CATO
HANDBOOK
FOR
CONGRESS

CATO
INSTITUTE

Washington, D.C.

7. Reducing the ''Lightning Rod'' Problem

> **Congress should** support a decisive, but narrowly focused, war on terrorism to eradicate the terrorists who perpetrated the September 11, 2001, attacks. In the long term, Congress should refuse to provide funds for U.S. military presence and military and political interventions overseas that are not required to defend vital U.S. interests and could result in catastrophic retaliatory attacks by terrorists on U.S. targets, including the American homeland. Most urgently, Congress should
>
> - direct that U.S. military forces be withdrawn from Saudi Arabia;
> - adopt a more even-handed approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by removing U.S. military and economic support for Israel and ending active mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict;
> - end the comprehensive economic sanctions against Iraq; and
> - end support for despotic Arab governments, such as those in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Current U.S. policies are unnecessary for U.S. security and incite radical Islamist terrorists to attack U.S targets.

The U.S. Government Has Endangered Citizens

Compared with other nations, the United States is disproportionately attacked by terrorists—in terms of both number of attacks and casualties. In 2001, according to the U.S. State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*, anti-U.S. attacks accounted for 63 percent of terrorist incidents worldwide. During the same year, attacks in North America alone (the vast majority of the casualties were American citizens) accounted

for 71 percent of the world's casualties caused by terrorist attacks. Why do terrorists single out the United States?

Some observers argue that the United States is a lightning rod for terrorists because it is a large, rich, capitalist nation; because it is a constitutional republic whose citizens enjoy many freedoms; or because American culture is pervasive and perceived as decadent by some groups. Although those factors no doubt have some effect, a deeper analysis should raise suspicions about them as significant causes for anti-U.S. terrorism. Many other countries are large, rich, capitalist nations with republican forms of government (for example, Germany and Japan), but they do not experience the magnitude of terrorism that afflicts the United States. True, American culture is pervasive, but American economic and political values (that is, civil society) are the envy of the world. Absent the element of U.S. government–driven military power, those values do not usually have coercive or ill effects on other countries and are not generally resented.

Many analysts focus on perceived Islamic hatred of decadent American culture. Yet more than one Zogby poll of numerous Islamic and Arab countries has shown that majorities in those countries liked American freedom, democracy, technology, and culture—including movies and television. Conversely, overwhelming majorities disliked U.S. government policies toward the Middle East. More important, if the goal is to uncover the motivations of the radical Islamists who attack the United States (and it should be, because that task is vital to both fighting and avoiding terrorism but has been neglected because of its sensitivity), the best place to start is with what Islamists say and write. For example, Peter Bergen, the CNN correspondent who interviewed Osama bin Laden and wrote *Holy War, Inc.*, notes that bin Laden has never railed against the decadence of American or Western culture. His hatred of America is generated by U.S. foreign policy—his biggest bone of contention is the unnecessary U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, which he believes desecrates Islam's holiest sites located there.

Although some pundits have claimed that America is targeted by terrorists for ''who it is'' rather than ''what it does,'' even high-level U.S. government sources admit a link between interventionist U.S. foreign policy (that is, being the world's policeman) and retaliatory terrorist attacks on U.S. targets.

That link was recognized in the upper levels of the U.S. government long before the September 11 terrorist attacks. According to a study completed in 1997 by the Defense Science Board, a panel of experts that advises the secretary of defense:

As part of its global power 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 attacks simply because of its presence. *Historical data show a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States* [emphasis added].

In an August 8, 1998, radio address justifying cruise missile attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan in response to bin Laden's earlier bombings of two U.S. embassies, President Bill Clinton admitted as much but put a positive spin on it with political hyperbole: ''Americans are targets of terrorism in part because we have unique leadership responsibilities in the world, because we act to advance peace and democracy, and because we stand united against terrorism.''

Most striking of all is the post–September 11 ''National Strategy for Homeland Security'' issued by the Bush White House's Office of Homeland Security in July 2002:

> For more than six decades, America has sought to protect its own sovereignty and independence through a strategy of global presence and engagement. In so doing, America has helped many other countries and peoples advance along the path of democracy, open markets, individual liberty, and peace with their neighbors. Yet there are those who oppose America's role in the world, and who are willing to use violence against us and our friends. Our great power leaves these enemies with few conventional options for doing us harm. One such option is to take advantage of our freedom and openness by secretly inserting terrorists into our country to attack our homeland. Homeland security seeks to deny this avenue of attack to our enemies and thus to provide a secure foundation for America's ongoing global engagement.

What is astonishing is that after 60 years the aberration in American history of acting as the world's policeman has become an end in itself. It is even a higher goal than that which should be any government's primary function—to make its territory and citizens safe and secure. Profligate intervention in the affairs of other nations (the United States is the only country in the world that regularly intervenes in every region of the world) is not a national security policy—in fact, it is quite the opposite. The Office of Homeland Security periodically issues ''duck and cover'' warnings to U.S. citizens at home, and the State Department does so to U.S. tourists, expatriates, and business people abroad. But the U.S. government's own actions are responsible for the disproportionate bull's-eye that is being drawn around Americans.

Extended Defense Perimeter Actually Increases the Vulnerability of the Homeland

During the Cold War the military paradigm of defending forward to keep the adversary far away from the homeland made some sense. The United States faced a foe with conventional military forces and reaped advantages from ensuring that its opponent did not make inroads in certain key strategic areas of the world. Although both superpowers possessed nuclear weapons, the disadvantages of U.S. intervention overseas were limited by the ''managed competition'' between the two behemoths that avoided direct interventions in the other's regions of core concern. Now, however, the disadvantages vastly outweigh any advantages gained from profligate U.S. interventions in remote parts of the world that are no longer strategic (if they ever were). The United States no longer has to check the advances of another superpower and now faces an unconventional foe in a war that has no front line. All of the layers of the extended U.S. defense perimeter did not prevent al-Qaeda from carrying out a catastrophic attack on the U.S. homeland and actually reduced U.S. security by generating much of the hatred that led to the attack. In short, the nontraditional interventionist foreign policy on a grand scale—initiated during the Cold War but abhorrent to U.S. policymakers for the prior 170 years—is now out of date and profoundly dangerous.

What the United States Should Do about Terrorism

The U.S. government has several options for dealing with terrorism. The possibilities include improving intelligence, enhancing homeland security measures, increasing military and covert action against terrorists, and reducing military and covert action. Even U.S. intelligence professionals reach the disquieting conclusion that there will be more terrorist attacks and that U.S. intelligence will not be able to detect some of them before they happen. That conclusion is especially unnerving now that terrorists are clearly willing to inflict mass casualties and are willing to give their lives in the attack. It should be noted that the conventional means used in the September 11 attacks are not the worst possibility; attacks with chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons could be far more deadly.

The United States certainly should take measures to enhance homeland security, but the public should not be lulled by all the official activity into thinking that the U.S. government can do more than catch some of the

attackers before they attack or reduce casualties at the margins after an attack. The United States is one of the largest and most open societies in the world—both in population and in area. The nation has thousands of miles of borders, countless skyscrapers and sports stadiums, vulnerable infrastructure, and a political system that prevents law enforcement's behaving too aggressively in the fight against terrorism. Moreover, according to the Defense Science Board, the problems of nuclear terrorism, defense against the threat of biological and chemical weapons, and defense against information warfare have historically been regarded as ''too hard'' to solve. Yet the U.S. government is now inculcating the American public with a false sense that government can solve those problems.

Finally, the question of military and covert action needs to be addressed. In the short term, the United States has no choice but to try to eradicate bin Laden and the al-Qaeda terrorist network by using intelligence, law enforcement, and, if necessary, military assets. In most nations (for example, Yemen and Pakistan), the United States should first rely on supporting local governments in their efforts to eradicate terrorists within their borders and, if that proves insufficient or ineffective, then take direct military action. But the United States should not get dangerously distracted in this war against the enemy at the gates by military or covert actions against terrorist groups that do not normally focus their attacks on the United States (for example, Hezbollah or Hamas) or against rogue states that cannot be linked to the September 11 attacks. Many foreign terrorist organizations on the State Department's terrorism list do not focus their attacks on the United States. Attacking them militarily or using covert action (which the Bush administration has authorized) is simply stirring the hornets' nest unnecessarily. The United States can continue to engage in lower-profile regional cooperation in intelligence and law enforcement with other nations to combat such groups.

Although narrowly focused military action will be needed in the short term to expunge the threat from al-Qaeda, a policy of military restraint should be adopted in the long term. Because improvements in intelligence capabilities (particularly intelligence from human sources) and homeland security measures will provide positive results only at the margins in the detection, prevention, and mitigation of terrorist attacks, it is vital that the United States lower its target profile vis-à-vis terrorists. That goal can be achieved by reducing the U.S. military presence abroad and intervening militarily or politically only on the rare occasions when vital U.S. interests are threatened.

Specific Recommendations to Lessen U.S. Vulnerability to Terrorist Attacks

Remove the U.S. Military Presence from Saudi Arabia

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from the land of Islam's most holy sites would remove an irritant that inflames Islamic terrorists to strike U.S. targets but would not adversely affect other U.S. security interests. Even if it were necessary to use the U.S. military to defend Persian Gulf oil— and economists from across the political spectrum attest that it is not— the United States did so successfully during the Gulf War in 1991 without having a prior peacetime military presence in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, a substantial portion of U.S. military assets has already been moved to surrounding countries because of restrictions on their use imposed by the Saudi regime. Anonymously, even senior U.S. military officials have expressed to the *Washington Post* a desire to withdraw U.S. forces from Saudi territory.

Furthermore, it is ethically questionable to use U.S. forces to defend a despotic regime with an abysmal human rights record that indirectly supported al-Qaeda terrorists and directly supported the radical religious schools in Pakistan that spawned those terrorists and the repressive Taliban regime in Afghanistan that harbored them. The Saudi government also makes the lives of American service personnel miserable by putting heavy restrictions on their personal lives and their mingling with Saudi citizens.

Some observers would argue that withdrawing from Saudi Arabia would hand bin Laden a victory by fulfilling his desire for a U.S. withdrawal. That argument can be nullified as long as the United States neutralizes most of the al-Qaeda network as U.S. forces pull back from Saudi Arabia. In addition, according to the *Washington Post*, because of fears that the American presence was destabilizing their regime by stirring up Islamic militants, the Saudis have been on the verge of asking U.S. forces to leave. The United States should take advantage of those sentiments as a cover and quietly pull out its forces if asked to do so.

Develop a More Even-Handed Approach to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict by Cutting Off Military and Economic Aid to Israel

Unbalanced U.S. involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict inflames the Islamic world and is a principal motive behind terrorist attacks by Islamists on U.S. targets worldwide. The desire to assist a nation inclined toward democracy is understandable, but doing so is no longer advisable

given the possibility of retaliatory mass terrorist attacks, including the use of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, on the U.S. homeland.

In attempting to mediate the negotiation of a settlement to an intractable conflict, the United States is perceived by Arabs to be pushing the Palestinians to end violence more than they are prodding Israel to do so. But both sides in the struggle have used excessive violence against civilians. Those excesses have made it even less likely that either side would be willing to end the conflict. The United States should discontinue futile efforts to pressure the parties to reach a settlement that neither wants and therefore has little chance of succeeding. Both sides must indicate a strong willingness to reach a settlement before the United States resumes mediation. When the United States does so, its role should be strictly limited and neutral. A much more modest and disinterested U.S. mediation role would lower the U.S. target profile to Islamic terrorism.

End Comprehensive Economic Sanctions against Iraq

The most grinding and complete sanctions in world history should come to an end. When economic sanctions are imposed, the target regime—usually a despotic government that tightly controls its nation's political and economic systems—usually transfers the pain of sanctions to the poorest members of society and earns enormous profits from smuggling. In addition, the sanctions create a strong ''rally-around-the-flag'' effect for the regime against the nations that imposed the strictures. The embargo also takes the blame for economic problems that are caused by the regime's poor policies. In those ways, economic sanctions have the perverse effect of actually strengthening the despotic government's hold on power. Although counterintuitive, the best way to weaken a despotic regime is to get Western products, services, and investment, and the ideas that go with them, into the target nation. But that strategy will work only over the long term.

In the case of Iraq, the bone-crushing U.S.-led embargo has devastated the Iraqi poor but made Saddam Hussein's regime stronger. The sanctions' ill effects on Iraqi society have provoked radical Islamic elements all over the world. The United States should break with conventional wisdom and lead the world in scrapping the sanctions. By doing so, the United States would lower the probability of retaliatory catastrophic terrorist attacks on U.S. targets.

Stop Supporting Despotic Regimes in the Middle East

The Cold War is over, and supporting ''friendly'' authoritarian regimes, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, is no longer necessary (if it ever was).

As noted before, other strategic reasons for supporting them—for example, the great oil reserves in Saudi Arabia—are questionable. Saudi Arabia and the other authoritarian Persian Gulf oil producers—which obtain the vast bulk of their export earnings and foreign currency from the sale of oil—are more desperate to sell the oil than the United States is to buy it. The corruption of those regimes generates the hatred of radical Islamists, as does U.S. support for those governments. As would implementing the other three recommendations, ending support for such authoritarian nations would lower the U.S. profile as a target for Islamic radicals.

Suggested Readings

Carpenter, Ted Galen. *America Entangled: The Persian Gulf Crisis and Its Consequences*. Washington: Cato Institute, 1991.

Carr, Caleb. *Lessons of Terror: A History of Warfare against Civilians: Why It Has Always Failed and Why It Will Fail Again.* New York: Random House, 2002.

Eland, Ivan. ''Does U.S. Intervention Overseas Breed Terrorism? The Historical Record.'' Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing no. 50, December 17, 1998.

———. ''Protecting the Homeland: The Best Defense Is to Give No Offense.'' Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 306, May 5, 1998.

———. ''Robust Response to 9/11 Is Needed but Poking the Hornets' Nest Is Ill-Advised.'' Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing no. 69, December 18, 2001.

Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside Terrorism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Hoge, James F. Jr., and Gideon Rose, eds. *How Did This Happen?: Terrorism and the New Year.* New York: Public Affairs, 2001.

Smith, James M., and William C. Thomas, eds. *The Terrorism Threat and U.S. Government Response: Operational and Organizational Factors.* U.S. Air Force Institute for National Security Studies, March 2001.

U.S. Department of State. *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001.* Washington: U.S. Department of State, May 2002.

—Prepared by Ivan Eland