# 45. *Reducing the Risk* of Terrorism

*The U.S. government should*

- avoid entanglement in regional conflicts or civil wars that do not have a direct and substantial relevance to vital American security interests;
- focus the attention and resources of the intelligence agencies on terrorism and other serious national security threats instead of phony or exaggerated problems such as economic espionage; and
- consider state-sponsored terrorist attacks against American civilians acts of war, not a law enforcement issue, and respond, in cases where there is clear and compelling evidence, with a formal declaration of war.

The sabotage of Pan American flight 103, the bombing of the World Trade Center, and (possibly) the crash of TWA flight 800 make it clear that Americans have become targets of international terrorism. Unfortunately, that danger is likely to grow rather than recede in the coming years. Moreover, the potential for thousands, rather than dozens or hundreds, of casualties in any single incident is also rising.

In a speech to a recent conference on terrorism sponsored by the Cato Institute, former CIA director R. James Woolsey noted that a terrorist attack involving chemical or biological agents instead of conventional explosives would be vastly more destructive than the terrible events that have already taken place. For example, the introduction of anthrax, a deadly but easily cultivated bacterium, into an urban environment could kill tens of thousands of people in a matter of days. The quantity of anthrax needed to produce such a catastrophe could be carried in a briefcase.

It is imperative mat Congress and the executive branch begin to examine ways in which to deal more effectively with the threat of international

terrorism. Although, as noted in Chapter 21, it is not possible for a free society always to prevent determined terrorists from striking, there are policy changes that can materially reduce the risk that Americans will be the target of terrorist initiatives directed from abroad. Those changes will, however, require a radically different U.S. foreign policy as well as a refocused mission for the U.S. intelligence community.

## What Terrorism Is—and Isn't

Most discussions of terrorism are surprisingly vague about the concept itself, and even prominent experts frequently fail to define the term. Their approach is reminiscent of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's handling of obscenity. Stewart conceded that he could not define obscenity, but he assured his coUeagues, "I know it when I see it."

If we are to deal intelligently with terrorism, a more rigorous approach is necessary. Terrorism is best defined as violence directed against innocent people for a political purpose. Both the "political purpose" and the "innocent people" components are crucial. The political purpose requirement is needed to distinguish terrorist incidents from ordinary crimes, however brutal those crimes may be. For example, the New York City nightclub arsonist and (probably) the Centennial Park bomber in Atlanta were common criminals, not terrorists.

The "innocentpeople" standard is more difficult to define with precision and is also more controversial. With rare exceptions, though, "innocent people" should mean civilians, not military personnel. That is especially true if targeted military forces are operating in another country and are parties to an armed struggle or ongoing political dispute. Indeed, attacks on military personnel should not be defined as terrorism even if the troops are operating in their own country, if there is no peaceful mechanism to remove the incumbent regime from power and the armed forces serve to prop up a dictatorship. Under those circumstances, attacks directed against such targets constitute guerrilla warfare, not terrorism.

The consequences of the attacks are, of course, no less terrible than terrorism would be for the victims and their loved ones. Nevertheless, it is important to make the distinction between guerrilla warfare directed against professional soldiers and wanton assaults on innocents who are in no Way involved in the underlying disputes.

## U.S. Foreign Policy: Making America a Target

The bombing of the World Trade Center and the other terrorist incidents that have victimized American civilians—as well as the attacks on U.S.

troops in Saudi Arabia—demonstrate that Washington's foreign policy has a direct bearing on the likelihood of violence against both American military personnel and American civilians. Such acts are hardly inexplicable. Perpetrators are not randomly selecting the United States out of a directory of members of the United Nations; they have rather specific grievances against America.

It might be tempting to conclude mat those who attack American targets are simply fanatics who hate American values and culture. Many experts on terrorism have advanced that argument. University of California professor Ronald Steel, for example, contends that

> the United States is the locus of power in a "new world order" that would render irrelevant traditional faiths and even whole societies. Americans pride themselves on being in the forefront of the modern, in being the world's leader. But not everyone finds that world as appealing or even as inevitable as we do. To many it is deeply threatening. Naturally, the discontented of the world hold us responsible for their plight: their poverty, their ignorance, their weakness, their irrelevance.

Steel is not entirely wrong. There are certainly some terrorists who hate America because of the values it supposedly represents: especially modernity, secularism, and individualism. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that most attacks on U.S. targets are motivated by a blind hatred of American values. City University of New York professor Yan Sun, responding to Steel's assertion, made a crucial distinction. Steel missed the point ''of why certain segments of the rest of the world may harbor resentment of the United States," Yan Sun argued. "It is not American ways and values that threaten them," but "American insistence on imposing those on others."

It is even more accurate to say that terrorism is primarily a backlash against Washington's meddlesome global interventionist foreign policy—a policy that often has little, if any, connection with the values embraced by most Americans. U.S. leaders have chosen to interfere in an assortment of regional, subregional, and even internal quarrels around the world. Whether in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, the Persian Gulf, or the Taiwan Strait, U.S. leaders are willing to threaten to use or actually use military might to impose "made in Washington" solutions. Such interventions inevitably work to the advantage of certain countries or factions and to the decided disadvantage of others. We should, therefore, not be surprised that aggrieved parties may want to exact revenge against the United States.

Nowhere *is* that tendency more pronounced than in the Middle East. Washington's pervasive support of Israel and its policies is an obvious source of anti-American sentiment throughout the Islamic world, but it is not the only one. The increasingly extensive U.S. support of an array of "friendly" Arab dictatorships also inflames groups that want to oust those regimes. Washington's friends and allies in the region—Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the other Persian Gulf states—have three characteristics in common. They are repressive, corrupt, and faced with growing domestic opposition.

The depth and intensity of popular bitterness toward the United States for being the patron of such autocracies would probably shock most Americans. Even relatively moderate opponents of the incumbent regimes increasingly regard Washington as an enemy. Mohammed Masari, the London-based Saudi exile who heads the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights, typifies that attitude. Masari advocates democracy for Saudi Arabia and repeatedly condemns terrorist acts. Nevertheless, after the bombing of the American barracks in Dhahran, Masari told BBC radio that foreign troops in his country were "legitimate targets" and that the United States should expect similar incidents as long as its soldiers stay in the kingdom propping up the House of Saud.

If Washington insists on playing the role of global policeman, violent retaliation against American targets, both inside and outside the United States, will be one of the inevitable costs of that policy. And the cost appears to be rising. Incidents such as the bombing of the World Trade Center are especially significant. Even at the height of the Vietnam War, Hanoi's agents never dared attack Americans in the United States. The World Trade Center incident indicates that terrorists are becoming bolder.

Perhaps most ironic, some of the terrorists appear to be monsters of our own making. During the 1980s the U.S. government financed, trained, and equipped the Afghan *mujaheddin* in their armed struggle against the Soviet invader. The policy was a short-term success, as Afghan fighters tied down Soviet military units and inflicted numerous casualties. The war itself became so unpopular in the Soviet Union that it probably contributed to the political unraveling of the communist state.

Nevertheless, the policy has produced horrific side effects over the long term. Not only does the chaos in Afghanistan exceed that in such places as Somalia and Bosnia, but alumni of the Afghan war are showing up in insurgent forces and terrorist organizations throughout the Middle East and beyond. And the principal target of their animosity is their onetime

patron, the United States. Such are the unintended consequences of an interventionist foreign policy.

## A Policy for Dealing with Terrorism

A sustainable policy to deal with the threat of terrorism would have three key elements. First, the United States should stop meddling in conflicts and disputes that do not have a direct and substantial connection to the vital security needs of the American people. A global interventionist strategy was dangerous enough when the lives put in harm's way were primarily those of American military personnel. The strategy has now become prohibitively risky; the lives of thousands, or even millions, of American civilians could be threatened by terrorist attacks. No rational policymaker should want to run such risks except for the most crucial stakes.

Rescinding Washington's global interventionist policy would not be a case of appeasing terrorists, as proponents of interventionism habitually claim. Adopting a more restrained security strategy would be a wise move even if no terrorist threat existed. The present policy is far too expensive and entangles the United States in conflicts in strategically and economically insignificant countries such as Somalia and Bosnia. The danger of terrorism being directed at Americans is merely an additional reason for rejecting interventionism.

Second, the attention and resources of the intelligence agencies need to be focused on serious national security threats such as terrorism. They must not be distracted by inappropriate missions such as dealing with the "threat" of economic espionage. That does not mean that the budget of the intelligence community (nearly $30 billion annually) needs to be increased. The intelligence agencies do not need more money or personnel; they need to better utilize the money and personnel they now have. Indeed, a leaner, better focused intelligence apparatus might well be able to do its job on significantly less than $30 billion a year, and Congress should seriously consider that possibility.

Counterterrorism will pose a great challenge to the intelligence agencies. Monitoring terrorist organizations and assessing their capabilities and intentions is a crucial mission, but penetrating such cells will be exceptionally difficult. Many of them are small, free-lance, highly decentralized operations whose members are almost pathologically suspicious of outsiders. In addition to an extreme reliance on an "old boy network''—in which service in the Afghan war is often a key feature—the personnel

are typically motivated by fanatical religious or ideological agendas. Bribes and other inducements that intelligence agencies use to recruit operatives are markedly less effective with such individuals than with officials of corrupt governments.

The decentralized nature of many terrorist organizations makes retaliation as difficult as penetration. Unlike their predecessors in the 1970s and 1980s, today's terrorists often do not boast of their deeds. That makes it difficult even to identify the perpetrators of a terrorist incident, much less to locate and either apprehend or eliminate them.

Nevertheless, the intelligence agencies have a vital role to play in the campaign against terrorism. They must be America's eyes and ears in a dangerous world. The agencies have a twofold mission—to identify international terrorist organizations and plans so they can be thwarted and, whenever those efforts fail, to locate the culprits so that retaliatory measures can be brought to bear.

Third, although many (perhaps most) current terrorist organizations are relatively small, free-lance operations, there are cases in which terrorist initiatives against Americans are directed or sponsored by other governments. Countering such state-sponsored terrorism is not a matter solely for the intelligence or law enforcement agencies. As syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer argues, the United States has every right to consider such incidents acts of war against the American people and should respond accordingly.

Krauthammer's argument is conceptually correct. Evidence indicates, for example, that two agents in Libya's intelligence service planted the bomb that brought down Pan Am flight 103, killing 189 Americans. It is difficult to believe that those agents acted without the authorization of senior officials in the Libyan government. Therefore, if the evidence of Tripoli's complicity stands up to scrutiny, that incident constitutes an act of war just as surely as if Libyan ships had shelled an American city and inflicted those casualties.

Responding to such an outrage with a declaration of war might seem drastic, but one of the prime constitutional responsibilities of the federal government is to defend the American people from external attacks. It is supremely ironic that Washington is willing to use military force for an assortment of causes around the world, most of which have little if any relevance to the security of the American people, but has treated the slaughter of 189 Americans by the Libyan government as merely an extradition issue involving the two agents.

Issuing a declaration of war does not necessarily mean that U.S. bombers must immediately launch strikes against the target country or the Marines conduct an amphibious invasion. U.S. leaders would have a full range of options for implementing such declarations at times and places of their choosing. War aims could be set at whatever level was deemed appropriate. Options might range from a demand that the perpetrators of the terrorist attack be turned over to American authorities to the complete removal of the offending regime.

A declaration of war is important as a statement of national intent. It also puts the United States in a different position under international law. Imposing a naval blockade, for example, is illegal in peacetime but legal in wartime. Washington could then inform countries trading with America's enemy that a state of war exists and that their ships must remain outside the blockade zone or be subject to boarding or attack.

Although Krauthammer is correct that a state-sponsored terrorist incident is an act of war, not a law enforcement matter, some qualifications need to be attached to his proposal. Most important, there must be clear and compelling evidence of another government's complicity in the attack. When it is a question of the direct participation of government operatives, as was apparently the case in the Pan Am bombing, the issue is simply whether there is sufficient evidence. A trickier situation arises when the allegation is of government sponsorship, rather than direct involvement. In that case, the standard should be that the accused regime must have actively sponsored an organization or individual that it knew intended to attack American civilians. General financial support of, or military training and other assistance to, organizations with political agendas (such as overthrowing the existing government in their respective countries) is not a sufficient casus belli unless the organization has already committed terrorist acts against the American people and the regime has nevertheless continued its sponsorship.

As a matter of policy, Washington should consider a declaration of war only when state-sponsored terrorism has been directed against Americans inside the United States or in another locale where they have a reasonable expectation of safety. (Passengers aboard an airliner flying in international airspace certainly qualify.) American civilians who travel to areas where there is an armed conflict are in a different category. An attack on such civilians is no less an act of terrorism, but the American government and society cannot be expected to incur the risks entailed in prosecuting wars merely to avenge the deaths of their fellow citizens who have voluntarily

put themselves in harm's way. Those civilians who insist on being in such places as Sarajevo, Mogadishu, or Kabul must do so at their risk.

Finally, in addition to the requirement for clear and compelling evidence of state complicity in a terrorist act, it is imperative that the evidence be presented to Congress along with a request for a formal declaration of war. A decision about whether the Republic goes to war is too important to leave in the hands of the president and his appointed advisers. The decision ought to be made—as the Constitution specifies—by Congress. Not only is that mandated by the Constitution—a fact that has largely been forgotten as chief executives have waged numerous presidential wars during the past half century—but it is an important check on rash action. The president may believe that the evidence of state-sponsored terrorism is compelling in a particular case, but others may conclude otherwise. It is important that the president's assessment be evaluated by an independent tribunal.

The policy outlined here for dealing with international terrorism is not a panacea, but it is prudent, balanced, and sustainable. We would not go around the planet looking for trouble, as Washington's current policy has us doing. But if trouble comes to us despite a policy of restraint, we will be prepared to use the intelligence agencies to identify and neutralize such threats whenever possible. We must also be willing to use the armed forces to punish those responsible for terrorist outrages that cannot be thwarted.

### *Suggested Readings*

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