ, DOD, the CIA and the FBI, who continued to be concerned about terrorism, and their principals, who believed this threat had waned. The principals, for the most part, continued to associate terrorism with the hijacking problem and the activity of the PLO. By 1975, it was assumed that the worldwide threat from hijacking had passed.² In November 1974, as diplomatic relations were restored with Algeria, a country which had once offered itself as a haven to the world’s skyjackers, the State Department spokesmen explained that hijacking “is no longer the problem it once was.”³ Meanwhile PLO terrorist activity continued the steady decline that had started after the Yom Kippur War.⁴ Indeed in early December 1974, PLO leader Yasir Arafat was reported as having

¹ Memorandum, General Ernest Graves, the assistant general manager for military applications of the Atomic Energy Commission to Mahlon E. Gates, manager of the AEC’s Nevada’s Operations Office, “Responsibility for Search and Detection Operations,” 18 November 1974, cited in Jeffrey T. Richelson, “Defusing Nuclear Terror,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March/April 2002.

² “Return the Terrorists,” 24 December 1975, *The New York Times*

³ Richard Homan, “Algeria, US Resume relations, Cut Off During ’67 Mideast War,” 13 November 1974, *The Washington Post*.

⁴ Minutes, 121st Meeting of WG/CCCT, 10 November 1976 [19 November 1976], NSArch-CT. This meeting included a CIA historical briefing on the evolution of Palestinian terrorist groups.

launched a purge of extremist Palestinian elements in part to curb international terrorist attacks against “neutral parties.”⁵

Thinking that international terrorism was yesterday’s news, the Ford White House was already predisposed to taking a hard look at Nixon’s limited counter-terrorism system when doing so became a matter of political necessity. A dramatic and almost immediate shift in public perceptions of the CIA set the stage for this review. “Huge CIA Operation reported Against Anti-War Forces, Other Dissident in Nixon years,” blared the headline of the New York Times on December 22, 1974. Seymour Hersh had scored a journalistic coup by gaining access to an internal CIA review of its most questionable operations, involving domestic wiretaps and break-ins. The Agency which was prohibited by the National Security Act of 1947 from operating within the United States had, according to Hersh, maintained “files on at least 10,000 American citizens,” all in the name of counterintelligence.⁶ Hersh did not use the word counterterrorism or anti-terrorism in his expose, but those words would become indistinguishable in the public mind with counterintelligence. Richard Ober, the official in the CIA’s Counterintelligence Staff who apparently oversaw these files, came to be described as the Agency’s “anti-terrorist expert.”⁷

Ford, who was on his way to Vail for a Christmas skiing vacation when the story broke, instructed his aides to prepare an immediate assessment of the reporter’s allegations. In follow-up reports, both CIA director William Colby and Henry Kissinger explained that the allegation of illegal domestic activity by the CIA was accurate. Kissinger added that there was even more political dynamite to be discovered in the CIA’s closet. “There are other activities ‘in the history of the Agency,’” wrote Kissinger on Christmas Day, “which though unconnected with the New York Times article, are also open to question....some few of them clearly were illegal, while others – thought not

⁵ Joseph Fritchett, “PLO Purging Dissident Extremists,” The Washington Post, 2 December 1974.

⁶ Seymour Hersh, “Huge CIA Operation Reported in US Against Antiwar Forces, Other Dissidents in Nixon Years,” 22 December 1974, The New York Times.

⁷ Jack Anderson and Les Whitten, “CIA’s Files Said to Support Denials,” 9 January 1975, The Washington Post.

technically illegal – raise profound moral questions.”⁸ That same day, Ford vowed to establish a commission to investigate CIA wrongdoing.

Ford’s advisers were eager to distance him from any illegal activities committed by his predecessors. Ford’s White House counsel Philip W. Buchen and John O. Marsh, then his assistant for Congressional liaison, flew out to Colorado on January 2, 1975, to confer with Ford on Air Force One as the first family flew back from their vacation later that day. ⁹On January 4, Ford announced that Vice President Nelson Rockefeller would head up the commission investigating questionable CIA activity.

On January 7, Buchen and Marsh wrote to Brent Scowcroft to suggest that the Cabinet Committee on Combatting Terrorism and its Working Group be abolished.¹⁰ The idea, which appears not to have been floated with the President during the Air Force One meeting, seems to have come from Buchen. “Under present circumstances,” he wrote in an informal note to Marsh, “I suggest we should question the continuance of this Committee and its Working Group.” Marsh then replied, “I think you’re on the right track.”

The national security advisor chose not to follow through on this suggestion and the idea died. Perhaps Scowcroft decided not to bother because he, like Kissinger before him, saw these organizations as harmless and inexpensive. Perhaps he assumed they were doing a credible job and would not prove politically embarrassing in the investigations to come. The available record is incomplete. What is certain is that this would be a pyrrhic victory for the Working Group, which would never shake the suspicions of key Ford advisers. Marsh soon became Counselor to the President for National Security Affairs, essentially the White House’s point man for the congressional investigative committees of CIA activities that formed a few weeks later. For the remainder of the Ford presidency, the Working Group remained for him the ghost of Christmas past.

The Hersh revelations inspired a Congressional response which would have an influence on country’s approach to counterterrorism extending beyond the life of the Ford administration. On 21 January 1975 the Senate launched an investigation of US foreign

⁸ John Prados, *Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby*, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003. p.295.

⁹ “Ford Sets Talks on C.I.A. Charges,” 2 January 1975, *The New York Times*.

¹⁰ Buchen to Scowcroft, “Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism,” 7 January 1975; Buchen to Marsh, undated, NSArch-CT. This is Buchen’s original with Marsh’s reply scribbled on it.

and domestic intelligence activities. Known as the Church committee, this Senate investigating body took testimony and would issue its report fifteen months later on subjects ranging from CIA attempts to kill Fidel Castro to the FBI's pursuit of Martin Luther King.

The Church Committee's investigations of FBI political intelligence activities would be the most influential in shaping counterterrorism activity. According to James B. Adams, a high-ranking FBI officer at the time, Attorney General Edward Levi had worried that Congress was in a mood to pass highly restrictive laws that would have "severely impaired the effectiveness of the FBI."¹¹ The FBI was very vulnerable. A number of its agents, sometimes at the request of J. Edgar Hoover or his top deputies, had committed acts of harassment and entrapment against minorities and political dissidents in the Cold War. Some of these abuses occurred within the context of the so-called COINTELPRO investigations of alleged political subversion. In an attempt to head off any crippling legislation, Levi drafted a set of guidelines in 1975 that restricted the FBI's ability to collect political intelligence outside of a criminal investigation.¹² What would become known as the Levi guidelines established the principle that a file could not be opened on a US citizen without a criminal predicate, in other words, evidence of the commission of a crime or a crime in progress. These guidelines had a chilling effect on information gathering. Adams recalled being taken to the woodshed by Assistant Attorney General Laurence Silberman who informed the Bureau that the FBI would have to drop all of its Ku Klux Klan informants in Klaverns that had not committed crimes. This approach would affect all collection on all domestic political targets. A few years later the FBI was told to drop an investigation of a group of 70 activists in Wisconsin who were preaching the violent overthrow of the US government but who were careful not to advocate putting this philosophy into practice. Under the Levi guidelines and the Privacy Act which Congress passed at roughly the same time, FBI officers could not even clip newspaper articles on these groups unless there was an official file and there couldn't be such a file unless there was a criminal predicate. The FBI's counterintelligence division was spared these restrictions, so if there was evidence that the citizen had

¹¹ Email, James Adams to the author, 16 June 2004.

¹² Loch K. Johnson, *A Season of Inquiry: Senate Intelligence Investigation*, (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985) pp. 153-155.

connections with a foreign government, an investigation could begin. But if this was a homegrown terrorist or if the individual had contact with a nongovernmental foreign terrorist organization, the FBI was not allowed to investigate the group before a crime was committed.¹³

Undeterred by this new political climate in Washington, the government's mid-level counter-terrorism experts were becoming increasingly worried about the growing activity of international terrorists and the burgeoning possibilities for danger. In October 1975, for example, the Defense Intelligence Agency reported that the PLO and the Irish Republican Army possessed Soviet-made SA-7s, a "man-portable, shoulder-fired, heat-seeking, surface-to-air missile with a maximum effective range of 3 nautical miles." Also widely available was the Soviet army's standard light anti-tank weapon, the RPG-7. In January 1975, a group of Palestinian terrorists under the command of the Venezuelan terrorist Ilych Ramirez Sanchez, alias Carlos the Jackal, had used RPG-7 rocket launchers to attack an El Al plane at Orly airport outside Paris. They launched two rockets, both of which missed the El Al plane which was taking in preparation for taking off.¹⁴ Not all of these weapons came from the Soviet bloc. The French, the West Germans and the Swedes produced portable guided missiles that could be purchased on the open and black market. A direct hit from one of these missiles could bring down a low-flying commercial airliner.¹⁵

The perceived threat to US security did not just come from conventional weapons. In the mid-1970s law enforcement and intelligence specialists began to worry about nuclear terrorism. In 1974, an extortionist had threatened to explode a nuclear device in Boston unless the FBI left \$200,000 at a drop site in the city. The threat turned out to be a hoax but in the course of responding, the FBI and the Atomic Energy Commission concluded that the federal government was woefully unprepared to deal with the real thing. "If they were counting on us to save the good folk of Boston," recalled a bomb

¹³ Telcon, James Adams to the author, 16 June 2004.

¹⁴ CIA, Research Study, "International and Transnational Terrorism: Diagnosis and Prognosis," April 1976, NSArch-CT; "Two Rockets Fired at Israeli Jet in Paris," 14 January 1975, The New York Times. One rocket hit a nearby Yugoslav airliner but did not explode and the second hit a storage facility. No one was killed. The PLO denounced the attack as "a conspiracy against the Palestinian cause and people."

¹⁵ Minutes, 94th Meeting of the WG/CCCT, 15 October 1975 [20 October 1975], NSArchive CT.

recovery expert at the AEC. “[W]ell, it was bye-bye Boston.”¹⁶ It took 48 hours for the AEC to assemble appropriate detection devices and then discovered it had no way of flying them to Boston.¹⁷ This experience led to the decision in late 1974 to create a response capability to nuclear threats. The AEC had conducted an audit of the security of the nation’s nuclear arsenal and found alarming flaws in the system. Some of the 26 factories licensed to handle plutonium and uranium were obsolete and lacked adequate security.¹⁸ The use of armed guards to protect the materials, a practice started in the early 1970s, helped when they were in transit; but fissionable materials had disappeared from factories and research facilities. In 1965, for example, about 200 pounds of enriched uranium went missing from a uranium plant in Apollo, Pennsylvania.¹⁹

It was not long before the AEC’s new Nuclear Emergency Search Team [NEST] – a group of 200 specialists in nuclear detection, recovery and protection -- had its first major deployment.²⁰ In July 1975, NEST responded to a threat to detonate a nuclear device in New York City. The extortionists or terrorists, they were never caught and their motives could never be determined, seemed to have a sophisticated understanding of nuclear physics. “We have successfully designed and built an atomic bomb,” they claimed and provided a drawing of the device to underscore this threat.²¹ “It is somewhere on Manhattan island,” they asserted. Asking for 30 million dollars in small bills, they gave the government until 6:00 p.m., July 10. After the FBI left a “dummy ransom packet” at the drop site in Northhampton, Massachusetts, the mischief makers disappeared though the threat did not, insofar as the nation’s newly minted counter-terrorist experts were concerned.

As the experts catalogued new ways in which terrorists could wreak havoc, they were noticing a troubling radicalization within the Palestinian movement. Arafat’s decision to seek international recognition for the PLO as the political representative of

¹⁶ Jeffrey T. Richelson, “Defusing Nuclear Terror,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March/April 2002.

¹⁷ John R. Emshwiller, “In Atom-Bomb Scare, Federal NEST Team Flies to the Rescue,” 21 October 1980, *The Wall Street Journal*.

¹⁸ Thomas O’Toole, “AEC Seeking to Cut Peril of Atom Threat,” 2nd of 2 articles, 27 May 1974, *The Washington Post*.

¹⁹ John R. Emshwiller, “In Atom-Bomb Scare, Federal NEST Team Flies to the Rescue,” 21 October 1980, *The Wall Street Journal*.

²⁰ *Ibid*; Jeffrey T. Richelson, “Defusing Nuclear Terror,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March/April 2002.

²¹ Jeffrey T. Richelson, “Defusing Nuclear Terror,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March/April 2002.

the Palestinian people had begun to pay off in 1974. The PLO received the endorsement of the Arab world at the Arab Summit in Rabat in October 1974 and a month later, the United Nations awarded the PLO observer status in New York City. But these diplomatic gains had come at a price. They fractured the Palestinian leadership, causing deep rifts within the PLO and between the PLO and the rival guerrilla groups, such as George Habbash's PFLP.

The so-called rejectionists wanted no part in negotiations that might lead to the recognition of Israel. In late 1974, Sabri al-Banna, who fought under the nom de guerre Abu Nidal, split from the PLO and gained the patronage of the Libyan government, which opposed the Middle East peace process.²² In November 1974, terrorists under his command hijacked a British airways flight leaving Dubai in what seemed to be the beginning of a campaign against Western commercial jetliners. Meanwhile there was a surge in attacks by the PFLP. Although restricted to Israel; the PFLP had been the first of the Palestinian groups to target western assets and it could be expected to do so again.

After reporting a steady decline in Palestinian terrorist activity from the Yom Kippur War through 1974, the CIA warned the counter-terrorism community that since July 1975, the trend had moved decidedly in the opposite direction.²³ In a switch from the early days of US monitoring of Mideast terrorism, some of the intelligence on the plans of Arafat's rivals apparently came from Arafat himself. To be precise, they were the product of the CIA ongoing liaison with Fatah's intelligence chief, Ali Hassan Salameh.²⁴ These tips helped Western governments take preventive measures but by increasing awareness of the anger and perhaps exaggerating the capability of PLO rejectionists they also had the effect of increasing the insecurity of those who watched terrorism for a living.

The Working Group found itself lobbying for the rest of the government to pay attention to these worrisome trends. In October 1975, at the same time that it received information on the proliferation of conventional "man-portable" missiles, the Working

²² CIA, Weekly Situation Report on International Terrorism, 17 December 1974, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

²³ Minutes, 121st Meeting of WG/CCCT, 10 November 1976 [19 November 1976], NSArch-CT. This meeting included a CIA historical briefing on the evolution of Palestinian terrorist groups.

²⁴ CIA, Weekly Situation Report on International Terrorism, 17 December 1974, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room. In the section on terrorist threats and plans it lists a general warning that "the Fatah leadership expects that the PFLP may mount a terrorist operation in West Germany."

Group distributed to all agencies and the White House a top secret report by its task force on Mass Destruction terrorism, chaired by Robert Kupperman, the chief scientist at the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. The report examined “the trends in terrorism, the physical effects of various terrorist weapons, and the domestic and international crisis management problems” involved.²⁵ The Working Group did not assign a high probability to a mass casualty event happening, saying simply that one “could arise at any moment, although this is not likely.”²⁶ Nevertheless, it expressed concern that the United States government had never prepared any coordinated planning for this kind of event. With its report completed, the Working Group believed it could go no further and hoped to interest John O. Marsh at the White House in proceeding with higher-level consideration of the problem.

The Working Group discovered that the Ford White House was extremely reluctant to discuss terrorism, even nuclear terrorism. The White House put off a meeting with Kupperman and the interagency task force. Indeed Marsh had been on the verge of granting Kupperman a ten-minute briefing, when his staff dissuaded him. “I have serious reservations,” wrote staffer Mike Duval, “concerning the degree with which top White House officials, such as yourself, should be involved in terrorism.” Duval, who worked the intelligence beat with Marsh, added that “[a]s you know, there’s very little we can do (that hasn’t already been done) without incurring far more negatives than pluses. Any presidential involvement in this subject invites terrorists to target the United States and latent domestic dissidents to move into action.”²⁷ The meeting apparently did not happen.

A president can be shielded from the terrorist problem only so long as an incident does not happen on US soil. A month after the White House turned down the Working Group’s request for ten minutes of its time, a mysterious explosion at LaGuardia airport forced the issue of terrorism to the top of President Ford’s agenda.

At 6:33 p.m., 29 December 1975, a bomb exploded in a baggage claim area used by TWA and Delta, killing 12 people and injuring 74. The FAA closed the airport for 24 hours, while the investigation began. The bomb, estimated to contain between 20-25

²⁵ Kupperman to John O. Marsh, Counsellor to the President, 19 November 1975, NSA-CT.

²⁶ Minutes, 93rd Meeting of the WG/CCCT, 1 October 1975, [October 6, 1975], NSA-CT.

²⁷ Mike Duval to Jack Marsh, 28 November 1975, NSA-CT.

sticks of dynamite, had been placed in one of the rentable lockers. The explosion was so powerful that it blew a 4x 6 foot hole in the reinforced concrete above the locker area and damaged the ceiling on the departures floor upstairs.²⁸

This had the look and feel of a terrorist act. Anonymous callers to two press services claimed responsibility on behalf of the PLO. "TWA flies to Israel," said one. "Death and destruction shall be the penalty for those who deal with the Zionist state."²⁹ The PLO, however, immediately denied responsibility and none of Arafat's rivals stepped up to claim responsibility.

The day after the explosion, Ford chaired a meeting on the LaGuardia Airport Explosion in the Cabinet Room. In attendance were Secretary William Coleman of the department of Transportation, John McLucas of the FAA, the Deputy Attorney General, the Assistant to the Director at FBI and Ford's senior White House staff, including Dick Cheney and Jack Marsh. The White House wanted to know whether the airport security measures implemented by the Nixon administration in 1973 were sufficient. Since 1973, there had been 100% screening of passengers and carrying-on luggage. "The facts available concerning the LaGuardia incident," FAA Administrator McLucas had written in a memorandum available within hours of the event, "do not indicate any weakness in the existing civil aviation security procedures required of airlines and air carrier airports pursuant to current Federal Aviation Regulations."³⁰ The FAA's response begged the question whether a new wave of terrorism required the adoption of additional security procedures – specifically the screening of all checked baggage. Even though the bomb had been in a locker at LaGuardia, the incident served to sharpen concerns already raised when two explosive devices were recently found in bags checked onboard an Allegheny Airlines flight.³¹

President Ford, like Nixon before him, was far more seized by the problem of terrorism than his senior staff. He considered the bombing as the opportunity to push ahead on increasing airline security. "[Let's] seize [the] opportunity for public support," he told the gathering, "[to] get things done [we] couldn't do in normal times." If the FBI

²⁸ Mike Duval, Meeting on LaGuardia Airport Explosion, Cabinet Room, 6:30 p.m., 30 December 1975; McLucas, FAA, to Ford, 30 December 1975, NSA-CT.

²⁹ CIA, Weekly Situation Report on Terrorism, 6 January 1976, NSA-CT.

³⁰ McLucas, FAA, to Ford, 30 December 1975, NSA-CT.

³¹ FAA, Civil Aviation Security, Security Alert, 30 December, 1975, NSA-CT.

determined that the explosion was an act of terrorism, Ford indicated that he wanted the issue “kick[ed] up for ‘new direction’ decision.”³²

Ford may have explained to those in the Cabinet Room which direction he hoped to take US anti-terrorism policy, but this does not appear in the notes taken at the time. As it turned out, the conditions for making this change did not materialize anyway. The FBI was not able to conclude one way or the other whether terrorists were involved and this White House’s interest in terrorism soon faded. Ford did, however, put pressure on the FAA to undertake “a maximum federal effort to prevent the recurrence of [similar kinds of] bombings.”³³ The public lockers at US airports – estimated at 30-35,000 – were all systematically removed. The LaGuardia bombing was the seventh bombing in three years to have occurred in a public locker. The FAA ordered consideration of “instituting at least a random physical or X-ray inspection of checked luggage” and set up a task force to assess a policy of 100% screening of checked luggage.³⁴

The FBI assigned 500 agents to the investigation and by mid-January had interviewed over 1150 witnesses. The Bureau could not develop a theory “strong enough to back a guess” as to who or what might have been responsible. At a meeting of the Working Group, an FBI representative explained that “it could have been a terrorist, or a lunatic acting alone. The explosion might have been meant to take place later, at a different occasions. It could have been an act of retribution, such as a murder of a narcotics peddler picking up drugs at the locker.”³⁵

Besides advocating that all coin-operated lockers be removed from airports, the DOT’s security task force offered few major suggestions. The process had been titled in favor of inaction. The airline pilots association, ALPA, which was by this time a well-known advocate of baggage screening, had not been invited to participate on the task force. Instead President Ford received a stream of information from the FAA and the airlines showing that 100% screening of checked luggage would clip the airline industry,

³² Handwritten notes, dated 12/30/75, NSA-CT.

³³ Richard Lally, FAA, to Chiefs, Air Transportation Security Divisions, 1 January 1976, NSA-CT.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Minutes, 99th Meeting of the Working Group/Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism, 14 January 1976 [19 January 1976], NSArchive CT Microfiche.

causing small airports to shut down and many airlines to suffer huge losses.³⁶ In the task force's report these estimates of economic hardship outweighed any potential threat from concealed explosives.

As White House turned to more pressing matters, the Working Group continued to observe disturbing trends overseas. A week before the LaGuardia bombing came a reminder of the ingenuity of the Palestinian groups that had rejected Arafat's diplomatic initiative. On 21 December, an international terrorist team of six took hostage the eleven oil ministers and 51 staff members attending the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries meeting in Vienna. The terrorists wanted money from Saudi Arabia and Iran. The figure has never been disclosed but somewhere between 20 and 50 million dollars was transferred to a bank account controlled by George Habbash's deputy Wadi Haddad in Aden on December 23, 1975. The oil ministers and their staff were released shortly thereafter.³⁷

The CIA had predicted that "extremist groups, most likely with Libyan support, would try to upset any movement toward an Arab-Israeli settlement."³⁸ Libyan support for the OPEC siege could not be confirmed but the fingerprints of the PFLP were all over the case. The commander of this operation was the illusive and pudgy Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, alias Carlos the Jackal, a Venezuelan terrorist who had worked for the PFLP in the past. An added cause for concern was that Carlos's team included two members of the West German Baader-Meinhof organization. This was one more piece of evidence that suggested a coalition of terrorist forces, much like the fictional SPECTRE of the James Bond series. In May 1972, Japanese Red Army [JRA] terrorists had attacked Lod airport in Israel on behalf of the PFLP and in late 1974 a large JRA network was discovered in Paris.³⁹

³⁶ Jim Cannon to GRF, "Secretary Coleman's Report on LaGuardia Bombing," 23 January 1976, NSArchive CT Microfiche.

³⁷ Peter Harclerode, *Secret Soldiers: Special Forces in the War Against Terrorism*, London: Cassell & Co., 2000, pp. 85-89

³⁸ Minutes, 99th Meeting of the Working Group/Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism, 14 January 1976 [19 January 1976], NSArchive CT Microfiche. During a report on the OPEC incident, the CIA representative at this meeting recalled an earlier prediction.

³⁹ CIA, Memorandum for the Working Group, Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism, "Study on the Japanese Red Army," 23 December 1974, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room.

These factors – the changes in terrorist capabilities and the sense that international terrorists were taking greater risks and working together – produced the first ever official concerns that a spectacular terrorist attack on the US homeland was possible in the short-term. In the eyes of many federal counter-terrorism experts, the approach of the Bicentennial celebrations across the United States and the two major party conventions presented excellent opportunities for international terrorists to grab the world stage. Given the experience in Munich four years earlier, the Working Group also worried about the vulnerability of US citizens at the upcoming Montreal Olympics.

In January 1976, the chair of the Counterterrorism Working Group, Robert Feary, initiated a report on what he called intermediate terrorism, “a level of terrorist violence lying between mass destruction and the types of assassinations or abduction of medium-grade USG officials or private citizens with which US terrorism policy and the Working Group have been primarily concerned.”⁴⁰ The Working Group assembled a task force with mid-level officials from State, FBI, CIA, DOD and the other departments and agencies with an interest in counterterrorism.

Overseen by Robert Kupperman, the chief scientist at the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, this report looked at the likelihood of a “spectacular” terrorist attack. Kupperman, who written the Working Group’s study on nuclear terrorism in 1975, had an equally difficult time in getting the attention of the White House or any of Gerald Ford’s key advisors once this new report was completed. Even the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, which was responsible for giving an outside opinion on the priorities and practices of the US intelligence community showed little interest in the Kupperman study. Having received it on May 19, the Chairman of PFIAB, Leo Cherne only acknowledged it two months later, after the Bicentennial was over and the Montreal games were well underway.⁴¹

The Working Group did its best to disseminate the conclusions on intermediate terrorism. Its chairman Fearey convinced Kissinger to convene an unusual meeting at the Assistant Secretary or Deputy Assistant Secretary level to discuss “the current, increased danger of major terrorist attacks in the United States requiring urgent preventive and

⁴⁰ Feary, Attachment to cover letter, “Intermediate Terrorism Study,” 22 January 1976, NSArchive CT Microfiche.

⁴¹ Kupperman to Cherne, 19 May 1976’ Cherne to Kupperman, 19 July 1976, NSA-CT.

preparatory action.”⁴² This would be the highest-level meeting on terrorism since the first and only Cabinet Committee Meeting on October 2, 1972. Although he was able to get the Secretary of State to sign the letter Fearey was unable to lure any Assistant Secretaries to the meeting. In fact, only two with the rank of Deputy Assistant Secretary, one from Transportation and one from Justice, bothered to turn up. Associate Deputy Attorney General Rudolf W. Giuliani represented Justice.

Giuliani was the most active participant at this meeting, which took place on 27 May 1976. Praising Kupperman’s report for making “Justice aware that it must take a more active position in combating terrorism,” Giuliani said that his department was reactivating the Civil Disturbance Unit in preparation for the possibility of attacks at official Bicentennial events or the two major party conventions. Giuliani also made an observation about the flow of intelligence about terrorism that would in retrospect appear to be extremely farsighted. Kupperman had advocated an “anti-terrorism management information system.” Giuliani warned the Working Group that the new Privacy act and Attorney General Edward Levi’s subsequent guidelines on domestic security investigations would complicate terrorism reporting. “Under the new guidelines,” explained Giuliani, “there was difficulty in collecting domestic intelligence unless there was some indication that there had been a violation of law.” Although CIA said it believed it would have no trouble collecting what it needed abroad and disseminating this information to the appropriate US agencies, it was clear that the FBI would face obstacles in ever participating in a central terrorist information center.⁴³

Giuliani encouraged the Working Group to use its clout to make intelligence collection and sharing by the Bureau easier. “If the guidelines on intelligence collection are too stringent and were hampering the US government in keeping track of terrorists,” he explained, “they could be amended.” All he requested was that the counter-terrorism experts submit specific examples “indicating areas in which the guidelines should be relaxed.” Giuliani was cautiously optimistic that if this were done, “such a change might

⁴² Minutes, 109th meeting of WG/CCCT, 27 May 1976 [June 10, 1976], NSA-CT.

⁴³ Ibid.

be accomplished.”⁴⁴ Available evidence suggests that the FBI was too cowed by its recent public-thrashing to request any amendments to the guidelines in the Ford period and later obtained only marginal changes in the guidelines under Presidents Carter and Reagan.⁴⁵

Election year politics forced the White House to reconsider its opposition to involving the President in making terrorism policy. In the spring of 1976, Ford was criticized from the right for lacking an interest in fighting terrorism. C. L. Sulzberger unfavorably compared US efforts in the anti-terrorist field to those of the West Germans, French and British. “The three European security partners,” he wrote, “eagerly await the day when the American services are less flabby and can join in the covert antiterrorist war.”⁴⁶ The challenge on this issue that mattered most to Ford came from California Governor Ronald Reagan, who was giving the incumbent president a race for the Republican nomination. In May Reagan criticized the Administration for allowing a deterioration of the US intelligence community’s ability to collect intelligence on terrorists. “Piously claiming defense of civil liberties and prodded by a variety of bleeding hearts of the society,” he said to a group of policemen in California, “we have dismantled much of the intelligence operations of law enforcement that we must have if we are to protect society from [political terrorism].”⁴⁷ Given his audience, Reagan was likely referring to domestic radicals, such as the newspaper heiress Patricia Hearst, who had been in the news in the mid-1970s. But these sorts of charges made Ford especially vulnerable to any terrorist surprises.

It is unlikely that new intelligence information about possible threats played any significant role in this shift. As of June, the FBI’s “threat cards,” on which it listed threats to Bicentennial events, “were coming in at a much faster rate than earlier in the year.” But some were of “limited credibility” and none was reported to the Working Group, at least, as particularly threatening.⁴⁸ By mid-June the CIA was discounting the possibility

⁴⁴ Ibid. In light of his later experience on September 11th 2001, it is interesting to note that at this meeting in 1976 Giuliani raised the importance of the US government speaking with one voice as it responded to press questions during an international terrorist incident and suggested that “a model plan be worked out.”

⁴⁵ Telcon with James B. Adams, 16 June 2004. Mr. Adams was the FBI’s Assistant to the Director-Investigations, the third ranking official in the Bureau, in 1974-1978, then Associate Director, 1978-1979.

⁴⁶ C.L. Sulzberger, “The Antiterrorist League,” 14 April 1976, *The New York Times*.

⁴⁷ Jon Nordheimer, “Reagan Asserts Law Aids ‘The Criminal Defendant,’” 27 May 1976, *The New York Times*.

⁴⁸ Minutes, 111th Meeting of the WG/CCCT, 16 June 1976 [June 21, 1976], NSArch-CT.

of an attack at home and suggested that the more likely scenario was an attack on a US installation abroad. Regarding the homeland threat, the CIA representative to the Working Group reported that “there is no firm indication, thus far, that any incidents of the latter type were being planned.” The CIA offered that maybe anti-Shah Iranian students who were studying in the United States would organize a demonstration or two.

Despite the lack of intelligence inside the Administration on any specific threats, there was a sense in the press that these threats existed. Frustrated by the inattention of the White House, someone in the Working Group probably played a role in fanning those fears. Leaks of information from Working Group meetings started appearing in Jack Anderson’s syndicated columns in mid-May.⁴⁹ Anderson learned of the discussion in October 1975 of the availability of portable missile launchers to terrorists. He also caught wind of concerns about the security of the US-Canadian border. By June the White House was noticing “a rash of news reports on the terrorist potential,” which were immediately blamed on the Working Group.⁵⁰

A year earlier it had seemed politically hazardous for the Ford administration to associate itself with anti-terrorism activities; now the political winds had shifted enough for it to be potentially a greater problem to seem aloof from them. Some NSC staffers started discussing having the NSC replace State as the lead agency in managing the counterterrorism community, such as it was. One staffer suggested the formation of a Terrorist Special Action Group. Chaired by the national security advisor, the TSAG would be a deputies committee, a membership two ranks higher than that on the existing counter-terrorism Working Group. The goal was to have something powerful in place, on paper at least, before a major terrorist attack to show that the White House was prepared.

In late June Mike Duval, who had argued against White House involvement in anti-terrorism, wrote to Dick Cheney about the need to revisit this question. “It is impossible to rule out the possibility of a major terrorist attack in the United States,” warned Duval. “The current Executive Branch organization (which was set up by former President Nixon) to combat terrorism, i.e., the Cabinet Committee and Working Group, is not adequate...I think the President should move very quietly to strengthen Executive

⁴⁹ Jack Anderson and Les Whitten, “Terrorists Get Missiles,” 14 May 1976, *The Washington Post*; Jack Anderson, “Terrorist ‘Fish’ in a Sea of Tourists,” 16 May 1976, *The Washington Post*.

⁵⁰ Mike Duval to Dick Cheney, 21 June 1976, “Terrorism,” NSArch-CT.

Branch efforts to combat terrorism. I think he should take caution now before a major incident turns this latent problem into a major public issue.”⁵¹

Although the NSC staff produced a draft National Security Decision Memorandum creating the TSAG, in the waning months of the Ford administration the White House never took charge of the terrorism problem. The only NSDM remotely related to the problem of security signed by the President in the fall of 1976 involved enhanced port security against foreign espionage and sabotage.⁵²

Fortunately there were no terrorist acts at the Montreal Games or the Bicentennial celebrations. This fact seemed to weaken the arguments of what the White House called the “doomsday-type papers” of the Working Group.⁵³ So, too, did the next terrorist act on American soil, which fell only marginally outside the parameters of those that had come before. Not long after the closing ceremonies in Montreal, a terrorist hijacking took place that resulted in the death of one NYPD officer.⁵⁴ The perpetrators were not Arabs. On 10 September 1976 two Croatian nationalists commandeered TWA flight 355 over New York City and demanded that a political manifesto calling for an independent Croatia be published in major newspaper. To demonstrate their seriousness, the terrorists informed the US government that they had planted a bomb at Grand Central Station and provide a detailed description of the location and apparently of how to defuse the device. Sadly, though the NY bomb squad found the bomb where the Croats, the police were not able to detonate the bomb safely and one policeman died. The FBI negotiated with the hijackers and agreed to let them issue their statement so long as they promised to release the hostages unharmed. In France after a two-day ordeal, the incident ended peacefully. The hijackers surrendered and were extradited to the United States. Unlike the hijacking cases of the early 1970s, this one had little effect on America’s anti-terrorism stance. The decision to allow the manifesto to be published revealed a disagreement between the FBI and the Department of State on how to apply Nixon’s “no concessions” doctrine. After the incident had ended, two State Department officers visited the FBI to reprimand the Bureau for “violating” US terrorism policy. James Adams, the third-ranking official in

⁵¹ Mike Duval to Dick Cheney, “Terrorism,” 21 June 1976, NSArch-CT.

⁵² NSDM 340, Port Security, Ford Library.

⁵³ NSArchive CT Microfiche

⁵⁴ Jeffrey D. Simon, *The Terrorist Trap: America’s Experience with Terrorism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 110-120.

the Bureau who had made the decision, refused to accept the criticism. "Where were you when we had two policemen killed, we had a planeload of people with hijackers who claimed to have explosives?" he asked.⁵⁵ No formal changes in counterterrorism ensued.

It is unclear what role, if any, the national security team in the Ford administration had played in the handling of the TWA hijacking. The key decision seems to have been made by the FBI. The principals and their senior advisers, it appears, were keeping their distance itself from the increasingly restive counterterrorism community. When higher-ranking members of the State Department received information that the military dictatorships of the Southern Cone states in Latin America had formed a terrorist international of their own, under the codename Operation Condor, to kill dissidents as well as guerrillas, the Working Group was not informed.⁵⁶ On September 21, 1976, a Chilean hit squad used a car bomb to kill dissident Orlando Letelier and his American assistant, Ronni Moffit. Working Group discussions in the wake of that attack, the first successful political assassination in Washington, D.C. since 1865, betrayed an unwillingness of either the State Department or the CIA to share with the Group or the FBI what it knew about Operation Condor.⁵⁷ After liaison on this issue proved unproductive, the FBI made a direct appeal to CIA director George H. W. Bush to get cooperation from the CIA. Bush agreed and apparently at that point material flowed to the Bureau which helped FBI officers solve the case.⁵⁸

The Ford administration was the first in history to consider the likelihood of a major terrorist attack on American soil. This was, however, a low-level discussion. With the White House deeply skeptical about the threat of terrorism, the principals did not participate in any systematic way. When the period of perceived danger passed uneventfully, those who had resisted a serious assessment of the terrorism problem had no reason for self-doubt. With investigations of the LaGuardia bombing and the Letelier assassination ongoing and Palestinian rejectionist activity now on the rise, the Ford administration nevertheless left office confident that the United States had the counterterrorism system that it needed.

⁵⁵ Interview with James B. Adams, 16 June 2004. Only one policeman was killed at Grand Central Station.

⁵⁶ Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability*, NY: The New Press, 2003, pp. 346-355.

⁵⁷ Minutes of the 118th Meeting of the WG/CCCT, 29 September 1976, [October 6, 1976], NSArch-CT.

⁵⁸ Interview with James B. Adams, 16 June 2004.