

Understanding Terrorism

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The devastating terrorist attack that struck the United States on September 11, 2001 shattered New York's massive World Trade Center, a piece of the Pentagon, thousands of innocent lives, and the illusion that sophisticated technology and powerful weapons could keep us safe.

Thousands of ordinary people became the victims of an enemy who cared nothing about our fleets of warships, bombers and missiles — an enemy who turned the fruits of our own technological brilliance against us.

Of course, terrorism is not new to the United States. More than a century before Timothy McVeigh brought down the Federal Building in Oklahoma City with a truck bomb, the Ku Klux Klan was committing widespread terrorist violence. New York's World Trade Center itself was the target of an international terrorist attack in 1993. What was different about September 11 was chiefly the scale of the carnage. But that is a very important difference.

Sub-national terrorists have now entered the realm of mass destruction. As bad as they were, the attacks of September 11 could have been worse. Terrorists might yet get their hands on weapons of mass destruction. Bio-weapons were on the minds of terrorists long before the recent anthrax attacks. In 1995, a member of the American white supremacist Aryan Nations pled guilty to buying three vials of frozen bubonic plague bacteria --- by mail. That same year, the Japanese Doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo killed a dozen people and injured thousands more by releasing nerve gas in the Tokyo subways. And there is some evidence that that was a dress rehearsal for much larger attacks the cult was planning for 1996.

All the information necessary to design a crude, inefficient nuclear explosive --- many times as powerful as the Oklahoma City bomb --- has been publicly available for decades. In 1996, Time reported that scientists at Los Alamos designed and built more than a dozen terrorist-type nuclear weapons using "technology found on the shelves of Radio Shack and the type of nuclear fuel sold on the black market."

Terrorists might also be able to steal or buy a ready-made weapon. In 1997, Russian General Alexander Lebed claimed Russia had lost track of some 100 "suitcase" nuclear bombs.

Terrorists could also escalate the level of destruction by conventionally bombing an industrial toxic chemicals plant, a nuclear power plant, or a toxic chemical or nuclear waste storage area. This thought has not escaped their minds --- there were almost 700 bomb-related threats against U.S. nuclear facilities from 1976-1994. The fourth jetliner that crashed in Pennsylvania during the barrage of hijackings on September 11 was looping back toward and went down about 120 miles from the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant.

Fighting Terrorism

In the short run, terrorism is most effectively fought by improved intelligence, greater international cooperation and a far better understanding of the character of terrorist groups.

In the long run, the best way to end terrorism is to drain the pool of marginalized and humiliated people from which demagogues like Osama bin Laden recruit people so frustrated that they are willing to die to strike a blow

against those they hold responsible for their pain. That cannot be done with military strikes — or better police work. It can only be done by helping them to develop economically and politically, by taking their economic and political rights just as seriously as we take the rights of those whose worldview aligns more closely with our own.

No one who feels that they and their people are respected and taken seriously by the world flies airliners into buildings.

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