50. Terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction

Congress should

- refuse to provide funds for U.S. military presence and interventions overseas that are not required to defend U.S. vital interests and could result in catastrophic retaliatory attacks on the U.S. homeland by terrorists using weapons of mass destruction;
- resist ''anti-terrorism'' initiatives that would undermine civil liberties and be ineffective in preventing terrorist attacks; and
- consider using a small portion of the savings from reducing unnecessary defense programs to stockpile antidotes to common chemical and biological agents and to train emergency response personnel to mitigate the effects of catastrophic attacks.

Recently, several U.S. government reports have emphasized the need for increased national attention to the defense of the American homeland. That mission has not been prominent since the 1950s, but the proliferation of technology for creating weapons of mass destruction, or WMD (chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons), has reawakened interest in protecting the homeland.

A study completed for the Department of Defense notes that historical data show a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and terrorist attacks on the United States. Once regarded as pinpricks by great powers, attacks by terrorist groups could now be catastrophic for the American homeland. Terrorists might now be able to obtain the technology for weapons of mass terror and may have fewer qualms about using them to cause massive casualties. A high-level official in the U.S. Department of Defense stated that such catastrophic attacks are almost certain to occur. It would be extremely difficult to deter, stop, detect, or mitigate such attacks.

As a result, there has been a dramatic change in the strategic environment of the United States. Even the weakest terrorist group could cause massive destruction in the home territory of a superpower. The United States is now the Gulliver of the international system. Yet, even though the Cold War ended nearly a decade ago, U.S. foreign policy has remained on autopilot. The United States continues to intervene militarily in foreign conflicts all over the globe—for example, those in Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Somalia—that are irrelevant to American vital interests. To satisfy what should be the first priority of any security policy—protecting the home territory and its people—the United States should adopt a policy of military restraint overseas. That policy entails intervening only as a last resort when truly vital interests are at stake.

Terrorists May Now Be More Willing and Able to Cause Mass Destruction

In its December 1997 report, the National Defense Panel—a group of retired generals and civilian defense experts created by Congress to develop alternatives to the Department of Defense's program—called for a reemphasis on defending the American homeland. The panel argued that, in addition to deterring a strategic nuclear attack, the United States must defend against terrorism, information warfare, WMD, ballistic and cruise missiles, and other transnational threats.

The threat to the American homeland could be magnified greatly by proliferating technologies associated with WMD. Terrorist incidents like the Oklahoma City and World Trade Center bombings are only the tip of the iceberg. The real worry is that, if terrorists obtain WMD, they could cause massive casualties. According to Secretary of Defense William Cohen, writing in the Department of Defense's November 1997 report, *Proliferation: Threat and Response:*

> With advanced technology and a smaller world of porous borders, the ability to unleash mass sickness, death, and destruction today has reached a far greater order of magnitude. A lone madman or nest of fanatics with a bottle of chemicals, a batch of plague-inducing bacteria, or a crude nuclear bomb can threaten or kill tens of thousands of people in a single act of malevolence.
>
> These are not far-off or far-fetched scenarios. They are real—here and now. Weapons of mass destruction already have spread into new hands. As the new millennium approaches, the United States faces a heightened prospect that regional aggressors, third-rate armies, terrorist cells, and even

> religious cults will wield disproportionate power by using—or even threatening to use—nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons against our troops in the field and our people at home.

The Defense Science Board concurred that the strategic environment has changed because terrorists are now more likely to attempt mass slaughter with WMD:

> The technology of today, and that which is emerging, allows a small number of people to threaten others with consequences heretofore achievable only by nation states. The United States' homeland, allies, and interests are vulnerable. In the judgement of this task force, the likelihood and consequences of attacks from transnational threats can be as serious, if not more serious, than those of a major military conflict.

The report continues:

> Transnational adversaries, in contrast to traditional terrorists, are motivated to inflict massive destruction and casualties. In the past, analysts believed one of the key "tenets of terrorism" was that terrorists calculated thresholds of pain and tolerance, so that their cause was not irrevocably compromised by their actions. While US government officials worried about terrorists "graduating" to the use of weapons of mass destruction (almost exclusively nuclear), they believed—based on reports from terrorists themselves—that most terrorist groups thought mass casualties were counterproductive. Mass casualties were believed to delegitimatize the terrorists' cause, generate strong governmental responses, and erode terrorist group cohesion. In essence, terrorists were ascribed a certain logic and morality beyond which they would not tread. The world has changed and this mentality is no longer the case.

Deborah Lee, then–assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs, put it even more strongly: "Doubts about the timing and location of possible terrorist attacks sit uneasily alongside the almost certain possibility that attacks against the U.S. homeland will eventually occur. Counterterrorism specialists define the problem not as a question of if but of when and where such attacks will take place."

Little Can Be Done against Terrorist Attacks on U.S. Soil

As scary as the potential for attacks using WMD may be, it will be very difficult to deter or prevent terrorists from making, transporting, or using such weapons. In addition, if terrorists use such weapons on U.S. soil, their effects will be difficult to detect in time and mitigate.

Biological and chemical weapons can be easily and inexpensively produced using commercially available raw materials and technologies in rather small facilities used for developing mundane commercial products. There are so many commercial facilities capable of making chemical and biological weapons in the world that such production would be easy to hide. Although making nuclear weapons requires somewhat more sophisticated technology and fissionable material, both may now be more readily obtained from the cash-strapped Russian nuclear establishment.

The difficulty of preventing states that sponsor terrorism from obtaining WMD is illustrated by the case of Iraq. The intense interest of the international community and the most relentless inspections in history were focused on Iraq's WMD programs. The spotlight was much harsher than that normally shone on enforcement of international arrangements. Even so, the international community will never be assured that all of Saddam Hussein's weapons and the facilities needed to make them have been uncovered and destroyed. (In fact, the only reason the international community knew about Saddam's biological weapons program was that his son-in-law defected and revealed its existence.) Despite extensive efforts to determine the location of Iraqi weapon stockpiles and production facilities, information is far from complete. "Put bluntly, we don't really know what Iraq has. And that's the heart of the problem," said Charles Duelfer, then–deputy chief of the UN special commission in charge of inspecting suspected Iraqi sites. (For example, biological weapons can be manufactured quickly and hidden, and they can be destroyed quickly if in danger of being found by inspectors.)

Even military action—that is, bombing—is unlikely to wipe out Iraq's chemical and biological weapons labs, which are small, mobile, and easily hidden (for example, in hospitals and fertilizer plants). In the unlikely event that the international community did succeed in destroying all existing stockpiles and facilities, Saddam could produce more agents using readily available commercial technologies after the inspectors left.

If Saddam could still conduct those weapons programs under such close scrutiny, other rogue nations—and especially terrorist groups—are likely to be even more successful in doing so. Even if inspectors became a permanent fixture in Iraq, the international community does not have the energy or resources to conduct such ongoing inspections in every nation that it suspects of developing—or harboring terrorists that are developing—chemical or biological weapons.

While rogue nations like Iraq may be deterred from launching a missile armed with WMD against the United States (after they obtain the capabil-

ity), they are less likely to be deterred from sponsoring a terrorist attack using WMD on U.S. soil. It is much easier to detect the origin of a missile launch (and retaliate) than it is to detect the origin of an indirect attack conducted by a shadowy terrorist group. Terrorist groups without state sponsorship might even be more difficult to deter.

Once initiated, such attacks are also hard to stop. With thousands of miles of border to police and millions of travelers to inspect, U.S. Customs authorities would find it virtually impossible—without intelligence tips—to stop the small quantities of such materials that could cause such horrific casualties. As Gordon Oehler, former director of nonproliferation at the Central Intelligence Agency, noted, the small amounts required could be shipped in normal commerce. This problem is even worse than that of interdicting drug shipments into the United States. Small quantities of drugs enter the country over thousands of miles of borders. As a result, law enforcement authorities stop only a paltry 5 to 15 percent of the total amount shipped. Biological, chemical, or nuclear materials would be even harder to stop because they are transported in even smaller shipments.

Once terrorists acquire nuclear, biological, or chemical material and smuggle it into the United States, they could disseminate it by several possible methods. The bomb needed for a nuclear explosion could be small enough to fit in a satchel or large enough to require a truck or ship for delivery. A conventional truck bomb could be used to spread medical radiological waste over a wide area. An aerosol sprayer—on a rooftop, a truck, or a crop-dusting aircraft—could be used to disseminate biological and chemical agents.

The independent National Defense Panel was pessimistic that any defense against terrorist attacks using WMD would be viable: "No defense will ever be so effective that determined adversaries, such as terrorists bent on making a political statement, will not be able to penetrate it in some fashion." Yet all it takes to cause massive casualties is one incident involving such powerful weapons. The Defense Science Board also candidly admits the daunting challenge of responding to attacks that use WMD and information warfare: "There are a number of challenges that have historically been regarded as 'too hard' to solve: the nuclear terrorism challenge, defense against the biological and chemical warfare threat, and defense against the information warfare threat." The board could recommend only incremental improvements to the government's response.

Once chemical and biological agents are used, detecting them in the air is difficult and slow. The first detection of biological agents may not

occur until several days after the attack, when victims start exhibiting symptoms. Then it is often too late to don a gas mask or provide an effective antidote. Most experts in mitigating the effects of biological incidents agree that mass vaccinations for biological agents are not the answer. Vaccines can be defeated by genetically engineering biological organisms to be resistant to them. Some organisms are contagious, compounding severely the problems of the medical response.

No effective protection against chemical weapons exists for the general population because suits are needed, as well as gas masks. The cost would be prohibitive. Decontamination of victims is critical, but also slow. In addition, many of the antidotes are toxic and must be used carefully. The effects of radiological contamination are severe and well-known.

In short, the medical response to any attack using WMD would be quickly overwhelmed. The casualties are likely to be massive. According to the Secretary of Defense Cohen, five pounds of anthrax could annihilate half the population of Washington, D.C. The nerve gas VX—a powerful chemical agent—could have similar effects.

Because the threat of terrorists' using WMD is difficult to deter, stop, detect, or mitigate and is potentially catastrophic in many cases, it is the greatest threat to U.S. national security today and will likely remain so in the foreseeable future.

Proposed Solutions

Some commentators have argued for trading off some of America's civil liberties in the fight against terrorists armed with WMD. They maintain that increased scrutiny of people is needed to gain more intelligence on terrorist activities. More intrusive domestic spying, however, would undermine the American way of life in the name of providing alleged protection from external threats.

Increased domestic snooping is both misguided and harmful. Increased domestic spying would be unlikely to afford much added protection against terrorists. The Defense Science Board admitted that preventing chemical and biological attacks is more challenging (because of the difficulty of gaining intelligence about the production, transportation, and delivery of such agents) than is mitigating the effects after the attack has occurred (which, as noted, is also difficult). Terrorist groups are hard to penetrate—even by the best intelligence agents and undercover law enforcement officials—because they are small and often composed of committed zealots. At the same time, law enforcement agencies and other organizations

have a tendency to stretch and abuse any increased powers of investigation. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation spied on and harassed Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. The law enforcement community might use the threat of terrorist attacks with WMD as an excuse to expand its power of investigation far beyond appropriate levels.

Some commentators also argue that civil liberties should be undermined sooner rather than later. They maintain that waiting to curtail civil liberties until after experiencing the emotional effects of a catastrophic terrorist attack might be unwise. They seem to assume that reducing liberties now will preclude a greater constriction of them after an attack. Although the threat of an attack is real, it may or may not occur. A preemptive surrender of civil liberties is, therefore, most ill-advised. Undermining civil liberties through increased surveillance is not the best way to deal with an attack and would not preclude a draconian suppression of liberty in the wake of a calamitous attack. In fact, an earlier constriction might set a precedent for even harsher measures later. In short, destroying the American way of life in a vain attempt to save it is a bad idea.

A less dangerous—but only marginally effective—solution would be to increase funding to stockpile antidotes for common chemical and biological agents and to train emergency response personnel to mitigate the effects of terrorist attacks. Congress should consider using a small portion of the savings from cutting unnecessary defense programs to provide additional funds for those activities.

Focusing on relatively ineffective surveillance measures and marginally effective efforts to mitigate the effects of an attack, however, diverts attention from measures that really could be effective in reducing the chances of a WMD attack on U.S. soil.

Interventionist Foreign Policy Increases Chances of Attack on the Homeland

The interventionist foreign policy that U.S. military power carries out increases the likelihood of a retaliatory terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland with weapons of mass destruction. That point was acknowledged by the Defense Science Board study for the undersecretary of defense for acquisition and technology, *DoD Responses to Transnational Threats.*

> As part of its global superpower position, the United States is called upon frequently to respond to international causes and deploy forces around the world. America's position in the world invites attack simply because of its presence. Historical data show a strong correlation between US involvement

in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States. In addition, the military asymmetry that denies nation states the ability to engage in overt attacks against the United States drives the use of transnational actors.

Terrorists and religious cults have an obsession with the United States because of its superpower status and behavior. The beliefs of the group Aum Shinrikyo—the Japanese religious cult that perpetrated the most unnerving terrorist act to date (attacking the Tokyo subway with poison gas)—are illustrative. Aum Shinrikyo prophesied an Armageddon-type conflict between Japan and the United States in the last years of the 20th century. To hasten it, the group believed the use of biological and chemical weapons was necessary. It is noteworthy that the group chose the United States as Japan's perceived adversary instead of China, Russia, or any other more likely potential enemy. Luckily, in 1995 members of the group were apprehended before they could carry out a plan to disperse nerve gas at Disneyland when attendance at the park reached maximum capacity during a fireworks display.

The best summary of the current state of affairs was made by Matthew Meselson, a geneticist at Harvard and copublisher of the journal *CBW Conventions Bulletin*, which tracks chemical and biological arms. He states, "The best protection would be if we didn't have any angry people or countries in the world."

Logically then, as a way to avoid inflaming such groups and nations *unnecessarily,* the United States should intervene overseas only when its vital interests are at stake. Since the end of the Cold War, however, the United States has never clearly defined its vital interests. The U.S. military has been asked to intervene anywhere and everywhere for a bewildering array of purposes. Those numerous interventions—for example, in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo—have nothing to do with America's national security. Such a casually interventionist foreign policy only provokes hostility from certain factions or groups within the target countries.

To minimize the likelihood of catastrophic terrorist attacks on the American homeland in this new and dangerous strategic environment, the United States must abandon its policy of being a military nanny in every area of the world. The nation must adopt a policy of military restraint. The foremost objective of the national security policy of any nation should be to protect its territory and the lives and well-being of its citizens. Instead, Washington's excessively interventionist foreign policy undermines that objective in order to reap amorphous gains by "enhancing stability" or "promoting

democracy" in faraway places. U.S. foreign policy invites consequences equivalent to those of a major military conflict on U.S. soil without any compelling need to do so.

Forgoing any minimal gains in security to be had by intervening in the Bosnias or Kosovos of the world would be worthwhile to avoid the very real potential of having an American city annihilated with WMD. Although some observers might label this policy prescription "appeasement," it is most certainly not. It is a much-needed winnowing of U.S. vital interests. The United States should openly declare what limited set of interests it considers vital instead of deliberately remaining vague in the vain hope that such ambiguity will deter all aggressive nations everywhere. If those more limited vital interests are threatened, the United States must follow through and take *decisive* action—unilateral if necessary—including the swift and devastating application of military power.

The United States should follow the advice of its former commander of Middle East forces, Gen. Anthony Zinni, who said, "Don't make enemies [but] if you do, don't treat them gently."

Suggested Readings

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—Prepared by Ivan Eland