

Act of War:
Reagan, Thatcher, and Counterterrorism Strategy
during the American Bombing of Libya, 1986

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“Only when he is made to pay an unacceptable price will he stop.” Armed with this among his talking points, Vice Admiral John Poindexter, national security advisor to President Ronald Reagan, entered the meeting with leaders from Congress that would precede the impending airstrikes against Libya on April 14, 1986.¹ For the previous year, a series of increasingly violent and costly terrorist attacks had escalated against American interests abroad, and the Reagan administration had searched in vain for an effective way to respond. Intelligence pointed to a common denominator tying the attacks to a single source: the sponsorship of the Libyan regime of Colonel Muammar Qadhafi. The bombing on April 5 of La Belle discotheque in West Berlin, a hotspot for American servicemen, at last provided the administration with an opportunity to mount a decisive response. Reagan and his advisors were determined not to let it pass.

Poindexter explained to the assembled senators and representatives that the United States had “tried every possible means short of military action to convince Colonel Qadhafi to stop his outlaw behavior.” As he listed the elements of the administration’s strategy for deterring terrorism, Poindexter did not linger on the lack of support that America’s European allies, including British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, had mustered for successive U.S. proposals, but his frustration on this point was palpable. “[I]t is our unanimous opinion,” he continued, “that a failure to respond by the world community has encouraged Qadhafi’s aggression.”² The proposed bombing of military and terrorist targets within Libya was designed to reverse this

¹ Memo, Oliver L. North, Howard R. Teicher, James R. Stark, Robert L. Earl, and Craig P. Coy to John M. Poindexter, “National Security Advisor: Talking Points for Congressional Leadership,” April 12, 1986, Folder “Libya Sensitive 1986 [1 of 7],” Box 91668, Howard Teicher Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (hereafter RRL).

² Ibid. The name of the Libyan dictator admits of numerous spellings. “Qadhafi” was the most popular version within the Reagan administration and is thus what I will use here, except in direct quotations from written sources.

perception of passive inaction by warning friend and foe alike that the United States had entered a new era in how it would respond to the threat of terrorism.

The bombing of Libya in 1986 marked a seminal moment in the development of American counterterrorism strategy, establishing a clear precedent for the use of military force against states sponsoring terrorism.³ By focusing attention on the states that sponsored terrorist activities rather than on the loose terrorist networks themselves, the airstrikes against Libya allowed the Reagan administration to break free from the conventional means of countering terrorism as a matter of criminal law enforcement. In the eyes of Reagan and his advisors, this past approach had bred passivity and failed to address what they viewed as the root of the problem. Instead, by shifting the issue away from the hurdles and debates of international law enforcement and redefining terrorism as an act of war, the Reagan administration brought the terrorist threat into the geopolitical arena, where the United States could employ its decisive preponderance of military power.

In the months leading up to the culmination of the Libya crisis in April 1986, the U.S. government, with significant input from Margaret Thatcher's government in Britain, developed the first coherent strategy to combat state-sponsored terrorism in American history. With an escalating series of steps to isolate such "rogue regimes," the resulting strategy aimed to preempt imminent terrorist threats, build a strong deterrent against future attacks, and create conditions inside an offending country that would prove conducive to regime change. While the

³ Scholars and policymakers alike have long grappled with the challenge of how to define terrorism. Historian David Tucker summarizes the general conclusion that scholars have come to in this way: "Above the gates of hell is the warning that all that enter should abandon hope. Less dire but to the same effect is the warning given to those who try to define terrorism" (David Tucker, *Skirmishes at the Edge of Empire: The United States and International Terrorism* [Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1997], 51). For the purposes of this thesis, which traces the formation of American counterterrorism strategy, the terms "terrorism" and "terrorist," when used here, indicate individuals, groups, governments, or actions that were considered as such by the U.S. government (borrowing from Mattia Toaldo, *The Origins of the US War on Terror: Lebanon, Libya and American Intervention in the Middle East* [New York: Routledge, 2013], 2).

administration sought to enlist the cooperation of and instill a consensus among its European allies, who also suffered from the growing terrorist threat, it made clear its willingness to take the lead and act decisively on its own. The British, under the strong influence of Prime Minister Thatcher, provided crucial input to square the American strategy with international law and set the precedent of backing American actions rather than face a split in the transatlantic alliance. For the British as well as the Americans, the bombing of Libya marked the point when terrorism was recognized as “a fundamental long-term security threat.”⁴

Terrorism’s rise to such a high profile in Washington’s hierarchy of priorities was a long time in coming. In fact, the United States saw little need for any counterterrorism strategy at all during the first half of the Cold War. A recurrent theme throughout the history of U.S. counterterrorism was the jarring impact of particular attacks in altering the ways policymakers and the public viewed the threat of terrorism. In the absence of any especially horrific instances prior to 1972, the term “international terrorism” had not yet emerged in either the national consciousness or high-level government circles. Rather, successive administrations through that of Lyndon Johnson tended to view terrorist actions as “regional phenomena” connected to insurgency and guerilla warfare in the Third World.⁵ Historian David Tucker notes that the U.S. government insisted from the beginning that “trying to define terrorism is counterproductive and even harmful,” since such debates would only diminish efforts to combat it. While most observers agreed on the general definition of terrorism as “politically motivated violence against

⁴ Memo, John M. Poindexter to Ronald Reagan, “Next Steps: Libya,” undated, Folder “Libya (Fortier File) [3 of 12],” RAC Box 8, Donald Fortier Files, RRL.

⁵ Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 13, 23–24, 26, 52.

noncombatants intended to influence an audience,” the consensus largely ended there. Through the 1970s, the U.S. government classified terrorist acts as criminal activity.⁶

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a significant shift that for the first time made international terrorism a first-order concern for American foreign policymakers. The largest terrorist problem in these years—one that remains central to the public consciousness of the threat—was the issue of airplane hijacking. Far from the horrific images that these words would later bring to mind, the hijackings of the late 1960s were more of a nuisance than an actual threat to national security. Historian Timothy Naftali explains in his book *Blind Spot* (2005) that until 1968 hijacking was “an almost entirely American problem” and “largely a victimless crime,” whereby hijackers would demand that the plane in question reroute to Cuba. Indeed, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) concluded that this was “an impossible problem,” and the public came to view it as “a travel inconvenience more than a danger, something akin to bad weather in Chicago.”⁷ This would change during the presidency of Richard Nixon, particularly after the Palestinian attack against Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. Following this attack, Nixon formed the first Cabinet-level committee to address the problem of terrorism, but without wider support in his administration and with other challenges competing for his attention, counterterrorism remained a secondary problem at best. It remained this way for most of the rest of the decade, with presidents and their top advisors convinced that the threat had waned.⁸

The inauguration of Ronald Reagan in 1981 signaled a break with this trend and a rethinking of how the U.S. government should define and approach the threat of terrorism. With the Iran hostage crisis ongoing, the 1980 presidential campaign had been the first in which

⁶ Tucker, *Skirmishes at the Edge of Empire*, 4, 24–25.

⁷ Naftali, *Blind Spot*, 19, 22–24, 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 59, 77, 79, 107.

terrorism had featured as an important part of the national debate, and Reagan vowed soon after taking office to enact “swift and effective retribution” for terrorist attacks against Americans.⁹ From the start, Reagan made combatting terrorism a higher priority than it had ever been under any previous administration. Initially, both Reagan and his first secretary of state, Alexander Haig, saw terrorism as inextricably linked to Soviet sponsorship. While experience would slowly move the President away from this stance and prompt him to view terrorism outside a traditional Cold War framework, he maintained his focus on the states that sponsored terrorist activities.¹⁰

Reagan’s second secretary of state, George Shultz, insisted that terrorism amounted to a form of warfare and ought to be countered as such, particularly after the disastrous bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut in October 1983, which eventually precipitated the withdrawal of American peacekeeping forces from Lebanon. In Reagan and Shultz’s view, the defensive focus of the 1970s, which had defined terrorism as criminal and centered on bolstering security at embassies and airports, promoting international conventions for prosecuting terrorists, and eventually hostage rescue operations, was inadequate to addressing this growing threat. Speaking to the American Bar Association in July 1985, Reagan declared that terrorist attacks were “acts of war” and advocated a new approach to counterterrorism that emphasized *offensive* as well as defensive measures to stave off the threat.¹¹ According to Naftali, Reagan’s willingness to use military force to retaliate against states that supported terrorism, such as in ordering the bombing of Libya in 1986, marked “a dramatic shift in U.S. counterterrorism doctrine.”¹²

⁹ David C. Wills, *The First War on Terrorism: Counter-Terrorism Policy during the Reagan Administration* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 2; Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Welcoming Ceremony for the Freed American Hostages,” January 27, 1981, American Presidency Project digital archive (hereafter APP), www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=43879&st=&st1=.

¹⁰ Naftali, *Blind Spot*, 118–122, 166; Tucker, *Skirmishes at the Edge of Empire*, 24.

¹¹ Wills, *The First War on Terrorism*, 27–28; Tucker, *Skirmishes at the Edge of Empire*, 3–4, 10, 33, 52; Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the American Bar Association,” July 8, 1985, APP, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=38854&st=&st1=.

¹² Naftali, *Blind Spot*, 121.

Nevertheless, Naftali joins the widespread consensus within the sparse historiography of American counterterrorism policy in dismissing the wider importance of the bombing of Libya.¹³ He identifies a shift toward a “quieter” approach to counterterrorism, relying primarily on covert rather than military action, after the Iran–Contra affair forced the ouster of the leadership and much of the staff of the National Security Council (NSC), which had been the driving force behind the more aggressive strain in the administration’s thinking toward terrorism.¹⁴ *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004), which devotes only brief attention to the evolution of American counterterrorism policy prior to the rise of al Qaeda in the 1990s, agrees with this assessment. The report asserts that the Iran–Contra scandal, which broke only six months after the airstrike on Libya, hampered the developing strategy of viewing terrorism as “an act of war” to be countered with an “active defense.” Indeed, Iran–Contra “cast a cloud over the notion that the White House should guide counterterrorism” and “made parts of the bureaucracy reflexively skeptical about any operating directive from the White House.”¹⁵ David Tucker’s *Skirmishes at the Edge of Empire* (1997) agrees with both of these works in asserting that the greater emphasis on a judicial approach to counterterrorism in the final years of Reagan’s presidency left the more important legacy for future administrations—“the exact opposite of the [military] approach its rhetoric suggested.”¹⁶

Studies that explicitly focus on the Reagan administration’s counterterrorism policies largely align with these general histories of American counterterrorism. For example, in *The*

¹³ While terrorism is a topic of significant interest for political scientists, remarkably few scholarly historical works cover the evolution of America’s involvement with the issue or the strategies and policies it has put in place to counter this threat. The works cited in this paragraph and the next represent a fairly comprehensive review of the currently available secondary literature.

¹⁴ Naftali, *Blind Spot*, 190–191.

¹⁵ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: The Attack from Planning to Aftermath* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 136–137.

¹⁶ Tucker, *Skirmishes at the Edge of Empire*, 42, 46.

First War on Terrorism (2003), David Wills emphasizes the gap between Reagan's tough rhetoric of "swift and effective retribution" against terrorists and the reality that "the administration rarely implemented any sort of action that could be construed as such."¹⁷ Likewise, Mattia Toaldo's *The Origins of the US War on Terror* (2013) argues that the Libya bombing "did not signal a definitive change in US national security strategy" but rather "set an example for further use in the future," after the attacks of September 11, 2001.¹⁸ The decision to take military action against Libya, according to these authors, was the exception and not the rule for counterterrorism under the Reagan administration. These works leave the undoubted impression that as the Cold War ended, the U.S. had still not settled on a concerted approach to combatting terrorism, and that even the bombing of Libya—the Reagan administration's signature counterterrorism initiative—was more of a one-off operation than part of a wider counterterrorism strategy. This essay will counter this prevailing view by illuminating the broader strategy that Reagan and his advisors crafted, within which the bombing was only one part—and thus far from a simple one-off airstrike meant to solve the Libyan terrorism problem in a single stroke.

Outside of these few historical works on America's involvement with terrorism, the American bombing of Libya in April 1986 has been relegated to a footnote in the eventful and dramatic trajectory of international affairs in the 1980s. On one hand, general accounts of the Reagan presidency and his administration's foreign policy rarely omit the airstrike altogether, for it amounted—along with the invasion of Grenada and participation in the multinational peacekeeping force in Lebanon—to one of the few times Reagan resorted to the use of direct military power. On the other hand, these works never treat the bombing of Libya as more than an

¹⁷ Wills, *The First War on Terrorism*, 5, 213.

¹⁸ Toaldo, *The Origins of the US War on Terror*, 146.

isolated episode without any sequel—never as a piece in a larger narrative along the lines of the more well-known story of the evolution of relations with the Soviet Union. No wider conflict or headline-grabbing, definitive results sprang from the airstrike’s aftermath. Even when terrorism leapt back to the center of the nation’s and the world’s attention in the 1990s and especially after September 11, 2001, the Libyans were no longer the central actors.¹⁹

In accounts of Anglo–American relations, the trend is largely the same: the bombing of Libya always makes an appearance, and occasionally an important one, in the trajectory of Reagan and Thatcher’s relationship in the 1980s. Indeed, the episode marked a moment of high controversy when the British government, in the face of strong public opposition, became the sole European ally to back the American action. However, except as an example of the steadfast nature of the U.S.–UK “special relationship” in the 1980s, the bombing of Libya does not appear as part of any larger theme.²⁰

This essay argues that the significance of the Libya crisis of 1986 extends beyond simply a moment of drama in Reagan-era foreign policy or an instance of solidarity in Anglo–American relations. Rather, the American decision to launch airstrikes against Qadhafi’s regime marked a defining moment in the development of American counterterrorism strategy, contrary to its depiction as a one-off aberration in existing works on the subject. The crisis should loom larger than it has in the context of the origins of the post–Cold War world, whose central challenges were already receiving deep attention in the 1980s.

¹⁹ For example, see H. W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2015); Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000); Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974–2008* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

²⁰ For example, see Richard Aldous, *Reagan and Thatcher: The Difficult Relationship* (London: Hutchinson, 2012); David Dimpleby and David Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart: The Relationship Between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century* (London: Guild Publishing, 1988); Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography, Volume Two: Everything She Wants* (London: Penguin Books, 2015); Geoffrey Smith, *Reagan and Thatcher* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991); Nicholas Wapshott, *Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher: A Political Marriage* (New York: Sentinel, 2007).

Forging a Strategy: Diplomacy, Sanctions, and Skeptical Allies, June 1985–March 1986

The year 1985 marked a turning point in the frequency, intensity, and violence of international terrorism. The escalating scale of the terrorist attacks during this year exacerbated the feeling within the Reagan administration that the existing approach to countering terrorism as a criminal offense was not adequate to curtail the ballooning threat. The attacks thus accelerated the shift in the administration's mentality from viewing terrorism as a crime to an act of war and spurred it to implement the more aggressive brand of counterterrorism that it had advocated rhetorically since 1981.

A sense of mounting crisis had been building for some time prior to 1985. Three of the most disastrous terrorist attacks against Americans all centered on U.S. involvement in a multinational peacekeeping force stationed in Beirut following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the midst of that country's ongoing civil war. Two bombings of the U.S. embassy in Beirut in 1983 and 1984 surrounded what amounted to the deadliest terrorist attack against Americans until 9/11: the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut on October 23, 1983, which resulted in the deaths of 241 U.S. military personnel. Lacking a consensus for action within the administration and among allies, the U.S. did not mount any retaliatory response. Still, the attacks prompted the first serious conversations over launching military action in the face of the terrorist challenge.²¹

The string of attacks in 1985 finally brought the Reagan administration's frustration with the international hurdles of treating terrorism as a matter of criminal law enforcement to a boiling point. First, the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in June created a spectacle for over two weeks in which numerous Americans were taken hostage and one was murdered, yet the Syrians

²¹ Naftali, *Blind Spot*, 128–135, 140–141; Wills, *The First War on Terrorism*, 62.

and Lebanese allowed the Hezbollah hijackers to walk free. Then, in October, the Palestinian Liberation Front hijacked the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* in the Mediterranean, killing a handicapped American. When the hijackers surrendered to Egyptian authorities, they too were allowed to go free. With Israeli intelligence assistance and in the face of Egyptian deception, U.S. fighter jets dramatically intercepted the hijackers' escape plane and forced it to land at a NATO air base in Sicily. American commandos surrounded the plane to detain the hijackers and bring them to the U.S. to stand trial, only to be surrounded themselves by Italian authorities, who insisted that the hijackers remain in Italy for prosecution; the mastermind of the operation was allowed to go free. This operation, both a dramatic success and ultimately a disappointment, proved the final straw in the administration's growing frustration with the hurdles of international law enforcement. When operatives from the Abu Nidal terrorist organization opened fire on passengers in line at the departure desks for Israel's national airline in simultaneous terrorist attacks at the Rome and Vienna airports on December 27, Reagan and his advisors swung into action in crafting and implementing a concerted strategy for countering future attacks.²²

The U.S. quickly connected the Rome and Vienna airport attacks to the sponsorship of the Libyan regime of Colonel Muammar Qadhafi, whose aggressive behavior and support for international terrorism had set him squarely in the sights of the Reagan administration since it came into office. Indeed, Qadhafi's support for international terrorism dovetailed with a conventional confrontation between the U.S. and Libya that had been growing since the former military officer had toppled the country's pro-Western king in a coup in 1969. Throughout the 1970s, Qadhafi's increasingly radical regime heightened tensions with the U.S. by appealing to

²² Naftali, *Blind Spot*, 162–165, 171–174, 180; Tucker, *Skirmishes at the Edge of Empire*, 36–37.

pan-Arab nationalism, expressing hostility to American and Western interests, vocally supporting the Palestinians and stoking anti-Israeli sentiment, and fostering commercial and military ties with the Soviet Union. The U.S. standoff with Libya reached its first flashpoint in August 1981, when American aircraft shot down two Libyan air force jets that had fired on them during naval exercises in the Gulf of Sidra. Contrary to international law, Qadhafi laid claim to this region of the Mediterranean as part of Libya's territorial waters, dubbing its northern boundary the "Line of Death." Since the early 1970s, U.S. naval and air forces had conducted "Freedom of Navigation" exercises to challenge Qadhafi's claim to these international waters.²³ This burgeoning conventional confrontation merged with Qadhafi's increasingly brazen support for terrorist groups to make the Libyans the "boogymen" of the 1980s, as such cinematic hits as *Back to the Future* (1985) and *Top Gun* (1986) memorably depicted.

Where Reagan and his advisors repeatedly ran into dead ends attempting to craft decisive military responses to attacks perpetrated by individuals or loose terrorist organizations, such as the bombings in Lebanon, they increasingly turned the focus of their thinking on counterterrorism toward the states sponsoring those organizations. The hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in June 1985 triggered a process of recalibration for Reagan's approach to counterterrorism that culminated just after the Rome and Vienna airport attacks at the end of the year. Reagan made his speech to the American Bar Association declaring "terrorist states" to be "engaged in acts of war against the government and people of the United States" just over a week after the conclusion of the TWA hijacking. Recognizing the ineffectiveness of attempting to merely react to terrorist incidents as they arose, Reagan argued for a more proactive approach, "taking a strategic, not just a tactical view of terrorism." The states that lent support to terrorist

²³ Toaldo, *The Origins of the US War on Terror*, 125–126, 130–131; Wills, *The First War on Terrorism*, 163–166.

organizations, in Reagan's view, were the true power behind this threat.²⁴ By late July 1985, Reagan codified the ideas from his speech in a National Security Decision Directive, NSDD-179, establishing a task force under Vice President George Bush to examine and improve U.S. counterterrorism policy and programs. Naftali writes that this task force amounted to "the most searching study of U.S. counterterrorism strategy attempted to date."²⁵ NSDD-179 confirmed as official government policy that terrorists were "waging a war" against the U.S. and that the country must therefore "develop a sustained program for combatting terrorism" in concert with other nations but also "be prepared to act unilaterally when necessary."²⁶

The "sustained program" that Reagan had in mind came into clearer shape in the first days of 1986, in the immediate aftermath of the Rome and Vienna airport attacks. The work of the task force itself lifted the profile of terrorism in the administration's hierarchy of international priorities. Writing to Margaret Thatcher to seek her "personal views" on combatting terrorism so the U.S. government could "learn from your experience," Vice President Bush emphasized that "the problem is one of deep personal concern" and "occupies such a high priority in the concerns of President Reagan and myself."²⁷ Reporting its findings to the President in December 1985, the task force identified terrorism as a "threat to [U.S.] national security" and "one of the most serious problems facing our government," evidence of its heightened place in the administration's ranking of threats. The report declared, "States that practice terrorism or actively support it will not do so without consequence," and laid out the

²⁴ Speech, Ronald Reagan, "Remarks of the President to the American Bar Association Convention," July 8, 1985, Folder "Terrorist Targets: Libya (3)," Box 48, Oliver North Files, RRL.

²⁵ Naftali, *Blind Spot*, 177.

²⁶ National Security Decision Directive 179, "Task Force on Combatting Terrorism," July 20, 1985, Folder "VP Task Force on Combatting Terrorism 1st Meeting with Senior Review Group—09/11/1985," Box 32, Oliver North Files, RRL.

²⁷ Letter, George Bush to Margaret Thatcher, September 17, 1985, Folder "London Trip, 09/30/1985–10/01/1985 (1 of 3)," Box 32, Oliver North Files, RRL.

broad outlines of the more proactive counterterrorism strategy the administration had in mind, including preemptive action, deterrence, and long-term planning. The task force advocated political, economic, and military measures to “retaliate” against terrorist acts and establish a “long-range deterrent effect,” singling out military action as a means to “deter future terrorist acts” and “encourage other countries to take a harder line.” Nevertheless, the report urged that such military action “could be more effective if utilized in concert with diplomatic, political or economic sanctions.”²⁸

With the task force’s recommendations as their rubric and the Rome and Vienna airport attacks as their catalyst, Reagan and his team wasted little time in the new year of 1986 to hone the President’s and the task force’s general guidance into a cohesive strategy ready to be put into action. The initial papers and press guidance that the President’s staff produced following these latest attacks repeated the emerging theme that “States have a legitimate right to respond with appropriate force to repeated acts of terrorism” and that such acts “cannot go unanswered.”²⁹ By the time the National Security Planning Group (NSPG), the administration’s chief foreign policymaking body chaired by the President, met to discuss the issue on January 6, 1986, their focus was no longer on merely how to respond to this attack but rather on how to confront “the more general problem of Libyan support for international terrorism.” The options on the table included enacting 1) economic and political sanctions, 2) simultaneous economic sanctions and limited military strikes, or 3) economic sanctions followed by limited military strikes after a two-

²⁸ “Public Report of the Vice President’s Task Force on Combatting Terrorism,” February 1986, Folder “NSDD on Vice President’s Task Force (13 of 13),” Box 34, Oliver North Files, RRL.

²⁹ Michael Kraft and Ryan Crocker, “Terrorism: Theme Paper,” December 28, 1985, Folder “Terrorist Attacks—Rome/Vienna 12/27/1985 (1 of 4),” Box 48, Oliver North Files, RRL; “Press Guidance,” December 29, 1985, Folder “Terrorist Attacks—Rome/Vienna 12/27/1985 (3 of 4),” Box 48, Oliver North Files, RRL.

week pause.³⁰ Already off the table was the fourth option that the deputies-level Crisis Pre-Planning Group (CPPG) had considered the previous week of taking “Decisive Action against Libya” rather than limited retaliation.³¹

Knowing that U.S. allies in Europe were reluctant and had expressed “great nervousness to talk of U.S. economic and military actions,” planners on the NSC staff emphasized the need to “generate momentum in Europe for firmer internal actions and closer cooperation with the United States.” One of the most crucial benefits to Option 1 (economic and political sanctions) was therefore the greater chance to promote “international cooperation against terror,” including increasing the prospects for parallel sanctions from the allies while reducing the chance of prompting “Allied criticism of precipitate U.S. action.” One of the prime drawbacks that the NSPG discussed for Options 2 and 3, with limited military strikes, was the possibility that these actions might “cause us to miss [an] opportunity to get Allies committed to [the] economic option.”³² Reagan accordingly chose to implement Option 1, without any military action.

Had Reagan decided to launch immediate military strikes in response to this latest terrorist incident, it would have aligned with his inclination for more aggressive action, but it would not have fit within any wider strategy. The very reason that Reagan opted to hold off on military action at this juncture was to prevent any such response from being an isolated, one-off operation—ironically just what commentators and scholars would later claim the Libya bombing to be. Rather, Reagan wanted his new counterterrorism strategy to be a “sustained program,”

³⁰ Memo, James R. Stark, Oliver L. North, Howard Teicher, Jock Covey, Rod McDaniel, and Elaine Morton to John M. Poindexter, “NSPG Meeting, January 6, 1986,” and “Summary of Options,” January 4, 1986, Folder “Terrorist Targets: Libya (9),” Box 48, Oliver North Files, RRL.

³¹ Agenda, “Crisis Pre-Planning Group: U.S. Response to Terrorist Attacks in Rome and Vienna,” December 27, 1985, Folder “Terrorist Attacks—Rome/Vienna 12/27/1985 (1 of 4),” Box 48, Oliver North Files, RRL.

³² Memo, James R. Stark, Oliver L. North, Howard Teicher, Jock Covey, Rod McDaniel, and Elaine Morton to John M. Poindexter, “Background Paper on Approaches to European Governments” and “Summary of Options,” January 4, 1986, Folder “Terrorist Targets: Libya (9),” Box 48, Oliver North Files, RRL.

within which military action would be only one part. John Poindexter, his national security advisor, emphasized at the NSPG meeting that the present response should be part of an “integrated strategy” designed to “convince our Western allies to work with us to isolate Qadhafi economically and politically.” Military strikes, he noted, were a “key component” of this strategy, but the immediate goal should be to “implement stringent, comprehensive economic and political sanctions against Libya.” Far from a one-off response to an individual terrorist incident, these sanctions could be “ratcheted upward” in an escalating strategy of coercive diplomacy if Libyan support for terrorism continued unabated.³³

The day after this NSPG meeting between the President and his chief advisors, Reagan issued an executive order declaring “a national emergency to deal with the unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States” posed by the Libyan government’s support of international terrorism.³⁴ The President thus left no doubt as to the seriousness with which he viewed the problem. Noting the “indisputable” evidence that the “scope and tempo of Libyan-supported terrorist activity against western targets is widening and accelerating,” Reagan laid out the general objectives for the first steps in his strategy to counter the threat: to reverse “the perception of U.S. passivity” in the face of terrorism and to isolate Libya economically and diplomatically. In addition to declaring a national emergency, Reagan announced a tightening of economic sanctions to “eliminate any U.S. contribution to the Libyan economy” and mandated that all American citizens and businesses leave Libya before the end of

³³ Memo, James R. Stark, Oliver L. North, Howard Teicher, Jock Covey, Rod McDaniel, and Elaine Morton to John M. Poindexter, “Talking Points,” January 4, 1986, Folder “Terrorist Targets: Libya (9),” Box 48, Oliver North Files, RRL; Memo, “Non-Military Alternatives,” December 28, 1986, Folder “Terrorist Targets: Libya (6),” Box 48, Oliver North Files, RRL.

³⁴ Ronald Reagan, “Continuation of Libyan Emergency,” December 23, 1986, Folder “Libya Financial (12/09/1987–09/19/1988),” RAC Box 6, Office of Counterterrorism and Narcotics, NSC: Records, RRL.

the month.³⁵ The need to evacuate American personnel from Libya prior to mounting any major military action weighed heavily on Reagan, who wrote in his diary, “We all feel we must do something yet there are problems including thousands of Americans living & working in the mad clown’s country.”³⁶

With the first two steps underway in its “integrated strategy” against Libyan-supported terrorism—diplomatic isolation and economic isolation—the Reagan administration launched a diplomatic offensive to rally the support of European allied governments in implementing comparable sanctions or, at the very least, not replacing U.S. business as it withdrew from Libya. It was here that the American strategy hit its first major roadblock, with the European allies refusing to join the boycott of the Libyan economy. The biggest surprise and setback came from Reagan’s closest ally of all: British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher had every reason to share Reagan’s disdain for the ruler he routinely referred to as “the mad clown” and “the crackpot in Tripoli.”³⁷ In 1984, Britain had broken off diplomatic relations with Libya, banned arms exports, and put strict restrictions on investments and immigration following the killing of policewoman Yvonne Fletcher outside the Libyan Embassy in London from a shot fired from an embassy window. Moreover, Qadhafi was known to supply funds and arms to the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), which had a long history of launching terrorist attacks within Britain, including the bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton in October 1984 in an attempt to assassinate Thatcher herself. As Charles Powell, her foreign affairs private secretary,

³⁵ Memo, John M. Poindexter to Ronald Reagan, “Acting Against Libyan Support of International Terrorism,” January 6, 1986, Folder “Libya Sensitive 1986 [1 of 7],” Box 91668, Howard Teicher Files, RRL; Memo, Tom Gibson to David Chew, “A Chronology of Terrorist Attacks; U.S.–Libya Relations,” April 24, 1986, Folder “Libya Sensitive 1986 [1 of 7],” Box 91668, Howard Teicher Files, RRL; “Fact Sheet: Significance of U.S. Sanctions,” Folder “Libya Sensitive 1986 [6 of 7],” Box 91668, Howard Teicher Files, RRL.

³⁶ Diary of Ronald Reagan, December 29, 1985–January 3, 1986, *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 380.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 380; Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 518.

explained, “Her resistance to terrorism was so powerful, so central to her being and existence, that there were no two ways about it.”³⁸

Nevertheless, Thatcher’s resistance to the American plan for isolating Qadhafi sprang from two principal concerns, as she pointedly outlined in a press conference for American correspondents at 10 Downing Street on January 10, 1986. First, she harbored a longstanding skepticism of the effectiveness of sanctions, particularly unilateral sanctions, which she believed caused more damage to the people who imposed them than the government they were imposed upon. “I do not, alas, think that sanctions against Libya would work,” she told the American journalists. “The materials would be supplied by other countries.” She worried that Reagan, who had supported her logic in relation to South Africa, was undermining her broader argument by making an exception for Libya. Pressed by the correspondents, Thatcher repeated time and again her message that “sanctions do not work.” When one reporter asked whether she would support preemptive or retaliatory military action instead, Thatcher delivered an even more strident broadside against the American thinking on counterterrorism that revealed her second, weightier concern with the American plan: “I must warn you that I do not believe in retaliatory strikes which are against international law.... [O]nce you start to go across borders, then I do not see an end to it and I uphold international law very firmly.” Thatcher sensed that the American plan included more than the initial moves toward Libya’s diplomatic and economic isolation that Reagan had unveiled thus far, and she aimed to head off any shift in the direction of military action. Connecting the Libyan problem with Irish terrorism in the UK, she cautioned her American allies, “may I remind you that we have suffered over 2,000 deaths at the hands of

³⁸ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, 172–173, 504–505, 509 (interview with Charles Powell).

terrorists, so we are well aware of the problems and at no stage has anyone in this country suggested that we make retaliatory strikes or go in hot pursuit or anything like that.”³⁹

This line about going in “hot pursuit” of terrorists ruffled more than a few feathers in Washington, as the Reagan administration began to see what an uphill battle it faced in enlisting European support for its newly developed strategy. Thatcher’s private reply to Reagan’s request for support concentrated on her case against sanctions but said little of her condemnation of retaliatory strikes, an omission that the Americans noticed: “The letter is perhaps more important for what it does not say.” Rather, sensing that her comments would not dissuade the Americans from pursuing their plans, Thatcher tried to maintain her position of influence on U.S. policy by asking that “we remain in close touch as our thinking develops.” Despite her “nice noises about cooperating in the struggle against terrorism,” the NSC staff expressed exasperation with the British response, with one staffer chafing, “It sounds to me as though the Brits have stiffed us completely.”⁴⁰ As the analysis of the situation filtered up the chain of command, however, officials began to see the more positive sides to Thatcher’s response, emphasizing a supportive public statement from the British and assurances that they “would not take any steps undercutting our measures.” Reagan’s reply to Thatcher’s letter noted his disappointment that Britain “apparently is not prepared to take additional steps” but emphasized the importance of its willingness to play “an active role in energizing the EC [European Community] to take more severe measures against Qadhafi.”⁴¹

³⁹ Margaret Thatcher, “Press Conference for American correspondents in London,” January 10, 1986, Margaret Thatcher Foundation digital archive (hereafter MTF), www.margarethatcher.org/document/106300; Aldous, *Reagan and Thatcher*, 206–207; Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, 505.

⁴⁰ Memo, Peter S. Sommer to John M. Poindexter, “Presidential Reply to Mrs. Thatcher: Libyan Sanctions,” January 16, 1986, File Folder 8600439, Executive Secretariat, NSC: System File, Series I: System I, RRL; Note, unknown author to John M. Poindexter, January 21, 1986, File Folder 8600439, Executive Secretariat, NSC: System File, Series I: System I, RRL.

⁴¹ Memo, John M. Poindexter to Ronald Reagan, “Presidential Reply to Mrs. Thatcher’s Letter on Libyan Sanctions,” January 16, 1986, File Folder 8600439, Executive Secretariat, NSC: System File, Series I: System I,

The administration decided to regain the initiative by stepping up its diplomatic offensive, first by sending Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead to European capitals to bolster allied cooperation and resolve against Libya—and to express in London the administration’s disappointment and displeasure with Thatcher’s remarks. Meanwhile, Secretary of State George Shultz gave a speech at the National Defense University in Washington on January 15 to “publicly challenge [Thatcher’s] conjecture” that international law prohibited retaliatory or preemptive strikes against states that sponsor terrorism. Without naming Thatcher, Shultz argued that “There is substantial legal authority for the view that a state which supports terrorist or subversive attacks against another state...is responsible for such attacks. Such conduct can amount to an ongoing armed aggression against the other state under international law.” Therefore, “a nation attacked by terrorists is permitted to use force to prevent or preempt future attacks, to seize terrorists or to rescue its citizens, when no other means is available.” If this was not permitted under the United Nations Charter, he later commented, then the document was “nothing more than a suicide pact.”⁴²

While these high-level disputes played out, Anglo–American cooperation on counterterrorism continued unhindered at lower levels, a sign of the unique resiliency of the “special relationship” between the two countries. As historian Richard Aldrich notes, the “fragmented structure” and “compartmentalized relationships” of the various aspects of the Anglo–American alliance, such as on matters of defense and intelligence, meant that close cooperation “could remain unshaken by high-level disagreements over Cold War policy, or by

RRL; Letter, Ronald Reagan to Margaret Thatcher, undated, File Folder 8600439, Executive Secretariat, NSC: System File, Series I: System I, RRL.

⁴² Aldous, *Reagan and Thatcher*, 207–208; Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, 506; George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993), 678; John M. Goshko, “Administration Acts on ‘Self-Defense’ Principle Espoused by Shultz,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 1986, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1986/04/15/administration-acts-on-self-defense-principle-espoused-by-shultz/3b72ac48-2fb0-46fa-9784-cdfad3842159/?utm_term=.c660945388d5.

security failures.”⁴³ Indeed, the British had set up an interdepartmental group on terrorism with representatives from its diplomatic, defense, and intelligence services following the Libyan Embassy shooting in 1984. This group met regularly, approximately every four months, with its American counterpart under the national security advisor to consult and coordinate on counterterrorism policy, a process that became particularly close after the hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* in October 1985.⁴⁴

These intergovernmental consultations on counterterrorism foreshadowed many of the areas of disagreement that boiled over into public view in the first months of 1986. The Americans noted after a bilateral meeting in May 1984 that the recent Libyan Embassy shooting had caused “a significant hardening of attitude” on the part of the British on which they hoped to capitalize to “develop a consensus that the international community needs to take steps to control Qadhafi’s free-wheeling.” Already the British expressed concern that Shultz’s public statements on U.S. counterterrorism policy “sounded like they would be contrary to international law and that the US should be on notice that British cooperation would probably not be forthcoming. Moreover, the British thought that an active defense program would probably only make matters worse.” The Americans left the meeting resigned to the probability that forging a consensus on economic sanctions was most likely a “non-starter.”⁴⁵ The theme was essentially the same the following year, in the midst of the TWA hijacking crisis, with the Americans trying to “press the British hard” on backing punitive sanctions against Libya and other states supporting terrorism. The American analysis of the meeting expressed frustration at the British concentration on

⁴³ Richard J. Aldrich, “British intelligence and the Anglo–American ‘Special Relationship’ during the Cold War,” *Review of International Studies* 24, no. 3 (July 1998): 337.

⁴⁴ Smith, *Reagan and Thatcher*, 190.

⁴⁵ Memo, Oliver L. North to John M. Poindexter, “Meeting with British representatives re combatting terrorism,” May 14, 1984, Folder “Terrorism: US–British (05/01/1984–05/14/1984),” Box 14, Oliver North Files, RRL; Memo, Robert M. Sayre to Ronald I. Spiers, “Meeting with British on Terrorism,” May 9, 1984, Folder “Terrorism: US–British (05/01/1984–05/14/1984),” Box 14, Oliver North Files, RRL.

merely keeping Middle Eastern terrorism “from spilling over” into Western Europe and the UK “rather than developing any strategy to combat Middle Eastern terrorism at its roots.”⁴⁶

By March 1986, with the implementation of the U.S. “integrated strategy” underway, the Americans spoke more bluntly than ever to their British counterparts about their intentions in the unfolding fight against terrorism. Robert Oakley, chairing the meeting as the State Department’s coordinator for counterterrorism, declared that the U.S. government had decided to move to a “more active, offensive policy” for combatting terrorism. While Oakley and the rest of the American delegation repeatedly emphasized their preference for multilateral support from European allies, they stressed that they were “prepared to act bilaterally [i.e. in concert with only Britain], or alone, if need be.” Oliver North of the NSC staff reminded the British that the U.S. government was growing increasingly “frustrated by [the] futility of trying to get our allies to respond to what we see as a common threat.” Questioned by the British delegation about the prospects for retaliatory strikes, Oakley explained that the “use of force could be only an element of [a] broader strategy,” reflecting the administration’s plans for an integrated approach to the problem. Toward the end of the meeting, however, the Americans left their British counterparts with little ambiguity of what was likely to come: North declared his “personal feeling” that the “next attack out of Libya will generate a military response.”⁴⁷

Accelerating the Strategy: Coercive Diplomacy, Confrontation, and Terror, March 14–April 5, 1986

On the morning of Friday, March 14, 1986, President Reagan chaired a meeting with all of his chief advisors on foreign affairs and national security in the Situation Room of the White

⁴⁶ Memo, Oliver L. North to John M. Poindexter, “Follow-on Talks with the British, June 27, 1985,” June 26, 1985, Folder “Terrorism: US–British (05/16/1985–06/26/1985),” Box 14, Oliver North Files, RRL.

⁴⁷ Memcon, “US–UK Bilateral Meeting on Terrorism, March 5, 1986, Washington, D.C.,” March 10, 1986, Folder “US–UK Meeting [March 5, 1986],” RAC Box 2, Craig P. Coy Files, RRL.

House. The group was meeting to decide on the rules of engagement for the upcoming Freedom of Navigation (FON) exercises that the U.S. Navy would soon mount in the Gulf of Sidra, contesting Qadhafi's claim to the international waters below the "Line of Death." While the Navy had conducted such exercises regularly since the early 1970s, the timing in this case was no accident. Despite the resistance they had received from European allies, Reagan and his team were ready to set up the final chain of events that could lead to direct military confrontation with Libya. The naval exercises in disputed waters off the Libyan coast would comprise the third step in the administration's escalating formula for coercive deterrence: placing military pressure on Qadhafi's regime. "Our goal," explained the NSC staff, "is to reinforce other U.S. actions which deter Libya from worldwide terrorism and regional aggression"—thereby clearly placing this step within the broader strategy to curtail Libyan-sponsored terrorism. The FON exercises were designed to complement the moves that the administration had already initiated to isolate Libya diplomatically and economically. "In conclusion," the NSC staff asserted, "we can now accelerate U.S. strategy toward Qadhafi" and "pursue a course which integrates current political and economic measures."⁴⁸ The strategy of escalation was reaching its penultimate stage.

The discussion between the President and his advisors at the NSPG meeting kept the wheels in motion on the administration's strategy to counter Qadhafi but also revealed disagreements over when it should implement the final stage of its new counterterrorism strategy: readying a military attack. Caspar Weinberger, the secretary of defense, left no doubt that the FON exercises were anything but routine: "We are going on the assumption that there will be a reaction." Reagan approved a loosening of the operation's rules of engagement, allowing U.S. forces to attack Libyan air bases or missile sites "[i]f hostile actions occur or

⁴⁸ Memo, Howard R. Teicher and James R. Stark to John M. Poindexter, "Meeting with the National Security Planning Group," March 12, 1986, Folder "Libya Sensitive 1986 [3 of 7]," Box 91668, Howard Teicher Files, RRL.

appear imminent” and to attack non-military targets “[i]f there are losses to the U.S.” However, he stopped short of permitting a wider military attack for fear of “crystaliz[ing] support” for Qadhafi. Where Weinberger and Admiral William Crowe, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, cautioned against “crossing a political line” by launching a non-proportional assault that would “end up leveling Tripoli,” Shultz favored a more robust military response connected to the administration’s goal to “undermine the confidence the Libyan people have in Qadhafi.” “We should be ready to undertake action to hurt him, not just fire back,” he urged. “Our forces should plaster him and the military targets.” Shultz’s point was that this confrontation would not be useful to the administration’s wider, integrated counterterrorism strategy unless it were designed to further the strategy’s overall goal to “put [Qadhafi] in a box.”⁴⁹ For now, Reagan was not yet ready to implement this final step in his escalating plan of coercive diplomacy, but Shultz’s preference for decisive action would not have to wait long.

The FON exercises in the Gulf of Sidra commenced on March 23, 1986, and came to a head the next day. A series of hostile maneuvers between the two countries’ fighter jets did not result in any shots fired, but when the Navy came under missile attack from the Libyan coast, it returned fire against the launch site and sank two Libyan patrol boats. Qadhafi responded by sending out a general order to all his European “People’s Bureaux” (as he called his country’s embassies) to organize terrorist attacks against U.S. military and civilian targets. With the help of British intelligence, this message and other Libyan cable traffic were intercepted, including one especially ominous message to Qadhafi from the People’s Bureau in East Berlin on April 4: “We have something planned that will make you happy.... It will happen soon, the bomb will blow, American soldiers must be hit.” True to their word, a bomb went off in La Belle discotheque, a

⁴⁹ Memcon, “NSPG on Libya, March 14, 1986,” July 16, 1986, Folder “NSPG 129 14 Mar 1986 [Libyan Oil Strategy],” Box 91308, Executive Secretariat, NSC: National Security Planning Group (NSPG), RRL.

nightclub popular with American servicemen stationed in West Berlin, in the early morning hours of April 5, killing one American soldier and wounding 79 other American servicemen.⁵⁰

Reagan wrote in his diary that night, “Our intelligence is pretty final that this bombing was the work of Kadaffy.” The President had finally found his smoking gun to launch the final stage of his strategy to counter Libyan-supported terrorism and hit back at long last against “the villain.”⁵¹

Framing the Airstrikes: Retaliation vs. Self-Defense, April 5–15, 1986

The ten days between the terrorist attack in West Berlin and the American bombing campaign against Libya were a flurry of activity within the Reagan administration. The debates at this juncture no longer centered on forging a strategy for what to do—that was already in place—but rather on how to execute and explain to the world the final step in the escalating series of pressures on Qadhafi’s regime to curb its support for terrorism: a military attack. The brazenness of the Berlin disco bombing and the clarity of the evidence tying it back to Libya lined up all the key members of the administration behind mounting the firm response that Secretary of State Shultz had long advocated. Even Secretary of Defense Weinberger, usually wary of using the military for anything but the most decisive and clear-cut of actions, backed the attack when he learned how incontrovertible the evidence was of Qadhafi’s involvement.⁵²

While the administration busied itself selecting targets for the bombing raid, the most important debate during this crucial week and a half featured the input of America’s closest ally, the government of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher and Reagan had nurtured a close personal and political bond since before either of them ascended to their respective

⁵⁰ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, 506–507. The attack also killed a Turkish woman and mortally wounded one other American serviceman, who died from his injuries two months later. A total of 229 people were injured.

⁵¹ Diary of Ronald Reagan, March 28–April 7, 1986, *The Reagan Diaries*, 402–403.

⁵² Wills, *The First War on Terrorism*, 196–197.

countries' highest office, and they worked hard to promote their image as “political soulmates” at the heart of a rejuvenated Anglo–American “special relationship,” a term coined by Winston Churchill in the aftermath of World War II. While the two leaders shared a common view of promoting free enterprise at home and combatting communism abroad, their rapport was not without its hiccups—most notably over Thatcher’s opposition to Reagan’s decision to militarily intervene after a Marxist coup on the Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983. Libya exemplified both the tensions and the closeness of the Anglo–American alliance in the 1980s and ultimately became, in the words of one of their joint biographers, “the supreme occasion when Thatcher delivered for Reagan.”⁵³

Yet as Thatcher’s press conference in January 1986 opposing both sanctions and military strikes against Libya made clear, her support on the issue was far from a foregone conclusion. Her greatest concern was whether such military action could be squared with international law, and the thrust of the debate between the American and British governments in the days leading up to the attack centered on the question of how to frame the airstrikes against Libya and explain them to the world. Thatcher’s influence on this question proved decisive and, in rooting the attack in the framework of self-defense rather than retaliation, helped cement a legally justifiable precedent for the use of military force against states sponsoring terrorism.

From the start of his recalibration of U.S. counterterrorism strategy in the summer of 1985, Reagan had not deemed the distinction between retaliatory strikes and military action in national self-defense to be an especially important one. On one hand, in his speech to the American Bar Association in July 1985, in which he declared terrorist attacks to be “acts of war,” he also addressed the issue of the legal justification for a military response: “under

⁵³ Smith, *Reagan and Thatcher*, 197.

international law, any state which is the victim of acts of war has the right to defend itself.”⁵⁴

However, Reagan twice wrote in his diary of selecting “targets for retaliation” in the days following the Berlin disco bombing, a clear indication that this was the way his administration originally envisioned the airstrike.⁵⁵ Indeed, Reagan’s message to Thatcher on April 8, 1986, requesting her permission to use long-range precision bombers stationed on NATO bases in England, explained that he had “reluctantly taken the decision to use U.S. military forces to exact a response to these Libyan attacks” and expressed his hope that “this operation will be effective in deterring further Libyan terrorist actions.”⁵⁶ Reagan thus outlined, without using either the words “retaliation” or “self-defense,” the two sides of the debate over how to present the airstrike, as well as his own initial ambivalence to separating these two avenues for justification.

Thatcher, however, cared about this distinction greatly, and her previously stated belief that international law did not permit retaliatory strikes made her wary of acceding to the American request. While the Americans erroneously assumed that “British agreement would be pretty much automatic,” Thatcher in fact had a series of reasons for distancing herself from the U.S. action. British public opinion, as well as the majority of her Cabinet ministers, opposed a U.S. attack on Libya, and anti-American sentiment in Britain was running high following a recent unrelated political crisis regarding the helicopter manufacturer Westland. In her reply to Reagan’s message, Thatcher urged the U.S. to avoid “precipitate action” that could boost Qadhafi’s standing and cause a “cycle of revenge,” including against British hostages held in Lebanon. Most of all she “was concerned that there must be the right public justification for the action” and encouraged her American counterparts to “think through precisely what their

⁵⁴ Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the American Bar Association,” APP, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Diary of Ronald Reagan, April 7 and April 9, 1986, *The Reagan Diaries*, 403.

⁵⁶ Cable, John M. Poindexter to Robert Armstrong, including letter, Ronald Reagan to Margaret Thatcher, April 8, 1986, Folder “Libya–El Dorado Canyon [1 of 10],” Box 91747, James Stark Files, RRL.

objectives were and how they were to justify them.” Reagan’s stated purpose to “exact a response” for the terrorist attack in West Berlin did not assuage Thatcher’s belief that retaliatory strikes were counter to international law and that self-defense would make a much more effective legal justification than punitive action.⁵⁷

Reagan, for his part, stood firm on his proposed course of action but incorporated Thatcher’s advice on the legal and public justification for the attack into his administration’s final stages of planning. Howard Teicher, a member of the NSC staff, later recalled, “We were conscious of her insistence that we frame the attacks in terms of self-defence...so definitely there would have been an impact on how things were framed as a result of her input.”⁵⁸ Reagan’s reply to Thatcher’s concerns, however, did not mention the issue of self-defense that she considered so important, implying that her message had not yet sunken in. Instead, he merely asserted that there was “ample legal justification” for a “decisive blow against Qadhafi.” On one hand, he admitted, “I have no illusions that these actions will eliminate entirely the terrorist threat.” But he emphasized that the U.S. was “the only Western power in a position to act decisively. I do not feel I can shrink from this responsibility.”⁵⁹

Nevertheless, Thatcher found Reagan’s “powerful, detailed” reply increasingly convincing as she pondered her decision through the night into April 10. As she later wrote, she progressively came to think of modern state-sponsored terrorism as a new, unprecedented phenomenon—“one which earlier generations never confronted”—and thus “[t]he means required to crush this kind of threat to world order and peace are bound to be different too.”

⁵⁷ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 443; Aldous, *Reagan and Thatcher*, 209; Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, 507–508.

⁵⁸ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, 514 (interview with Howard Teicher).

⁵⁹ Cable, John M. Poindexter to Charles Powell, including letter, Ronald Reagan to Margaret Thatcher, April 9, 1986, Folder “Libya–El Dorado Canyon [1 of 10],” Box 91747, James Stark Files, RRL; Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, 508–509.

While there was no doubt that she had always despised terrorism, Thatcher was coming around to the conclusion that the Americans had recently reached themselves, that international terrorism had become “a fundamental long-term security threat” that needed to be countered with new strategies.⁶⁰ Moreover, the realization that Reagan was determined to strike with or without British support led her to believe that “opposition to the attacks was a dead end,” in the words of her biographer Charles Moore, for a few days of good headlines would not be worth the price of “gravely weaken[ing] the alliance and the relationship on which she had built so much.” She did not want to repeat the transatlantic rift over Grenada and cited American support for Britain during the Falklands War as further justification in a meeting with members of her Cabinet.⁶¹ As she later recalled, “Whatever the cost to me, I knew that the cost to Britain of not backing American action was unthinkable.”⁶² Thus, early on the morning of April 10, Thatcher made her decision known to her private secretary Charles Powell: “We have to support the Americans on this. That’s what allies are for.”⁶³

Once she had made this decision, however, she missed no opportunity to ensure that the Americans reframed their justification for military action in terms of self-defense rather than retaliation. When General Vernon Walters, Reagan’s ambassador to the UN, arrived in London to meet with Thatcher on April 12 to discuss the American plan in more detail, she repeated her insistence that the administration frame the attack in terms of self-defense; there must be no talk of “retaliation, revenge, or reprisal.”⁶⁴ She seized on Walters’ offer to share with the British in advance the President’s public statement announcing and explaining the Libyan raid. This gave

⁶⁰ Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 444; Memo, Poindexter to Reagan, “Next Steps: Libya,” RRL, op. cit.

⁶¹ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, 510–511.

⁶² Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 444.

⁶³ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, 509 (interview with Charles Powell).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 510–511.

the British Foreign Office the chance to stress to their American counterparts that “the UK attached great importance to inclusion of explicit reference to Article 51 (‘self-defense’) of the UN Charter in the President’s remarks.” This point, Foreign Office officials believed, would be of “tremendous use” in bolstering wider European support for the operation.⁶⁵ As if she had not made her position clear enough already, Thatcher had her staff follow up with the NSC again on April 14, the day of the raid, to reiterate that she was “particularly concerned” that Reagan’s speech reference self-defense.⁶⁶

Reagan and his team did not let her down. If it took some time for the major theme of Thatcher’s messages to sink in for the President and his staff, by the day of the airstrike they had incorporated self-defense into all aspects of their public messaging. Most important of all was President Reagan’s address to the nation on the evening of April 14 to announce the bombing raid against Libya. Speaking from the Oval Office, Reagan declared, “Self-defense is not only our right, it is our duty. It is the purpose behind the mission undertaken tonight, a mission fully consistent with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.”⁶⁷ The White House talking points for the press repeated the President’s message that “the U.S. response was in self defense and was intended to pre-empt” Qadhafi’s ongoing terrorist campaign.⁶⁸ Immediately following the President’s speech, Secretary of State Shultz and Secretary of Defense Weinberger gave a press conference from the White House Briefing Room to explain the details of the operation. Shultz

⁶⁵ Memcon, Arnold Raphel and John Kerr, “UK Comments on Draft Presidential Speech on Libya,” April 14, 1986, Folder “Libya (Fortier File) [9 of 12],” RAC Box 8, Donald Fortier Files, RRL; Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 445–446.

⁶⁶ Note, Rod McDaniel to John M. Poindexter, April 14, 1986, Folder “Libya (Fortier File) [9 of 12],” RAC Box 8, Donald Fortier Files, RRL.

⁶⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the United States Air Strike Against Libya,” April 14, 1986, APP, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=37131&st=&st1=.

⁶⁸ White House Talking Points, “U.S. Action Against Libyan Terrorists,” April 16, 1986, Folder “U.S. Action in Libya, 1986 (3/4),” Box 91747, James Stark Files, RRL.

explicitly emphasized self-defense three times in his remarks, including in his opening line: “The President has just described an act of self-defense on the part of the United States.”⁶⁹

The airstrikes against Libya occurred in two coordinated attacks. On the evening of April 14, 1986, eighteen U.S. Air Force F-111 bombers left the Royal Air Force base at Lakenheath, England, to attack three targets near Tripoli. France’s unwillingness to permit overflight rights required the bombers to fly on a circuitous route around Spain to enter the Mediterranean via the Strait of Gibraltar. Meanwhile, the Navy launched an attack on two additional targets near Benghazi from aircraft carriers stationed in the central Mediterranean.⁷⁰ The administration selected targets “that play a key role both in maintaining Qadhafi in power and in directing terrorist operations abroad.”⁷¹ The two wings of the bombing raid reached their targets simultaneously in the early morning hours of April 15, about 7:00 P.M. on April 14 in Washington, D.C. While one F-111 was shot down and Qadhafi narrowly escaped unscathed, the attack took the Libyans by surprise and caused significant damage to the intended targets. Reagan recorded in his diary that night, “One thing seems sure—ours was a success.”⁷²

The Aftermath: Keeping Up the Pressure, Building International Consensus, and Regime Change, April 15–August 1986

President Reagan made clear in his Oval Office address that the airstrike against Libya would not be an isolated event but rather part of a wider effort. “Today we have done what we had to do,” he declared. “If necessary, we shall do it again.” He also explained that he had “no illusion that tonight’s action will bring down the curtain on Qadhafi’s reign of terror” and that

⁶⁹ News Footage, “CBS News Special Report—Attack on Libya,” April 14, 1986, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIvc8alwQIY; Cable, Oliver Wright to Geoffrey Howe, “Libya Crisis: Shultz/Weinberger Press Conference,” April 15, 1986, MTF, www.margarethatcher.org/document/149551.

⁷⁰ Aldous, *Reagan and Thatcher*, 211.

⁷¹ Memo, Poindexter to Reagan, “Next Steps: Libya,” RRL, op. cit.

⁷² Diary of Ronald Reagan, April 14, 1986, *The Reagan Diaries*, 405.

the airstrike was therefore not intended as a one-and-done solution to the problem of international terrorism. Rather, he portrayed the bombing raid as a clear indicator of the new shift in America's active approach to countering terrorism as an act of war: "[Qadhafi] counted on America to be passive. He counted wrong.... I said that we would act with others, if possible, and alone if necessary to ensure that terrorists have no sanctuary anywhere. Tonight, we have."⁷³ Indeed, the bombing of Libya on April 14–15, 1986, was not the endpoint of the Reagan administration's new strategy to counter Libyan-supported terrorism. The months following the raid witnessed a series of intense discussions and analysis over how to continue to build international consensus for the administration's approach to counterterrorism and maintain pressure on Qadhafi's regime.

The job of building international support among America's European allies would prove an uphill battle, as the administration knew from before the time the strikes occurred. France's refusal to grant overflight permission for the F-111 bombers flying from Britain was the most glaring example of a general European feeling of condemnation for the American military action. Nevertheless, Shultz spoke for the administration in stressing the necessity to "fashion a collective approach to confronting the common enemy of terrorism." Otherwise, he predicted more accurately than he could have imagined, "terrorism will become the political determinant of our times."⁷⁴

The difficulty of maintaining the momentum of international support for the American approach to counterterrorism began where that support had been strongest, in Britain. Margaret Thatcher "stood up to the political heat with her usual tenacity and style," the U.S. ambassador in

⁷³ Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the United States Air Strike Against Libya," APP, op. cit.

⁷⁴ Cable, George Shultz to American embassies around the world, "Post Libya: Addressing U.S. Relations with Arab World," April 24, 1986, Folder "U.S. Action in Libya, 1986 (1/4)," Box 91747, James Stark Files, RRL.

London, Charles Price, wrote to Reagan, but “it looks like she will pay a price for her decision” to support the American action.⁷⁵ While the airstrike on Libya was enormously popular in the U.S., public opinion polls in the UK showed that two-thirds of the British public opposed Thatcher’s support for it.⁷⁶ Price wrote two weeks after the airstrike, “While she is with us, she is not with her own people despite every effort on her part to turn around public opinion.”⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Thatcher remained resolute in her remarks to the House of Commons. “The United States is our greatest ally,” she declared. “The time had come for action. The United States took it. Its decision was justified, and, as friends and allies, we support it.” She also reasserted her conviction that the “growing threat of international terrorism” was now one of the greatest security challenges confronting Britain and its allies: “To overcome the threat is in the vital interests of all countries founded upon freedom and the rule of law.”⁷⁸

The Reagan administration sought to provide support for Thatcher’s “effort to move terrorism higher up the national agenda” by mounting an all-out campaign to encourage the Senate to ratify a revised extradition treaty between the U.S. and Britain, which had been stuck in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee since the previous year. The revised treaty would close a loophole barring the extradition of those who had committed political crimes, such as members of the IRA.⁷⁹ Reagan took the unusual step of making a direct personal appeal to Senate leaders, emphasizing that Britain was “our staunchest Ally in the battle against

⁷⁵ Cable, Charles Price to Ronald Reagan, April 21, 1986, Folder “United Kingdom – 1986 – 04/21/1986–04/24/1986,” RAC Box 4, Peter Sommer Files, RRL.

⁷⁶ Aldous, *Reagan and Thatcher*, 212–213.

⁷⁷ Cable, Charles Price to George Shultz, “Libya Raid: UK Perspective Two Weeks On,” April 29, 1986, Folder “Post April 14 [1986] Action (2),” Box 1, Elaine Morton Files, RRL.

⁷⁸ Margaret Thatcher, House of Commons Speech: U.S. Bombing of Libya, April 16, 1986, MTF, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106363.

⁷⁹ Cable, Price to Shultz, “Libya Raid: UK Perspective Two Weeks On,” RRL, op. cit.; Aldous, *Reagan and Thatcher*, 214–215; Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, 518.

international terrorism.”⁸⁰ He repeated the same message in his weekly radio broadcast: “rejection of this treaty would be an affront to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher—one European leader who, at great political risk, stood shoulder to shoulder with us during our operations against Qaddafi’s terrorism.”⁸¹ However, this initiative on the part of the Reagan administration was not merely a reward to Thatcher for her support over the Libya bombing, as it typically has been portrayed. Rather, the administration saw the treaty as “an important initiative in our overall counter-terrorism effort,” an “anti-terrorist weapon” necessary to “put our own home in order in the international campaign against terrorism.”⁸² “The Treaty is important, both for US–UK relations and for its wider implications in the struggle against terrorism,” Reagan told Thatcher when they met in May. Thatcher, in turn, asserted, “We cannot mount an active effort to fight terrorism in Libya, while ignoring it in Northern Ireland.”⁸³ Thanks in significant part to Reagan’s personal push, the Senate overwhelmingly ratified the treaty on July 17, 1986.

In the weeks following the bombing of Libya, the U.S. government felt that the “time appears to be ripe to press allies” to take firmer measures against Qadhafi’s regime, particularly at the G7 summit meeting in Tokyo in early May 1986.⁸⁴ The administration hoped to convince its European allies that “terrorism is a legitimate security concern of the NATO Alliance,” and it

⁸⁰ Letters, Ronald Reagan to Richard G. Lugar and Robert Dole, April 22, 1986, Folder “United Kingdom – 1986 – 04/21/1986–04/24/1986,” RAC Box 4, Peter Sommer Files, RRL.

⁸¹ Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address by the President to the Nation,” May 31, 1986, Folder “United Kingdom – 1986 – 05/29/1986–06/02/1986,” RAC Box 4, Peter Sommer Files, RRL.

⁸² Memo, Nicholas Platt to John M. Poindexter, “US–UK Supplementary Extradition Treaty,” May 12, 1986, Folder “United Kingdom – 1986 – 04/25/1986–05/15/1986,” RAC Box 4, Peter Sommer Files, RRL; Memo, Peter R. Sommer to John M. Poindexter, “Your Meeting With Sir Robert Armstrong,” April 2, 1986, Folder “United Kingdom – 1986 – 04/01/1986–04/20/1986,” RAC Box 4, Peter Sommer Files, RRL; “Statement on U.S.–UK Extradition Treaty,” undated, Folder “United Kingdom – 1986 – 05/16/1986–05/20/1986,” RAC Box 4, Peter Sommer Files, RRL.

⁸³ Memcon, “President’s Meeting with Prime Minister Thatcher,” May 4, 1986, Folder “United Kingdom Meeting on Libya/Syria—05/28/1986 (1 of 2),” Box 91750, James Stark Files, RRL.

⁸⁴ Memo, Nicholas Platt to John M. Poindexter, “Libyan Economic Sanctions,” May 1, 1986, Folder “Next Steps (1/2),” Box 91747, James Stark Files, RRL.

received positive signs on this front in the days leading up to the summit.⁸⁵ French President François Mitterrand, whose support for the American airstrike on Libya had been conspicuously absent, “privately signaled” his sense that the differences between France and the U.S. were “resolvable” and “indicated [an] overall French desire to improve anti-terrorism cooperation with the United States.”⁸⁶ A far more cooperative spirit on the issue of terrorism reigned between the allies at the summit meeting in Tokyo than might have been expected less than three weeks after the American bombing raid. Thatcher expressed her “sense that there was a certain coming together among the allies in the war against terrorism.” She lent her support in drafting a joint communiqué that officially named Libya as a supporter of terrorism, and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl offered ideas about high-level intergovernmental cooperation on the issue.⁸⁷

This diplomatic offensive to bolster international support was only one part of the Reagan administration’s continuing strategy to keep up the pressure on Libya following the airstrike in April. An intensive series of deliberations that continued through the summer revealed more clearly than ever that the ultimate goal behind the administration’s strategy of escalating pressure on Libya was to create conditions favorable to regime change against Qadhafi. Even before the airstrike occurred, National Security Advisor Poindexter wrote to the President that “our most important objective over the long term” was “creating conditions for a regime change in Libya.” He explained that the two immediate goals of the airstrike were to “weaken Qadhafi’s ability to stay in power and damage his international terrorist activities.”⁸⁸ In the days following the

⁸⁵ “Public Diplomacy Action Plan: Countering Libyan Support for Terrorism,” undated, Folder “Terrorism—Libya Public Diplomacy (05/01/1986–05/09/1986),” Box 91721, Judy Mandel Files, RRL.

⁸⁶ Cable, U.S. Embassy in Paris to George Shultz, April 29, 1986, Folder “U.S. Action in Libya, 1986 (1/4),” Box 91747, James Stark Files, RRL.

⁸⁷ Memcon, “President’s Meeting with Prime Minister Thatcher,” May 4, 1986, RRL, op. cit.; Talking Points, “Private Meeting with Sir Percy Craddock and Sir Anthony Acland,” May 28, 1986, Folder “United Kingdom Meeting on Libya/Syria—05/28/1986 (2 of 2),” Box 91750, James Stark Files, RRL.

⁸⁸ Memo, John M. Poindexter to Ronald Reagan, “Next Steps: Libya,” undated, Folder “Libya—El Dorado Canyon [6 of 10],” Box 91747, James Stark Files, RRL.

bombing raid, Reagan's team pondered ways to "use our action to help trigger a serious coup," convinced that the American airstrike had "created a vacuum" in Libya's political leadership that "presents an opportunity that we can exploit." Indeed, the NSC staff believed that "Qadhafi's vulnerability to a coup has never been greater" but that "this window will close rapidly." Further U.S. airstrikes could catalyze a rebellion that was already simmering in parts of the Libyan armed forces.⁸⁹ The CIA undertook a series of studies on the likelihood of fomenting promising conditions to oust Qadhafi. While these reports expressed concerns that Soviet influence could increase in a post-Qadhafi Libya, they also noted that popular discontent within Libya toward Qadhafi's regime "has become more open since the US strike." As late as July 1986, the CIA predicted that Qadhafi had "only a slightly better than even chance of staying in power through the end of this year" and recommended increased international pressure and even additional U.S. military action to "further reduce his chances for survival."⁹⁰

Reagan chaired an NSPG meeting in the White House Situation Room on August 14, 1986, to discuss the prospects of the strategy to counter Libyan terrorism that the administration had forged at the beginning of the year. The President and his top advisors and Cabinet officials reiterated the major components of their "multi-faceted strategy designed to intensify the pressures on Qadhafi." Shultz stressed the need to "keep the diplomatic isolation on" and "turn up the heat on economic sanctions." The interdepartmental coordination that lay at the heart of the strategy was on full display as officials from the State, Defense, and Treasury Departments

⁸⁹ Memo, Don Fortier to John Poindexter, "Libyan Planning," April 28, 1986, Folder "Libya Sensitive 1986 [7 of 7]," Box 91668, Howard Teicher Files, RRL; "Next Steps to Deter Further Libyan Terrorism," undated, Folder "Libya Sensitive 1986 [3 of 7]," Box 91668, Howard Teicher Files, RRL.

⁹⁰ Memo, Graham E. Fuller to William J. Casey and Robert M. Gates, "A Successor to Qadhafi," April 15, 1986, Folder "Libya Sensitive 1986 [3 of 7]," Box 91668, Howard Teicher Files, RRL; Memo, CIA Directorate of Intelligence, "LIBYA: What if Qadhafi is Ousted?" April 30, 1986, Folder "Libya Sensitive 1986 [2 of 7]," Box 91668, Howard Teicher Files, RRL; Memo, CIA Directorate of Intelligence, "LIBYA: Qadhafi's Political Position Since the Airstrike," July 17, 1986, Folder "Libya (1)," Box 91095, James Stark Files, RRL.

and the CIA outlined their various contributions to “tighten the screws” and “keep the pressure on.” Poindexter noted that “a combination of economic and military pressure to deter terrorism...has been successful—even more successful than we had hoped.” But the members of the NSPG also expressed concern that deterrence would only last for so long without additional action. President Reagan concluded unequivocally that “it is absolutely necessary that there be no delay in hitting Qadhafi again when the evidence links Libya to a terrorist act.”⁹¹ This was clearly not an administration that harbored any illusions that the airstrike in April had resolved the problem of state-sponsored terrorism. The bombing had been merely one act in a much broader counterterrorism strategy that the Reagan administration had begun executing well beforehand and planned to continue into the long-term future.

Conclusion: A Strategy Postponed

President Ronald Reagan told the American public the month after the airstrike on Libya that “history is likely to record that 1986 was the year when the world, at long last, came to grips with the plague of terrorism.”⁹² This declaration begs two questions: why did he believe this, and why did he turn out to be so wrong?

Reagan believed that the world had come to grips with terrorism in 1986 because he felt that it had finally devised and put into practice a counterterrorism strategy with a promise of successfully deterring states from sponsoring such acts. As he repeated numerous times following the airstrike on Libya, he did not assume that 1986 would spell the end of terrorism altogether. But no longer would the United States and its allies stumble passively from one terrorist attack to another, reacting to events and threats rather than shaping and preempting

⁹¹ Memcon, “NSPG on Libya,” August 14, 1986, Folder “NSPG 0137 14 Aug 1986 (2/2),” Box 91308, Executive Secretariat, NSC: National Security Planning Group (NSPG), RRL.

⁹² Reagan, “Radio Address by the President to the Nation,” RRL, op. cit.

them, as they had through the end of 1985. It took the increasing scale and frequency of attacks against American interests, which culminated in 1985, for the thinking of the Reagan administration to evolve and coalesce behind a more proactive approach to counterterrorism. Reagan himself had advocated taking a more aggressive line against terrorists since the time he took office, but he lacked a cohesive strategy to fit his inclinations until the beginning of 1986.

The Reagan administration's counterterrorism strategy took far more time to develop and implement than scholars have previously noticed, and the bombing of Libya on April 14–15, 1986, while certainly the most visible and dramatic aspect of this strategy, was not the reactive, one-off operation that historians have made it seem. Rather, Reagan initiated a recalibration of American counterterrorism strategy in the aftermath of the TWA hijacking in the summer of 1985, and the administration was only ready to put it into action once the Vice President's Task Force had delivered its recommendations at the end of the year. The Rome and Vienna airport attacks in December 1985 proved an effective catalyst for implementing the first phases of the "integrated" and "multifaceted" plan: the diplomatic and economic isolation of Libya. In late March 1986, Reagan and his team added military pressure in the form of naval exercises off Libya's coast. The terrorist attack against U.S. military personnel at the disco in West Berlin in early April 1986 triggered the unleashing of the American military action that captured headlines around the world. The following months saw renewed debate within the administration over how to intensify the strategy against Libya into the long-term future with an eye toward regime change.

The administration recognized from the start that it needed to garner international support for its new strategy if it were to have its intended long-term deterrent effect on state-sponsored terrorism, but this proved no easy task. By the time Reagan delivered his optimistic prediction

that the world had come to grips with terrorism, however, he had good reason for his words. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who had voiced stern opposition to key aspects of the American strategy in January 1986, evolved to strongly back U.S. actions and played a critical role in shaping their justification under international law as acts of self-defense rather than retaliation. Only weeks after the airstrike against Libya drew sharp international condemnation, America's allies seemed to be moving, however slowly, in its direction.

Then how to account for the inescapable fact that 1986 was *not* the beginning of the end for international terrorism? Why did the bombing of Libya and the momentum it generated for combatting terrorism appear to largely fade away after the spring and summer of 1986? Three central reasons account for this dissipation of attention on Libya. First, despite the significant amount of discussion, analysis, and planning within the Reagan administration through at least the summer following the airstrike, the lack of allied and domestic support for intensified military action—whether through a series of sustained airstrikes or an invasion of Libya to topple Qadhafi's regime—precluded any further escalation of the confrontation on the part of the U.S. Poindexter noted after the bombing that Qadhafi and the terrorist organizations he supported would have to do something “spectacular” before the U.S. could launch any further military strikes.⁹³ Despite a brief flurry of anti-American and anti-British violence, the few terrorist attacks in the months following the airstrike were on a much smaller scale than the Berlin disco bombing and produced few American casualties.

Second, Libyan-backed terrorism appeared to largely fade away in the aftermath of the airstrike. The decline in attacks helped dissipate the public uproar in Britain against Thatcher's decision to support the American action. As Geoffrey Smith points out in his study of Reagan

⁹³ Memo, Howard Teicher and Rod B. McDaniel, “Terrorism/Libya topics discussed at the Summit,” May 9, 1986, Folder “Libya Sensitive 1986 [2 of 7],” Box 91668, Howard Teicher Files, RRL.

and Thatcher's relationship, "It is more difficult to maintain a burning sense of indignation against an act of deterrence that appears to have deterred."⁹⁴ The CIA predicted that Qadhafi would take increased precautions to conceal the links between his regime and the terrorist organizations he supported.⁹⁵ This analysis proved prescient, and its fulfillment contributed further to the sense that Libyan-sponsored terrorism had subsided. Indeed, the last major terrorist attack during Reagan's presidency, when a passenger airplane exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988, proved to have Libyan origins; however, Western intelligence agencies were not able to conclusively connect the dots back to Libya until the early 1990s.⁹⁶

Finally, a resurgence of Cold War concerns monopolized the administration's and the American public's attention only months after the bombing of Libya. By the fall of 1986, bilateral relations with the Soviet Union dominated headlines as the series of summit meetings between Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev reached their dramatic apex in Reykjavik, Iceland, culminating in the signing of a historic nuclear arms reduction treaty a year later. Moreover, the Iran–Contra affair engulfed the administration and particularly the NSC from late 1986 through 1987 and caused the ouster of two of the leading engineers of the counterterrorism strategy against Libya: National Security Advisor John Poindexter and his subordinate Oliver North. These concerns crowded out other issues in the absence of a fresh terrorist crisis or provocation. Soon thereafter, the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the Gulf War, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union absorbed the attention of the administration of Reagan's successor, George H. W. Bush, through the end of 1991 and beyond. By this time the airstrike against Libya was a distant memory.

⁹⁴ Smith, *Reagan and Thatcher*, 197.

⁹⁵ Memo, CIA Directorate of Intelligence, "LIBYA: Qadhafi's Political Position Since the Airstrike, Appendix C: Prospect for Libyan Terrorism," July 17, 1986, Folder "Libya (1)," Box 91095, James Stark Files, RRL.

⁹⁶ Naftali, *Blind Spot*, 206–207, 219–220.

Reagan was correct that 1986 and the bombing of Libya marked a crucial turning point in the evolution of U.S. counterterrorism policy. This event marked the apex of the first concerted counterterrorism strategy in American history and the moment when the U.S. government first recognized terrorism as a fundamental threat to its national security. Moreover, the Reagan administration's determination to build international consensus on the issue and Margaret Thatcher's support and contributions to its strategy helped boost the standing of terrorism in the priorities of the international community. The bombing of Libya may have had a limited short-term impact, but it set a precedent for the use of military force against states sponsoring terrorism that waited patiently until a later administration, responding to a different crisis of an altogether larger magnitude, needed it once again.

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