In February 1881, just days after the first the Irish nationalists’ bombings inaugurated a half-decade dynamite war in Great Britain, in his essay on the Irish land question Henry George wrote,

the civilized world is on the verge of the most tremendous struggle, which, according to the frankness and sagacity with which it is met, will be a struggle of ideas or a struggle of actual physical force, calling upon all the potent agencies of destruction which modern invention has discovered, every sign of the times portends. The voices that proclaim the eve of revolution are in the air. Steam and electricity are not merely transporting goods and carrying messages. They are everywhere changing social and industrial organization; they are everywhere stimulating thought, and arousing new hopes and fears and desires and passions; they are everywhere breaking down the barriers that have separated men, and integrating nations into one vast organism, through which the same pulses throb and the same nerves tingle.¹

George’s words, composed during the sanguineous agrarian Land War in Ireland, presaged a novel breed of terrorism confronting the Western world. Various strains of Irish-American nationalist groups utilizing technological innovations to attack the British Empire introduced significant challenges for the Atlantic community. The adoption of dynamite and other high explosives, and the sophisticated transatlantic arms trafficking network, reveals that the process of greater globalization not only offered new opportunities for positive, productive cultural exchanges, but also demonstrates that these transnational interactions opened the door for nefarious activities and introduced a new potential risk for modern imperial powers.

By the 1880s, a number of Irish nationalists moved beyond simple assaults, assassinations, and minor property damage to exploit vulnerable targets, such as urban areas and oceanic commercial traffic, seizing the opportunities that greater American industrialization and affluence offered
them, adopting a highly destructive, potentially very lethal strategy of modern, systematic terrorism. The globalization of Irish terrorism compelled the British to harden their repression against Irish nationalists and to take a more aggressive posture toward its Atlantic partner’s perceived leniency. The audacity and ruthlessness of the Irish-American attacks had by mid-decade alerted Anglo-Americans to the destructiveness that terrorism posed to modern urban societies and at moments threatened to reverse efforts to improve Anglo-American relations. But by the end of the dynamite campaign in 1885 the two Atlantic powers had cemented a common ideological repulsion to terrorism. By the 1880s, an awareness of the potential lethality and injury to non-combatants and the physical destruction to private property and public facilities produced a growing consensus within the Atlantic community that terrorism was an intolerable method of achieving political goals. The threat of unconventional warfare from revolutionary sub-state agents had become so palpable that the New York Times reported in early 1881 a movement among European elites for the “suppression of terrorism.” According to the Times, Europe’s leading monarchs were contemplating a conference to coordinate a strategic “war on terrorism.”

Americans also began to seriously contemplate and discuss, especially in collaboration with the British, counterterrorism policies that relied on law enforcement and intelligence gathering. Politically conversant Americans, however, remained far from united about Irish terrorism as certain elements continued to support Irish national independence and tended to minimize the terroristic qualities of Irish attacks. The highly competitive political culture of Gilded Age America, in conjunction with the political and economic energy of Irish immigrants, forced some prominent officials, much to the chagrin of British officials and the public, to ignore or even defend some of the most heinous nationalist activities. An active transatlantic Irish propaganda campaign worked to undermine American sympathies for the British. In fact, throughout the 1880s and beyond, as with earlier experiences with Irish terrorism, many Americans found fault with the British colonial system for creating an environment that nurtured political violence. Not only did Americans hold the British responsible for the conditions in Ireland that fostered nationalist terrorism, some Americans were vociferous critics of Britain’s counterterrorist measures, which they believed were harshly repressive and largely ineffective. As the American public vacillated between an aversion for terrorism and sympathy for suffering Irish peasants, the Federal government faced enormous pressure from the British and Anglophile Americans to confront directly nationalists using the United States as a sanctuary and staging area for offensive actions against the United Kingdom.

Beyond the transnational financial and logistical operations conducted by Irish-American nationalists, the globalization of terrorism forced Anglo-Americans to reevaluate broader questions, such as the legal definitions of political prisoners, reconsideration of neutrality responsibilities under