
America at War

What the attack on the USS *Cole* tells us.

BY TOM DONNELLY

THE DUST FROM THE RUBBLE of the Berlin Wall had barely settled when, in December 1989, George Bush inaugurated the post-Cold War era by sending thousands of American Rangers and paratroopers to Panama to arrest a petty tyrant and drug dealer whose thugs had threatened U.S. soldiers' lives. In the decade since, the frequency and duration of scattered U.S. constabulary missions abroad has increased dramatically—threefold, by Pentagon reckoning. But as the response to the attack on the USS *Cole* demonstrates, America's understanding of its new, quasi-imperial role in the world has failed to keep pace with events.

The immediate reaction to the bombing of the *Cole* was telling. President Clinton denounced a "cowardly act of terrorism." An American president these days has difficulty recognizing an assault on a U.S. Navy vessel in a foreign port for what it obviously is: an act of war. Almost anything short of a conventional armored invasion across an international border is now regarded as terrorism, ethnic cleansing, or even genocide—something entirely irrational, as opposed to a calculated political act. And the proper response to today's unconventional assaults is seen to be legal and moral: Terrorists should be "brought to justice" and ethnic cleansers made to stand trial in the Hague; our military forces should be employed in a disinterested, evenhanded way on "humanitarian" missions.

But lumping together the wide variety of unconventional attacks

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on Americans and U.S. interests under the rubric "terrorism" has created confusion. It has distracted attention from essential distinctions among types of terrorist acts. Some terrorist attacks—like that on the *Cole* or the bombing of the Khobar Towers barracks in Saudi Arabia in 1996, which killed 19 U.S. airmen—target U.S. military forces. Others—like the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993—target civilians, reflecting a different strategy on the part of the attacker. Some terrorist acts are the deeds of lone malcontents, like Timothy McVeigh or the Unabomber; others are part of a coordinated long-term strategy in pursuit of a political agenda shared by a broad-based and determined enemy.

Failing to see that we are at war, we also fail to see our enemies. President Clinton described those who attacked the *Cole* as "cowardly." In fact, their operation was clever and well planned, and it culminated in an extraordinary act of self-sacrifice and courage: According to news reports, the two commandos in the rubber boat stood to attention and saluted each other just before they detonated their explosives. If these had been Americans laying down their lives, their story would be fit for a John Wayne movie. Likewise, in the 1993 battle of Mogadishu that killed 18 Army Rangers and ultimately drove Americans out of Somalia, hundreds, if not thousands, of Somalis were killed and wounded.

Not only are these anti-American warriors brave, they are increasingly well organized, well armed, and well trained. "Globalism," it turns out, favors not only international businessmen, but also international

drug lords and guerrillas. These may be "non-state actors," but they benefit from state sponsorship, and they can form alliances of convenience with governments hostile to the United States or simply take advantage of weak or failing states. New information technologies, along with old-fashioned weapons proliferation, make the resort to violence both tempting and effective.

Curiously, those most resistant to these lessons include the leaders of the U.S. armed forces, both in uniform and out. To them, constabulary duties are far less glamorous and honorable than the conventional wars they signed up for, and far more ambiguous. These missions do not take place on a well-defined battlefield and drive to a clear end. As a result, despite their frequency, the Pentagon has done almost nothing to adapt its operations, its forces, or its budgets to the new reality.

Our military leaders cling to the mantra that their job is to fight the nation's wars, the neat and clean conventional wars they prefer. And when, inevitably, there comes a Khobar or *Cole*-style attack, the Defense Department retreats into denial, blaming the catastrophe on an "intelligence failure" or on the need to accommodate the political sensibilities of our regional allies.

But there must be better ways of responding to these challenges.

The first step is to recognize reality, and that includes recognizing who we are. The extent of American power and reach today is without historical precedent. The collapse of the Soviet empire ushered in a truly "unipolar moment." The general peace and prosperity of the post-Cold War world rest upon our pre-eminence. By any measure of influence—political, military, economic, cultural—America stands alone.

Our very greatness, and the appeal of our principles rooted in our belief that every individual has inalienable political rights, pose a challenge to potential adversaries,

and leave them little means of striking back. A conventional war against the United States is a losing proposition, as Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic discovered. The alternative—terrorism, guerrilla warfare, and so on—can be effective in the short term and can sometimes even bring victory, as the North Vietnamese demonstrated.

As long as the unipolar moment lasts, then, unconventional attacks like that on the *Cole* or on the Khobar Towers or the ambush of the Rangers in Mogadishu will continue to punctuate the headlines. The American response to these acts of war should be to use the instruments of war—intelligence gathering and military force—not only to avenge them and deter similar acts, but also to frustrate the political aims of our enemies.

We are more likely to succeed if we see that there are lessons to be learned from the unconventional wars fought by great powers in the past. The lessons may not be pleasant, from the vantage point of our politically correct time. But we could do worse than contemplate the wisdom, for example, of Sir Garnet Wolseley, who helped enforce Queen Victoria's Pax Britannica. "In planning a small war against an uncivilized nation," said Wolseley, "your first object should be the capture of whatever they prize most, the destruction or deprivation of which will probably bring the war most rapidly to a conclusion."

Wolseley, like his contemporaries, was a man with few illusions, least of all that the cruel and bitter conflicts that marked his career were anything other than wars, and wars to be won. Nor did he doubt that there would be casualties—indeed, the history of the British army in his day is largely a tale of massacres suffered and avenged. Yet Wolseley, and his political masters, did not shy from playing the hand history had dealt them. In the process, they preserved their empire and secured decades of (mostly) peace and progress. ♦

The U.N. Also Rises

American power and Israeli security may never be the same. **BY JOHN R. BOLTON**

WHETHER LAST WEEK'S heralded Mideast summit will achieve either its immediate goal of ending violence in Gaza and the West Bank or its larger aspiration of reviving the "peace process" is unclear at the moment. What is clear, regrettably, is that a fundamental and perhaps irreversible shift in Middle East diplomacy has occurred. If sustained, this shift will weaken the hitherto preeminent role of the United States and ultimately imperil Israel.

One sign of this important shift is that the United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan, was a key player in advocating and fashioning the summit. As he did in his dealings with Iraq a few years ago, Annan assumed an increasingly powerful and visible role in the shuttle diplomacy that led to the summit. In Baghdad, he torpedoed the U.N.'s own weapons inspection efforts, almost certainly at the Clinton administration's bidding. His recent Middle East efforts, too, were doubtless supported, if not initiated, by the floundering Clinton team. This development is a striking, 180-degree shift from a decades-long bipartisan policy of keeping the U.N. out of Arab-Israeli diplomacy.

A second sign of this tectonic shift was the American failure to veto the U.N. Security Council's Resolution 1322, which did little more than blame Israel for the violence it condemned. The Clinton administration abstained from voting in an effort to signal to the Palestinians their com-

mitment to being an "honest broker." But make no mistake, an abstention by one of the five permanent members is the functional equivalent of a "yes" vote, because abstaining allows a resolution (with nine affirmative votes) to be adopted. Permanent members cannot be neutral, whatever the view of Clinton's diplomats, as everyone else understood.

Third, the U.N.'s ill-defined consultative role in the post-summit investigative commission is a time bomb for Israel and its friends. Kofi Annan will apparently help pick commission members, and is entitled to comment on the report in draft. Moreover, the final report is to be published, but it is unclear to whom or for what purpose. In the current logic of international human rights, if there are allegations of "criminal" behavior, the inevitable next demand is for a special tribunal to prosecute and punish those who committed such offenses. What will the "honest broker" Clinton diplomats do then?

Fourth, ignoring the investigative commission set up by the Sharm el Sheikh summit, the U.N. Human Rights Commission met in a rare, emergency session, and found Israel guilty of "war crimes" and "crimes against humanity"—two of the Nuremberg offenses—in the "occupied Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem." The commission, albeit on a very close vote, created its own "human rights inquiry commission" to do essentially what the Sharm el Sheikh body is to do. It unleashed no less than six special rapporteurs to conduct separate investigations, and it invited High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson, for-

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