Examining historical responses to terror

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In 1886, reflecting on lessons learned during the Civil War, Union general John Sanborn claimed "that there exists in the breasts of people of educated and Christian communities wild and ferocious passions, which in a day of peace are dormant and slumbering, but which may be aroused and kindled by war and injustice, and become more cruel and destructive than any that live in the breasts of savage and barbarous nations."

Americans are by no means immune from these passions — and the brutal behavior that flows from them. Indeed, according to Michael Fellman, a professor of history emeritus at Simon Fraser University in Canada, in every colonial war, and in suppressing domestic radicals, "terrorist means, including torture and the massacre of unarmed civilians, become standard procedure, both licensed by authorities — more often covertly than overtly — and covered up by them."

To demonstrate that terrorism has been "a constant and driving force" in American history, Fellman examines the raid on Harper's Ferry by the abolitionist John Brown; guerilla warfare during the Civil War; the "redemption" of Mississippi by white supremacist paramilitary groups in the 1860s and '70s; the show trial and conviction of Haymarket anarchists; and the subjugation of the Filipino people following the Spanish-American War.

Arguing that the concept of a "War on Terrorism" is falsely one-sided, Fellman claims that these case studies constitute "a counter-narrative," in which government officials did not hesitate to use "reactionary terrorism" against "alien others." And, alas, he's got plenty of evidence to draw on.

Fellman's indictment of the United States and his suggestion that 19th century responses to terrorism provided "templates" for the future are sad and sobering.

But his analysis is not without flaws. In the 19th century, it is important to remember, the term "terrorism" was rarely used. And, Fellman writes, defining the term "is akin to searching for the Holy Grail."

Even more importantly, Fellman does not adequately examine legitimate uses of violence by the state. Nor is it a slam dunk that the behaviors he describes are part of a deep and dominant tradition of American political violence, essential to the consolidation of national power.

He acknowledges that his "lens on history" was reconstructed by the post 9/11 world, during which the Bush administration's war clearly used extralegal means, and bogus constitutional interpretations of the right to self-defense and the powers of the commander-in-chief, to make sure "the evil-doers" got the treatment they deserved. Although "reactionary terrorism" may not be as American as apple pie, "In the Name of God and Country" does deliver a timely reminder that this war isn't really "unlike any other." And a challenge to Americans that to preserve our own liberties, and the very best of our traditions, we should put in place "a more self-examining, complex, and peaceful alternative framework."

IN THE NAME OF GOD AND COUNTRY:
RECONSIDERING TERRORISM
IN AMERICAN HISTORY
Michael Fellman
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