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# A Cowering Superpower

*It's time to fight back against terrorism.*

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**BY REUEL MARC GERECHT**

**I**n December 1999, the Clinton administration issued a worldwide terrorist alert to Americans overseas advising them to avoid crowded millennial celebrations. Bomb-toting Islamic militants under the banner of the Saudi terrorist Usama bin Laden had declared war, so Americans were to stay discreetly indoors while other Westerners partied. In Israel and Jordan, American Christians were strongly advised to avoid any public manifestation of their faith. Vexed by the growing number, geographical range, and fearfulness of Washington's warnings, one senior Foreign Service officer declared the millennial alarm "the chicken-little PR finale of America's cover-your-ass foreign policy."

Unfortunately, this hard-nosed diplomat was wrong. The policy he deplored was not about to end. The Bush administration has continued and actually surpassed its predecessor's display of timidity in the Middle East. The possibility of terrorist attacks recently prompted the Pentagon to withdraw U.S. Marines from military exercises in Jordan and hastily move ships anchored in Bahrain, the home base of the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf. Likewise, pistol-packing FBI officials investigating the October 2000 attack on the USS *Cole* in Aden, Yemen, decided to scoot—against the counsel of the State Department and the U.S. embassy in San'a—when they thought a terrorist attack might be imminent.

Which prompts the question: Are we a great power or not? If we are, then what in the world are we doing running from men whose mission in life it is to make us flee? If Marines and men-of-war cannot hold their own against the specter of a Saudi terrorist, how will our friends, let alone our enemies, in the macho Middle East measure us against real heavyweights like Saddam Hussein or the clerics of Iran?

Usama bin Laden and his terrorist organization, Al Qaeda, scored an impressive victory by nearly sinking the

*Cole*, yet Washington still has not responded. Our fear is pure oxygen to Islamic militants. Every alert, particularly when it panics U.S. military and diplomatic personnel, sends an adrenaline rush into the central nervous system of men truly convinced that with God's help and the right explosives they can crack the will of the infidels who are, in their eyes, destroying the one true faith.

Secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld's decision to yank the Marines out of Jordan is, when viewed from the mud-brick and cinder-block ghettos of the Middle East, an extraordinary triumph, further proof that the martyrs of the *Cole* attack died gloriously. America's military leaders may think that they're being prudent with our soldiers; the average man in the streets of Amman certainly knows better. Terrorism is war by unconventional means. Its ultimate objective is the psychological debilitation of the enemy through fear. In the fight against terrorism, the U.S. military's ever-more exclusive focus on "force protection" diminishes the awe in which America is held abroad, the ultimate guarantor of the safety of U.S. civilians and soldiers, especially in lands where hostility to the West rests near the surface.

Martyrdom has a long and complex history in the Muslim world. It began with God's promise of paradise to the seventh-century warriors who died expanding the first Islamic state. Over the centuries, rules and understandings evolved about the pivotal difference between combatants and civilians, but these have evaporated in the fundamentalists' radical modernity, which divides the world cleanly and brutally between good and evil. If we want to play hardball with Islamic militants—and the Bush administration isn't spending billions of dollars on counterterrorism to be nice—we need to pay more attention to the history and metaphysics of Islamic extremism. In other words, we need to take bin Laden's men apart psychologically. Cutting off the flow of oxygen to the Muslim world's anti-American radicals isn't an impossible task, so long as we patiently hold our ground.

**U**sama bin Laden and his men are, or at least aspire to be, contemporary "Assassins," the medieval founding fathers of modern political terrorism, who from their mountain redoubts in Iran and Syria first showed the possibilities of purposeful, disci-

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plined terrorism. For a time, great sultanates and kingdoms lived in profound fear of men who gladly sacrificed themselves to kill their enemies. The word “assassin” entered Western languages because the originality and shock of the Assassins’ assaults were sufficient to embed the word permanently into the consciousness of the region’s Muslims and Christians. The allure of the Assassins’ propaganda, which depicted acts of violence as acts of divine love and anger, tapped into strong currents within Islam that see God’s justice continuously betrayed by the *‘ulu al-amr*, “the men who hold the reins.” Bin Laden might not like being paired religiously with the “Old Man of the Mountain,” the mysterious Shi’ite overlord of the Assassins, but the Sunni Arab militant wouldn’t mind at all the geopolitical comparison, which, given his own mountain hideaway and his faithful kamikazes, has no doubt already occurred to him.

Though there have been times when large numbers of young Muslim men felt the thrill of a charismatic calling—the early years of Iran’s Islamic revolution is the most recent case—the contemporary Sunni Arab world, where bin Laden draws most of his strength, hasn’t experienced a similarly infectious wave. One can find many angry young men in Yemen, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, or Gaza; few want to vent their emotions against the age-old Western enemy by vaporizing themselves in a truck or skiff. Jihad, the moral and spiritual obligation of a Muslim to wage war to protect (and, in Islam’s ascendant days, expand) the faith, is no longer understood by most Muslims as denoting anything more than an individual’s duty to survey his soul.

Drawing in good new recruits to Al Qaeda’s cause thus isn’t, as many Westerners might assume, an easy task. In Afghanistan, a broken, barren country far from the crossroads of the Muslim world, it probably seems daunting, which is one reason why so many of bin Laden’s foot soldiers are hapless, ill-educated misfits who get themselves arrested when they stray too far from their native stamping grounds in the disorganized, listless Third World.

Islamic militants, like everybody else, must have hope. They, like everybody else, believe in winning. Israel’s most determined enemies—Lebanon’s Hezbollah, Iran’s mol-

lahs, the Palestinian fundamentalists in Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and Yasser Arafat’s protégés in his security and intelligence services—constantly underscore Israel’s decision to withdraw unilaterally from southern Lebanon in their clarion calls for more martyrs. This Israeli action, widely applauded in the West as strategically astute and morally estimable, was seen (correctly) in the Middle East as an astonishing retreat by a once seemingly unbeatable Western power. Israeli weakness, not Israeli “intransigence,” is what heats the militant’s death-wish dreams red-hot.

We need to remember that Al Qaeda, like its allied fundamentalist organizations, has to survive on little regular positive feedback. For Hamas, killing Israelis is easy since the Arab and Jewish communities are geographically and economically intertwined. The body count on the nightly news keeps the spirits up. For anti-American holy warriors based in Afghanistan and the northwest frontier of Pakistan, daily life in comparison is tough. Radios and satellite phones are the only constant links with the outside world. Time passes very slowly. The two years between the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Africa in August 1998 and the *Cole* attack could seem like an eternity to young men who burn to die. When failures supervene—for example, the botched suicide attack on the USS *The Sullivans* in Aden in January 2000—it becomes that much harder to sustain spirit and momentum.

America is, as Muslim militants quite frankly admit, an awesome foe. The allure and mystique of America in the Middle East are nearly impossible to overstate: It’s Goliath, Thomas Jefferson, Wall Street, and Madonna rolled together in a cacophony of sound and color that relentlessly fascinates and repels. In the eyes of Islamic fundamentalists, we are worse than the Mongols, who laid low the Muslim heartland and nearly annihilated the faith. As fundamentalists regularly complain, most Muslims are easygoing backsliders, willing victims of Western ways. Even the Saudi royal family—perhaps the folks bin Laden detests the most—who are supposed to maintain the rigorous, funless, Hanbali school of Sunni Islam, have become woefully dependent on the West, in particular the United States.



Usama bin Laden

Illustration by Kevin Chadwick

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The Afghan civil war also probably complicates bin Laden's life. His disparate collection of holy warriors fight alongside the fundamentalist Taliban, against Ahmad Shah Massoud's Northern Alliance. This gives Al Qaeda's guerrillas some combat experience and esprit de corps. Though the main tie between bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Omar is spiritual, the war allows the Saudi militant to further secure his exile home by contributing men and materiel to the Taliban campaigns and the Pakistani-approved camps where Kashmiri separatists are sometimes trained.

However, this war *really* isn't fun: ambushes, minefields, artillery barrages, and trench warfare through mountainous countryside increasingly define Afghanistan's strife. The offer of "terrorist training" in Afghanistan, a country where "good" Muslim peasants are fighting "bad" Muslim peasants, isn't a recruitment pitch with lasting appeal for young Arab men who really just want to kill Americans.

For bin Laden's "sleepers"—agents already outside of Afghanistan awaiting the right moment to strike an American target—the situation is probably little better. While terrorists who've implanted themselves into the local environment can obviously be lethally effective (both the embassy attacks in Africa and the operations against *The Sullivans* and the *Cole* in Yemen relied on such people), few men in bin Laden's network are likely to have the fortitude, talent, and discretion to hold themselves in position long, their death-wish intact. Like isolated foreign espionage agents in dangerous areas, they probably need regular spiritual reinforcement and monitoring, perhaps more than their more numerous brethren in Afghanistan, who can counter isolation and ennui through open fraternity.

**I**f these are the terrorists we're up against, what would a successful American counterterrorist policy look like? Obviously, it should play up our strengths and relentlessly play upon our enemy's anxieties and fears.

Bloodied, the crew of the wounded *Cole* did better. When their ship limped out of Aden's mountain-ringed harbor, the sailors played over the loudspeakers hard rock graphically describing what they wanted to do to the terrorists, if not the denizens of Aden. Would that the Clinton White House and the Navy's senior brass had matched the crew's insight into the Middle East's power politics and immediately dispatched other warships to Yemen to demonstrate symbolically the indefatigability of American power.

Once upon a time, the U.S. Navy reacted more astutely to tragedy. After the kamikaze truck-bomb assault on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, the Navy's planners correctly anticipated kamikaze boat-bombers. The

Navy experimented with weaponry and discovered that a .50 caliber round fired into the engine block of a small boat will stop forward momentum quite quickly. Such weaponry on the *Cole*, combined with the shoot-to-kill orders that are standard operating procedure for U.S. diplomatic security officers who determine that a lethal threat exists, would have likely saved the ship.

It's hard to believe that the Navy, which enjoys a relatively isolated and protected preserve for its vessels in Bahrain, couldn't have adopted similar tactics to protect its ships and men. We ought not make our enemies larger than they are: Bin Laden's holy warriors aren't remotely in a class with our SEAL teams, the elite commando strike units of the U.S. Navy which tirelessly train to disable warships in protected harbors. If bin Laden wants to triumph over us again, we should at least make his men do something more stressful than converse menacingly over intercepted telephones—which apparently was enough to provoke the Pentagon's flight from Jordan and Bahrain.

Most American diplomats and intelligence officers unquestionably know there is no efficacy in a bull-horned terrorist warning: It's quiet, bare-knuckled, local police work, not worldwide bulletins on CNN, that saves lives. Yet as another senior Foreign Service officer remarked, "There is no percentage in standing against the tide." Informing American citizens discreetly that a specific and credible threat exists in a certain time and place may have some value (informing terrorists that we are privy to their plans may well incline them to switch targets). But advising Americans that a country the size of Turkey, which always seems to be in some state of alert, may have an anti-American terrorist plotting within its borders is just silly. In this risk-averse quagmire, America's martial virtues and pride inevitably get lost.

Going in the opposite direction, other foreign-affairs circles pooh-pooh the terrorist threat from the Middle East, pointing out that more Americans kill themselves each year flying kites than die at the hands of holy warriors. Compared with those of the 1970s and 80s—the halcyon days of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Hezbollah, and the intelligence ministries of Syria, Libya, and clerical Iran—today's death tolls and sense of siege really aren't so bad. The issue of terrorism has been hijacked, so these circles often assert, by the 24-hour media maw and intelligence and security bureaucracies eager to encourage Congress's multi-billion-dollar counterterrorist budgets.

This critique is statistically correct and bureaucratically astute, but otherwise wrong. Today's radical Islamic terrorism matters because it helps define the way the United States is perceived in the Middle East and beyond. Only 17 sailors died on the *Cole*, but symbolically it was a stunning

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achievement for a jihadist fraternity that proved it could strike a warship, the historic instrument of Western power. Anyone who has been in the coffeehouses and bazaars of the Middle East since the *Cole* attack knows how ordinary Muslims, who generally don't countenance bin Laden's killing, nevertheless are in awe of him. A good tactician when it comes to Muslim emotions, bin Laden has played well the clash of civilizations.

**T**hese are bad days for America in the Middle East. Ali Khamenei, Iran's clerical overlord, isn't alone in seeing the United States on the defensive throughout the region. American policy toward the Israeli-Arab confrontation—keep trading Israeli-held land for the promise of Arab peace—is naive. Yet the the Israeli Left adopted this policy and kicked it into overdrive, and now the inevitable dénouement is at hand: a real war between the Israelis and Palestinians. Seemingly endless Israeli concessions, always applauded by the Clinton administration, have undermined America's standing in the Middle East.

The Bush administration, led by an obviously and understandably exasperated Colin Powell, has compounded the problem by endorsing the Mitchell Report, which puts forth the odd, very secular notion that Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, comprising less than 2 percent of the land, have provoked Palestinian young men to blow themselves to bits. The White House and Foggy Bottom are desperate to “stop the cycle of violence.” But only violence—Israeli violence, if prime minister Ariel Sharon still has the stamina and insight at last to unleash it—may recoup the damage that the Labor party, Bill Clinton, and the Near East Bureau of the State Department have done to America's standing in the region.

Farther east, the situation is even worse. From the spring of 1996, the Clinton administration's Iraq policy was in meltdown; under the Bush administration, it has completely liquefied. The administration's retargeted “smart sanctions” are clearly a huge retreat, which the Russians, we can only pray, have turned into a permanent defeat with their threatened veto in the Security Council. All we need is to have two of our principal allies in the region, Turkey and Jordan, further enmeshed in an America-ordained, U.N.-“enforced” sanctions regime that pivots, when all the diplomatic varnish is off, on bribery. Face to face in the Middle East, *rishwa* is often the only expeditious route for virtue to triumph over villainy. But bribery mediated by the United Nations would be a strategic cross-cultural mess. With “smart sanctions” in place, not only would Saddam continue his “illegal” cross-border weapons-related commerce—the allure of Iraqi oil money

is just too great—but we would have Turkey and Jordan adamantly seeking financial redress for their efforts to staunch the unstoppable trade. We would again be asking others—in the case of Jordan, a weak kingdom always inclined to appease Saddam Hussein—to bear the burden and responsibility for our failure to confront directly the Iraqi dictator.

Does anyone in the Bush administration remember Madeleine Albright, Sandy Berger, and their minions spinning themselves dizzy trying to deny that Saddam Hussein had outwaited and outplayed Washington? It would be better to see the administration start explaining how we will live with Saddam and his nuclear weapons than to see senior Bush officials, in the manner of the Clintonites, fib to themselves and the public. In any case, in Middle Eastern eyes, the Butcher of Baghdad has checked, if not checkmated, the United States.

Only against this backdrop can we properly assess the threat bin Laden poses. The Saudi militant is unquestionably going to come at us again. If he can find a weak spot, which he probably can, he will target us most likely in the Third World, where his men can maneuver. Then the Bush administration will have to make a defining decision. Will President Bush continue the Clinton administration's preference for putting terrorist strikes into the FBI's investigative hands and, forensic evidence willing, into the courts, thereby avoiding the diplomatically messy question of retaliation? Will the administration forcefully complement the above with another barrage of cruise missiles aimed at rock huts on the thin hope of catching bin Laden and his lieutenants unawares?

Deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage recently warned that the United States would hold the Taliban responsible for future attacks by Al Qaeda. We can only hope that this doesn't mean filing some future court case in New York City or bouncing the rubble in makeshift camps in Afghanistan. The Taliban chieftain Mullah Omar ought to discover that dead Americans mean cruise missiles coming through his bedroom window and cluster bombs all over his frontline troops.

The Pentagon's alarms in the Middle East and the fecklessness of the administration's policy toward Saddam Hussein and Yasser Arafat, however, suggest a different chain of events. Odds are, America's position in the Middle East is going to get much worse. In the not too distant future, bin Laden may well rightfully proclaim that he, as much as Saddam Hussein, exposed America's writ and most terrifying principles—liberal, secular democracy—as finished in the Arab world. This would be an amazing accomplishment for a Saudi holy warrior, considering the forces arrayed against him. The Assassins achieved far less and were immortalized by friend and foe alike. ♦