The Nixon administration was the first in US history to consider international terrorism a federal problem. Over the Nixon years the US government’s response would grow in intensity from a simple initiative to endorse the international community’s first efforts to regulate hijackings to the establishment of a permanent executive branch institution to facilitate widespread counter-terrorism cooperation and information-sharing.

Initially, terrorism, domestic or international, was not on the administration’s agenda. At the time of his inauguration, Richard Nixon, who had fought and won the election of 1968 on foreign policy, would not have understood a timetraveler asking about “the threat of international terrorism.” As it had been in the Johnson administration the word terrorist was used interchangeably by the new Nixon team with insurgent, guerrilla or, in the Palestinian and Vietnamese cases, fedayeen and Viet Cong, respectively. These were regional bands which outside of Latin America and Southeast Asia did not target Americans. Despite the taking of the El Al flight in August 1968, there still seemed to be nothing international or transnational about them.

Nixon’s ambitious foreign policy program was focused on tangible threats to US national security. Nixon sought to build a better relationship with the Soviet Union based on a mature understanding that even these two adversaries shared an interest in avoiding nuclear war. Détente with Moscow, as this approach became known, was one of three interlocking achievements that would define the core of US foreign policy. The second was to be the establishment of relations with the People’s Republic of China. Presidents before Nixon had viewed China as the most dangerous Communist power, less committed to international order than the Kremlin and a potential political problem at
home where Congress still recalled the “Who Lost China” debate of the early Cold War. Nixon was not naïve in his expectations of what Mao Zedong would give the United States but he sensed that the time was right for a Republican administration to recognize China. He saw through the ideological similarities of the Soviet and Chinese regimes to the traditional rivalry beneath, locating in those mutual suspicions the basis for a constructive relationship between Beijing and Washington. Détente and the opening to China were two pillars of a new foreign policy structure that would allow the United States to withdraw with its reputation intact from the disastrous war in Vietnam. Ending the American dimension of the Vietnam war, which was Nixon’s third foreign policy objective, had been his most important campaign promise.

At the top of the second tier of his foreign policy goals, Nixon placed a renewed commitment to a process that would move Arabs and Israelis to reduce tensions in the Middle East. Not wholly divorced from the Cold War realities that shaped Nixon’s top agenda items, the new administration’s Mideast policy was also designed to improve the US standing in the region, where Washington had been doing less well than Moscow in the campaign for political influence. Seven Arab countries – including Egypt and Syria – had broken relations with the United States following the Six Day War and the Nixon team hoped to restore those links as the peace process went forward.

Nixon’s management of his foreign policy team reflected these priorities. He assigned the three core policy areas to Henry A. Kissinger, a Harvard professor of government and foreign policy entrepreneur who had been advising Democrats and Republicans alike for over a decade. As the presidential assistant for national security affairs [or national security advisor], Kissinger became Nixon’s main foreign policy aide. Middle Eastern policy, however, was farmed out to the Department of State. Nixon chose as his secretary of state, his old friend and former law partner, William P. Rogers. Rogers, who had served as attorney general in the Eisenhower administration, had no foreign policy experience and did not bring any specific goals to his new post. Rogers and his concerns, despite his close personal relationship with the President, would take second place in the hierarchy of the new administration. Counterterrorism would eventually belong to Roger’s set of responsibilities.
TWA 840

Terrorists grabbed the attention of the Nixon administration for the first time in late August 1969 when two Palestinian guerrillas hijacked TWA flight 840. For Nixon officials the phenomenon of Palestinian attacks on civilians had not yet risen to the level of a threatening “ism,” a transnational political movement with the potential to harm the United States, but this hijacking stirred immediate high-level concern as the first case of Palestinian violence being directed at a US target. The flight which originated in Los Angeles was scheduled to end in Tel Aviv after stops in New York, Rome and Athens. Instead the plane flew to Damascus. A man and a woman belonging to the “Che Guevara Commando Unit of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine [PFLP],” a rival of Yasir Arafat’s Fatah group, had boarded the plane in Rome and initially instructed the pilot to fly to Beirut. The hijackers then changed their minds and the plane headed for Tel Aviv, its original destination. Their reason for the attack also seemed to change as inexplicably as their destination. At first the hijackers informed the passengers that they would be freed except for “a passenger responsible for death and misery of a number of Palestinians.” Speculation later centered on Yitzhak Rabin as their principal target. Israel’s ambassador to the US had left for Israel on the same day but on a different flight. Wit Rabin nor on their flight, the hijackers blamed the recent sale of US phantom jets to Israel as the motive for this act of piracy. As the plane was preparing to land in Tel Aviv, the hijackers panicked and forced the pilot to abort the landing and head for Syria.¹ The Syrians welcomed the hijackers, who managed to set off a bomb in the cockpit to create a final moment of panic as the crew and the passengers were filing out of the plane.

The State Department was designated the lead agency in responding to the incident, which involved an aircraft registered in the United States, an American crew and several US citizens among the 98 passengers. There was no debate within the Administration over who should manage the US response to this event. In 1969 the Justice Department lacked jurisdiction over crimes committed abroad, even on US planes. It was also assumed that diplomacy was practically the only tool available for extracting a US plane under hostile control on the ground in a foreign country. In 1969

the US military had no experience in rescuing civilians from commercial airplanes, nor did it have any small units trained for that particular kind of operation. The choice of State over the National Security Council reflected a tacit understanding since the first domestic hijacking in 1961 that the management or response to these spectacular crimes was best kept away from the White House. With so few instruments at the government’s disposal to deal with low-intensity military challenges – the hijackers were usually armed – there was a good chance that an incident would go tragically wrong and the President, if too closely associated with managing the affair, would be politically embarrassed. “The supreme irony of this age of power,” wrote James Reston of the New York Times, “is its impotence to deal with determined or fanatical minorities.”

Secretary of State Rogers immediately issued a statement condemning “this act of international piracy” and calling on Syria to “take immediate steps to arrange the release of the aircraft, its crew and its passengers.” A year earlier the government of Algeria had decided to hold some passengers hostage to help publicize the Palestinian cause. The Nixon administration hoped for better behavior from Damascus.

Unfortunately, the Syrian government was no more prepared to show respect for the civil rights of Israeli passengers than the Algerian government had been. On August 30, Syria allowed the crew of twelve and the 93 passengers who were not Israeli citizens to leave. Three women, a 15-year old girl and two elderly gentlemen, one of whom was a professor at Hebrew University, were kept in Damascus as prisoners. Under international pressure, the Syrians did release the three women and the girl two days later. But they refused to surrender the two remaining male hostages.

The taking of TWA 840 was major news in the United States. Although it was the 30th commercial plane hijacked in the United States in 1969, this was the first time that foreign hijackers were involved. Every other hijacking that year and 90% of those since 1961 had been committed by US citizens who wanted for one reason or another to go to Cuba. Although armed, those American hijackers had neither been suicidal nor murderously psychotic. Not a single passenger had died or been seriously injured. By a combination of signaling and trial and error, the United States and Cuba – which still did

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not have diplomatic relations – had established procedures to regularize these incidents and reduce the inconvenience to the passengers and crew. Cuba provided food for its unexpected guests – it was rumored that the US paid $50 per Cuban sandwich – and the Cubans also did everything they could to get the plane and the passengers back into the air safely. The hijackers stayed in Cuba, though in recent years the Castro regime had started sending back hijackers who had done the deed for money and not ideology. As a result of this informal arrangement, the White House, the FAA, the airlines and the public had come to view hijackings in the United States as a travel inconvenience more than a danger, something akin to bad weather in Chicago.

Airline pilots and some in the US Congress, however, disagreed with this policy of tolerating hijacking. “It’s a tragedy waiting to happen,” warned James G. Brown, the captain of a National Airlines flight hijacked to Cuba earlier in the year, in testimony before Congress. Following a year in which 22 hijackings had occurred in the United States -- there had never been more than 5 in any previous year -- Congress had held hearings on airline security in early 1969. The hearings, which did not lead to any legislation, had been a disappointment to pilots. It bothered them that it was so easy for hijackers to bring weapons on board. How long would it be before a mentally deranged man or a terrorist decided to commandeer a plane for a more violent purpose? The Airline Pilots Association, which represented all of the country’s commercial pilots and about half of the flight attendants, saw in the TWA 840 incident an opportunity to force the federal government and the airlines to take airplane security seriously. As the Syrians continued to hold the Israeli passengers, the airline pilots association began gearing up for another international strike.

John H. Shaffer, the administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration, agreed with the pilots that there was a problem. In his eyes, TWA 840 was a worrisome “new” kind of hijacking. “I’m afraid that this is a warning of things to come.” But Shaffer and the FAA were pessimistic that much could be done in the short-term to solve it. Although careful never to admit this publicly, the FAA shared the view of the airlines that hijacking

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was a flaw in the system that just had to be managed. The FAA was also very sensitive to
the argument of the airlines that their profit margins were so slender that only the most
effective and most necessary security systems should be required.

Following Congressional hearings on the hijacking problem in early 1969, the
FAA set up a government-industry task force to look into cost-effective ways to increase
security. The task force, which involved psychologists, developed a system that profiled
passengers according to the six behavioral traits believed to be associated with hijackers.
Any passengers who fit that profile would then be screened by a metal detector, a so-
called “a passive electromagnetic device.” This system was still on the drawing boards
when TWA 840 was taken. In the wake of the public concern that followed that
hijacking, the FAA decided to test the system on a trial basis. Eastern airlines offered
itself as the guinea pig. “It is not the final answer,” admitted Shaffer, who was publicly
pessimistic about the effectiveness of defensive measures at US airports. Shaffer
reminded the traveling public that some hijackings had occurred without a real weapon
being present. In one case, the hijacker bluffed with a can of shaving cream made up to
look like a bomb. The FAA believed that the only real solution was for the State
Department to use diplomacy to close down all the safe havens where planes were being
diverted. In the meantime, hijackings even by terrorists were inevitable.

The State Department shared the FAA’s fatalism about dealing with the problem
in the short-term. “It’s really frightening how damned vulnerable an airplane can be in a
political situation like this [in the Middle East],” lamented one State department official
to the New York Times. “How do you protect the planes and the passengers? It’s going to
be awfully tough.” As for the long-term, like the FAA and the airlines, the State
Department believed that persistent multilateral diplomacy was the answer.

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6 John Shaffer discussed the history of the task force and the system it recommended in a Press Conference
on September 11, 1970. See “Hijackings, Part 2,” NSC 331, NMP-NARA.
8 Robert Lindsey, “US Moving on Two Fronts in Effort to Halt Sharp Increase in Plane Attacks,” 5
9 Acting Secretary of State to RMN, “Aircraft Hijacking,” 2 October 1969.”Hijackings, Part 2,” NSC 331,
NMP-NARA.
The White House assigned itself a limited role in handling the hijacking of TWA 840. President Nixon approved US efforts to push diplomatic pressure on Syria to release the two remaining Israeli passengers and was kept briefed.\textsuperscript{10}

Not all of the president’s efforts occurred offstage. Nixon did make a very public statement to encourage an international response to the general problem of terrorism. At the suggestion of his Labor Secretary George P. Shultz, Nixon included a reference to the problem of air piracy in his speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations.\textsuperscript{11} Shultz had relayed to White House the pilot union’s impatience at the hijacking epidemic. “Sky piracy cannot be ended,” Nixon said at the UN on September 18, “as long as the pirates receive asylum.”\textsuperscript{12} But Nixon did not publicly refer to Syria; nor did the White House establish any deadlines of its own for the release of the Israelis.

While the White House’s patience seemed inexhaustible that of the Israelis was not. In what would become a recurring pattern, the Israelis privately threatened the United States to take matters into their own hands if US diplomatic efforts to secure the release of the two remaining Israeli hostages failed. The National Security Council staff, which believed that Israeli policy rested on a hair-trigger, was particularly vulnerable to these pressures.\textsuperscript{13} As the TWA hijacking entered its second month, for example, Henry Kissinger warned the president that in response to a diplomatic failure “Israel may attack a prominent target like the Damascus airport.”\textsuperscript{14}

Ultimately the two remaining Israeli prisoners were released before Israeli jets hit Damascus or any other Arab airport in retaliation. US diplomacy did play a role in the successful conclusion of this affair; but no one that Washington would want to crow about. Despite a stream of messages to the Syrians from the United States by way of the Italians, it was the fact that Washington ultimately pressured Israel to release some

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\textsuperscript{10} HAK to RMN, “TWA Hijacking,” 21 September 1969, Hijackings Part 2, NSC 331, Nixon Materials Project, NARA. Nixon scribbled his approval on this document. The US opposed the election of Syria to the UN Security Council and alerted the Soviets and other governments that it would seek stronger diplomatic sanctions against Damascus if the Syrians did not release the men.


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with Alexander Haig, Jr.

\textsuperscript{14} HAK to RMN, “TWA Hijacking,” 21 September 1969, Hijackings Part 2, NSC 331, Nixon Materials Project, NARA.
captured Egyptians that brought the two Israelis home at the end of October, nearly two months after their ordeal began. As the NSC staff later concluded, “the 1969 TWA hijacking experience showed that the US – without even diplomatic relations – has no leverage to use against Syria except for those pressures that can be generated through the international forums associated with air travel.”

Paying the ransom was all that worked.

By his later actions Richard Nixon would show that he did not accept that hijacking or terrorism had to be a permanent feature of American life. Due to poor staff work, however, toleration of domestic hijacking remained the policy of the US government despite the TWA affair. The end of the crisis brought no thoroughgoing White House assessment of how to avoid similar events in the future. In part this could be explained by the enormous number of items on the President’s schedule in late 1969. But it was also because the President was misinformed by his advisors at the National Security Council and the Department of State. In October Henry Kissinger mistakenly assured the President that the FAA was working with the airlines on the “perfection of a system to detect hijackers in advance.”

As of the fall of 1969, no one at the airlines or the FAA believed a perfect defensive system was possible. The FAA was moving forward with only a limited test of its profiling system that involved precisely one airline and appeared not to be in any hurry to try it out on an airport-wide basis. State had not made Kissinger’s mistake in overselling the FAA’s efforts but the lead agency in managing the Syrian incident did not attempt to explain to the President – or perhaps did not itself understand -- the tradeoffs involved in the FAA and the airlines’ approach to airport security.

A year later, when the PLO attempted the simultaneous hijacking of four aircraft, a feat not replicated by a terrorist organization until September 2001, Nixon woke up to

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15 HAK to Peter Flanigan, “Possible Actions Against Countries Which Are Uncooperative on Hijacking,” “Hijackings, Part 2,” NSC 331, NMP-NARA.
16 HAK to RMN, “Aircraft Hijacking,” 15 October 1973; DOS to the President, “Aircraft Hijacking,” 2 October 1973, Hijackings Part 2, NSC 331, Nixon Materials Project, NARA. Kissinger summarized a report from the Acting Secretary of State. The Acting Secretary of State spoke of FAA work on a system of detection but said nothing about perfecting the process.
17 The first airport-wide trial, at New Orleans International Airport, did not occur until July 1970.
the widespread weakness in US airplane security and would try to get the federal
government to do something about it.

_The September 1970 Crises_

Three simultaneous crises in September 1970, two in the Middle East and one in
the Caribbean, were the Nixon’s administration’s baptism of fire. The terrorist crisis was
considered the least threatening of the three; nevertheless it would establish the President
as front and center in reshaping the federal government’s handling of the hijacking
problem and, by extension, the matter of terrorism.

On Sunday September 6, the PFLP hijacked four airplanes flying from Europe to
New York. Teams of two hijackers took control of Pan Am Flight 93 with 152 passengers
and a crew of 17; TWA flight 741, with 141 passengers and a crew of 10; Swissair flight
100 with 143 passengers and a crew of 12 and attempted to commandeer El Al flight 219,
which had originated in Tel Aviv but was assaulted after a stop in Amsterdam. This
fourth hijacking failed. The pilot sent the plane into a controlled dive while two plain-
clothed El Al security guards shot and killed the male hijacker and wounded his female
accomplice, Leila Khaled. Khaled was a veteran in this deadly new game of terrorist
hijacking. She had been the female member of the team that diverted TWA 840 to
Damascus in 1969. Once the hijackers had been defeated, the pilot of El Al flight 219
got permission from the British government for an emergency landing in London, where
Khaled was taken into custody. The ordeal for the passengers on Pan Am 93 was also not
long. The hijackers diverted the 747 to Beirut and then Cairo, where after freeing the
passengers they blew up the plane. The Swissair and TWA passengers were not that
fortunate. Their planes were diverted to an abandoned British air base, Dawson Field, in
the Jordanian desert where the sun was hot and the planes’ air conditioning systems soon
failed. These 306 people became hostages.  

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This time, the hijackers made it clear that they were attacking the United States as much as Israel. Through the US embassy in Amman, the PFLP sent word that it was “not operating against the American people in any way but rather against the policy of the US government.” Its spokesman Abu Omar said that “because of this attitude we are protecting passengers.” The Palestinians provided a shopping list of terrorist that they wanted released. For the safe return of the Swiss hostages, they requested the release of three Palestinians in Swiss jails; the British nationals would be set free when Leila Khaled was released. Similarly the West German hostages would remain in captivity until three Palestinians in West German jails were freed. The United States held no Palestinian prisoners – and the PFLP this time did not request the release of Robert F. Kennedy’s assassin – so the Americans would remain until all the PFLP’s other demands were met. The terrorists’ last demand was that Israel agree to an as yet unspecified “prisoner exchange” for the release of its citizens and any Israeli dual nationals.\(^\text{19}\)

At the time it was US policy to negotiate with hostage takers.\(^\text{20}\) This approach had brought TWA 840 to a peaceful conclusion. In supporting negotiations with hijackers, the State Department was merely adapting US domestic practices for its own use. The FBI and local police believed in paying ransom and then going after the criminals.\(^\text{21}\) In the first phase of the incident, the main objective was to ensure the safety of the hostages by separating them from the criminals. On September 7, the US welcomed the mediation of the International Committee of the Red Cross which represented the interests of all of the Western hostages in negotiations with the PFLP. On the first day of the crisis, the terrorists had moved 123 passengers, mainly women and children, to the Intercontinental Hotel in Amman, which was under PLO control, with the remaining 150 left aboard the two planes at Dawson Field outside Amman. Besides the goal of the safe return of its hostages, the US hoped to keep the Western side united so that the Western Europeans would not seek side deals that permitted their nationals to go home before the Israelis and

\(^\text{19}\) Cable, US Embassy, Amman, to DOS, 7 September 1970, Jordan Volume V July 1/70 – September 30/70, NSC, CO: Middle East, Box 615, Nixon Materials Project, NARA.

\(^\text{20}\) The Administration recognized that it would be in a difficult position if the terrorists had asked for Sirhan Sirhan’s release, since Washington expected the Israelis and its allies to release the prisoners requested by the PFLP.

\(^\text{21}\) This remained the FBI approach to hostage incidents throughout the period under review in this study.
US-Israeli dual nationals. Before the negotiations began the Swiss and the West Germans had announced they would release the prisoners requested by the PFLP. Washington was able to convince the Swiss and the West Germans not to proceed with this side deal. On September 8, these two governments joined the British in offering to hand over the seven Palestinian terrorists in their jails only in return for the release of all of the hostages and the two planes.

Nixon was in San Clemente when the hijackings took place. After releasing a statement condemning the hijackings through his press secretary, Ronald Ziegler, Nixon chose to remain almost invisible. Fearful that this crisis could come out badly, Kissinger had recommended the low-key approach to Nixon. Besides a general concern for the fate of the hostages, the national security advisor’s great concern was that the Western negotiating bloc would collapse before the Israelis passengers were freed. The British, Germans and Swiss would deal for their nations and Americans with Israeli passports would be stranded in Jordan much as the two Israeli gentlemen were a year earlier when TWA 840 was taken to Damascus.

Although he adopted a quiet public stance, Nixon was not about to be passive behind the scenes. He was impatient for action on the hijacking problem. On a status report from Henry Kissinger he received the day after the planes were taken, he wrote, “I would like to see on a priority basis a recommendation by State (as the lead agency) and others as to what new steps we can take to deal with this type of activity in the future.”

In the year since TWA 840 was taken, there had been an additional 27 hijackings in the United States, a rate of more than 2 a month. This number was embarrassing for a self-described law and order politician. As a result Nixon was determined to drag the federal government into assuming more responsibility for dealing with this problem.

Nixon was the most interventionist of the administration on the terrorism issue. At the first crisis meeting on September 8, held without Nixon in the Secretary of State’s office, Secretary of Transportation John Volpe, who oversaw the FAA, explained that “it...

22 DOS, Operations Center, Sitrep 4, 8 September 1970, 1600, “Hijacking,” NSC Box 330, MNP-NARA.
24 HAK to RMN, “Status of Mid-East Hijacking,” [Undated but transmittal form for this document, #21799, places it on September 7, 1970], “Hijackings, Part 2,” NSC 331, NMP-NARA.
25 HAK to RMN, “Status of Mid-East Hijacking,” [Undated but transmittal form for this document, #21799, places it on September 7, 1970], “Hijackings, Part 2,” NSC 331, NMP-NARA.
would probably be impossible to develop any system that would give 100% certainty against conceivable sabotage threats.”

Neither Volpe nor anyone else in the room – Secretary of State Rogers, Kissinger or the Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird – said anything about expanding the federal presence at airports or in the air.

In Nixon’s eyes, his advisors were not working the problem hard enough. He wanted an immediate improvement in US air security. He could not help but be impressed with the success of EL Al’s onboard security in subduing the hijackers without hurting any of the passengers. Nixon instructed his administration on September 8 to begin preparing for the implementation of a similar system on international flights by US carriers that originated from American airports as soon as possible. There were 2300 of these a day and the FAA calculated it would need on average 2.5 guards per flight or 7,750 men. As a first step, Nixon suggested hiring about 4,000 armed airplane security men or sky marshals. Airline industry officials and law enforcement experts were brought to the White House on September 9 to hammer out a workable plan. Within hours, the administration located 125 sky marshals, 100 from Treasury and the FAA and 25 security officers from the Central Intelligence Agency who could be put on planes with little delay. These numbers were still too low for Nixon. When he was told that it was going to take considerable time for the civilian agencies to train the remaining 3,875, he decided to turn to the US armed services as a stop-gap measure.

The first interagency struggle in the history of US counterterrorism efforts erupted in response to the President’s decision to involve the US armed forces in air security. Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, a former congressman from Wisconsin, was ideologically opposed to the involvement of the federal government in air security. “The most preferable course by far,” he counseled the White House, “is to provide training assistance to the airlines to establish their own guard service.” The next best solution, according to Laird, was to involve civilian law enforcement agencies. But he strongly opposed using military personnel, a proposal he admitted to viewing “with grave concern.” He advised Nixon that the military was not trained for those types of conditions

and that this duty would have a negative effect on morale while depleting the already insufficient number of military policemen.  

Laird also tried to rewrite the presidential statement that Nixon planned to give to announce the sky-marshals initiative. Laird argued that the President should not identify himself with the hijacking problem. There was little the US government could do to prevent these attacks and it would be better to shield the White House from future blame. “If a statement is to be made,” he wrote on September 10, I believe it unwise for the President personally to do it. The tenor of the statement indicates that hijacking will be stopped. An additional hijacking or hijackings could occur within one hour or one day after the statement is made.” Laird took a page from history to warn the White House of any hubris, “A long history from the Barbary Pirates to the Pueblo argues strongly against the conclusion that effective means have been found [to deal with piracy].”

Laird was not the only member of the Nixon administration who was uneasy with Nixon’s desire to put the White House front and center in the fight against hijackers. Nixon refused the first draft prepared by NSC staffers for his anti-hijacking statement because he found that it watered down the role of the President. H. R. Haldeman, Nixon’s chief of staff, noted in his diary: “[The president] wants to say ‘I have directed that,’ not ‘I urge that.’” Nixon also encountered opposition at State and in the NSC when he raised the idea of putting an embargo on states that protected hijackers. Secretary of State Rodgers opposed the idea because it would affect the Arab-Israeli peace process. Kissinger and the National Security staff also considered an embargo unwise.

Although Nixon was unable to carry the day on the sanctions policy, he got the air marshal program he wanted. Over the objections of his defense secretary, Nixon issued a statement on September 11, 1970 that ordered the creation of sky marshals. Over the objections of his National Security staff and the State department, Nixon also included a line in his public statement vowing to hold states where hijacked planes landed accountable for the protection of US lives and property. Laird had been unable to prevent

the creation of the sky marshals. However William Rogers and Henry Kissinger, in one of the rare examples of cooperation, would do what they could to take any meaning out of Nixon's desire to penalize Cuba and the Arab governments that provided sanctuaries to hijackers.33

As the internal debate over how to deter future hijackings took place, the Administration still had the problem of managing the hostage situation in Jordan. On September 9, the administration's crisis management team -- the Washington Special Actions Group [WSAG] -- held a wide-ranging discussion that involved consideration of a military operation to free the hostages. The Pentagon advised the WSAG that it would be ready to move within 48 hours using forces from Europe and that once an alert were initiated an operation could be mounted within 6-8 hours. Despite the readiness of the US military, Nixon's aides advised him that a US military operation would be inadvisable "except in the extreme case in which there is conclusive evidence that the hostages would otherwise be killed."34 Nixon's national security team was also wary of encouraging the Israelis to try to free the hostages for fear that this would spark another Mideast war. As discussions continued in Washington, the PFLP placed additional pressure on the British government to release Leila Khaled by hijacking a BOAC [British Airways] flight from Bombay and diverting it to Dawson Field.

With reluctance hanging heavily over Washington, there was no real planning for a hostage rescue mission. The CIA officer in Amman, who was sent to Dawson Field to report on the planes, was not tasked to acquire additional information to assist a military rescue. His mission through the crisis was to act as the principal line of communication between the embattled King Hussein and Washington.35

Even as the Nixon administration was turning away from it, rumors of a possible US military intervention swept through Jordan. Memories of the consequences of the US and British military interventions in 1958 caused the Palestinian leadership to reconsider its tactics. A split developed between Yasir Arafat's Fatah movement, which controlled

33 In the fall of 1970 Kissinger initiated a meeting of the Under Secretaries Committee to discuss a sanctions policy, but nothing came of it. HAK, "Memorandum for Chairman, Under Secretaries Committee," 31 October 1970, "Hijackings, Part 2," NSC 331, NMP-NARA.
34 HAK to RMN, "Mid-day Situation Report on Hijacking Situation," [Undated but cover note is dated 9/9/70, 3 p.m.], "Hijacking, Part 2," NSC 331, RMP-NARA.
the PLO, and the PFLP. Since replacing Ahmed Shuqairi, the first chairman of the PLO, in 1969 Arafat increasingly tried to set the priorities of the entire Palestinian movement. Seeking to avoid a western military intervention in Jordan, which would upset its plans to overthrow King Hussein, the PLO suggested that all of the hostages be moved from the three planes to Amman. All Israelis and dual nationals would be segregated from the rest. The Western European and American hostages would be trade for the seven Palestinian guerrillas in Switzerland, West Germany and Great Britain. The PFLP disliked that approach and in a dramatic display of its independence blew up the three airliners at Dawson Field after evacuating the passengers. The PFLP took a group of over fifty hostages, of whom 40 were US citizens and four were US government employees -- to an undisclosed location. The rest were permitted to go on buses procured by Al Fatah to Amman. 36 Throughout the crisis, Washington did not have a precise list of the names of the hostages.

The PLO intensified its pressure on King Hussein as it moderated its approach to the foreign hostages. Yasir Arafat was playing for larger stakes than the release of Palestinian prisoners. He hoped to overthrow the King and install himself as the leader of a Palestinian state in Jordan. Understanding this, Washington advised Hussein to mount a more effective defense of his position. The Jordanian army had 50,000 men, many of them well-trained. The PLO, on the other hand, had fewer than 15,000 troops, none of whom were a match for a trained Jordanian. In the view of official US observers, the King’s indecision was the greatest threat to the Kingdom.

On September 15, King Hussein informed the US that he would finally use his army against the PLO. While welcome and long overdue the King’s decision posed a difficult tradeoff for Washington. Washington recognized that the Jordanian counteroffensive would mean that the hostages, who were being held in a few homes in Amman, were about to enter a period of “grave danger.” At the request of the administration, Hussein planned to include a warning to the Palestinians that there would “be severe consequences if they harmed the hostages.” But the administration understood

that “this may not be enough to stop them if they are desperate” The Nixon administration, however, refused to let this tradeoff become a paralyzing dilemma. The political survival of King Hussein, it was believed, was more important to US national security than the survival of the estimated 50 American hostages.37

The situation worsened in Jordan over the next few days. On September 19, in reaction to the King’s decision to use his army against the PLO, Syrian invaded northern Jordan. As the US watched, Soviet advisors jumped off the tops of Syrians tanks as they crossed into Jordan. In all, Damascus sent a force of 300 tanks plus artillery and infantry. Desperate to hold his position, the King requested emergency help from the United States and, secretly, from Israel.

On September 21, the United States gave the Israelis the green light to bomb the Syrian army in northern Jordan. Alexander Haig recalls giving the message to Israeli ambassador Yitzhak Rabin in a long conversation from his home.38 The next day, the Administration considered the possibility of US direct intervention in the crisis. Plans were worked up for the movement of US troops to Israel for a strike on the Syrians and the PLO in Jordan. Assets already in place for a hostage rescue attempt were to be used. Trapped in Amman, the hostages might be rescued but this would be incidental to the main mission of keeping King Hussein in power.

As the administration juggled these two crises in Jordan, the most dangerous crisis in Cuba since the 1962 missile crisis arose unexpectedly. When US intelligence discovered evidence of a nuclear submarine base being built in Cienfuegos, Cuba, the Nixon administration assumed the Soviets were violating the guarantees that Nikita Khrushchev had given John F. Kennedy and were again attempting to turn the island into an extension of its strategic striking force. The Cuban submarine base affair, which would ultimately be resolved to Washington’s satisfaction, immediately ended discussion of US military involvement in Jordan.

As it had in 1969, the granting of concessions to the PFLP brought the safe return of all of the Dawson Field hostages in late September. The Swiss, the West Germans and

38 Interview with Alexander M. Haig, Jr., 2004.
the British released their Palestinian prisoners and Israel staged a major release that though times to look voluntary was understood to be part of the overall package.

Following this event, President Nixon assigned responsibility to the Department of Transportation for overseeing the hijacking issue. DOT worked closely with the Department of State. In the White House, Frank Carlucci of the Office of Management and Budget was given the task of coordinating White House action on hijacking in cooperation with the President’s domestic advisor John Ehrlichman and the Cabinet Secretary Peter Flanigan.\(^{39}\)

The events at Dawson Field led to some successful international efforts to deal with air piracy, thanks in part to pressure from the United States and Canada. The ICAO passed what became known as the Hague convention imploring member countries to extradite or prosecute hijackers. In October 1970, US representatives at the ICAO also introduced a resolution calling for sanctions against countries that assisted or abetting hijackings. Behind the scenes, the Nixon administration unsuccessfully tried to convince both the Soviets and the French, the two most reluctant members of the ICAO, to ratify not only the Tokyo and Hague conventions but a new one that would impose sanctions on countries that failed to extradite or prosecute hijackers. A year later the US did succeed in rallying support for a ICAO agreement, known as the Montreal Convention, to compel signatories to extradite or punish individuals responsible for sabotage or the destruction of airplanes.\(^{40}\)

At the UN, where so many newly independent countries in the developing world were finding their political voice, the opportunities for helpful public diplomacy were even less auspicious. Discussions in the General Assembly over what to do about terrorism quickly dissolved into debates over what constituted terrorism and what was a legitimate act of anti-colonialism.


\(^{40}\) CIA, Research Study, “International and Transnational Terrorism: Diagnosis and Prognosis,” April 1976, NSArch-CT.
Although the US pilots union beat a drum for a Security Council debate, the administration believed that the subject would inevitably get entangled with the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict. "The veto," lamented a NSC staffer, "will preclude anything but the blandest of resolutions."\(^{41}\) Meanwhile the US tried to encourage the Israelis not to lead the issue at the United Nations. NSC staffers and Stated Department officials were concerned that any US support for an Israeli counter-hijacking initiative would lead to countermeasures by Arab states directed at Washington.\(^{42}\)

The administration also decided not to do anything about the PFLP. The peaceful end to this drama had spawned a series of misconceptions about Palestinian radicals that would take years to undo. It was assumed that the PFLP had adopted terrorist tactics to make a political statement. Hostages were useful as bargaining chips to secure the release of PFLP prisoners; but the PFLP saw no political value in killing them. As a result, intelligence and law enforcement professionals believed that Palestinian hijackings were unlikely to lead to any deaths. The Nixon administration, which adopted a more aggressive stance in the area of passive defense against hijacking, did not seriously consider an active approach against the personnel in the PFLP. Although the declassified record of CIA operations in the Middle East in this period is scanty, interviews suggest that the Agency was not engaged in any covert operations directed at the PFLP in the 1970s.\(^{43}\)

Administration documents still referred to members of the PFLP as guerrillas or the fedayeen. The term "international terrorist" or "international terrorism" did not yet appear in high-level documents and seems not to have existed as a concept in the minds of Nixon or his chief foreign policy aides. This would soon change.

\section*{The Munich Massacre and the Formation of the Cabinet Counterterrorism Committee}

The PLO's assault on the Israeli team at the 1972 Munich Olympics shocked the consciousness of the world and defined a new menace, international terrorism. Two

\footnote{41 Melvin H. Levine to HAK, "International Efforts to Stop Air Piracy," 13 June 1972, Hijackings Part 2, NSC 331, Nixon Materials Project, NARA.}

\footnote{42 Macomber, DOS, to Carlucci, "Western Airline Hijacking," 10 June 1972, Hijackings Part 2, NSC 331, Nixon Materials Project, NARA.}

\footnote{43 Interviews with Frederick Turco, Harold Saunders, Robert Oakley, Stansfield Turner.}
athletes were killed in the attack and the rest held hostage. The unit of the PLO that staged this attack, which called itself Black September in commemoration of the events in Jordan of September 1970, demanded the release of 200 Palestinians from Israeli jails. In the course of a botched rescue attempt by the West German authorities on September 5, 1972, the remaining nine Israeli athletes and five of the terrorists were killed.

Along with the millions of sports fans who unexpectedly found themselves witnesses while watching the drama unfold on live television, the administration had monitored the situation closely. A task force was set up at State and the administration instructed local police department to protect sensitive areas. The US government had accepted West German reports that the situation would be resolved peacefully. The massacre at the airport came as a complete surprise to the Nixon administration. Staffers at State had already prepared congratulatory messages for Nixon and Rogers. Rogers decided to wait for word the Israelis had been released. “Wait till we’re sure,” he told his aide, “Don’t issue them.” “Thank God we didn’t,” Rogers recalled later.44

In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, President Nixon and Henry Kissinger’s thoughts were less on the new problem of the internationalization of Mideast violence than on how to contain Israeli anger. Israel wanted the United States to pressure the International Olympic Committee to cancel the remainder of the Games. Over the course of the night of September 5, Kissinger and Haig tried to discourage the Israeli government from making this demand. They did not wake the President, whose opinion they knew. Nixon believed that canceling the Games would be handing the terrorists a public relations victory. “They want to make it appear that they’ve stopped the Games,” Nixon said the next morning to Kissinger. “It’s like these assholes that tried to stop us running the government….If we’d stopped like some of the softheads around here[wanted] or gone over and prayed at the Lincoln Memorial, that’s what they want. So the thing to do is to do it the other way.”45

44 Tape 771-2, 6 September 1972, Nixon Tapes. I am grateful to Craig Daigle, a graduate student in the history program at George Washington University, for allowing me to quote from his draft transcript of this meeting.

45 Conversation 771-2, 6 September 1972, Nixon Tapes. I am grateful to Craig Daigle, a graduate student in the history program at George Washington University, for allowing me to quote from his draft transcript of this meeting.
Nixon also worried about the domestic political fallout of the Munich massacre. "[T]he trouble with the Jews," he told Kissinger and Haig, "is that they've always played these things in terms of outrage. You've got the Jewish Defense League raising hell and saying we ought to kill every Arab diplomat."\(^{46}\) If the administration did not show that it cared about the massacre, it would come under stiff criticism from the American Jewish community. "You don't really know. Henry, what the Jewish community will do on this. It's going to be the goddamandist thing you've ever saw."

On the other hand, Nixon had a sense that he should not do too much. Some Jewish community leaders were asking for a national day of mourning, a proposal that Secretary of State Rogers agreed with. Nixon thought this was grandstanding, as did Henry Kissinger. "It's not our day of mourning, Mr. President," agreed Kissinger, "...God I am Jewish. I've had thirteen members of my family killed. So I can't be insensitive to this. But I think you have to think of the anti-Semitic [unclear] in this country. If we let our policy be run by the Jewish community."

Kissinger's greater concerns were international. Drawing a parallel with the circumstances surrounding the beginning of the First World War, he worried that the Israelis would start a war over the Munich attack. "My great fear is," he told Nixon, "World War I started because the Austrians had been frustrated for fifteen years, had the archduke assassinated, the Germans and the whole world was outraged." Kissinger thought that Israel was contemplating an invasion of Lebanon to capture the leadership of the PLO. And he was concerned that they might take US support for granted. "We've got an election campaign," argued Kissinger, "...and I don't want them to think that they've got you in their hip pocket." Following this conversation with the President, Kissinger warned the Israelis not to launch any military attacks.\(^{47}\)

Nixon understood better than Kissinger that there was indeed something precedent-setting about this new level of Palestinian violence. In Oval Office conversations as soon as he returned from San Clemente the president began calling the PLO operatives "international outlaws." "They are unpredictable and all the rest. Egypt and Lebanon did not put them up to it," explained Nixon to his chief of staff H. R. "Bob"

\(^{46}\) Ibid.
\(^{47}\) Tape, Nixon Materials Project, NARA.
Haldeman on September 7. "We have to do something to deal with that threat," Haldeman chimed in. Nixon agreed but was at a loss as to what to do: "Rogers is consulting with people to see what the hell we can do, talking about the hijacking convention." Nixon was angry at the Lebanese for having provided a home to the PLO after Arafat was thrown out of Jordan following his defeat in the civil war. "Why is Lebanon harboring those sons of bitches?"

On September 8, the Israeli air force attacked approximately 10 PLO bases in Syria and Lebanon. Three Syrian jets were shot down in the course of the operation and Israeli bombs destroyed the railway between Syria and Beirut. It was estimated that 200 Arab civilians were also killed. The Administration was prepared to accept the attacks on guerrillas bases but feared that the Israelis would want to bomb a much larger target. A week later, three Israeli armored columns invaded southern Lebanon. Designed as a show of force, the tanks destroyed 130 homes of suspected PLO militants before withdrawing.

The Israeli incursion into Lebanon increased the administration’s concerns that Israel was about to do something spectacular. Nixon saw the Munich tragedy through the lens of the Arab-Israeli crisis. Although he understood that the Palestinians were now becoming a violent threat, he did not yet see them as a threat to the United States.

Both the State Department and the CIA instituted changes in how they handled Palestinian activities. The terms counter-terrorism and international terrorism formally entered the Washington political lexicon. The State Department established two committees and named a coordinator of counterterrorism. Meanwhile the CIA began systematic reporting on "international terrorism." The Agency created a team of midlevel specialists in the Directorate of Intelligence, who would pull together what they could on terrorists organizations around the world. Their first product, the so-called "weekly

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48 Tape 772.6, 7 September 1972, Nixon Materials Project, NARA.
49 Tape 771/7, 6 September 1972, Nixon Materials Project, NARA.
51 Ibid., p. 153.
summary on international terrorism," appeared on September 15. Specialized reports on
Black September and the fedayeen movement followed.52

On September 19, 1972 a dramatic change would occur in the President's
perception of the threat posed by the PLO. That morning he was due to discuss counter-
terrorism with the US permanent representative to the United Nations George H. W.
Bush and Secretary Rogers. Ambassador and Mrs. Bush had many friends among the
Arab diplomatic community in New York City. A Lebanese diplomat had called Mrs.
Bush to express concern about US protection of Arab diplomats. Ambassador Bush
shared the concern that Jewish extremists, the Jewish Defense League led by Meir
Kahane, would target Arab diplomats in retaliation for the Munich tragedy. He arranged
for the NY Police Department to acquire an additional 40 men from the US secret service
to beef up federal protection for Arab diplomats. Kissinger's staff set up the meeting
with Nixon to focus Bush's mind on making the achievement of international agreements
on counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics the focus of US efforts at the UN sessions due
to begin on September 19.

Nixon's mind, however, was still distracted by the consequences of what he saw
as the Israeli overreaction to Munich. The administration had started picking up hints that
Israel's friends in Congress were playing on public sympathies to raise objections to
détente with the Soviet Union because of Brezhnev's unwillingness to allow the free
emigration of Soviet Jews emigrate. Kissinger and Nixon believed that Israel might use
the Munich massacre to force a deal on Soviet Jews as part of détente with Moscow.

Nixon complained to Bush and Rogers that Israel was putting pressure on Jewish
senators to prevent the ratification of a US-USSR trade agreement. "What do we care
about Soviet Jews?" Nixon asked rhetorically to no one in particular. Nixon's complex
feelings about Jews and Israel were evident in his decision not to call the family of David
Berger, a dual US-Israeli citizen who had been a wrestler on the doomed Israeli Olympic
Team. Deciding that he went to Israel to be a draft-dodger and not happy that a US

David R. Young, Files of the Working Group of the Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism, Box 28, NA.
Only the title of this report has been declassified. In January 1973, the CIA produced a report on the
Munich massacre, "The Black September Attack at the Munich Olympic Games," Ibid. Only the title of
this report has been declassified. The CIA also produced a list of individuals linked to the PLO. "Persons
Involved with Fedayeen," Volumes I and II, are located in Box 26 of the Working Group files and also
remain classified.
citizen would leave his native country in any case, Nixon scotched suggestions that he convey the sympathies of the American people to the Berger family. “Rogers can do it,” Nixon told Haldeman after Bush and Rogers had left the Oval Office.

It was information that Nixon received after the meeting with Bush that brought revolutionary change in the US government’s approach to terrorism. From 1968 to 1972, Washington incrementally and with reluctance addressed the problem of hijacking. But this was never considered part of a coherent policy on combating terrorism. Indeed no one had proposed such a policy to either President Johnson or President Nixon.

Mystics and soothsayers have never been strangers to the White House. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Vice President Henry Wallace was a devotee of a Russian mystic. Forty years later Nancy Reagan would coordinate her husband’s schedule with a California astrologer. But it is rare for responsibility for the birth of an entire federal national security policy to be laid at the feet of a psychic.

Yet in what must be the oddest moment in the history of US counterterrorism, the Nixon administration might well had done little else in response to Munich had it not been for Jeanne Dixon, a psychic syndicated in many US newspapers. Nixon thought well of her prophesies and used his secretary Rose Marie Woods as a conduit for Dixon’s predictions. Not long after Bush and Rogers left the Oval Office, Rose Marie Woods came in with Dixon’s latest information. The Psychic predicted a major terrorist attack on either an Israeli official in the United States or an American political figure.53

Nixon’s acceptance of this piece of bizarre information showed in his immediate irritation at hearing this news. In front of Rose Marie Woods he unleashed a diatribe against Israel. “What the hell do we care about that? [Soviet exit permits to the Jews].” Why should the Jews get out and not the Ukrainians? Why should the Jews get out and not the Poles? He blamed the Israelis for creating the conditions that were now making a terrorist attack in the United States possible. And he resented how the Israelis seemed to be using the Munich tragedy to push their anti-détente agenda in Washington. Once he calmed down, Nixon decided that however angry he might be at the clever Israelis, he had an obligation to take measures to protect Americans and foreign

53 Tape 783/25, 19 September 1972, Nixon Tapes. Dixon also predicted that Soviet efforts at détente were a fraud and would lead to an ultimatum against the United States in 1973 or 1974. Nixon chose to ignore that information.
diplomats assigned to the United States. Jeanne Dixon’s “information,” however improbable the source, had effectively forced him to consider the Palestinian problem a US matter and not just something the Israelis had to deal with. Nixon understood that if Yitzhak Rabin were killed on US soil, he would be blamed.

After his discussion with Rose Marie Woods, Nixon called Kissinger’s deputy Haig to see to it that the FBI had contingency plans for dealing with a terrorist incident in Washington, DC or New York.

Kissinger, who was in New York at the United Nations, still believed that the principal threat posed by the Munich Massacre was an Israeli overreaction. Besides efforts to decry international terrorism at the UN, Kissinger the United States could slow the Israelis down by to showing that it was gearing up institutionally to fight international terrorism. Kissinger’s idea was the formation of a meaningless but nonetheless impressive Cabinet Committee on Combating Terrorism. In broaching the idea to Nixon once he returned from New York, Kissinger was candid about this being little more than a gesture. He also thought it would be a useful bone to throw to the American Jewish Community, which might then lessen its attacks on detente.

Nixon and Kissinger were no longer on the same wavelength in handling the aftermath of Munich. Nixon liked the idea principally because it fit in with his increasing concern that the US be prepared for a terrorist attack. “Rose talks to this soothsayer, Jeanne Dixon, all the time,” said Nixon, confessing to Kissinger on September 21 the intelligence upon which he was basing his new threat assessment. “She was in,” he continued, “...they are desperate that they will kidnap somebody. They may shoot somebody. They may create... We have got to have a plan. Suppose they kidnap Rabin, Henry, and demand that we release all Blacks who are prisoners around the United States, and we didn’t and they shoot him...what the Christ, do we do? We are not going to give in to it...we have got to have contingency plans for hijacking, for kidnapping, for all sorts of things that [could] happen around here.”

In subsequent days, as Kissinger pulled the plan for the Cabinet Committee together, Nixon insisted that it be more than window dressing for the benefit of the Israelis and American Jews. Nixon wanted both Acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray,

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54 Tape 784/7, 21 September 1972, Nixon tapes.
who had replaced the late J. Edgar Hoover in May 1972, and the Director of Central
Intelligence Richard Helms as members of the Committee, so that intelligence about
possible terrorist attacks would be coordinated at the highest level. “I don’t want a bunch
of . . . jerks from State,” he told Kissinger. “No, no,” assured the national security advisor
in an effort to placate his boss, “this is a cabinet-level committee . . . lots of prestige.”

Kissinger and the NSC staff never accepted Nixon’s view of the Cabinet
Committee. Haig later recalled the Committee as “a charade.” In a contemporary
memorandum to Nixon’s chief domestic advisor John Ehrlichman, Haig stressed that the
“reasons for this [establishing the Committee] involve the Soviet Jewry issue and our
need to keep the Israelis cooperative on this issue. This vehicle will serve that purpose.”

The Committee would meet only once, in early October 1972, before it was
replaced by a different executive counterterrorism organization in 1977. But it did spawn
an active working group, chaired by the State Department’s new Coordinator of
Combatting Terrorism and attended by representatives of nine other agencies, including
CIA and the FBI. The Working Group as it became known gathered only mid-level
officials. The chairman himself was outranked by deputy assistant secretaries of state and
the rest of the Working Group carried little more clout. Nevertheless it constituted the
first interagency study group to be thinking about terrorism on a regular basis. Initially,
the group, which would grow beyond the original ten members, met every two weeks.

The difference of opinion between Kissinger and Nixon on the importance of the
Working Group was evident in the choice of the White House representative. Probably
on the advice of John Ehrlichman, the White House selected David Young to be its
representative. Young reported through Ehrlichman to Nixon. Young was co-director
with Ehrlichman of the White House plumbers unit. In late 1971, Young had investigated
the leaks from the White House to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. On September 16, only nine
days before the formation of the Working Group, at the instruction of the president

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55 Tape 786/5, 25 September 1972, Nixon Tapes.
56 Interview with Alexander Haig, Jr.
57 Haig to Ehrlichman, 23 September 1972, Cabinet Committee on Terrorism [Sept 72 – July 73], NSC
Subject File, Box 310, NMP-NARA.
58 Haig interview; Entry, 22 December 1971, The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House (NY:
Haldeman had asked David Young to check out the source of the leaking of two CIA documents to Dan Rather of CBS News.\textsuperscript{59}

On October 18, David Young reported back to Ehrlichman some intelligence that the PLO were plotting to kidnap Rabin and Sargent Shriver, McGovern’s Vice Presidential running mate. The FBI wanted presidential authorization to be able to move quickly in the event of an attempted assassination. Ehrlichman brought this to the President because of his concern that with Nixon leaving on another campaign swing he might be out of touch in the critical early moments of an incident. Ehrlichman wanted to distance the President from any government counter-terrorism operation. He wanted to set up an automatic mechanism so that the FBI could respond to any terrorist incident. “It gets it away from here,” said Ehrlichman, “if something goes wrong.”

As he did in 1970 when pushing for a greater federal commitment to airline security, Nixon saw efforts to protect him as an abandonment of his presidential responsibilities. He wanted the FBI to assume responsibility for responding to terrorist incidents. “But I will back him...[Gray] can say he had orders from the President...”\textsuperscript{60}

\textit{Solving the Hijacking Problem?}

US commercial pilots had been predicting for at least three years that a domestic hijacking would turn violent. On Saturday November 11, 1972, the Nixon administration witnessed the most chilling domestic hijacking in US history.\textsuperscript{61} Although not an act of international terrorism the incident would have a major effect on the nation’s ability to deal with that challenge. Three men, all with criminal records, boarded Southern Airlines Flight 49, a twin-engine DC 9, in Birmingham, Alabama, for an evening flight to Memphis. Lewis D. Moore and Henry D. Jackson were running from rape charges in Detroit and Melvin Cale was a fugitive from a prison in Nashville. Southern airlines had adopted the FAA’s voluntary hijacker profiling system, which not surprisingly these three men triggered. They were nevertheless allowed to board their flight and an airline

\textsuperscript{60} Tape 804, 18 October 1972, Nixon Materials Project, NA.
employee quickly passed a metal-detecting wand over them in their seats. The perfunctory search missed the arsenal of guns, ammunition and grenades the men had brought with them.

Soon after the plane took off, the three criminals broke into the cockpit demanding 10 million dollars to release the plane, the largest ransom in the history of US hijackings. They diverted the plane to Detroit where they demanded the money to be paid. When the FBI offered only $500,000 the men ordered the pilots to fly to Toronto, Canada, thus turning this into an international incident. It was now the early morning and desperate to prove to the US government that they were serious, the gunmen devised an ingenious plan. One of them had worked at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, a major nuclear research center. After the plane was refueled, the hijackers ordered the pilots to fly a holding pattern around Oak Ridge, 25 miles from Knoxville, Tennessee. They then let them know that if their ransom demand were not met they would drive the plane into the Oak Ridge facility, causing the nation’s first nuclear disaster. “It was a very, very scary situation” recalls Jim Alexander who was a public relations officer at the AEC facility in Oak Ridge. Weekend staff at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory could see the plane circling overhead.

Air to ground communications from the cockpit found their way to the local media, which began broadcasting the hijackers’ threats to the nuclear facility. Officials at the Atomic Energy Commission, which oversaw both the country’s civilian and military uses of nuclear energy, decided after receiving news of these threats to shut down Oak Ridge’s High Flux Isotope Reactor. The hijackers had identified it as one of their targets, as well as two other smaller nuclear reactors in the immediate area. In response to media questions, the AEC explained that the main facility would be severely damaged if hit by an airplane but because the reactor core was underground only a limited amount of radioactivity would be released.

With President Nixon in Key Biscayne relaxing following his recent re-election, the incident was handled in Washington by the Justice Department in collaboration with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the White House. In their desperation to gain the

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attention of the White House, the hijackers demanded to speak with President Nixon. White House officials refused to involve the President directly but the hijackers were offered the chance to speak with other White House personnel, which they quickly rejected.

In Chattanooga, the local FBI office forged a document signed by John Ehrlichman and witnessed by John Dean granting the hijackers 10 million dollars. A truck then delivered between 2 and 2.5 million in 10s and 20s. The hijackers, who assumed they had received 10 million, piled the money in the last rows of the aircraft.

Assuming they had the entire ransom, the hijackers ordered the pilot to fly to Havana. The Cuban government, however, had no interest in providing safehaven to extortionists. Two weeks earlier Castro’s government had arrested two bank robbers from Virginia who had hijacked a Delta airlines plane. When the Cubans refused to admit the hijackers, the gunmen ordered the pilot to take off for Europe. The crew, however, convinced them that they needed oil for the engine and additional fuel before attempting to fly across the ocean. A DC-9, a small jet could not fly nonstop from Cuba to Europe and would have to puddle jump to Iceland or the Azores then to Ireland or North Africa.

Throughout the crisis, the FBI had looked for ways to disable the plane. In recent years, the FBI had reached an agreement with the airlines and the pilots association that in a hijacking situation the Bureau would not attempt to disable the plane without the approval of the captain on board. This first experience with a violent incident revealed the flaws in the arrangement. How could the FBI seek the pilot’s approval without tipping off the hijackers? The incident revealed other flaws in the federal government’s standard procedure for responding to hijacking. The FBI had few undercover assets for use in terrorist emergencies. Instead it had to rely on the airlines for this dangerous work. The FBI requested that Southern airlines approach Delta airlines to get one of its mechanics to disable the plane’s engines when it was on the ground getting refueled in Tennessee. Fearing a future lawsuit for damages from its competitor Southern airlines, Delta initially refused. Ultimately Delta ordered one of its mechanics to approach the plane to disable the engine. Having no crisis training, the mechanic panicked and ran from the task.

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64 John Dean was not told that his name had been forged. Interview with John Dean, 4 May 2004.
Once that scheme failed, the FBI had no resources to fall back on other than its sharpshooters. The FBI had very little experience in ending hijackings; but in August 1961 the FBI had forced a father and son hijacking team to surrender in El Paso after shooting out the tires in the plane.\textsuperscript{65} When the hijackers of Southern Airline 49 requested charts for Europe at a stop in Orlando, acting FBI director L. Patrick Gray in consultation with the airline and the FAA decided to try this a second time. In this case, Gray approved a plan calling for FBI officers once they had immobilized the plane to enter through the emergency exit at the back of the plane and then kill the three hijackers. Fortunately for the passengers some of whom would have been killed in the melee, the FBI effort to shoot out the tires failed. Despite the assurances of the FAA and the airline, it turned out that a DC-9 could take off with flat tires. With a revolver at his head, the captain managed to get the plane off the ground.

The foiled FBI operation enraged and scared the hijackers. “That drove them into a frenzy,” recalled a passenger later, “They were raving maniacs after that. Before, they were just docile maniacs.”\textsuperscript{66} They took the co-pilot outside the cockpit and told the passengers that he would be sacrificed. Quick work by the co-pilot who ducked behind the first two rows of seats saved his life. The hijacker shot at the co-pilot as he fell to the floor, shattering his right arm.\textsuperscript{67} The insistence of the captain that he needed his co-pilot to fly the plane, stopped the hijackers from killing the wounded man.

The hijackers tried for a second time to escape to Cuba. This time the Cuban government, in a humanitarian gesture, accepted the hijackers. A foamy flame retardant was sprayed on the runway at Jose Marti Airport and 29 hours after it had begun the ordeal of Southern Flight 49 ended.

Southern Airlines Flight 49 altered the domestic politics of hijacking. “How many more airline passengers must fly with terror, how many more airline employees face death or serious injury before the United States Government, the international community and the airlines put safety before politics or profit and take decisive action to curb aerial

hijackers?” asked the New York Times editorial page the day after the incident ended. Media coverage of the drama, which was carried live by radio and television, remarkable for the era before 24-hour news, broke the back of public complacency which had prevented strong anti-hijacking measures. It also enraged the Airline Pilots Association [ALPA] and the Transport Workers Association -- representing between them the nation’s 31,000 pilots and 29,000 flight attendants -- which criticized the FBI for its inept handling of the case. “This incident was the closest to the total loss of a plane and its passengers we’ve had from hijacking,” commented the President of ALPA, John J. O’Donnell. ALPA asked President Nixon to restore the principle of ‘pilot in command’: “Our experience has shown,” argued the interest group, “that without prior knowledge and complete cooperation of the captain and his crew, any action by outside forces could end in total disaster.” The ALPA also requested the posting of federal marshals to supervise boarding on commercial airlines and encouraged the Nixon administration to “directly negotiate an accord” with the Castro regime so that Cuba was no longer a magnet for skyjackers. The pilots union let it be known that it would organize a worldwide strike of airline pilots in January 1973 if its requests for greater airline security were not met.

In the days that followed even the political taboo of dealing with Fidel Castro was temporarily suspended. After the Castro regime arrested the hijackers and sent word that they were interested in negotiating an anti-hijacking pact with Washington, the Nixon administration initiated indirect negotiations through the Swiss. Members of Nixon’s own party advocated the end to the twelve-year embargo on Cuba. Three months later the US and Cuba initialed the first agreement ever between the two countries since Castro came to power. Both countries agreed to either try hijackers or return them and to provide safe passage for the aircraft or ship and their passengers. In a concession to the Cuban government, which had concerns about the activities of Cuba-exile groups in the US, the two countries agreed to prosecute terrorists who used the territory of one signatory to

71 Ibid.
attack the other. Havana and Washington also agreed to retain the right to grant political asylum.

The other consequence of the hijacking of Southern Airlines 49 was the beginning of serious anti-terrorist security measures at the nation’s airports. Before this incident the Nixon administration and the US House of Representatives had allied themselves with the airlines in resisting an anti-hijacking measure that would have dramatically expanded the federal role in airport security. The bill, which went down to defeat in the House after passing in the Senate, would have created an "enlarged Federal airport security forces, with security responsibility centered in the Federal Aviation Administration," appropriated federal money to purchase screening devices and mandated 100% of screening of passengers and carry-on baggage. In light of new public concerns about hijacking, the Nixon administration dropped its opposition to 100% screening of passengers and carry-on luggage but maintained its opposition to the creation of a federal airport security service, leaving the implementation of these security measures to the airlines.

On December 5, the US department of transportation announced that 100 percent screening of passengers and hand luggage would begin January 5, 1973. To prevent a recurrence of the Keystone cops routine in Orlando, the Department of Justice signed an agreement with the Department of Defense on November 22 to make military assistance available to the FBI in a terrorist emergency.

In a quiet response to the hijackers’ threat to destroy the nuclear reactor at Oak Ridge, the US government took the possibility of nuclear terrorism seriously for the first time. A decade earlier the CIA, the White House, the AEC and the Department of Defense hardly imagined that a group of individuals not linked to a government could acquire fissionable materials. But on November 25, 1973, an aide to the National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger wrote that “The AEC is developing better procedures for protecting nuclear raw materials which, if captured by terrorists, can be made into crude nuclear explosives.”

72 SecState Rogers to RMN, “Action Against International Terrorism,” 8 January 1973, Cabinet Committee on Terrorism [Sept 72 – July 73], NSC Subject File, Box 310, Nixon Materials Project, NARA.
atomic bombs or exploded to cause contamination.” Expecting his boss to see this as alarmist, the staffer added, “This is a real threat, not science fiction.” In backgrounders to reporters the AEC was now admitting that enough existed in public articles for a terrorist to build a nuclear device. The AEC instituted new procedures for the transportation of radioactive materials in the United States. For the first time armed guards were to accompany the shipments.

There were also changes in how the State Department handled foreign visitors. The US government ended a program that allowed up to 600,000 visitors a year to remain in the United States for 10 days without prior approval or screening if they said they were in transit. As of September 27, 1972, all foreign travelers, with the exception of Canadians, had to have visas to enter the United States. At the same time, State launched “Operation Boulder” to establish safeguards against the entry into the country of foreign terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. Visa applicants were to be screened by the FBI, the CIA as well as the Immigration and Naturalization Service. There was a five-day waiting period for Arab nationals seeking visas. Nationals of other countries with active terrorist organizations were also included in this program.

For the US government terrorism remained the annoying little gnat that buzzed around the superpower while it was trying to handle truly dangerous matters. Policymakers were quick to see improved statistics as a sign that the problem was going

74 Richard T. Kennedy to HAK, “Status of USG Actions Against Terrorism,” 25 November 1972, Cabinet Committee on terrorism [Sept 72 – July 73], NSC Subject Files, Box 310, NMP, NARA.
76 SecState Rogers to RMN, “Combating Terrorism,” 27 June 1973, Cabinet Committee on Terrorism [Sept 72 – July 73], NSC Subject Files, Box 310, NMP, NARA.
77 Rogers to RMN, “Actions to Combat International Terrorism,” 7 November 1972, Cabinet Committee on Terrorism [Sept 72 – July 73], NSC Subject Files, Box 310, NMP, NARA.
away. In 1973, it appeared that the steps taken by the Nixon administration in the wake of the Southern Airlines incident had finally solved the country’s twelve-year air security problem. Hijackings dropped from 21 in the first seven months of 1972 to only one, which was unsuccessful, for the same period in 1973. It was impossible to know how many hijackings had been prevented by the DOT’s screening program; but what was immediately clear was that the FAA and the airlines had seriously underestimated or even misrepresented the value of the available screening technology in the early 1970s. In just the first three months of the program, screeners intercepted 4916 weapons, which led to 573 arrests at the nation’s airports. The pact with Cuba had also played an important role in the improvement of the situation. Even the conservative editorial page of the Wall Street Journal singled out the memorandum of agreement with Cuba as “the biggest breakthrough yet in the campaign to cut down international air and sea piracy.”

The “No Concessions” Policy

Unfortunately as the country seemed to become less vulnerable to hijacking, terrorists seemed to be adopting a new set of weapons to send their message to Washington. On March 1, as a reception for the departing US charge d’affaires George Curtis Moore was winding down at the Saudi embassy in Khartoum, four Palestinian gunmen jumped out of a land-rover and began shooting at the diplomats. They took five hostages, including three westerners: Moore, the US ambassador Cleo Noel and a Belgian diplomat Guy Eid. The Black September faction of the PLO took responsibility and demanded the release of several hundred Palestinians in foreign jails, including Sirhan Sirhan, the convicted assassin of Robert F. Kennedy. The Sudanese government denounced the attack and ordered soldiers to form a ring around the occupied embassy.

79 SecState Rogers to RMN, “Combating Terrorism,” 27 June 1973, Cabinet Committee on Terrorism [Sept 72 – July 73], NSC Subject File, Box 310, NMP, NARA.
The PLO had targeted the US mission in Khartoum because of the role that US-Sudanese relations had been playing in the Mideast peace process. Starting in early 1972, the Sudanese had shown increasing interest in helping the United States bring key Arab states like Egypt and Libya into the western fold. Sudanese president Gaafar Nimieri told US Ambassador to the United Nations George Bush, who went on a special mission to the Sudan in February 1972, that “the Sudan could assist any initiative which the US might undertake provided he felt it serious and genuine and provided that any action he was called on to take would not embarrass or weaken Egypt.”

Nimeiri had also offered to arrange a meeting between George Bush and Libya’s leader Muammar Qaddafi. Bush had been prepared to go, “I feel I could thread my way through this particular minefield if you believe President Nimeiri’s suggestion worth trying.” Washington had said no to that suggestion. Nevertheless, formal diplomatic relations between the Sudan and the United States resumed in August.

Initially the State Department shaped the US response to the hostage incident. State expected to negotiate the release of Noel and Moore as it had negotiated the release of the hostages in Damascus in 1969 and at Dawson Field in 1970. Rogers dispatched Under Secretary of State William Macomber to the Sudan to lead these negotiations. The terrorists’ demand that Sirhan Sirhan be released, a concession no US leader could agree to, meant that some sort of compromise would have to be arranged. During the Dawson Field incident, the administration had heard rumors that the release of Sirhan Sirhan would be one of the PFLP’s demands and there was widespread relief when the PFLP denied that this was a demand.

Washington’s next move was completely unscripted. During a press conference on March 2, as Macomber was on his way to the Sudan, a reporter asked President Nixon to comment on the Palestinian demand that Sirhan Sirhan be released. Outraged by the idea, Nixon instantly created a new policy for the United States in terrorist incidents. “We will do everything we can to get them released,” said Nixon, “but we will not pay blackmail.” Nixon was blowing off steam. There appears to have been no discussion or staff work prior to his uttering this pledge.

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82 Ibid.
Some uncertainty remains as to whether the Working Group, which continued to meet regularly, and the National Security Council staff had already started moving away toward a "no concessions" policy even before the Khartoum incident.\(^{83}\) Armin Meyer, who as State’s Coordinator for Combating Terrorism chaired the mid-level Working Group in 1973 later recalled that the Working Group had advocated this new policy but that until Khartoum Secretary Rogers considered it “too callous” to accept.\(^{84}\) These internal debates, in any case, had not bubbled to the surface before March 1973.

Indeed to that point the five-year old negotiating approach had never come under public scrutiny. But once the President endorsed the morally transparent and rhetorically simple statement that the United States did not reward blackmail, a return to the old policy of negotiating with terrorists became politically untenable. Thus was born, in a moment of presidential pique, what future administrations would enshrine as America’s “no-concessions policy.”\(^{85}\)

Nixon’s statement doomed Noel and Moore. After Hussein’s victory in the Jordanian civil war in September 1970, Palestinian guerrillas had left Jordan and PLO chairman Yasir Arafat moved his headquarters to Beirut. The terrorist operation in Khartoum was under the control of PLO headquarters in Beirut, which supervised the hostage drama through telephone calls to the PLO office in Khartoum. When the Beirut headquarters learned of Nixon’s rejection of its terms, the PLO immediately changed tactics. In communications intercepted by the United States, the PLO sent the order “Cold River” to the terrorists in the Saudi Embassy. This was a codeword instruction to execute the three western envoys. Noel, Moore and the Belgian Eid were then led to the basement of the Saudi Embassy and riddled with bullets, as each terrorist was allowed to take his turn at the trigger. PLO chairman Yasir Arafat participated in the supervision of the

\(^{83}\) David Tucker, Skirmishes at the Edge of Empire: The United States and International Terrorism, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997, p.9. Tucker was permitted to see Armin Meyer’s unpublished memoir of the Khartoum incident. Meyer argued that the Working Group had already made this shift in thinking, encouraged by Henry Kissinger.

\(^{84}\) Ibid.

operation and the US government later concluded that he had given the order to kill the diplomats.\textsuperscript{86}

The murders left Washington in a quandary as to what to do next. The NSC staffer responsible for the Middle East, Harold Saunders, had had the same position under Lyndon Johnson. He proposed that strategy that Kissinger and Nixon ultimately approved. On the theory that any unilateral reaction by the United States would upset moderate Arab countries and kill the fragile peace process, Saunders suggested quiet encouragement of the Arabs to deal with Black September. Nevertheless Washington had known for years that the moderate Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, were funding Fatah, which controlled Black September. The Saudi subsidy was drawn from a 5% income tax levied on all Palestinians working for the Kingdom. The Kuwaitis subsidized Arafat through a 2% tax on gasoline and theater tickets.\textsuperscript{87} Saunders suggested and Kissinger agreed that they should be told privately that such activities were not helpful to the peace process. Saunders, however, warned against making counterterrorist actions a precondition of US engagement with any Arab states. Such a policy, he advised Kissinger "would play into Black September's hands because they would like to prevent a negotiated solution."\textsuperscript{88}

Help soon arrived from an unlikely quarter. President Nimieri asked his minister of national reform Abdel Rahman Abdullah to accompany the bodies of Noel and Moore to the United States. Minister Abdullah carried with him a request for President Nixon. In the Oval Office on March 6, Abdullah explained that the Sudanese planned to "see that justice was done and to brook no interference from outside." The terrorists, who had given themselves up to the Sudanese authorities on March 4, were to stand trial. The Sudanese were persuaded that Black September, which claimed responsibility for the attack, was merely a cover for a covert operational unit within Arafat's Fatah.\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{88} Saunders and Richard T. Kenendy to HAK, [no date], "Follow-up on Murders in Khartoum." NSC, CO:Africa, Sudan, Vol. 1, NSC Box 745, NMP-NARA. This is Kissinger's copy on which he initialed his approval of the suggested policy.
Sudan would be the first Arab country to bring charges against a Palestinian terrorist. The NSC could not have asked for a better outcome.

Worried about a backlash from Arafat and his terrorist organization, Nimieri had Abdullah request emergency security assistance from Nixon. The Sudanese wanted US intelligence training for their Public Security Department and National Security Organization. They also requested assistance in improving the security at Khartoum airport, including the provision of metal detectors. Nixon energetically approved the requests. The United States had given Sudan's security requirements "a high priority" in the year since Ambassador Bush's productive visit to Khartoum. But with Nimieri's very helpful response to the murders of Noel and Moore, Washington decided to step up these efforts.\(^90\)

Washington left to the Sudanese the investigation of the murders. On March 6, President Nimieri announced on radio and television that he was closing the Khartoum office of Fatah and accused its director, Fawaz Yassin, of complicity in the murder of the western diplomats.\(^91\) Yassin had fled to Libya hours before the attack. Although Washington was persuaded that responsibility for the actions in the Saudi Embassy could be traced back to Arafat and Fatah, the Nixon administration almost certainly did not undertake any covert operations to destroy Arafat or the Black September faction. "That was not part of the ethos" recalls Robert Oakley, who was in the Embassy in Beirut before taking over the NSC Middle East portfolio in 1974.\(^92\) "We did not go after them," agrees Oakley's predecessor. It was assumed the Israelis would go after them. This was not something the Nixon administration wanted the CIA to do.\(^93\)

**Morocco and Beirut**

Any inclination on the part of the Nixon administration to seek retribution for the murders of Noel and Moore dissipated in the wake of the Yom Kippur War. In October

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\(^92\) Interview with Robert Oakley, 7 February 2004.

\(^93\) Telephone interview with Harold Saunders, 15 February 2004.
1973, for the fourth time in twenty-five years, Israel was at war with her neighbors. Audacious attacks by the Egyptians and Syrians had caught Israel by surprise. However, the Israeli Defense Force regrouped within a few days and launched a stunningly successful counterattack. On the Sinai front, the Egyptians were pushed back across the Suez Canal. Israeli forces followed and as the capture of Cairo became increasingly likely the superpowers intervened to restore the status quo.

Egypt’s leader Anwar Sadat, who had succeeded Nasser after his sudden death in September 1970, had launched the attack in the hope of reshuffling the playing cards of Middle East politics. As Nimieri had hinted in early 1972, the Egyptians were looking for a way to build better relations with the West. In the wake of the Arab defeat, regional negotiations acquired renewed vigor.

Among those who now wished to speak to the United States was Yasir Arafat, who approached the United States the day after a UN-backed cease fire went into effect. The moderate Arab states all wanted Washington to accept Arafat, despite his terrorist background, as the political spokesman for the Palestinian people.94 “Talk to him,” was their refrain. When Arafat signaled his interest in backchannel communications, Nixon approved discussions in Morocco and assigned Eisenhower’s former interpreter and then Deputy Director of the CIA, General Vernon Walters to represent him. Walters was instructed not to begin negotiations or to offer any kind of US position but just to listen. The principal message he was to bring with him was that “there are no objective reasons for antagonism between the United States and the Palestinians.” The PLO was also to be praised for the “responsible positions” its leaders had taken during the Yom Kippur war. There was to be no mention of Khartoum.95

Walter’s opposite number was Arafat’s chief of intelligence Ali Hassan Salameh. Salameh had blood on his hands as the chief organizer of Black September’s attack on

94 Ibid.
95 Scowcroft to Walters, “Talking Points for Meeting with General Walters,” 23 October 1973, NSC CO: Middle East, “Palestinian [July 73 – July 74],” Box 139, NMP-NARA; The United States informed the Israelis of this contact with the PLO a month later. Memcon, Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz – Scowcroft, 26 November 1973, NSC CO: Middle East, “Palestinian [July 73 – July 74],” Box 139, NMP-NARA.
the Israeli athletes at Munich. Arafat’s decision to send him to meet the Americans suggested that he had no fears that Fatah’s terrorist past would disqualify the PLO from negotiations with the United States.

The discussions continued in Beirut in December 1973. Robert Oakley, the political officer in the US Embassy, passed messages from Kissinger to Arafat through Walid Khalidi, an “advisor on the politic side, not on the operational side to Arafat.” The notes from Kissinger had no address, no signature but the PLO knew where they were coming from. “There was little of substance; this was just an attempt to start a dialogue,” recalls Oakley. Arafat, however, treated these contacts differently. In April 1974, he sent word to the Nixon administration through this backchannel that he needed “very early indication” of US reaction to his position that the PLO should be the representatives of the Palestinian people at any peace talks. Arafat, who referred to himself as a “moderate Fedayeen leader,” now agreed to recognize King Hussein as the ruler of Jordan so long as the world agreed to recognize him as the eventual leader of the “Palestinian National Authority” on the West Bank and Gaza. Eventually Kissinger raised the PLO’s use of terrorism in the exchanges. The US let Arafat know that for him to be accepted as a party in any negotiation, he would have to renounce his use of terror.

These early discussions introduced a new complication into US thinking on terrorism. Arafat now presented himself as a foe of terrorism. In laying out his concerns, he warned the Americans that if they chose not to deal with him, they faced only worse alternatives. He complained that the governments of Iraq and Libya as well as the PFLP faction in the Palestinian movement had been “working hard and spending lots of money to swing Fatah away from [his] moderate position.” The PLO chairman was also blaming recent terrorists attacks on these hardliners. Washing his hands of these events, he lamented that the “sharp upsurge in fedayeen terrorism could destroy hope of ever

96 Reeve, One Day in September, pp. 203-205.
97 Interview with Robert Oakley, 7 February 2004.
98 Cable, Beirut to Asst Sec State Atherton, 22 April 1974, Section 1, NSC CO: Middle East, “Palestinian [July 73 – July 74],” Box 139, NMP-NARA.
reaching negotiating stage.” Khalidi stressed that Arafat and his circle had “come very far, indeed, on road to realism and moderation” and they now feared assassination by the radicals. Arafat said that he was working hard to convince George Habash, the leader of the PFLP, to accept something less than the return of the entire UN mandate of Palestine and the destruction of Israel.

Arafat also continued to use the CIA channel to reinforce the image of his change of heart. After the meeting with Walters, Salameh continued to meet with a CIA case officer Robert Ames. Ames and Salameh apparently had established contact in the late 1960s, when Ames was in Beirut. Their discussions were broken off before the Munich but now Arafat wanted them resumed. For the next four years, Arafat used Salameh to pass intelligence to the CIA on the world of Arab terrorism and the interests and aspirations of the PLO. “They were constantly trying to recruit each other,” recalls longtime CIA officer in Jordan, Jack O’Connell. The information from Salameh, which was raw and voluminous, reached the NSC staff and gained for Ames a reputation as the CIA’s main expert on the PLO. The contact remained unbroken until 1978 when the Mossad killed Salameh, whom they had dubbed the Red Prince, in retaliation for Munich.

Arafat’s signaling was very seductive. But could he be believed? What tests would be sufficient to prove that a former terrorist leader had transformed himself into a responsible leader of a peaceful national-liberation movement? By his actions after the Yom Kippur war, Arafat provoked a policy debate in Washington over his true political identity that still continues after three decades. The significance of the debate for US policy on terrorism was that from this moment forward, there would always be some reluctance in Washington to hold Arafat fully accountable for the acts of Palestinian terrorism.

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100 Cable, Beirut to Asst Sec State Atherton, 22 April 1974, Section 1, NSC CO: Middle East, “Palestinian [July 73 – July 74],” Box 139, NMP-NARA.
101 Cable, Beirut to Asst Sec State Atherton, 22 April 1974, Section 2, NSC CO: Middle East, “Palestinian [July 73 – July 74],” Box 139, NMP-NARA.
102 Cable, Beirut to SecState, 23 May 1974, 1:05 p.m., Idem.
103 Reeve, One Day in September, pp. 203-207.
104 Interview with John O’Connell, 22 October 2003.
106 Ibid.
In its last months before being swallowed by Watergate, the Nixon administration decided to discourage Arafat from thinking that he was in direct contact. There was a concern that these contacts were bound to complicate US negotiations with Israel and Jordan.\(^{107}\) Despite receiving this message, the PLO continued to use Khalidi to send messages to the Americans. Following a terrorist attack at Ma’alot where some Israeli children were taken prisoner and killed, Arafat used Khalidi to deplore the act because it involved children. Arafat implied that those responsible had crossed a line, though he added that on principle “neither he nor any other Palestinian leader could oppose operations inside Israel.”\(^{108}\) Arafat’s ambiguous dance with the United States would continue into the next administration.

The discussions with Arafat did not mean that future Khartoums were impossible. Nixon remained concerned about terrorism and refused to let the Federal Government slip into the old pattern of complacency. Although the Cabinet Committee never met, the Secretary of State reported to Nixon every six months on the government’s achievements in combating terrorism. In mid-1973, Rogers had reported that despite Khartoum the decrease in hijackings and in letter bombs showed that Washington was winning on at least two fronts. After receiving a summary of this report prepared by Kissinger, Nixon wrote that though he wanted this good news to get out to the public, he also wanted “some admonition for additional action and sense of urgency.”\(^{109}\) A year later Nixon was out of the White House and that additional action became the responsibility of Gerald Ford.

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\(^{107}\) Cable, SecState to Embassy, Beirut, 1 May 1974, Section 2, NSC CO: Middle East, “Palestinian [July 73 – July 74],” Box 139, NMP-NARA.

\(^{108}\) Cable, Beirut to SecState, 23 May 1974, 12:31 p.m., Idem.

\(^{109}\) Nixon comments on HAK, Kenneth R. Cole to RMN, “Actions to Combat International Terrorism,” 24 July 1973, Cabinet Committee on Terrorism [Sept 72 – July 73], NSC Subject Series, Box 310, NMP-NARA.