

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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TRACING THE PATH FROM CRIME CONTROL TO COUNTERTERRORISM: THE WAR ON CRIME AS A PRECURSOR

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of security policies from the War on Crime to the War on Terror, examining how crime control strategies laid the groundwork for counterterrorism efforts. The War on Crime, initiated in the mid-20th century, focused primarily on domestic law enforcement and the criminal justice system, aiming to reduce crime rates through policing, surveillance, and punitive measures. Over time, as global threats shifted, many of these same strategies were adapted to address terrorism, leading to the emergence of the War on Terror. This paper traces the continuity between these two security paradigms, analyzing the role of surveillance technologies, militarization of law enforcement, and shifts in public discourse surrounding security. By examining key policy shifts, legislative changes, and cultural responses to crime and terrorism, the paper reveals how the War on Crime set the stage for the more global, militarized strategies of the War on Terror. The study provides insight into the transformation of domestic security measures into a broader counterterrorism framework and the long-term consequences for civil liberties, governance, and global security.

Keywords War on Crime, War on Terror, Crime Control, Counterterrorism, Surveillance, Security Policy, Law Enforcement, Militarization, Civil Liberties, Global Security, Policy Evolution, Public Discourse, Terrorism.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of global security policies over the last several decades reveals a notable shift from a focus on crime control to an emphasis on counterterrorism. This transition, from the War on Crime to the War on Terror, is not merely a change in the type of threats being addressed, but a deeper evolution in the mechanisms, ideologies, and strategies employed by governments in response to perceived dangers. While the War on Crime, initiated in the mid-20th century, primarily aimed to address domestic criminal activity through law enforcement and punitive measures, the War on Terror—emerging after the 9/11 attacks—focused on combating global terrorism through military interventions, surveillance, and international cooperation. Yet, a closer examination reveals that

many of the security tools and tactics that became central to the War on Terror were already in place during the War on Crime.

This paper seeks to explore the continuity between these two security paradigms and investigate how crime control policies and strategies laid the groundwork for the War on Terror. The focus will be on the increasing role of surveillance, the militarization of law enforcement, and the shift in public and governmental discourse surrounding security. The rise of mass incarceration, expanded police powers, and the adoption of advanced surveillance technologies during the War on Crime set a precedent for similar strategies in counterterrorism efforts. These developments not only shaped how security threats were understood

and addressed but also had profound implications for civil liberties and the relationship between the state and its citizens.

By tracing the path from crime control to counterterrorism, this paper explores the idea that the War on Crime was not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a precursor that influenced the policies, attitudes, and infrastructure that would come to define the War on Terror. Understanding this evolution provides critical insight into the long-term consequences of these shifts for law enforcement, governance, and international relations in the contemporary world. Through this analysis, the paper aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the balance between security and individual freedoms, particularly in the context of increasingly globalized and militarized responses to perceived threats.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the evolution from the War on Crime to the War on Terror, this study adopts a qualitative, historical approach, analyzing primary and secondary sources to trace the development of security policies and their interconnections. By examining the historical context, political discourse, and legislative changes that marked the shift from crime control to counterterrorism, this paper seeks to understand how the strategies and ideologies developed during the War on Crime laid the groundwork for counterterrorism measures. The methodology involves a detailed review of scholarly literature, policy documents, legislative acts, and government reports, complemented by an analysis of key events and shifts in security practices.

Historical and Policy Analysis:

The first step in the methodology involves reviewing the historical trajectory of security policies related to crime control from the 1960s onward, with particular focus on the United States, as its policies have been influential globally. This includes examining landmark initiatives such as the “War on Crime” declared during the Johnson administration in the 1960s, followed by the rise of the “War on Drugs” and the “Law and Order” agenda of the 1980s under Presidents Nixon and

Reagan. These policies, along with their key components (increased policing, surveillance, and mass incarceration), serve as the foundational context for understanding the later evolution of counterterrorism measures. The analysis will identify specific policies, shifts in law enforcement tactics, and the adoption of new technologies during the War on Crime that foreshadowed counterterrorism practices.

Examination of Key Security Measures and Strategies:

Central to this paper is an analysis of the security measures implemented during the War on Crime and how these were adapted or expanded in response to the rise of global terrorism. This includes the militarization of law enforcement—the use of military-grade equipment by domestic police forces—and the growing reliance on surveillance technologies such as wiretapping, data collection, and intelligence-gathering. Additionally, the use of anti-terrorism legislation in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks will be analyzed for continuity with prior crime control measures. In particular, the study will focus on the USA PATRIOT Act and how its provisions expanded government surveillance powers, echoing earlier policies from the War on Crime.

Discourse Analysis:

The paper also employs discourse analysis to investigate how the framing of security threats has evolved from criminal activity to terrorism. This involves analyzing political speeches, media reports, and official government documents from the War on Crime era and the subsequent War on Terror. The shift in rhetoric—from a focus on law enforcement and crime prevention to a focus on national security and the global war on terrorism—will be explored to understand how political narratives influenced public attitudes and policy decisions. By analyzing these discourses, the study will identify how fear, political agendas, and societal concerns about security led to the expansion of state power in both domestic and international spheres.

Case Studies and Comparative Analysis:

To illustrate the continuity of security practices,

the paper will include case studies of specific incidents or periods that highlight the overlap between crime control and counterterrorism strategies. These case studies will include:

The 1980s crackdown on organized crime and how strategies used in this context (e.g., wiretapping, surveillance, and targeted arrests) were mirrored in the early counterterrorism measures post-9/11.

The implementation of the “three strikes” laws and their role in mass incarceration, which set a precedent for militarized responses to perceived threats.

The post-9/11 security responses, such as the expansion of the Department of Homeland Security and the adoption of military tactics in domestic policing, including the use of the National Guard and the fusion of federal and local law enforcement.

This comparative analysis will help to clarify the continuity between the two security paradigms and the ways in which practices developed under the War on Crime were repurposed or extended to address terrorism.

Interviews and Expert Testimonies (Optional):

For additional perspective, the study may also include interviews with experts in the fields of law enforcement, counterterrorism, and security studies. These interviews will provide firsthand accounts of how law enforcement strategies evolved from crime control to counterterrorism. Expert opinions will help contextualize the historical material and provide insight into how these changes were viewed by practitioners, policymakers, and the public. While the main emphasis is on historical and policy analysis, these expert perspectives can enrich the understanding of the real-world implications of the shift from crime control to counterterrorism.

Data Synthesis and Conclusion:

Finally, the paper will synthesize the findings from historical, policy, and discourse analyses, providing a comprehensive view of how the War on Crime laid the foundations for the War on Terror. The study will draw conclusions on the long-term implications of these security practices, particularly in relation to civil liberties, the

militarization of law enforcement, and the role of surveillance in modern governance. By understanding this trajectory, the paper will offer insights into the challenges of balancing national security with individual freedoms, particularly in the context of an increasingly interconnected and surveilled global society.

RESULTS

The results of this study reveal a clear continuity in the evolution of security strategies from the War on Crime to the War on Terror. Several key findings emerge from the analysis of historical documents, policy shifts, discourse, and case studies:

Militarization of Law Enforcement: One of the most significant outcomes of the War on Crime was the increasing militarization of local police forces. The adoption of military-style tactics, the use of SWAT teams, and the acquisition of military-grade weapons became common during the War on Crime in response to the rise of urban crime and drug violence. These strategies, which were initially intended to deal with domestic threats, later found their place in the War on Terror. The militarization of law enforcement only intensified post-9/11, with federal programs such as 1033 Program that allowed the transfer of military surplus equipment to local police departments. This shift facilitated a seamless integration of military tactics in domestic policing during the War on Terror.

Surveillance and Intelligence Gathering: The expansion of surveillance technologies, including wiretapping, data collection, and intelligence sharing, was central to the War on Crime. These techniques, initially used for criminal investigations and anti-drug efforts, were later extended to counterterrorism following the 9/11 attacks. The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001, for example, allowed for the expanded use of surveillance methods that had been honed during the War on Crime. The analysis showed a significant overlap in the tools and strategies employed in both contexts, especially regarding the tracking and monitoring of individuals considered potential threats to national security.

Legislative Foundations: Legislation passed during

the War on Crime, such as the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 and Crime Control Act of 1990, established the legal and institutional frameworks for increased surveillance, militarization, and the use of federal resources in law enforcement. These measures laid the groundwork for later counterterrorism legislation, including the Patriot Act, which expanded federal authority and surveillance powers. The findings indicate that many of the legal and institutional mechanisms put in place during the War on Crime were merely adapted and rebranded for counterterrorism after the attacks of 9/11.

Cultural and Political Discourse: The discourse surrounding crime and terrorism underwent a significant transformation from the 1960s through the 2000s. During the War on Crime, crime was framed as a domestic issue primarily handled by law enforcement agencies. By contrast, the War on Terror emphasized a national security threat posed by foreign and domestic actors with terrorist affiliations. Despite these differences in framing, the response to both was similar in terms of strategy—both saw the expansion of state power, increased surveillance, and the prioritization of national security concerns. The political rhetoric used to justify these policies shifted in the aftermath of 9/11, but the foundational themes of law and order, security, and the need for strong governmental intervention remained consistent.

Case Studies: The case studies of the “three strikes” laws and the militarized responses to terrorist threats provide further evidence of continuity in the security strategies. The three strikes laws, implemented in the 1990s, were part of a broader trend toward harsher punishments and the criminalization of social issues, which were later echoed in counterterrorism efforts that sought to classify terrorism as a criminal act and punish it severely. Additionally, the post-9/11 responses, such as the Homeland Security Act, were directly influenced by the aggressive policies of crime control, using similar language and strategies.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that the War on Crime significantly shaped the security policies and strategies that later became integral to the War on

Terror. Both wars share common elements: the expansion of state surveillance powers, the militarization of law enforcement, and an increasing emphasis on security over civil liberties. The War on Crime not only provided the institutional and legal frameworks for the War on Terror, but also helped normalize the idea of a permanent state of emergency, where state security measures could be continuously expanded in the name of protecting the public.

A critical discussion point is the legacy of surveillance and militarization, which has raised concerns about the erosion of civil liberties and the growing power of the state. The blending of domestic policing and national security measures blurs the lines between criminal justice and counterterrorism. This is particularly evident in the use of mass surveillance and the criminalization of dissent, where individuals, often from marginalized communities, are disproportionately targeted both for criminal behavior and for their potential ties to terrorism. The militarization of policing has also led to increased tensions between law enforcement and local communities, with concerns over police brutality and the use of excessive force.

Moreover, the War on Terror expanded the global reach of the security state, drawing on strategies developed domestically to address terrorism worldwide. The same tools of surveillance and data collection used to fight crime were deployed in the global war on terror, where countries outside the U.S. became subjects of intense surveillance, intelligence gathering, and military intervention. This global extension of the War on Crime raised concerns about human rights violations, with the Global War on Terror sometimes being criticized for infringing on privacy, due process, and international law.

CONCLUSION

The War on Crime played a critical role in laying the foundation for the War on Terror by introducing surveillance tools, militarized policing tactics, and a legal framework that prioritized security over civil liberties. While these strategies may have been necessary at the time to address the specific challenges of crime in the 20th century, their

evolution into counterterrorism strategies raises important questions about the balance between national security and individual freedoms.

As the War on Terror continues to evolve, the lessons learned from the War on Crime provide crucial insight into the potential dangers of unchecked government power, especially when it comes to surveillance and law enforcement. The overlap in tactics and ideologies underscores the importance of maintaining a careful balance between security concerns and the protection of democratic freedoms. Future discussions on national security should consider the long-term implications of these strategies, not only for domestic policy but also for global governance and human rights.

This study suggests that the legacy of the War on Crime continues to shape contemporary security measures, and that understanding this evolution is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness and ethical implications of modern counterterrorism policies. By tracing the path from crime control to counterterrorism, we gain a deeper understanding

of how past security measures inform present and future approaches to maintaining order in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

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