

A War with a Purpose

The goal of the attackers is to drive the U.S. from the Middle East. BY GARY SCHMITT & TOM DONNELLY

PRESIDENT BUSH was right Wednesday morning when he looked up from his cabinet meeting to announce: "The deliberate and deadly attacks which were carried out yesterday against our country were more than acts of terror. They were acts of war." But war to what end? What do the initiators of this war seek to achieve? What must we accomplish in response?

The short answer is this: Our adversaries want to push the United States out of the Middle East. Our response must be to prevent that.

This will require more than a vague, unfocused "war on terrorism." Yes, there is an informal global network of terrorists. But no one believes that this week's attacks came from Colombian "narcoterrorists," Southeast Asian drug lords, or the Russian mafia. The attacks came from the Middle East. They came for a purpose: They are the continuation of a long-running struggle to force the United States out of the Middle East, and especially out of the Persian Gulf.

This struggle took on renewed life with the end of the Cold War, first with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and continuing through the 1995 Riyadh and 1996 Khobar Towers bombings in Saudi Arabia, the 1998 attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the "millennium" plot to bomb the Los Angeles airport in 1999, and the attempt last year to send the USS *Cole* to the bottom of the harbor in Yemen. Last week's strikes represent a new and

more complex phase of this war. But this is not a new war. This is a "thicker war" in the classic sense. Neither Usama bin Laden nor Saddam care much about America's role in Europe or East Asia. They want us out of their region.

Nor is this a generalized war on American values or political principles. Yes, Saddam and Usama bin Laden despise the ideas of individual freedom and democratic government. They see our way of life as a mortal threat. But what they hate most is that America and its allies prevent them from seizing control of Saudi Arabia and the surrounding region, whether to rule in Ba'ath party power or fundamentalist glory.

So the war is a struggle for power in the Persian Gulf. How can we win it?

We win by reasserting our role as the region's dominant power; as the guarantor of regional security; and as the protector of Israel, moderate Arab regimes, and the economic interests of the industrialized world. These are enduring tasks for the United States.

Our position in the Gulf has been under accelerating attack since the end of Operation Desert Storm and the decision not to remove Saddam from power in Baghdad. As Saddam has crawled back from defeat—evicting U.N. monitors, rebuilding his forces—bin Laden has grown increasingly bold. Meanwhile, our regional allies have begun to hedge their bets, not only with the terrorists and Iraq, but with Iran as well.

A serious effort to reassert U.S. preeminence in the region must therefore be built upon a sustained campaign that addresses not just the

problems of bin Laden and other terrorist organizations but the underlying strategic goal that animates them and their allied states.

To be sure, Usama bin Laden and his organization should be a prime target of this campaign. His past actions alone make him a key figure in the anti-American axis in the region, and even before September 11, he had the blood of dozens of Americans on his hands. But the larger campaign also must go after Saddam Hussein. He might well be implicated directly in this week's attacks—as he was implicated in the 1993 World Trade Center bombings—or he might not. But as with bin Laden, we have long known that Saddam is our enemy, and that he would strike us as hard as he could. And if we have learned anything at all from the past week, it is that adopting a defensive posture risks attacks with unacceptable consequences. The only reasonable course when faced with such foes is to preempt and to strike first.

More important, eliminating Saddam is the key to restoring our regional dominance and preventing our enemies from achieving their war aims. Not only has Saddam been the greatest threat to the United States, its interests, and its allies in the past, but his drive to acquire weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles makes him the great danger for the immediate future. When Bush Administration officials speak of "ending" regimes that participate in the war against America, they must mean Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Defeating the Saddam/bin Laden axis will send a broader message as well. It will deter Iran, Syria, and the other part-time members of the anti-American coalition in the Middle East, and reassure our regional friends. And it will restore the global credibility tarnished in the Clinton years. Both our friends and enemies will be watching to see if we pass this test.

Our tactics should be appropriate to these campaign goals. In going after Usama bin Laden, it will surely be necessary to do more than fire

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cruise missiles at mud huts; indeed, the idea of attempting a “precision strike” at what is very clearly a worldwide organization—he is said to operate in more than 50 countries—is nonsensical. But it will be important to eliminate his base in Afghanistan, with or without the assistance of the ruling Taliban. And just as George Bush in 1989 not only went after Manuel Noriega but the entire structure of the Panama Defense Force, so must the Bush administration now root out the bin Laden organization. This will mean an extended operation, including ground forces, and some sustained actions beyond. While it is probably not necessary to go to war with Afghanistan, a broad approach will be required. For example, any failure by the Taliban to help should be rewarded by aid to its Afghan opposition.

The campaign against Saddam Hussein must likewise be decisive, completing the job begun in 1991. Although U.S. armed forces are much smaller than they were then, so is the Iraqi army. Unless Saddam already has acquired weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles, the outcome of such a battle is almost certain. Nor need the attack await the deployment of half a million troops. Indeed, the larger challenge will be occupying Iraq after the fighting is over; even with allied help, a constabulary mission in Iraq will make the costs of operations in the Balkans pale in comparison.

Congress has already approved a “downpayment” of \$40 billion in supplemental appropriations. The “lock-boxes” that vitiated Bush’s earlier promises to restore American military strength are yesterday’s news. Winning the war will require a significant and sustained increase in defense budgets, but given the surpluses that exist, there is no impediment to such increases.

The president thus has a rare opportunity to deny our enemies their strategic goals in the Middle East and to restore American preeminence in a critical region of the world. With a clear, concrete, and coherent

strategy, America can avenge the attack on our cities, restore national honor, and finally win the larger war in the Middle East. ♦