

Thinking Like a Terrorist in Latin America

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The great German military theoretician Von Clausewitz noted that war was an extension of politics by other means. One should look at terrorism as an extension of war and hence of politics by different means. There is no universally agreed on definition of terrorism simply because the looseness of the term has value for those in authority, to allow them to condemn all kinds of violent or destructive activities which they do not like and find inconvenient to deal with. The unifying theme in non-governmental terrorism is that it is a tool of the weak against the strong or the tool of two relatively weak forces against each other.

There are unfortunately many cases of state terrorism against its own citizens. The Soviet Union and the Nazis by no means began the pattern. We have seen it more recently in the former Yugoslavia. It has in the last 50 years plagued several countries of Latin America as governments attempted to root out dissident movements. Hundreds to thousands of people “disappeared” as governments waged violent and even murderous attacks on small internal communities of putative enemies of the state. As an example outside Latin America, consider Iraq’s actions against its own Kurds.

There are all kinds of individuals and mini-scale groups that may engage in activities that are atrocious. Atrocious does not imply terrorism which is politically motivated. We have the case in the United States of a social isolate who over a decade or more sent protest messages and bombs to specific people. He severally injured or killed a small number of people. There are also dissident employees and associations that come together to implement a goal through

violence. Most of these activities can be handled by routine police work. Atrocious does not imply terrorism which is politically based.

The sharp focus today throughout the world is on politically motivated terrorism, particularly, but not exclusively instigated by factors outside the target country. For Latin America foreign instigated terrorism is far less important than that from indigenous dissidents. The key to understanding terrorism of the latter sort is that without exception it involves a political cause and a political agenda.

The tools terrorists use are tools of the weak against the strong. They have three goals. First is to demonstrate that the government cannot protect you. Second is to evoke extreme responses from the government. The third goal is to use those extreme responses as a mechanism for recruiting new people into the movement, for disparaging the creditability of the government, to highlight its incompetence, and at least to raise in many peoples’ minds questions about the relative merits of the terrorists’ political objectives.

In order to implement any violent terrorist action three conditions have to be made. The terrorist group must have access to its target. Second, it must have the technical competence to execute its plan. Third, it must select a target which is appropriate to promote the three operational goals mentioned above.

There is almost always some merit in the political objectives and purposes underlining the terrorists’ action. One must consider before turning to the terrorist tactics, whether or not to meet with the terrorists to negotiate a mutually agreeable settlement. It sounds

easy in principle, but it is most difficult in practice for governments, especially in democratic societies, to acknowledge any merit in the terrorists' political position. Acknowledgment gives them the entering wedge for forcing further concessions. Whatever concessions are made are likely to be followed by the claim that government has not satisfied a different point, and so on and on. To enter into the negotiations with implicit or even explicit acknowledgment of some basis for the terrorists political objectives opens a Pandora's Box of endless pressures for further concessions, both by negotiation and by terrorist actions.

The alternative strategy of relentless, violent pressure on the terrorists to expunge them from society is hardly acceptable in any democratic society. In all likelihood it will promote goal three above. Extreme measures are likely to bring political backfire on those in the executive or legislative function. Often a change in Administration, party in power, or head of state provides for a fresh opening to begin discussion and negotiations.

Even in the strongest willed societies, unrelenting violence against terrorists is found increasingly unacceptable by the global community, and will involve global or regional interventions either at the time of violence or later. We are seeing now trials of Milosevic in connection with his actions in the former Yugoslavia. The search is still going on for two of his principal lieutenants. Even if the violent actions are successful, they are likely to involve highly personal risks for and international sanctions against the head of state, the head of the military, or whoever is or was in charge of the unacceptable anti-terrorist actions.

Adding to the complexity of dealing with terrorists is that with the passage of time there is a stabilization of the terrorist group. They may find it desirable, even necessary, to tie into frankly criminal activities as a source of funds. We see this now with the cocaine cartels in Columbia, where the guerillas are working hand in glove with drug barons to get money to support their political movement. It is almost certain that

eventually drug dealing will become a preferred way of raising funds for terrorists since there is a virtually guaranteed market.

We have seen a variation on this in Ireland, where terrorist violence has been going on for many decades. At least two generations of people have grown up in an environment of violence against the established government. What happens when some resolution of the cause of the terrorism does occur? Prior ties to criminal activity, the lack of any occupational skills, and inadequate sources of personal income may cause the terrorists, after the political situation is settled, to turn to crime as their only significant source of employment and income.

Turning now to the question of what are the things terrorists might do: keep in mind the three goals and the three conditions noted above. The terrorist has a wide range of choices as to actions and targets. But the target should be one which is of great significance psychologically, so it will carry a message of unstoppable power throughout the whole country and not be seen as a mere local episode. It might even have international significance if it has a high enough symbolic value. An example is destroying a densely populated resort. International awareness can scare away foreign investors and tourism as it did a few years ago in Egypt. One of the earliest, most primitive strategies is assassination of senior government officials and jurists as is now practiced in Columbia.

In the modern world, with increasing urbanization and the centralization of government and corporate functions in big cities, urban areas have become an attractive place for terrorist activities, with the countryside as a relatively safe haven for them.

The tools of terrorism are not limited to politically motivated terrorist groups. In many of the large favelas or barrios, the incredibly poor massive shantytowns in many Latin American cities, the local criminal groups use the tools of terrorism—assassination, extortion, and physical violence—to keep people

in line. Too often the established local authority is unable and even unwilling to go into these crime-ridden poverty-stricken areas to root out crime. This is an interesting illustration of how the tools of terrorism can be used as tools of strictly criminal activity. The two should not be confused. Even criminal links from the barrio gang leaders to corrupt local officials do not make it political terrorism. There is no political issue to negotiate.

Terrorism's target in Latin America is not the poor, but the middle class, the wealthy, and the government. We see an example of politically based terrorists in the Basques of Spain. The rebels are trying to raise the price of resistance to their political objectives too high for the middle class and the wealthy. Hence those classes become the targets for all three goals of the terrorist movement, to demonstrate that the government can't protect them, the government's responses are excessive and ineffective, and that there is some merit to the terrorist cause. This implies concessions to the dissidents as the answer.

In many countries the entrance of European and American firms has been an economic godsend. They supply jobs, they offer opportunities to use indigenous skills, they provide employment for the middle class, and they often develop an export market. Consequently an attractive goal for the political dissidents would be to use a well-established tactic, assassination, to knock off the top foreign leadership in those foreign businesses, thereby creating a reign of terror among the foreign business concerns—upsetting them, shutting some down, driving some out of the country, or at least reducing their general economic effectiveness.

This would hit the middle class, the wealthy, and the government hard. Attacks on the infrastructure could have a high payoff, notably disrupting telecommunications, the telephone, internet, and the telegraph, and radio. The inability to communicate would highlight the impotence of government.

Attacks on tourists, who are a source of substantial

revenue in many Latin American countries, is attractive. Making them ill or even kidnapping or murdering a few tourists can have a dramatically negative effect on tourism and the economy.

While the attacks on waterworks, the rupture of dams, the flooding of the countryside, and damage to agriculture are all technically feasible, they are undesirable in general because they would bring a net negative ambiance to the terrorists that would thwart their political goals, which in general favor redistribution of wealth and income and benefits to the urban and rural impoverished.

The persistence of terrorism is worse when there are multiple clear fracture lines between the established government and the dissident group, e.g., along economic, occupational, ethnic, religious, or geographic lines. Geographic fracture lines can be macro, in the regional sense, or micro, in the sense of location within a city. The longest continuing example of this, worldwide, is the dissident Irish situation going back to 1916, where all five fracture lines are found.

State-based terrorism is a far more important problem in Latin America than it is in North America or Western Europe and is much more important than foreign initiated terrorism. It calls for special attention because the central feature of that terrorism is that government is not the friend, but is actually or potentially everybody's enemy. The powerful physical forces and limited intelligence of government when stressed or threatened can move it toward wide scale, uninformed, ineffective and grotesque actions. Furthermore, in Latin America government is or often has been the handmaiden of the extremely wealthy, who are out to protect their unique prosperity and are bereft of any social sense of fairness and equity. They usually resist any long term plan for improvement in the condition of the masses.

State-based terrorism in general until now has been dealt with only by a change of government and a radical alteration in the makeup of the military. There

are factors that are slowly changing the acceptance of state-based terrorism. Television is the great worldwide educational force. It shows what goes on in countries outside that victimized by state-based terrorism. Foreign education of the middle and wealthy classes' children, whatever their preconceptions are, reeducates some of them to new points of view, particularly toward democracy and equity. Slowly emerging, but of tremendous importance, is world government as seen in the growth of the World Court, and more military interventions by the United Nations to deal with state-based terrorism. There also are interventions at the local or regional scale, as in the case of the U.S. invading Haiti.

Whatever has to be accomplished subsequent to the removal of the leaders of state-based fascism, high on the agenda must be a radical breakdown in the business-military linkages. Second must be closer attention by external funders, such as the World Bank, to how much of their support is skimmed off into the pockets of the wealthy politically, connected families and the military. Third, there must be a drop in arms acquisition. No Latin America country has the justification for large and lavishly equipped militaries. That money could be better used for economic programs to redress long term grievance. Fourth, the bureaucracy and the police in many Latin America countries, particularly the poorer ones, are so underpaid that it becomes an unstoppable invitation to what in advanced countries is called graft or corruption. Fifth, radical reform of the civil service, perhaps with fewer civil servants getting much higher wages, would moderate the temptations of corruption, especially if accompanied by strong penalties for those caught taking graft.

Summary

The four forms of terrorist-like violence in Latin America call for different solutions. First, external political terrorism is not likely to be in any great consequence in the near future. There may be some cases in which border conflicts may raise that issue.

Second is internally initiated terrorism. This reflects long-term social issues of justice and equity which are not likely to be dealt with by an administration or regime which has been intransigent for years or decades. Most likely to be effective are calls for a change of administration and a change in government reflecting broad change in public outlook. Those changes are important although not an absolutely necessary condition for beginning negotiations.

Third, are criminal terrorist-like activities most commonly in the barrios of large cities. These can be dealt with by the enforcement of the law and the treatment of the citizens in the barrios with the same enthusiasm and gusto that the middle class and the wealthy enjoy. These are fundamental questions of law enforcement. Linked to that is attention to the often associated corruption of public officials.

Finally, and most important in Latin America, is state-based terrorism—sometimes against helpless indigent people—either directly by the state or with its concurrence by big local landowners or foreign corporations and most commonly in the recent past by an intransigent dictator and the intransigent party in power.

When faced with serious political threats the party cannot bring itself to conciliation and begins terrorist action against the threat. This politically driven violence can only be stopped quickly by external intervention. The United Nations is becoming more confident and skilled in doing this. The capabilities of regional organizations to act are untried in Latin America.

Finally, a single intervention unilaterally, as by the United States in Panama, is generally unsatisfactory in the long run because of the reluctance to continue in place long enough to establish or reestablish a new kind of governance and regime.