

Fighting terrorism with terrorism

America's hijacking of the Palestinian terrorists who hijacked the Achille Lauro was for most westerners a deeply satisfying event. A heinous, and all too frequent crime had been avenged. But feeling good does not absolve us from considering the wider implications of the American action. Consider:

• The U.S. clearly violated international laws by hijacking an Egyptian civilian airliner and forcing it to land at a NATO airbase in Italy. Washington seemed to be saying that the right of hot pursuit took precedence over other laws and usages.

• During the 1950s, Algeria rose in revolt against its French colonizers. A group of Algerian rebel leaders, including Ahmed Ben Bella, were flying on a Moroccan plane when they were hijacked by French jets and forced down. The rebels, termed "terrorists" by the French, were jailed. The U.S. denounced the hijacking as air piracy. Now, to the delight of the French, the sabot is on the other foot.

If the U.S. can intercept aircraft or ships carrying "terrorists," why cannot others do the same? Let us cite some examples:

• In Nicaragua, U.S.-backed contra rebels are assassinating officials of the Marxist government. Does this

behavior in the face of wildmen terrorists. But should the U.S. resort to actions abroad that its own laws and constitution ban at home? This question bears some sober thought, divorced from the media-induced emotions of the present moment.

The terror-drama in the Mediterranean also obscured the murder of another American by terrorists. After having defended the PLO on a California radio show he was killed by a bomb blast. This act of terrorism received scant attention. At the same time, 500 Puerto Rican Americans were buried alive by mud — and almost no one noticed.

If we allow ourselves to become mesmerized by the theatre of terror, we will not only give a victory to the terrorists but also ignore events of greater importance. Israel may be able to bomb and blast its many enemies with relative impunity. Great powers such as the U.S. cannot enjoy the luxury of such freedom of mayhem. Israel can bomb Tunis and feel better; the U.S. cannot bomb Havana, Damascus or Tripoli without running the risk of igniting a world war.

No one wants to sit still and watch terrorists murder innocent people — if such people exist any more on earth. But the U.S. should also take care that emotional responses do not put it into the same league as the people it opposes, that its hasty actions, no matter how popular at home, do not cause its vital allies severe, perhaps mortal, problems.

The U.S. public wants Rambo, not Jimmy Carter but so, alas, do the terrorists. Every swat that the U.S. takes at Arab terrorists draws the giant one step deeper into the morass of the Middle East.



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an American airliner carrying contra "terrorists" from Honduras to Miami?

These questions, however galling, cannot be ignored. The West simply does not have exclusive right to brand people "terrorists"; it is either a universal crime or else no more than political warfare. Another disturbing point:

• The U.S. charged the Palestinian Mohammed Abbas with masterminding the ship hijacking. He was aboard the Egyptian aircraft taking the hijackers to what was to have been a trial by the PLO in Tunis. Abbas, travelling under an Iraqi diplomatic passport, was freed by Italians in spite of angry U.S. demands that he be arrested and turned over to the FBI.

• Here we see the U.S. advocating that the rules of diplomacy be violated — a most curious position for a nation that so loudly denounced the arrest of its own diplomats in Teheran. Everyone knows that Abbas was using diplomatic cover but so do thousands of other diplomats, including CIA agents. Do not forget that U.S. "diplomats" in Beirut were involved in a car bomb attack this year that left over 80 civilians dead. Should they also be arrested by Lebanon?

It's easy and tempting to forget rules of civilized

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