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Review of Political Terrorism: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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Abstract

Review of *Political Terrorism: An Interdisciplinary Approach* by Jeffrey Ian Ross.

KEYWORDS: terrorism, counter-terrorism

Political Terrorism: An Interdisciplinary Approach by Jeffrey Ian Ross: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006 xxii + 287pp notes, bibliography, index, 2 illustrations (paper) ISBN 0-8204-7949-7

Review by James F. Miskel, consultant, Portsmouth RI 02871

Dr. Ross' textbook fundamentally strives to teach students how to think critically and objectively about terrorism. That is certainly a worthwhile project. As a result, the book is more about models and "sources and methods" of research into terrorism than it is about terrorism per se. The book starts by reviewing the history and causes of terrorism and provides several case studies against which analytical models may be applied. There are also chapters on Al Qaeda, the role of the media as a platform for enhancing the fear-inducing effects of terrorism, methods of combating terrorism, and concluding remarks about the future directions that terrorism may take.

This is very much a textbook designed for classroom use. Each chapter in the book concludes with an annotated summary of other key readings for students to consult and with a series of discussion questions that students can use to test their understanding of covered material. Essay topics that faculty would presumably assign are also provided. It must be said, though, that some of the discussion questions and essay topics do not live up to the high analytical standards of the text itself. For example, discussion questions apparently envision students memorizing such things as the date that the PLO was founded and the derivation of the word "assassins." Interesting trivia, to be sure, but not particularly relevant to a critical analysis of the phenomenon of terrorism.

As we know, the international community and scholars have long wrestled with and failed at the challenge of defining the term "terrorism." And as Dr. Ross notes, this has contributed to a lack of precision and consistency in governmental policies and academic writings on this very important topic. Unfortunately, this particular problem is not one that a single textbook can resolve. Be that as it may, the sensible definition adopted by Ross has five elements: (1) the target must have symbolic value, (2) the violence must create a climate of fear, (3) the victims are not ordinarily considered legitimate targets, (4) the violence has an audience beyond the immediate victims, and (5) the purpose of the violence is to influence public opinion and/or the policy of a government. However, by noting that an act could be considered terrorism even if all five of the criteria are not met (p. 8), the text seemingly not only undercuts the precision of the definition, but also smudges the dividing lines between terrorism and "ordinary" crime and psychopathic behavior.

There are three case studies in the book: Al Fatah, the Provisional Irish Republican Army, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. Analytical

models about the causes of terrorism are applied to each, both to validate the models and provide insight into the three terrorist organizations. The models make an insightful distinction between permissive causes and precipitant causes, but the case studies do not provide enough information about all three of the organizations to do justice to an application of the models. As a result, the conclusions that are drawn at the end of the case studies appear to be only loosely related to the information presented in the case studies themselves. Furthermore, some aspects of the models appear not to offer any insights into the causes of the terrorism described in the cases.

The analysis of the case studies concludes with the observation that the “trait” that the three groups have in common is the “powerful effect of grievances” (p. 138) — nationalist in the Al Fatah and IRA cases, economic in the FARC case. This is a point that can hardly be contested — clearly some individuals are motivated by grievances to join or support a terrorist organization. As Dr. Ross observes, it has often been noted that most people with grievances do not resort to terrorist violence, just as most poor people do not resort to street crime. This being the case, the application of the models to the cases appears suggestive, but not as conclusive as students might wish.

Another of the chapters in the book is dedicated to a review of the various terrorist groups that have been active in the United States since the era of the Ku Klux Klan. While some of the groups covered in the chapter are obscure (for example, the “Croatian Freedom Fighters” of the late 1970s, whose membership apparently could have been counted on the fingers of two hands), it is certainly useful for readers to be reminded that there have been terrorist groups in the United States for a very long time and that the ideological profiles of the groups are, to say the least, varied.

The textbook shifts gears in its final chapters to an overview of the different types of counter-terrorism measures and homeland security programs. Analytical models for appraising the different measures and programs are not presented, but Dr. Ross’ narrative ought to remind readers that the tools available to policy makers in both areas are far from perfect. A particular matter of concern to Dr. Ross is the issue of sacrificing American values in the quest for security against terrorism. This is, as it should be, a matter of grave concern to every citizen. It is clear from Dr. Ross’ language that he is not a fan of the Bush Administration’s approach towards privacy, but his implication that the Bush team has been “knee-jerky” and “panicky” in its efforts to build a “national security state” (p. 231) may strike other readers, as it did me, as unfair and out-of-sync with his emphasis on critical analysis.