Identifying “terrorists” in the U.S. is historically ubiquitous yet controversial in today’s national discourse. For instance, the views of scholars John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, who are associated with the conservative Cato Institute, can be compared with those of Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a civil rights law practice that represents victims of civil rights violations, and monitors and exposes white supremacist activity.1

In Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism, Mueller and Stewart question whether civil liberties can be adequately protected in the midst of a “vast policing and intelligence venture” driven by beliefs that “terrorism presents a…significant threat to national security [so] we can never be safe enough” (9). These notions and practices lead to “‘institutionalized paranoia’” (Garfinkle qtd. in Mueller and Stewart 22). By contrast, as part of their research and educational efforts, SPLC asserts that terrorist tactics are used by some groups in the U.S. and claims that evidence abounds of an “international terrorist movement linked by a dangerous white supremacist ideology” (Cohen).

Of course, the title of Khan-Cullors’ and Bandele’s memoir places accusations of terrorism against them and people of their community at the center of any discussion of the book. Explaining the treatment that her brother received while in L.A. County Sheriff custody, Khan-Cullors, references both the Center of Victims of Torture and the 2011 ACLU of Southern California complaint of torture against the L.A. County Sheriff’s Department. In defense, she explains, “The skills to torture people were honed in this nation on people who were not terrorists. They were the victims of terrorism” (157).

(1) Consider all of the above as well as the 2016 online petition submitted through the White House’s “We the People” project, which was signed by more than 119,000 people in the U.S. In part, it states:

It is time for the pentagon to be consistent in its actions – and just as they rightfully declared ISIS a terror group, they must declare Black Lives Matter a terror group – on the grounds of principle, integrity, morality, and safety.

(2) In groups, take a position on whether or not Black Lives Matter or anyone involved in the movement can be classified as a terrorist.

(3) Reference the handout, “Writing a Counter Argument and Rebuttal Guidelines,” and collectively write a paragraph that both asserts the position your group has agreed upon and presents a position counter to your own. Then, finish the paragraph with a rebuttal to the counter position. Use signaling language found on the handout. Provide sources to support both your position and the counter position.

(4) Prepare to present your paragraph to the other class groups (everyone your group should be encouraged to have a role in the presentation).

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1 The founding members of the SPLC incorporated the organization in 1971. Describing her brother’s treatment by L.A. County Sheriff’s Department as “torture”, Khan-Cullors describes the civil rights work of a similar, long established organization, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), specifically in its influence on her political analysis of the treatment of her brother (157-160).

2 A second, similar petition was filed in 2017.