

What September 11 Should Have Taught Us

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OSAMA BIN LADEN: HIS FUTURE AND OURS

The tragic events of September 11, compounded by the Anthrax attacks, have profoundly affected us all. It was our country's first experience with catastrophic terrorism, and the full impact of the attacks has yet to be fully appreciated. Foremost, of course, are the thousands and thousands of deaths, the long-term psychological toll, and the overwhelming sense of loss. We feel not only rage, but also frustration in the knowledge that whatever price we exact from Osama bin Laden can never approximate the pain and damage he has inflicted.

Most of us are wondering whether the events of September 11 are likely to be repeated and if so, in what form, against what targets and using what weapons? What I want to do is to share with you, as a basis for discussion, what I believe may be coming down the pike and why.

The first question most of us are asking is “Will bin Laden attack us again?” The short answer is - he never stopped. Osama bin Laden is said to be responsible for:

- The 1986 attack against the Office of the Program Manager-Saudi Arabian National Guard in Saudi Arabia and the deaths of five United States personnel.
- The February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, the scene of six deaths and injuries to approximately 5,000 people.
- The October 1993 deaths in Somalia of 18 Special Operations Force personnel. The body of one of our men was dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. The United States left Somalia much the same way we left Beirut after the 1983 Hizballah bombing of our Marines barracks. We left Somalia with our tail between our legs.

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- The bombings of our Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, that resulted in the deaths of approximately 300 persons and injuries to more than 5,000, the vast majority of whom were Kenyan nationals.
- The attack on our ship, the USS Cole, in Yemen, resulting in the deaths of 17 sailors.
- Most recently, he was responsible for the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and the deaths of more than 3,000 people.

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

With a track record like that, why would bin Laden not be back?

If any of you have any doubts concerning bin Laden’s resolve or his targets, let me read a portion from bin Laden’s February 1998 fatwa, issued under the name of the World Islamic Front against Jews and Crusaders:

“In compliance with God’s order, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims:

“The ruling is to kill the Americans and their allies--civilians and military. It is the duty of every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque in Mecca from their grip....

“We--with God’s help--call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God’s order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it.”

This person harbors an implacable hatred of who we are and what we stand for and sees us as the Great Satan. He believes he is engaged in a struggle of biblical proportions, with a country and culture bent on the corruption and ultimate destruction of Islam. His goal is much more ambitious than driving us out of Saudi Arabia or driving us out of the Middle East. His goal is the complete and utter destruction of the United States of America.

Bin Laden has proven himself a ruthless and clever adversary. He is an innovative thinker. Some suspect he may have used his foreknowledge of the September 11 attacks to reap significant financial rewards on the futures market.

Bin Laden thinks strategically. I am convinced that one of the reasons he wanted to inflict mass casualties on September 11, was not only to punish us, to humiliate us, and to demonstrate his global reach, but to provoke a massive, unfocused, knee-jerk

conventional military response. That type of response would have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of innocents and inflamed the Arab street, putting at risk our security interests in much of the Muslim world.

His strategic goal, I believe, was to change the paradigm and recast the scope and nature of the struggle from the United States vs. bin Laden to the United States vs. the Muslim world, a world comprised of more than one billion adherents.

Recent polling data suggests he has been largely successful. The vast majority of Muslims in the Middle East do not believe that the September 11 attack was carried out by bin Laden, much less by Muslims. Most believe that the Jews were behind the attack and been forewarned. They assert that about 4,000 Jewish workers stayed home on that fateful day and, thereby, escaped the carnage.

They decry the War Against Terrorism as an imperialist plot to reoccupy Muslim lands and that the September 11 attack is being used as a pretext for Crusader ambitions. After all, did President Bush not describe his War on Terrorism as a “Crusade?” Incendiary broadcasts serve to reinforce their suspicions and feed their paranoia. The Palestinian cause has been adopted by bin Laden as his own, which has broadened his appeal throughout the Arab World, to include those of even a secular bent. Why would Bin Laden not be back?

I remember the comments of a man who had met bin Laden and spent some time with the Taliban. He stated, “These are men who are not afraid of death.” “You look into their eyes and you realize that these are men who know how to die.”

What kind of attacks will we likely see? Let me recount a portion of the 1998 fatwa:

“We--with God’s help--call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God’s order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it.”

In the December 27 tape broadcast by Al Jazeera, bin Laden stated:

“If their economy ends they will busy themselves away from the enslavement of oppressed people...it is important to concentrate on the destruction of the American economy.”

Later in the tape, he continued:

“These blessed attacks have caused by their own admission to markets in New York and elsewhere, more than a trillion dollar loss with the help of God Almighty.”

He further stated:

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“I stress the importance of carrying on Jihad against America militarily and economically. America is in decline...the economic drain is continuing but more strikes are required and the youths must strike key sectors of the American economy.”

In reference to the skyjackers he said:

“I hope God will receive them, those who have shaken the foundation of America and have struck the American economy in its core and have struck the biggest military might in its heart with the help of God Almighty.”

TARGETS OF TERRORISM

I think there can be little doubt that bin Laden’s immediate target has been the American economy and, more specifically, New York City. The scope of the success of the attack of September 11 probably exceeded his wildest dreams and most likely, whets his appetite and that of his followers.

If nothing else, bin Laden is a man of conviction and uncommon resolve. For these and other reasons, I believe he again will target the American economy and, most probably, New York City. Remember that bin Laden’s 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, although causing extensive damage, was in his eyes, at best, a mixed bag. Only six deaths resulted and the Trade Center Complex left standing, was rebuilt.

Some eight years later, on September 11, bin Laden returned to finish the job.

I believe bin Laden is obsessed with New York, both as a target and a symbol. It is a symbol of American wealth and greatness and, in his eyes, a symbol of American corruption and evil. New York City is the financial capital of the world. It is home to two stock exchanges, headquarters of major banking and financial institutions, and home of the New York Federal Reserve. New York is also the home of the largest Jewish community in the United States and, as we all know, bin Laden has a special place in his heart for the Jews.

I think bin Laden will be back and, although he may seek mass casualties, I think his real target has been and will continue to be the American economy. He has seen the stock market’s wild gyrations, resulting from the September 11 attack, and the damage to the economy that has ensued.

In the months after the attack, consumer confidence was down and fears of recession or worse were rampant. As a student of history, he knows how economic catastrophe can rend a nation and turn a people against its government. Economic meltdown is divisive. As one cynic put it, “You can kill a thousand and the American people will soon forget; just don’t mess with their 401K’s.”

If bin Laden were to engage in a phased campaign, it might begin something like this:

He might again target American airliners. Why? That is because they continue to represent a lucrative and vulnerable target. There has been much publicity about increased security measures. The President has assured the people that it is safe to fly and the flying public is taking him at his word. Washington National Airport has reopened, curbside check-in is again permitted, and return to normalcy has been given high priority, sometimes at the expense of security.

Are our airliners a tempting target? You bet, and we inadvertently have raised the payoff should the terrorists succeed. The industry is in dire financial straits with layoffs exceeding 100,000 and a massive federal subsidy being required to forestall possible collapse. Such attacks would be a deathblow to companies teetering on the brink and further weaken an economy that his attacks are believed to have tipped into recession. Moreover, Presidential prestige is now a part of the equation and, if planes begin to plummet from the skies, so will presidential credibility and the public’s trust—both priceless commodities.

How could such attacks occur? Security is up. Passengers are subject to much more rigorous checks, National Guard troops are at the airports, airline personnel with access to aircraft or sensitive operations are undergoing background checks, etc.

I ran across an interesting article in the September 27 issue of the *Wall Street Journal* which noted that about 25 percent of America’s airfreight is carried on passenger aircraft as is much of America’s mail. An article in the September 28 issue of the *USA Today* notes that air freight and airmail, even those carried on passenger planes, are hardly ever x-rayed and, more recently the public has also learned, their checked baggage is hardly ever inspected. I do not think I need to connect the dots.

A coordinated bombing campaign of American flag passenger carriers would exact a horrific toll, particularly if the attacks were virtually simultaneous. Is it far fetched? No, it is not. A simultaneous bombing campaign to down 12 American flag carriers was well along in 1995, when Ramzi Yousef, a bin Laden operative and the architect of the World Trade Center bombing, was interrupted by Philippine police and forced to flee the country.

OUR VULNERABILITIES

Simultaneous bombings of several airliners exploiting such vulnerabilities would again ground passenger air traffic. If such were to occur, a significant portion of the public would be terrified to fly. Moreover, much of the mail would not move nor would much of the airfreight. The effect on business would be significant, and for some businesses, it would be the death knell. The effects would ripple through the economy, affecting everything from tourism to spending at the neighborhood mall.

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A follow-on move in such a phased campaign could well be another attack on a symbol of American wealth and power, with the target being finance and banking. The chilling discovery that bin Laden agents were investigating the use of crop duster aircraft, suggests that he might be contemplating a biological or chemical attack. Perhaps the plan would be to fill the spray tanks with lethal chemicals and crash the aircraft into a high value target.

Particularly worrisome are the efforts of bin Laden operatives to obtain licenses to transport hazardous waste. Many of the trucks used in such operations, carry huge payloads. Some officials have suggested that bin Laden’s men plan to crash the trucks into the target and, thereby, contaminate the target and the surrounding area. However, I suspect their planning may be somewhat more sophisticated, perhaps configuring the vehicles brimming with hazardous waste, as truck bombs. If this were the case, the explosion would not only take out the immediate target but also disseminate the lethal cargo far and wide.

I can see bin Laden returning to Manhattan to tie up loose ends. Perhaps it will be to the Wall Street area, with the Stock Exchange as the primary target. His intent would be to turn it and the New York’s financial district into the nation’s most expensive hazardous waste site.

Bin Laden operatives could up the ante by constructing a Radioactive Dispersal Device or RDD. This is not a nuclear bomb, but uses radiological material to contaminate large areas. Construction is relatively simple. Radiological material is placed around a core of high explosives and then detonated. This could be material such as Cobalt-60, Iodine 131, or Cesium-137. Such material may be stolen from hospitals, industrial sites, or university research centers.

As we noted in our Department of Defense 1994 study, *Terror-2000*, if such a device were detonated in New York’s financial district, a significant area would be contaminated and rendered uninhabitable for years to come. The radioactive dust would permeate surrounding buildings and contaminate air conditioning systems, floor and wall coverings, furniture, computers, and servers. Depending on the substance used, it could bond with the concrete and cement, making decontamination, without site destruction, a virtual impossibility. The impact on world financial markets would be immediate and potentially catastrophic.

The most devastating effects, however, would be to public confidence and the resultant fear and panic such an attack would generate. How many workers would return to their offices in the financial district even if the authorities declared them decontaminated and safe? How many would return the next day? How many would return the next week?

Bin Laden’s aim would not only be to close down Wall Street and impact the world economy but, perhaps even more importantly, to try to turn the rage and frustration of the American people against the government for failing once more to protect them. I do not

know how successful bin Laden would be, but I can guarantee the conspiracy theorists of talk radio and the Internet would have a field day, and their poison would have a terribly corrosive effect on public morale and societal cohesion.

In addition to biological, chemical, and radiological attacks, other tactics exist that can be terribly disruptive and further exacerbate panic and loss of confidence. A campaign of selective assassination could be employed that would target pillars of the economy, such as Alan Greenspan, David Rockefeller, as well as select CEO's of the Fortune 500. Such assassinations would have a particularly unsettling effect on American and global financial stability.

WAR OF IDEOLOGIES

I would like to leave you with a few, perhaps somewhat disjointed, thoughts.

What we are involved in is not a conventional war. Wars have a defined beginning and ending. This conflict could well continue indeterminately, and the opportunity to use conventional military power in conventional battles, will be few and far between. In war, there is a readily identifiable enemy. There are battlefields and front lines. In this struggle, there are no front lines. In this struggle, the enemy is indistinguishable from friend or neighbor. He lives among us. The enemy is within the gates.

At times, this conflict will be bloody and sub-threshold, hardly perceptible. It will be fought in many arenas: economic, political, psychosocial, and to a lesser extent, military. What we are engaged in is not war in the conventional sense, but rather, what might better be called a *Protracted Conflict*. I believe what we are witnessing is a “clash of civilizations.” Our adversaries view this protracted conflict as a continuation of their campaign against the Crusaders--now epitomized and led by the United States. They take the long view, which I believe, is the perspective we need to adopt.

This is not a conflict that can be won with bombs, guns, and technology. This, primarily, is a war of ideologies and belief systems. It is a most dangerous form of conflict because our adversaries are motivated by unquestioned religious tenets that have the demonstrated ability to motivate men to suicide attacks and unspeakable cruelties. Now, these same men well may gain access to Weapons of Mass Destruction.

Fighting terrorism is not a game for an impatient people. One must carefully think through second and third order consequences of any move. It is a bit like three-dimensional chess. Good intelligence, tenacity, an engaged public, and uncommon courage and patience are required. I hope when history writes the final chapter, we will be judged to have been effective in our use of power and thoughtful in its exercise. The way we choose to prosecute this endeavor will largely determine the winners, the losers, and the price paid by each.

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Mr. Probst is a graduate of Columbia College and Columbia University where he received a B.A. in history and an M.A. in anthropology/archaeology. While at Columbia, he also attended the Russian Institute and the Latin American Institute. Mr. Probst, in addition, served in the U.S. Air Force Intelligence Service from which he retired with a reserve rank of Lieutenant Colonel.