

When to Strike Back

By John Deutch

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We seem to have gotten this one about right. The United States Government has concluded that Osama bin Laden, a rogue Saudi millionaire with a record of sponsoring terrorist activities, organized the nearly simultaneous bombings of our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing and wounding both Americans and local citizens. After reaching that determination, the Government, working quickly and quietly, planned and executed a limited and measured military response, bombing targets in both the Sudan and Afghanistan, seeking to destroy Mr. bin Laden's capacity for further terrorist acts.

For some time, we have known that global terrorism, especially against United States targets, is on the rise and that we must deal decisively with terrorist acts as they happen. What is new about the threat is the international scope of terrorist operations,

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the possible use by terrorists of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, and the possibility of cyberattacks against computer and telecommunications networks. The bin Laden operation illustrates two of the three new elements of terrorism: operations of a terrorist organization in more than one country, and terrorists' interest in weapons of mass destruction.

The retaliation took place in two continents: Africa and Asia. One of the important targets was a factory in the Sudan where Mr. bin Laden was believed to be building a capability to manufacture chemical weapons. Global scope, chemical agents — these certainly justify action.

It is too soon to assess the effects of the air strikes. But the episode is a sobering reminder of the challenge of catastrophic terrorism — terrorism that could cripple our ability to govern, destroy essential infrastructure and kill thousands of citizens. Our leaders must have a thorough understanding of our vulnerabilities — not only those of our embassies and military forces around the world, but those here at home.

We must insist on superior intelligence that will warn of potential terrorist actions. We must insist on tough and prompt responses to such acts and on developing an effective capability to manage the consequences of these acts when they occur.

These are major challenges and, in general, public and private experts have concluded that our country is not fully prepared to act effectively on these matters.

But the bin Laden operation does indicate that at least we are capable of a decisive response. Such a response is not possible without exquisite cooperation between several agencies of our Government. I trust I do not shock

The delicate, decisive art of answering terror.

when I say that such cooperation is not always present.

In this case, however, the National Security Council managed a quiet and rapid cooperative process involving the Departments of State and Defense, the intelligence community and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. That allowed the President to make a careful decision and inform Congressional leaders in a timely way.

Thoughtful Americans may wonder how we know that we went after the right man. As I understand it, the evidence tying Mr. bin Laden to the

explosions in Tanzania and Kenya is compelling, but without the physical evidence available in the case of Saddam Hussein's abortive attempt to assassinate George Bush on the former President's 1993 visit to Kuwait, which led to retaliatory air strikes.

Acts of international terrorism are essentially attacks on our national security, and a decision to retaliate does not require the same standard of proof as a conviction in an American court of law arising from domestic terrorism like the Oklahoma City bombing. What is required is that the President and his senior foreign policy team have the opportunity to weigh information presented coolly and objectively by the intelligence community.

If the evidence comes from independent sources, perhaps including both communications intercepts and human agents, it can be compelling. But ultimately, it depends on the good judgment of our senior foreign policy officials and the President, not a legal process — which in any case is virtually impossible in such terrorist attacks.

As the United States acts to combat terrorism now and in the future, the President and his senior advisers will need to convince both the American public and the rest of the world that the actions we take are justified. We must not let enthusiasm for these types of operations overshadow that heavy responsibility. □