Could September 11 Have Been Averted?

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How did we fall victim to a second and more terrible Pearl Harbor? At first glance, this seems an unsolvable puzzle.

On the one hand, we had various kinds of warning. The bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995 and the Tokyo nerve-gas attack that same year provided a powerful demonstration of some of the methods terrorists might employ and the destruction they could achieve. It was also abundantly clear, from a decade-long series of lethal attacks on U.S. facilities abroad, and an attempt to knock down the World Trade Center in 1993, that a group or groups of terrorists were making a determined effort to strike at the U.S. That these same terrorists might attempt once again to hit targets in the American homeland was an obvious possibility; indeed, the CIA issued a series of generalized alerts to that effect, the most recent appearing this past August.

On the other hand, a conspiracy came out into the open with ruthless efficiency on September 11 and caught us entirely by surprise. Scores of Arab terrorists, having carefully prepared for years, managed to execute a highly imaginative and precisely synchronized attack on the political, military, and financial nerve centers of the United States. Even though the terrorists did not reach all of their intended targets, they still achieved near total success: thousands of people were burned alive or buried in rubble, major financial and transportation links of the country were paralyzed or destroyed, symbols of our freedom and security were reduced to ashes, and fear of still more death and destruction was made ubiquitous across the land.

Now the attack on the United States has provoked, in response, what President George W. Bush has called “a war against terrorism,” the first major military phase of which began on October 7. But far more quietly, and partly behind the scenes, it has also provoked a war of finger-pointing. Some has been directed at the Federal Aviation Administration and other bodies in charge of airport security, where laxity unquestionably ruled the day. Some has been aimed at our immigration authorities, for opening the door to virtually all comers. And far more has been directed at the U.S. intelligence community—primarily the FBI and the CIA—for failing so utterly at a primary responsibility. Among other problems, we are told, the FBI lacked adequate authority to engage in electronic surveillance of suspected terrorists, while the CIA, thanks to a series of ill-guided “reforms,” has been chronically weak in gathering human intelligence.

But whatever genuine operational failures these postmortems reveal, our real shortcomings run much deeper. Terrorism is a problem the U.S. government has been contending with in an increasingly organized fashion since 1968, when Palestinian terrorists began hijacking aircraft and the modern era of international terrorism was born. In the intervening years, an intricate structure has been built to deal with the extraordinary number of different facets of the problem,

ranging from prevention all the way to what is called “consequence management,” a euphemism for dealing with the aftermath of a major assault.

All told, some 45 separate governmental units and subunits are responsible for handling the different dimensions of the terrorist threat. This unwieldy structure has the burden of carrying out a policy that mirrors it in complexity. The formal aims of U.S. policy have been set forth in a myriad of official documents, with two “presidential decision directives” promulgated by President Clinton being especially significant codifications. These documents, which have been only partially declassified, declare that the policy of the United States is to “deter, defeat, and respond vigorously” to terrorist attacks against Americans no matter where they take place.

How precisely have these words been put into action? One recent and very impressive guide is *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy* by Paul R. Pillar.[1] Its author served throughout much of the 1990′s as the deputy director of the CIA’s Counterterrorist Center, and his book, published not long before September 11, is both authoritative and exceedingly well-informed. I draw upon it freely in what follows.

As we learn from Pillar, the U.S. has been fighting terrorism over the years in a variety of ways, ranging from the indirect to the direct, and by means of a variety of instruments, ranging from the peaceful to the violent. To begin at the indirect and peaceful end of things, let us look first at Pillar’s summary of attempts by the government to address the “root causes” of terrorism.

In the aftermath of September 11, this subject has become somewhat poisoned, with some on the Left (Susan Sontag most notoriously) citing American actions and alliances to explain—and explain away—the terror attack itself. But since, as Pillar notes, terrorism and terrorist groups “do not arise randomly, and they are not distributed evenly around the globe,” U.S. officials have necessarily been impelled to give serious attention to the conditions in which terrorism appears to flourish. Roughly, he discerns two types of such “antecedent” conditions: political repression and economic deprivation.

“Terrorism is a risky, dangerous, and very disagreeable business,” Pillar writes; “few people who have a reasonably good life will be inclined to get into” it. It follows that tamping down resentments that might lead to terrorism is an interest of the U.S., in line with our efforts to provide development assistance, promote democracy, and foster peace negotiations in troubled regions of the world like Northern Ireland and the Middle East.

Another indirect aspect of the U.S. counterterrorism program is the effort to shape the intentions of terrorists. Behind our oft-declared principle of not negotiating with hostage-takers is the idea, in Pillar’s words, “that not rewarding terrorism will give terrorists less incentive to try it again.” Our frequently reiterated determination to punish terrorists or bring them to “justice” is also presumed in at least some cases to exercise a similarly deterrent effect.

More significant than either of these aspects of policy has been erecting physical defenses against attack. This effort began in the late 1960′s with aviation-security measures designed to foil hijackings. Over the years, it has extended into other areas, primarily through increasing protection for key federal sites like the White House and Congress and civilian infrastructure like nuclear power plants. In the wake of a string of attacks on U.S. embassies and military bases abroad in the 1990′s, the U.S. has spent billions tightening the security of overseas buildings and placing concrete barriers in the way of truck bombers.

On the more active side of things, Pillar shows that the U.S. has also tried to interfere with the ability of terrorist organizations to carry out attacks. An enormous intelligence-gathering apparatus, employing techniques from satellite reconnaissance to electronic interception of communications to the recruitment of informers and the placement of moles, helps us track the movement of terrorists, impose financial controls on their organizations, and, when appropriate, apply force against them and the states that sponsor them.

Financial controls have received heightened attention as the U.S. tries to freeze the funds sustaining Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist network. But the approach is not new. As the State Department's annual report on terrorism shows, the U.S. has blocked the assets of dozens of organizations, including the Abu Nidal group based in the Middle East, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, and the Aum Shinrikyo in Japan.[2] Similarly, U.S. intelligence-gathering has bolstered the effort to locate terrorists abroad and arrange for their arrest, rendition, and prosecution in U.S. or foreign courts. Indeed, in any tally of time, energy, and resources devoted to counterterrorism, the objective of "bringing terrorists to justice" would undoubtedly occupy first place.

The best-known example of this approach was our response to the downing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in December 1988, in which 270 passengers died, including 189 Americans. A decade-long effort to bring two Libyan intelligence agents to trial came to a culmination earlier this year with the acquittal of one and the sentencing of the other to life imprisonment (with the possibility of parole after twenty years) by a Scottish court sitting in the Netherlands. The same prosecutorial machinery has been set in motion following other major attacks against American targets, including the truck bombing of U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998, which killed nearly 300 people including twelve Americans, and the suicide bombing of the *USS Cole* in 2000, which killed seventeen American sailors.

The legalistic approach has not entirely supplanted more forceful action. Though the subject is by definition wrapped in secrecy, the President has the authority under U.S. law to "use all necessary means, including covert action . . . to disrupt, dismantle, and destroy international infrastructure used by international terrorists, including overseas terrorist-training facilities and safe havens." Press reports suggest that there have been at least a few covert operations launched against terrorists in recent years, including one mission that was to have been carried out by Pakistani proxy forces against Osama bin Laden in 1999 but was aborted on account of a coup d'etat in Pakistan.

Finally, open military action has also been part of the U.S. portfolio, but only, prior to our current war on the Taliban and al Qaeda, on three occasions and only in retaliatory fashion. In 1986, after Libyan agents placed a bomb in a Berlin discothèque frequented by American

soldiers, the U.S. struck Libya from the air, hitting military sites as well as the compound of Libya's leader, Muammar Qaddafi. In 1993, in response to an attempted assassination plot aimed at former President George Bush, Bill Clinton lobbed 23 cruise missiles at the headquarters of the Iraqi intelligence service in Baghdad. And in 1998, following truck-bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Clinton again fired a fusillade of cruise missiles in an attempt to kill Osama bin Laden at one of his training camps in Afghanistan. Clinton also simultaneously struck a pharmaceutical plant in the Sudan believed by the CIA to be producing the nerve agent VX.

These, then, were the main elements of U.S. counterterrorism policy up until September 11. Roaming over the territory in great detail, along the way Pillar offers his own judgments of which elements were sound, which were unsound, and what was missing.

To begin again at the beginning, Pillar believes that "cutting out roots" can indeed be useful; as a case in point, he cites the U.S. role in fostering the Oslo peace accords between Israel and the PLO. That the Oslo process seems, if anything, to have *fueled* terrorism, and never more dangerously so than at Oslo's peak under Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, tells heavily against Pillar's judgment here. But it should be noted that in general he does not favor putting "root causes" at the center of U.S. policy, and (in keeping with his habit of qualifying almost everything he writes) he is also careful to acknowledge that terrorism does not *necessarily* follow from oppression, that terrorist groups have emerged "in some wealthy Muslim societies like Kuwait but not in some poor ones like Niger," and that peace processes can "enflame a minority that opposes a settlement." Besides, even if all root causes were somehow removed, there would "always remain," writes Pillar, "a core of incorrigibles—and these will include the terrorists about whom the United States must worry the most."

Pillar is similarly realistic about efforts to shape the intentions of terrorists. A policy of making no concessions, for example, can help at the margins, and perhaps has served to prevent some hostage-taking incidents. But some terrorist attacks "are conducted without any particular concession in mind; the destruction is more of an end itself." When dealing with this extreme brand of terrorism, "there is no way to influence intentions over the long term."

Physical defenses are also no panacea. Although in some instances they have unquestionably saved lives and complicated the work of those who would attack us—Pillar cites the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, where U.S. casualties were held to a minimum—the limitations of such steps are no less obvious. For one thing, the resources poured into physical defense, however enormous, cannot begin to afford protection to all the facilities requiring it. What is more, such security measures may encourage terrorists to shift from secure to more vulnerable targets. In an open society like ours, there will always be an unlimited number of paths by which determined terrorists can wreak havoc and kill people en masse. Particularly difficult to stop—as the Israeli experience teaches us—are terrorists willing to commit suicide in the course of carrying out their assault. In sum, physical defenses at some

times and in some places are reasonable and necessary, but in themselves they are not "a solution."

The collection of intelligence is no less problematic, essential though it is as a first step toward more active efforts. For starters, the major technological tools of U.S. intelligence—satellite reconnaissance and the interception of electronic communications—are better suited to monitoring the maneuvers of a conventional adversary than the activities of small terrorist groups, which do not typically possess assets observable from high altitudes or outer space and whose members can elude electronic detection by arranging to communicate in face-to-face meetings.

As for human-source intelligence, that is especially hard to come by in the realm of terrorism. Even if the Clinton administration had not issued controversial guidelines discouraging the CIA from recruiting "unsavory" characters as sources, successful penetrations of terrorist plots would in all likelihood have remained the exception rather than the rule. The obstacles, writes Pillar, arise from the structure and composition of terrorist groups:

Those who are closest to the center of decisionmaking in a group (and thus most likely to be witting of all its operations) are the ones least likely to betray it and thus most resistant to recruitment as intelligence sources. Besides this problem of motivation, any attempt to recruit such individuals also faces a problem of access—of getting to them and cultivating relationships with them. This is an even greater difficulty with most religiously oriented terrorists of today than it was with, say, leftists who moved within bourgeois circles in Europe. . . . A well-placed human source is the best possible intelligence asset for counterterrorism, but for the reasons just given, such sources will be very few—and always will be.

Compounding the problems in gathering intelligence are the difficulties in analyzing it. The challenge goes beyond the hurdle of working through reams of documents in obscure languages like Dari or Pashtu. The greater challenge is to find small grains of wheat in a mountain of chaff. The "sheer magnitude of what there is to cover" includes, in Pillar's words,

not only the whole lineup of existing terrorist groups but also terrorists who have not yet formed a group . . . and groups that have not yet gotten into terrorism. . . . [And] what about the plethora of other extreme religious cults around the world, many of which could represent future terrorist threats? There are not the resources to cover them all, and culling the ones that are most likely to pose such a threat is an awesome analytical task.

From these inherent difficulties, Pillar is impelled to conclude that there "will never be tactical warning of most attempted terrorist attacks, or even most major attempted attacks against U.S. targets."

Bleak as all this sounds, Pillar is no less straightforward in enumerating the limitations on *active* measures. Thus, sanctions and financial controls are not likely to amount to much more than a pinprick, even if they were far more stringent than what we had in place before September 11. Unlike in narcotics smuggling, or money laundering, the salient characteristic of terrorism, writes Pillar, is that it is "cheap." (The first attempt to topple the World Trade Center is estimated to have cost only $400 in total; the second, $500,000 at most.) The small sums involved would make the movement of money difficult to track even if it took place in this country, but most of it does not, and is subject only to the unwatchful eyes of governments rarely eager to cooperate with U.S. authorities. In the end, says Pillar, financial controls are primarily of "symbolic" significance.

Next, the criminal-justice approach, vaunted by several successive American administrations as a clear demonstration of our resolve. On the plus side, putting terrorists on trial does serve to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to the rule of law, and has succeeded in putting a number of dangerous terrorists behind bars. The mere prospect of being apprehended may also deter some, or at least interfere with their operational freedom. But the advantages have to be weighed against the serious disadvantages, of which Pillar enumerates several.

For one thing, the American criminal-justice machine is set in motion only when American citizens are victimized. But "the impact of international terrorism on U.S. interests cannot simply be measured in dead American bodies"; there are incidents abroad in which *no* Americans are killed but in which failure to intervene robs us of potentially valuable intelligence and also makes us appear callous, indifferent to the terrorism that afflicts our friends and allies but not ourselves.

For another thing, the criminal-justice approach tends to apprehend only the "working-level" operative while permitting the powers behind terrorism—heads of organizations and leaders of sponsoring regimes—to remain at large. This not only leaves the worst perpetrators unpunished but has the additional practical pitfall of giving the public, and perhaps the U.S. government itself, "a misleading sense of closure."

Among our various tools, covert action is, in Pillar's view, the most "effective possibility." He conceives of it not as thriller-style raids by shadowy special forces but as a "painstaking cell-by-cell, terrorist-by-terrorist" campaign, inherently "small-scale," with the U.S. playing a quiet, "behind-the scene" role (providing "encouragement, prodding, information, advice, . . . and perhaps monetary or logistical support") while the main work is done by the countries where the terrorists are operating or hiding. Among other advantages of this method of procedure, the "U.S. hand can stay hidden, and the risk of reprisals is minimal."

Though conceding that some groups are so violent and recalcitrant that they "should be exterminated, not engaged," Pillar concludes that assassination of terrorist leaders, currently forbidden by a 1976 executive order, is on the whole a detrimental practice. Not only would it be perceived "as a stooping by the United States . . . to the level of the terrorists," but "it would completely undercut the principle that terrorism is a matter of methods, not just of targets or purposes." It would also "shake the confidence of many Americans in the relevant government

institutions, resurrecting old suspicions about what the CIA and other U.S. intelligence and security services were doing."

Finally, the open use of military force. This, in Pillar's judgment, is another mixed bag. Retaliatory strikes of the kind we have carried out on three occasions may have some merit, but there is little evidence that they stop terrorists from striking again. Qaddafi, for example, "did not get out of the terrorism business" but continued to hit American targets, using the Japanese Red Army as a surrogate and also directly ordering his agents to place a bomb aboard Pan Am 103. The U.S. attacks against Saddam Hussein in 1993 and bin Laden in 1998 similarly seemed to exercise no deterrent effect.

Indeed, far from working to deter, such strikes in Pillar's view can "serve some of the political and organizational purposes of terrorist leaders," increasing publicity for their cause, bolstering their "sense of importance," and reinforcing the message "that the United States is an evil enemy that knows only the language of force." At best, retaliatory strikes can help sustain the spirit of a public demoralized by terrorism, and help mobilize allies by impressing on them our own seriousness. But in the last analysis, writes Pillar, such strikes "will always be primarily message-sending exercises, rather than a physically significant crippling of terrorist capabilities." As for preemptive as opposed to retaliatory strikes, Pillar says little about them other than to note that they would lack "the justification of being a response to a terrorist attack" and for this and other reasons would be "unwise."

Pillar's survey, written while on sabbatical from the CIA, is cheerless indeed: none of our major tools promises to work very well, and the United States is bound to remain perpetually vulnerable to surprise attack. But Pillar himself does not appear especially perturbed by the state of affairs he sketches.

True, in some respects the dangers posed by terrorism have been getting worse. The casualty rate rose over the 1990′s even as the number of incidents declined, and across the same period the U.S. itself became more of a target, a development reflecting the "increased global reach of terrorists" and the "demonstration" provided by the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center and then by Timothy McVeigh that "low-tech methods could cause mass casualties even in the heart of America." But Pillar also notes a more encouraging side of the picture: among Americans, the toll that terrorism has exacted over the past two decades—some 856 killed, including 190 from domestic terrorism—is "tiny" when measured against annual highway deaths or major U.S. wars, and does not even match the death rate from bathtub drownings or lightning strikes.

What such comparisons show, writes Pillar, is that terrorism "tends to have greater psychological impact relative to the physical harm it causes than do other lethal activities." But the public focus on the *failures* of counterterrorism obscures the victories the U.S. has achieved—among them a dramatic cut in the "frequency of international terrorist incidents worldwide" since the mid-1980′s and the rapidity with which a number of major terrorist incidents, including the World

Trade Center bombing of 1993, were solved and the perpetrators apprehended, tried, and imprisoned. All told, Pillar concludes, the U.S. track record against terrorism over the past decades has been "remarkable."

As I mentioned early on, Pillar's book was published before September 11. In the wake of September 11, of course, a number of his conclusions and observations—at one point he hails the "drastic reduction in skyjackings" over the past 25 years as a "major success story" of U.S. counterterrorism—seem not just wide of the mark but almost risible. But to pick at Pillar for not having foreseen the future is unfair. Much of what other government officials had to say about terrorism before September 11 is far less wise and clear-eyed than anything in this book.

Just this past July, for example, one of Pillar's colleagues, a former CIA and State Department counterterrorism specialist named Larry C. Johnson, took to the op-ed page of the *New York Times* to dismiss the idea "that terrorism is the greatest threat to the United States," that it is "becoming more widespread and lethal," or that "extremist Islamic groups cause most terrorism." Such "fantasies," Johnson wrote, have been generated by "pundits who repeat myths" and "bureaucracies in the military and in intelligence agencies that are desperate to find an enemy to justify budget growth."

Even *after* September 11 (but before the U.S. began its counterassault on the Taliban and al Qaeda in October), Philip C. Wilcox, Jr., who served in the State Department as ambassador at large for counterterrorism under Madeleine Albright, was insisting in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* that "armed force" is "usually an ineffective and often counterproductive weapon against terror." What is needed instead, he wrote, is "a concerted international effort, with carefully calculated pressures and incentives—and cooperation from Pakistan, which is essential—to persuade bin Laden's hosts to hand him over for trial"; in other words, diplomacy of the very same kind practiced to no effect by the Clinton administration. As for military action, this has several pronounced disadvantages, wrote Wilcox. For one thing, it "may alienate governments, especially in the Islamic world, whose cooperation we need." For another, it "might kill innocents." It could even "violate international laws, including treaties against terrorism that the U.S. had worked hard to strengthen."

If we turn from the executive branch to another arm of government, mention must be made of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, widely regarded, before he retired last year, as the intellectual giant of the U.S. Senate. Having completed a slow journey from a 1970′s neoconservative hawk to a 1990′s neoliberal dove, the senator from New York spent much of the last decade campaigning to cut the CIAs budget, and indeed introduced a bill to abolish the agency altogether and turn over its intelligence-gathering functions to the State Department, where the likes of Larry C. Johnson and Philip C. Wilcox, Jr. were running the show. Among the provisions of Moynihan's bill, one in particular stands out. It concerns the entry of aliens into the U.S. and might aptly be labeled the Free Admission for Terrorists clause:

Within two years of the effective date of this Act the United States Government shall delete from any Lookout List the name of any alien and all information pertaining to such alien placed on such list because of any past, current, or expected beliefs, statements, or associations, if such beliefs, statements, or associations would be lawful within the United States.

There is nothing remotely resembling such terminal astigmatism in Pillar's *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Not only is it consistently cogent and sharply reasoned, but at every step of the way Pillar explores the weakness of his own arguments, offering necessary caveats, pointing out areas of uncertainty, and delineating the risks and costs of the policies he himself favors. This is, in sum, a specimen of official thinking at its best. If Pillar's analysis is flawed—and it is deeply flawed—that is because his entire framework for thinking about his subject is misconceived.

To Pillar, the metaphor of a " 'war' against terrorism" is not an apt one, for from that metaphor "it is a small step to conclude"—mistakenly—"that in this war there is no substitute for victory." Instead, counterterrorism should more properly be likened to "the effort by public-health authorities to control communicable diseases" or the effort to improve "highway safety," where regulators "can reduce deaths and injuries somewhat" by taking action on a variety of fronts but without any false idea of "defeating" the problem. Above all, we must be prepared to compromise. Although some terrorists are "monstrous vermin to be locked up or stamped out," there will be occasions, Pillar writes, "when the greatest contribution the United States can make to counterterrorism will be to swallow hard and . . . to shake hands that carry stains of old blood, possibly including American blood." In short, less emphasis on "absolute solutions" and more willingness to seek "accommodation."

Pillar's strategy was demolished on September 11; but even before then, its deficiencies were glaring. To think of terrorism as a public-health or traffic-safety problem, with whatever qualifications, is profoundly to misread it as a political and moral phenomenon. Yes, infectious disease and defective automobile tires do cause death, but they do not do so by deliberate human agency. To lose or blur the distinction between such radically disparate things is to deprive us of the clarity necessary to combat it. In particular, by ruling out preemptive strikes, we allowed terrorists to wage war against us at the time and place of their choosing, while we could never hit them, or the states harboring them, first. In other words, the catastrophe of September 11 was not a matter of inadequate airline security or porous border controls or even insufficient watchfulness by the CIA and the FBI, though all of these conditions and more undoubtedly obtained. Rather, what brought us low was a passive strategy, executed passively.

As the 1990′s wore on, the government was well aware that Osama bin Laden was targeting the United States for attack. Here, for example, is the relevant entry in the State Department's 2000 annual report on terrorism, listing al Qaeda's activities over the previous decade, but not yet including the attack on the USS Cole:

- Plotted to carry out terrorist operations against U.S. and Israeli tourists visiting Jordan for millennial celebrations. (Jordanian authorities thwarted the planned attacks and put 28 suspects on trial.)
- Conducted the bombings in August 1998 of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, that killed at least 301 persons and injured more than 5,000 others.

- Claims to have shot down U.S. helicopters and killed U.S. servicemen in Somalia in 1993 and to have conducted three bombings that targeted U.S. troops in Aden, Yemen, in December 1992.
- Linked to the following plans that were not carried out:
    - to assassinate Pope John Paul II during his visit to Manila in late 1994,
    - simultaneous bombings of the U.S. and Israeli embassies in Manila and other Asian capitals in late 1994,
    - the midair bombing of a dozen U.S. trans-Pacific flights in 1995,
    - and to kill President Clinton during a visit to the Philippines in early 1995.

For years, the U.S. government was also aware that Afghanistan and a number of other countries were harboring bin Laden and his associates. It was aware that in some of these countries, terrorist training camps were graduating more than 2,000 men a year, all schooled in the arts of subterfuge and mayhem, all steeped in hatred of the West and preeminently hatred of America. It was aware that bin Laden was attempting to acquire chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons of mass destruction and had built facilities for their production in Afghanistan. And it was aware that bin Laden was himself only a part of a larger picture that included dozens of other affiliated terrorist organizations and more than a half-dozen states giving them succor.

As the problem posed by bin Laden grew steadily more acute over the course of the decade, how did we respond? "The tendency to overreact to shocking events, and to fall into complacency in their absence," writes Pillar, "is natural and inevitable." Here, however, was a case where the U.S. fell into complacency in the *presence* of shocking events. We did, it is true, launch at least one covert operation and one overt military operation against bin Laden. As is obvious, they failed.

The covert operation never got off the ground, and for a no less obvious reason: to rely on the Pakistani intelligence service to carry it out, when Pakistan was a main prop of the Taliban, was to doom it from the start. As for the overt operation, the retaliatory strike on bin Laden launched by Bill Clinton on August 20, 1998 was designed above all to eliminate any risk to the U.S. Thus Clinton opted only to fire a salvo of cruise missiles from a great distance and did not deploy troops on the ground. Next to the politically costly possibility of suffering American casualties, successfully hitting the target was a secondary consideration—and we missed the target. After bin Laden escaped unscathed, there was no follow-up action whatsoever.

At the time, Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, making the best of a mini-operation gone awry, told reporters that the strike had actually achieved its goal: "It is very likely something would have happened had we not done this." In the wake of September 11, asked to comment on the Clinton administration's failure to put bin Laden out of business, Albright said only that "I think we accomplished quite a lot." More honest has been Nancy Soderberg, a former senior aide in Clinton's National Security Council: "In hindsight, it wasn't enough, and anyone involved in policy would have to admit that."[3]

The U.S. under Clinton and both Bushes "accomplished quite a lot" of other things, too. In gaining the passage of a UN resolution imposing yet more sanctions against the Taliban last year, the U.S., the State Department proudly announced, had secured a "major victory" against terrorism. The opening in New York of the trial of bin Laden operatives accused of bombing the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania was, according to the State Department, still another "major victory." When Qaddafi decided to permit the extradition of his intelligence agents to stand trial in the Netherlands, this was, in the words of a ranking Clinton diplomat, "a real achievement" for U.S. policy. And when the guilty verdict was handed up this past January, the reaction of the Bush administration was the same: a "momentous decision," in the words of a State Department spokesman.

At the same time that we were compiling paper victories against our deadliest adversaries, we also declared that we were systematically choking them off. It would be more accurate to say that we were laying bare our own throats.

Consider the financial and immigration controls in place before September 11. "[A]ny contribution to a foreign terrorist organization," the State Department declared in 1997, "regardless of the intended purpose," was henceforth "prohibited." But the same document announcing this blanket proscription went on to explain that because some terrorist groups had been operating "charitable activities such as clinics or schools," Americans could still donate to them if their "contribution is limited to medicine or religious materials." Hamas, the Palestinian terrorist group responsible for dozens of suicide bombings within Israel, was specifically singled out as an organization that could be aided in this way, but it was not the only eligible one. Up through September 11 and for a time beyond, it remained perfectly legal to make donations of medications to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network, including Cipro—a helpful tool for safely working with anthrax. And one could also contribute texts—"religious materials"—calling for holy war against the United States.

Immigration controls: in theory, members of foreign terrorist organizations were subject to various limitations on their freedom of movement, at least as far as entrance to and residence in the U.S. were concerned. Actual practice was something else. Al Qaeda was officially labeled a terrorist group only in 1999 (a date that in itself speaks volumes about bureaucratic sloth), but as we now know, followers of bin Laden had little difficulty remaining here *legally* even after they were ostensibly banned.

"Four to five al Qaeda groups have operated in the United States for the last several years," the *Washington Post* reported on September 23, 2001. These groups, it continued, "are under intensive government surveillance. The FBI has not made any arrests because the group members entered the country legally in recent years and have not been involved in illegal activities since they arrived, the officials said." A few days later, on September 27, a *New York Times* article helpfully explained the rules governing the issuance of visas to terrorists: "According to the State Department manual for consular officers, participating in the planning or

execution of terrorist acts would bar a foreigner from getting a visa, but ‘mere membership’ in a recognized terrorist group would not automatically disqualify a person from entering the United States. Nor would ‘advocacy of terrorism.’ ” There was no need, it turns out, for passage of Moynihan’s Free Admission for Terrorists provision; it had effectively been the law of the land all along.

Even worse, what the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* have reported is but the tip of an iceberg. Last year, at the behest of Congress, the National Commission on Terrorism, a body of leading experts, issued findings that were duly praised as hitting hard at our complacency. But the report itself, which begins by declaring that “American strategies and policies are basically on the right track,” repeatedly illustrates the very attitude it purportedly condemns. Thus, the commission called attention to the “thousands” of students from the countries identified by the State Department as sponsors of terrorism who have been permitted to enter the U.S. to study. But the presence of such students, the report goes on to say, “is not objectionable in itself”; not only do the “vast majority” have “no adverse impact on U.S. national security,” but they actually strengthen us by “contribut[ing] to America’s diversity.” As for the small minority who might in fact be terrorists, the report raises only a very mild alarm about the lack of any functioning system that might tell authorities what they are studying, or whether one of them has suddenly switched his major from, say, business administration to microbiology (with a specialization in anthrax spores), or whether they even remain enrolled in school.

Another startling indicator of lassitude comes from the heart of counterterrorism itself. According to the commission, the guidelines governing the recruitment of “unsavory” sources, introduced by the Clinton administration in 1995, had created a climate within the CIA that was “overly risk-averse” and that contributed “to a marked decline in agency morale unparalleled since the 1970′s.” That is bad enough; but the morale problem had sources beyond the restrictive guidelines. Again according to the commission, some CIA officers and FBI special agents were being “sued individually” by terrorist suspects for actions taken in the course of their officially sanctioned duties. Instead of representing them in such suits, the government was letting the agents fend for themselves; those who chose to stay on the job were being forced to purchase personal-liability insurance to cover their legal bills.

Did the commission call for an end to this preposterous state of affairs, whereby accused terrorists have been able to turn the tables on their pursuers and bring *them* to court? Not at all. It asked only that the government provide “full reimbursement of the costs of personal-liability insurance.”

One can easily go on, but the point is clear. Foreign terrorists were waging war on the United States, and the United States was determined, above all, not to wage war back. Instead, we satisfied ourselves with palliatives: compiling lists of terrorist organizations and the states that sponsored them; capturing and extraditing underlings while letting the planners roam free; imposing sanctions replete with exceptions and loopholes; even, on occasion, closing our eyes

entirely to the nature of the perils confronting us. It seems very long ago indeed but it was only last year that Madeleine Albright took to the podium of the State Department to announce that countries on the terrorism list would no longer be known as "rogue states." Henceforth, she declared, they were to be called "states of concern." When an ostrich sees one of its natural predators, it rushes to bury its head in the sand. Here was a great power doing the same.

For our refusal to face down adversaries who were openly bleeding us, and for our unwillingness to take even minimal risks in providing for our self-defense, we have now paid a heavy price. In numbers unknown, terrorists have infiltrated our society and struck a powerful blow. More blows are almost certain to follow. And now at last, to paraphrase Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in a not altogether different context, the pitiless crowbar of events has pried open our eyes, and we are attempting to fight back.

But are we too late? More to the point, have we truly changed our ways, or will we soon be back on the road to "accommodation," shaking hands with "moderate" members of the Taliban and cementing a phony alliance with the terrorist-sponsoring states of the Middle East? How many more of us will die before we steel ourselves to do what is necessary in order to secure the victory that many besides Paul Pillar assure us can never come?

Footnotes

[1] Brookings Institution, 272 pp., $26.95.

[2] By law, the State Department must annually compile a list of states that sponsor terrorism; those placed on it are subject to sanctions that bar them from purchasing various items from us—primarily military gear, trucks, aircraft, and some types of dual-use technology. As of last year, seven states fell on the list: Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, North Korea, Cuba, and Sudan. Though al Qaeda has long been active on its soil, Afghanistan was not included. Instead, through a chain of bureaucratic misfirings, it was given the far milder classification of "not cooperating fully with U.S. anti-terrorism efforts."

[3] In a series of post-September 11 interviews, Albright has also been contending that the Clinton administration would have lacked popular support for any action against bin Laden more vigorous than what it undertook, and that only with the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon did public opinion awaken fully to the terrorism menace. "This has been such a horrible event," says Albright, "that it has mobilized people in a way that [the destruction of] two embassies and the *Cole* didn't."

But this line of reasoning only serves to remind us once again of how heavily the Clinton administration relied on reading opinion polls in formulating vital national-security plans. What is more, even if public opinion had been as pacific as Albright suggests, could not the American people have been aroused to the danger with proper leadership? A long series of polls cited by Pillar show extremely *high* levels of support throughout the 1990′s for a forceful

counterterrorism policy; in one representative survey, 79 percent of the public, and 75 percent of "opinion leaders," agreed that "combating international terrorism should be a 'very important' goal of the United States."

What these numbers indicate is that not public opinion but the President's preoccupation with the Lewinsky affair throughout 1998—the crucial year when our embassies in Africa were blown up—foreclosed the possibility of a more militant course. As it was, and as Pillar reminds us, even the President's limited retaliatory strike against bin Laden in that year was widely seen at home and abroad as part of a "*Wag the Dog* scenario" whereby the White House concocted a "a phony war to divert attention from a presidential sex scandal." Even if Clinton's motives in firing cruise missiles at bin Laden were pure (I would give him the benefit of the doubt on that score), we are all now, three years later, beginning to see the real price of his year-long distraction from his duties and his dissipation of presidential authority.

About the Author

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