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Adventures in Political Rhetoric: Terrorism and Assassination Policy

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Title: Adventures in Political Rhetoric: Terrorism and Assassination Policy

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Abstract. This article analyzes the language of recent United States Government communications related to the intent to assassinate Osama bin Laden, an alleged mastermind of terrorism operations.

From open-source information, one can learn that the plotting or carrying out of assassination by anyone employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government (USG) has been forbidden by the USG since an executive order issued by President Ford in the 1975-1976 timeframe. Yet journalistic accounts of USG discourse concerning recent USG military attacks in Sudan and Afghanistan suggest that "forbidden" can be subverted in creative and intriguing ways.

USG discourse suggests that it may be acceptable to intentionally target--by any means necessary--terrorist "infrastructures." The term "infrastructures" usually denotes nonliving assets such as communications, transportation, logistics, and weapons. Yet people develop, maintain, upgrade, and/or protect infrastructures and may be proximal to infrastructural assets when the latter are attacked--inadvertently, unavoidably, or in a premeditated fashion. Moreover, people may be considered infrastructure in at least two ways: first, if the infrastructural function--e.g., communication--is constituted by human resources--e.g., face-to-face, word-of-mouth communication; second--as described above--because human assets are necessary to develop, maintain, upgrade, and/or protect what are usually denoted as infrastructures. So there are at least three different rationales for achieving the proximal goal of an assassination policy--the deaths of human targets--by seeming to comply with it. These rationales stemming from "by any means necessary" resonate with the applied philosophical premises of Malcolm X.

USG discourse also suggests that it may be acceptable to attack people commanding a terrorist organization but not to intentionally plan to kill individual people. In essence, there are two semantic routes to arrive at the proximal goal of an assassination policy. The first is to plan to "attack" as opposed to "kill." The second is to target a group of people as opposed to one person.

Moreover, USG discourse suggests that it may be acceptable to intentionally plan to kill and to kill one or more people if the context is that of a war. Here it is interesting to note that the common political boilerplate of exhorting that terrorists are at war with the US and that the US is in a war with terrorists has at least three typical consequences: first, the authorization and allocation of more money for antiterrorism and counterterrorism activities; second, a nexus of the marshalling of political support and the demonstration of political will against terrorism; third, the pretext for intentionally killing people who are now viable military targets of war.

In addition, USG discourse suggests that it may be acceptable to intentionally plan to kill and to kill people who are both proximally and distally engaged in an "ongoing effort" against U.S. interests. The rationale here is one of "self-defense" against the "ongoing effort"--thus the USG need not wait for the planning and initiation of a specific terrorist attack before attempting to kill people. The net cast can be wide indeed--so wide that one might contemplate whether the subverters of U.S. currency, values,

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and the quest for Olympic medals might be included during an interlude of mass and/or executive hysteria.

Finally, USG discourse suggests that it apparently is acceptable to target an individual or individuals for death via something called a Presidential finding. The finding usually functions as an exception to the usual way of carrying out political business and is vetted by some combination of Presidential political aides, Congressional representatives, and varying legal authorities. In other words, assassination remains forbidden except when it's not.

The current USG proscription against assassination serve a dual purpose. It can be used as propaganda (propagating the faith) to reinforce an image of the USG as supporting the sanctity of life and human rights. It also can be used as a cover for decisions to engage in assassination or to effect its consequences. An analysis of the USG language to proscribe and--in special cases to prescribe-- assassination suggests that the intent and the rule of law may too easily be assassinated as well. In this sense, the goals of anti-US terrorists are fulfilled, as assassination policy and the national security interests of the USG are subverted. (See Feldman, H. (1954). The hero as assassin, *Psychoanalysis*, 3, 48-64; Martin, J. (1984-1985). Clinical contributions to the theory of the fictive personality. *Annual of Psychoanalysis*, 12-13, 267-300; Pontius, A.A. (1974). Threats to assassinate the king-president while propitiating mother: Some aspects of dangerousness. *Journal of Analytic al Psychology*, 19, 38-53; Risen, J. (November 14, 1998). Bin Laden was target of air strikes, U.S. acknowledges. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Rothstein, D.A. (1973). Reflections on a contagion of assassination. *Life-Threatening Behavior*, 3, 105-130.) (Keywords: Assassination, Terrorism.)