

## **Coming to grips with terrorism**

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The horrifying events in New York and Washington, DC still have the nation reeling in shock. The unprecedented scale of the attacks, the massive scope of the damage, the uncertainty about the identity of the attackers and the paralysis of national institutions were a psychic trauma of unprecedented magnitude for this generation of Americans. The world has not suddenly changed, but the scales have been peeled from our eyes. The world is a much smaller place than it used to be. Our nation's self-image has long been shaped by a feeling of immunity from remote events. Those and other fantasies of the past crumbled yesterday.

What remains to be seen is whether or not we have the wisdom, the will and the courage to adapt and go forward. This is just the first of many difficult questions which we must confront.

The foremost question is: will we make the world a safer or more dangerous place by our response to the airliner attacks? History is cluttered with examples of wooden-headed failures to learn from experience. Most of the tragedies of human folly can be attributed to senselessly pursuing bad policy when better alternatives exist. The national illusion of invulnerability and invincibility has been badly shaken. The notion that we can pursue our national goals and priorities with complete disregard for the interests, feelings and passions of the rest of the world needs to be seriously examined.

The recent emphasis on tactical security and intelligence failures which enabled or failed to prevent these attacks obscures a deeper issue: the failure of the U.S. to evolve and adapt a comprehensive anti-terrorism policy which is responsive to events in the real world.

Like the cavalry generals at the outbreak of WWI, U.S. anti-terrorism policy is outdated, inadequate and badly in need of a searching re-evaluation. The bureaucratic and political inertia which has hampered policymaking was not destroyed in the attacks. The paralysis and inappropriate responses in the immediate aftermath of the attacks is perhaps the most telling sign of the policy vacuum which has been allowed to develop.

The need for a reappraisal of U.S. policy was acute before the attacks and its urgency is in no way diminished in the aftermath. This will be a difficult task, but if the widely applied parallel to Pearl Harbor has any validity, then a though-going shakeout had better be forthcoming. The calls for national unity are not only meaningless – since there is no political division requiring unification – but counterproductive if they mean getting behind failed policies that are demonstrably contrary to our national self interest.

**Catastrophic terrorism is not new, but it is poorly understood by the establishment**

Despite the fact that public figures and the media were disoriented by events, these attacks were not unexpected. The 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the Aum Shinrikyo nerve gas attacks in Japan and the Oklahoma City bombing were watershed events that transformed our understanding of the “new terrorism.” The character, frequency and lethality of terrorist incidents underwent a noticeable sea change after the demise of the Cold War and the relative success of multilateral policy initiatives to curtail international terrorism as a proxy for major powers’ foreign policy. Terrorism is a dynamic phenomena, the relative success of policies designed to curtail state-sanctioned terrorism produced an evolution in terrorist behavior.

First and foremost was the change in the character and motivation of terrorist groups from deniable assets of national policy to sub-national groups pursuing religious and cultural goals. The second important qualitative difference in terrorism was the shift from hierarchical terrorist organizations which mimicked the structure of their sponsors and opponents to more diffuse networks without clearly defined centers of power or chains of command. The third significant change was the increase in the lethality of terrorist attacks. While terrorist incidents have declined substantially over the last several decades, the number of casualties associated with major incidents has increased substantially.

This emergent trend towards rarer and more deadly terrorism produced a small network of researchers and policy analysts who have focused on what is termed “catastrophic terrorism.” Catastrophic terrorism is one pole of a scale of incident magnitude. At the lowest end is the “local incident” which was typical of the terrorist attacks of the 1960’s and 70’s. A local incident involved few casualties, was confined to a small area such as a single room or vehicle and was well within the capabilities of available “consequence management” resources. A “mass-casualty” incident, such as the events which triggered the evaluation of “new terrorism,” involves casualties in the hundreds, a much more complex environment and places severe strains on responding agencies. Until the jetliner attacks on New York and Washington D.C., no terrorist incidents had exceeded the mass-casualty threshold.

Catastrophic terrorism involves incidents where the scale and scope of the attack completely overwhelms the ability of responders to cope. In the discussions of catastrophic terrorism, most of the scenarios involved the use of weapons of mass destruction: chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapons. The only human experience with these instruments of mass-murder has come from warfare involving national military forces. Since World War II, the major industrialized powers have always been the attackers in these incidents, never the targets. As a result, most of the strategic thinking and policy analysis imagined these attacks would be reflexively modeled on our own capacity for committing these acts. It is only now that the massive and fatal blunder in this strategic thinking has been tragically and painfully revealed. Failing to understand opponents is a correctable error, but falsely imagining them to be just like oneself is an irretrievable blunder.

## **Need to reevaluate strategic policy**

If we believe, as we must, that policy influences events, the most serious and pressing policy issue is what effect our current policy stance had in contributing to the jetliner attacks. A comprehensive, critical and searching inquiry into counter-terrorism policy is clearly needed. It makes no sense to do more of what we are already doing if our current policy encourages, provokes and enables terrorists.

The extent to which current policy is flawed can be seen in the presidential transition briefing papers presented to then president-elect Bush by the RAND Corporation, a California think tank. The complete report, *Taking Charge: A Bipartisan Report to the President Elect on Foreign Policy and National Security - Discussion Papers*, edited by Frank Carlucci, Robert Hunter, Zalmay Khalilzad can be found at: <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1306.1/>

Bruce Hoffman, vice-president of RAND and head of their terrorism studies group has some strong criticism of the existing terrorism policies. He notes that “U.S. counterterrorism policy must be anchored to a clear, comprehensive, and coherent strategy.” He also notes that such a strategy is currently lacking and that no comprehensive policy evaluation has taken place since wrenching changes were hurriedly implemented in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing: “the collective U.S. policy mindset in responding to terrorism remains arguably locked in a 1995-96 time frame.” At that time, the focus of counterterrorism shifted to events modeled on the World Trade Center bombing, the Aum nerve gas attacks, and the Oklahoma bombing. Furthermore, he notes that “the means do not currently exist to undertake a comprehensive domestic terrorism net assessment.”

Among the list of deficiencies, Hoffman observes “...attention needs to be paid to the psychological as well as the physical effects of a terrorist attack. Nearly three quarters of the 5,000 casualties who received medical treatment as a result of the 1995 nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway, for example, in fact suffered from adverse psychological effects including shock, emotional upset and psychosomatic symptoms.” The absence of any such preparedness was seen nationally after the attack, as the entire nation exhibited signs of precisely such shock and upset.

Numerous other failures in counterterrorism policy exist to be corrected. Perhaps the most grievous blunder is the simultaneous blackout of meaningful information on and the inadvertent lionization of Osama bin Laden. Hoffman notes that “bin Laden has achieved a prominence and stature in recent years partially as a result of efforts that have failed to consider additional means by which support and sympathy for him and his cause could have been deflated or deflected rather than fueled and enhanced.”

## **Lessons from past incidents**

There are several as yet unlearned lessons from past terrorist experiences. First of all, it

should be noted that much of the “new terrorism” involves heavily brutalized communities. The swath of war and destruction that has swept back and forth over the Islamic world for the last fifty years has eroded many communities sense of security, peace and safety. From Algeria to Bangladesh, a broad region of the world which has suffered repeated brutalization. In these regions, the incorporation of violence into the culture has produced a considerable population motivated by rage, isolation and powerlessness. It is from this population that terrorists are recruited.

In October 1999, John V. Parachini, a Senior Associate at the Monterey Institute of International Studies’ Center for Nonproliferation studies, testified before Congress on assessing the threat of mass-casualty or catastrophic terrorism. In assessing eight incidents of “unconventional” terrorism involving the use of extraordinarily deadly tactics, the Monterey Institute terrorism study group identified six characteristics which distinguished these incidents from “conventional” terrorism:

- Charismatic leadership (6 of 8 incidents)
- No outside constituency (8 of 8 incidents)
- Apocalyptic ideology (4 of 6 incidents)
- Loners or splinter groups (6 of 8 incidents)
- Sense of paranoia and grandiosity (8 of 8 incidents)
- Defensive aggression (7 of 8 incidents)

Brian Jenkins, former head of the RAND terrorism studies group, has defined “conventional” terrorism as groups who want “a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead.” “Unconventional” terrorism involves actors who specifically want a lot of people dead.

### **The organizers of the attack likely are a relatively small group with limited resources**

The characteristics of past unconventional terrorists suggest a substantially different profile of the perpetrators of the jetliner attacks from what the public is being told in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. The image being painted by government officials and the media is of a sizeable group controlled by Osama bin Laden with a high degree of organization, finance and support structure. If this is the case, it will be in utter contradiction to what we know and have known for some time about these types of incidents. The image of a quasi-institution with extensive organization, large amounts of funding, and clearly defined boundaries. This is a projection of our military/industrial self-image onto the unknown attackers, not a considered view derived from confirmed evidence. If nothing else, this confusion about the nature of the attackers is evidence that the intelligence and security failures which preceded the attack have not miraculously vanished but persist and will

continue to haunt us.

The real picture of the attacking group is probably quite different from the initial reporting. It is always dangerous to make predictions, particularly since dissenting views are more likely to fall under criticism than mistaken consensus. Be that as it may, the attackers are most likely a rival or splinter group with respect to the bin Laden/Al-Qaida, network rather than recognized leaders within that network. Secondly, they did not require massive funding or extensive infrastructure. The attackers are currently known to number between three and six per aircraft. This gives a total of at least fifteen and no more than twenty four. The limiting factor on the number of attacks is probably the availability of people with minimal flight training.

The support network for a terrorist operation is necessarily limited by the need for security and it is very rare for support personnel to number more than three times the operational group. This suggests the total number of people directly involved in the attacks was somewhere between fifty and seventy five.

Some of the attackers are known to have been in the U.S. since December and February. As many as 27 (more than were believed to be on board the four planes) are reported to have received flight training. The cost of flight training is said to be between \$10,000 and \$20,000. This expense, combined with living expenses for nine months (reportedly the identified attackers lived quite modestly) and the cost of travel works out to around \$30,000 per person for the entire period or a little more than \$3,000 per month for the known duration of the terrorist operation. This is a tiny amount of finances, compared to the costs of fielding military personnel for nine months of operations. This small financial requirement is an indication of the size of the network directly supporting the attack cells. Given the sophisticated strategy of coordinated attack, it is a reasonable assumption that if the supporting network had more resources, they would have been employed in hijacking more aircraft. This is additional circumstantial evidence that the responsible organization is splinter or faction group.

### **Bin Laden is unlikely to be solely responsible and may not be directly involved**

Recent public statements by senior U.S. officials implicating Osama bin Laden in the jetliner attacks may be erroneous or misguided. The repeated insistence on assigning central responsibility to bin Laden is not based on any concrete evidence. Rather, it is the result of centralizing attention on him as a boogey man and ignoring the copious evidence that Muslim fundamentalist terrorism exists in a loose and non-hierarchical network of competing and contending groups. The massive intelligence failure which has not properly assessed the difference between networks and hierarchies is probably the single most fundamental error contributing to our increased vulnerability to catastrophic terrorism.

It is very likely that the supposed “connections,” “links,” and “ties” to bin Laden are not really very solid or backed up by concrete evidence. Instead, it is most likely the result of

intelligence and policy analysts seizing on bin Laden as the most visible and well-financed node in a complex and continually shifting network of sympathetic terrorist groups and factions. To date, the only publicly presented evidence of a “connection” to bin Laden is the reported interception of communications after the attacks informing bin Laden’s organization of the success – information that was already spreading over the world media at the same time.

A simple question to consider about the imputed responsibility of the bin Laden/Al-Qaida network: if our intelligence before the attacks was defective, what has changed to improve it?

### **The role of provocative U.S. policy**

The U.S. illusion of invulnerability has created a callous disregard for destabilizing effects of violence as a policy tool. For twenty years, there have been sporadic U.S. reflexive attacks with aircraft and cruise missiles after terrorist incidents. The “wag the dog” attacks in the wake of the African embassy bombings are the most recent example of this irresponsible and counter-productive strategy. American policy makers have enshrined as dogma the myth that our policy is neither provocative nor escalatory. The standard tag line of using military force for “sending a message” is a good example of the sheer woodenheadedness of reflexive violence.

A crucial flaw in U.S. counterterrorism policy is the failure to consider the provocative aspects of U.S. policy. For over five years, U.S. policy has focused considerable attention and billions of dollars of funding on catastrophic terrorism, particularly on defending against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons. This, like much of our other defense spending, has increased our vulnerability by concentrating resources on low-probability/high-consequence events. In addition to starving less cosmetically attractive, but absolutely necessary, measures like airport security and rescue services of resources, the emphasis on catastrophic terrorism advertised our greatest fears and vulnerabilities.

The significant characteristics of past known terrorist groups which have attempted catastrophic terrorism offer an important lesson in evaluating both policy and contemplated actions in response to the attack. The most valuable actions against an opponent are those which create surprise or incomprehension in their minds. The characteristics of rejecting outside constituencies, apocalyptic ideology, paranoia, grandiosity and defensive aggression are familiar territory in the mental landscape of unconventional terrorists. The presence of these signals in either statements or actions by the U.S. is a form of surrender to the terrorist mindset.

The impotent bluster of defensive aggression as exhibited by some of our less responsible officials is nothing less than caving in to terrorism. Likewise the miasma of secrecy and paranoia which has hampered our informational response is equally contrary to national interests. The shock and upset following these attacks is not without reason, but the

absence of effective planning for consequence management is neither unforeseeable nor excusable.

An important test of both immediate responses and more forward-looking policy debate is considering how much the proposed action or policy mimics the characteristics of catastrophic terrorism. The more like terrorists we are, the less effective we can be. This means answering rage with restraint, violence with anti-violence, grandiose paranoia with humility and isolation with bridge-building. Adapting successfully will mean deep reconsideration of a wide range of policies and practices.

### **U.S. has actively suppressed criticism of security policy**

In 1993 and 1996, A. Mary Schiavo, Inspector General for the U.S. Transportation Department, tested security at major airports. The testing found major deficiencies in airport security. In 1996, Congress funded an inadequate upgrade to airport securities measures, based in part on Schiavo's findings. Schiavo resigned in protest. In 1999, she took her concerns public and enlisted the help of WCMH-TV in demonstrating the porosity of security in U.S. airports. The response of the FBI was to target her and the television reporters for an investigation of possible violations of federal law. The Federal Aviation Administration banned investigations of security flaws by news media. These actions by the FBI and the FAA are an object lesson in how the suppression of dissenting opinion undermines security. Terrorists conduct extensive intelligence operations in planning attacks.

The cover-up and retributive FBI investigation of former Inspector General Schiavo was likely a provocative factor in the recent attacks. It is also likely that the scandalous security deficiencies at Logan Airport and the attendant publicity played a role in the terrorists' selection of that location as a point of departure. This is far more likely than the widely touted presence of Osama bin Laden's estranged relatives as prominent and loyal residents of that city.

The experience of former Inspector General Schiavo is only one example of how the politics of security policy are conducted. The failure to consider differing opinion and the refusal to explore available alternatives is the classic sign of folly: pursuing policy contrary to self interest. The necessary debate on U.S. policy must necessarily involve the entire range of public opinion and knowledge. This is the outstanding informational strength of a truly open and democratic society.

It may very well be necessary to explicitly solicit minority views and to encourage the publication of dissenting analysis. Perhaps the gravest danger facing us today is the manufacture of a counterfeit consensus and the unification of public opinion behind wrong-headed and self-destructive policies.

## **Defending democracy**

The best way to defend democracy is to act in accord with democratic values. That may sound easy, but “doing democracy” is considerably different than being a consumer of political rhetoric and mass-media infotainment. “Doing democracy” means being an activist – with all the attendant risk, sacrifice and uncertainty that entails. It also means challenging widely accepted notions if they are in conflict with the facts or democratic values.

On a national scale, it is clear that a searching re-evaluation of foreign and domestic policy is needed before lurching off into military or political actions with grave and lasting consequences.

On the local scale, attention needs to be paid to the inevitable erosion of democracy that accompanies outbreaks of militaristic nationalism. Humanitarian projects, such as a searching and comprehensive evaluation of post-disaster consequence management: psychological trauma, information policies, protection of civil liberties, and forestalling scapegoating attacks.

Locally, little has been done to address the lack of treatment for the psychic trauma. At noon Tuesday, I was downtown near the Bellingham Federal Building. In the course of one half hour, I witnessed several people who were clearly suffering from shock and exhibiting the classic signs of pale, drawn faces and listless manner. During that period, I also saw a pedestrian blunder across the street against the traffic lights and a car turn the wrong way down Magnolia Street. Later that afternoon, I saw several near-miss traffic accidents. At no time did I see or hear on any of the local or national media any word of the need for people to take precautions against the psychological consequences of the attack.

One would have thought that Bellingham, of all places, would have derived some experience in dealing with the sort of widespread mental trauma which follows a disaster. Evidently, we have not drawn many useful lessons from our experience with the pipeline explosion. Developing civic policy to guide media and public officials in managing psychic trauma is something that we can do here and now – a local action which may provide an example to others across the country and around the world.

The touchstone for judging the value of anti-terrorist actions is: does this make the trauma of violence more or less likely in the future?

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