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# Terrorism, Counterterrorism and ‘The New Darwinism’ of American National Security Policy<sup>1</sup>

ERIC SCHMITT AND THOM SHANKER

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It has been said that the United States’ failure on September 11, 2001, was a failure of imagination, the consequence of the United States’ inability to anticipate how a sophisticated terrorist network could infiltrate its operatives into the United States, train them how to fly—but not take off or land—commercial airliners, and use those passenger planes in a fiery assault on national landmarks. But the failures went beyond imagination to gaps in intelligence, capability, and in technology.

In the first years after 9/11, the United States was lucky and good, and the terrorists were unlucky and not particularly good. Through the tenth anniversary of 9/11, Al Qaeda was unable to replicate the success of a simultaneous, mass-casualty attack on American soil. But the public must understand that the United States—its military, its diplomatic corps, its intelligence community, and its law enforcement personnel—cannot count on being lucky all the time. Terrorism and counterterrorism are the “New Darwinism:” both species are evolving. And it is certain that despite

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improvements in American tactical counterterrorism skills, in time a determined terrorist plot is certain to get through again. The United States could move from one tactical success to another against extremists and still end in stalemate against terrorism.

In our book, “Counterstrike: The Untold Story of America’s Secret Campaign Against Al Qaeda,” we examine American counterterrorism efforts in an organizational framework learned from the military, which divides the world into tactical, operational and strategic arenas. At the tactical level, we relate a number of missions carried out by soldiers, spies and diplomats “downrange” in such places as Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Mali, Djibouti and the Philippines. These case studies show what has worked, and what has not. We then describe the operational level of action, and how over the past decade the interagency process has learned to knock down walls to share information and cooperate to a degree not witnessed before 9/11. While still imperfect, the trends have moved in the right direction. It is at the level of strategy, however, where we pulled back the curtain on an evolution of thought never described before, detailing the search for a coherent, encompassing strategy for counterterrorism that would replicate the strategy of containment and deterrence that kept a tense nuclear peace during the Cold War.

#### WHAT HAS GONE WRONG?

The central problem in attempting to apply Cold War deterrence theories to the age of violent religious extremism is that terrorists hold no territory and thus hold no territory dear. They offer no large and obvious

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high-value targets for American attack comparable to the national treasures the Soviets knew were at risk: populous cities, critical factories, dachas of the elite, military bases, or silos protecting the Kremlin’s own nuclear forces.

Then there is the question of attribution: a nuclear warhead hurled toward American soil by an intercontinental ballistic missile has a return address. The attacking nation and its leaders can be identified and held responsible, and with certainty. This is not applicable to a weapon of mass destruction smuggled into the United States and set off by a shadowy, stateless terrorist organization. Finally, the

millennial, aspirational, otherworldly goals of the jihadists demonstrate how different the game has become. The Politburo pursued its clear self-interest, which required the survival of the Kremlin leadership. What can you threaten that will deter a suicide terrorist already resolved to giving up his life in pursuit of a holy war against the United States?

This new threat seems wholly irrational, with no identifiable self-interest to which appeals can be made. Negotiations may be impossible, deterrence questionable. The future, then, holds little but a long war until one side is beaten into submission or eliminated; the only course is a fight to the death—or at least to exhaustion.

In fact, the 2002 National Security Strategy, signed by President George W. Bush one year after the September 11 attacks, stated that “traditional concepts of deterrence will not work against a terrorist enemy whose avowed tactics are wanton destruction and the targeting of innocents.”<sup>2</sup> Combating terrorists, then, can be done only by picking them up or picking them off.

#### WHAT CAN THE COLD WAR TEACH US?

Recognizing the impossibility of killing every terrorist, the United States tried to fashion a campaign of inducements and pressures to alter the behavior of terrorist leaders.

Even the Bush administration, which after 9/11 focused exclusively on a capture-and-kill strategy, acknowledged before leaving office that there was value in combining traditional national security thinking with an evolving, broader, and more nuanced approach to combating terrorism. It would still include capture-and-kill missions, to be sure. But it would also create a broader set of policies that included increased defenses to deny terrorists certainty of success; disruption of their fund-raising, recruiting, and planning networks; campaigns to dissuade those who may support extremist ideology but do not want to sacrifice their own lives to the cause; and, yes, even deterrence strategies to prevent an attack with weapons of mass destruction, whether nuclear, radiological, biological, or chemical.

“A new deterrence calculus combines the need to deter terrorists and supporters from contemplating a WMD [weapons of mass destruction] attack and, failing that, to dissuade them from actually conducting an attack,” the Bush administration wrote in its 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, just four years after declaring that deterrence “will not work.”<sup>3</sup> In applying the term *deterrence* to counterterrorism policy, had the administration found a new strategy or just a new slogan?

Deterrence in the strictest Cold War sense refers to the idea that you induce, even compel, an adversary not to do something by credibly threatening terrible pain and suffering in retaliation. From the beginning of the debate on this strategy, American officials conceded that their evolving

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..... strategy included a more elastic set of concepts, in particular deterrence by denial (of the opportunity to attack) and deterrence by disruption, as well as deterrence by punishment. As the debate spread across the government and military, some national security experts sought to create something new by recapturing the concept's meaning from an older literature of criminal law. Criminal deterrence puts cops on the street and bars over windows — and prisons in our communities — to force potential lawbreakers to weigh costs and benefits before deciding whether or not to engage in illegal activity. Locking up a bad guy prevents him from committing more crimes, and might deter others from similar actions.

Students of diplomatic history, as well as of national security game theory, might be interested to know that although the Bush administration -- like all of its predecessors -- swore never to negotiate with terrorists, it did undertake an extraordinary, and extraordinarily secret, effort to open a line of communication with bin Laden and Al Qaeda's senior leadership. It was an attempt to replicate how the United States tried to sustain a dialogue with the Soviet Union, even during the darkest days of the Cold War, when White House and Kremlin leaders described, in private and in public, a set of acceptable behaviors while describing with equal clarity the swift, vicious, and even nuclear punishment for gross violations. In the months after the September 11 attacks, Bush's national security staff made several attempts to send a private message to bin Laden and his inner circle. The messages were sent through business associates of the bin Laden family's vast financial empire as well as through some of bin Laden's closest relatives, a number of whom were receptive to opening a secret dialogue to restrain and contain their terrorist kinsman, whom they viewed as a blot on their name (other relatives were openly hostile to the American entreaties). According to a senior American intelligence officer with first-hand knowledge of the effort, the response from Osama bin Laden was silence.

The most detailed work on "new deterrence" was carried out within the office of the undersecretary of defense for policy by a young intern on loan from the CIA, Matthew Kroenig, and a veteran analyst, Barry Pavel. They

identified the specific “territory,” physical and virtual, that terrorists hold dear: personal glory and reputation, embellished by publicity and support from Muslim populations; network cohesion and dependability strengthened by trust in fellow cell members; the well-being of their families enhanced by growing material assets; and strategic success defined in part by successful attacks and a more robust, supportive and participatory Muslim community.

The United States needed to impose costs on this “territory,” put it at risk, and deny terrorists the benefits they expected to receive; this was the essence of the “new deterrence.” As was the case with traditional deterrence, the goal was to alter the behavior and thinking of the adversary while simultaneously taking steps to .....  
reduce its ability to alter one’s behavior and thinking.

The challenge of the “new deterrence” strategy became one of cracking the organizational DNA of constantly evolving militant networks, especially as Al Qaeda adopted a new business model by franchising out its activities and becoming as big of a threat as an inspirational idea as it was in its operations. This development required the American government to focus not solely on bin Laden and Al Qaeda’s senior leadership but also on a proliferating network of cells in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the rest of the Middle East, .....  
along with parts of Africa, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

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The original slides for the Pavel-Kroenig concept for deterring and dissuading terrorist networks listed nine functions required by militant networks to survive, thrive, and operate:

- Leadership
- Safe havens
- Intelligence
- Communications
- Movement
- Weapons
- Personnel
- Ideology
- Finances

Despite progress in the search for a grand strategy of counterterrorism, officials up and down the chain of command offer a grim bottom line: it will be impossible to end terrorism. It will be impossible to eradicate the root causes of terrorist action: poverty or lack of education or hope; the humiliating corruption in public life across the developing world; and a wide-spread regard of American foreign policy as a twenty-first-century crusade to occupy sacred Muslim lands. Nor will it be possible to silence everywhere and forever the caustic voices of the misguided minority calling for violence against innocents in the aspiration of creating a better world. Even the task that is far simpler by comparison -- to find and finish off terror cells -- will never be fully achieved. As uplifting as the prospect of populist revolts pressing for democracy across the Muslim world may be, political upheaval in the region risks disorder and opportunities for terrorist cells to find new safe havens.

“There is a fundamental tension in seeking a counterterrorism ‘Grand Strategy,’” said Michael Vickers, the Defense Department’s undersecretary for intelligence:

“How do you get at the long-term strategic defeat of these groups? One model that was put forward was that they spring from an unhealthy political and social system. I need to remake that system if I am going to get at the root causes of these problems. We promote democracy, we promote development—we do that no matter what, but are they critical instruments? Is this the only way I can defeat the enemy in counterterrorism? The counter approach is to work with what you have, while not abandoning your long-term goals. Shore up the security institutions. Work with intelligence—more near-term things -- but to try and tamp down this threat and drive it to low levels in lots of critical places.”

You can destroy the people in Al Qaeda, but you can’t destroy the idea of Al Qaeda. The brand name of Al Qaeda—an inspiration to a rising tide of terror affiliates across the Islamic world as well as to self-radicalized, individual, lone-wolf extremist in the West—has barely been dented. American forces are racking and stacking terrorists like cordwood. But America has not killed terrorism.

### **SO, HOW DOES THIS END?**

Americans face a challenge, and the nation must alter its thinking about terrorism and terrorist attacks. The United States must adopt a culture of resilience. Yes, every effort must be made to disrupt, dismantle, and

defeat Al Qaeda and its affiliates. Yes, defenses must be erected to prevent attack and deny terrorists tactical successes that might be trumpeted as strategic victories. Yes, the United States must encourage economic progress in the developing world and seek to empower those who feel powerless. But a demand by the American people for perfection against terrorist attacks—a zero tolerance for error—hands extremists victory any time they even get close. The so-called “underwear” bomber failed to set off his bomb aboard a commercial jetliner over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009. The bomb fizzled; the plane didn’t crash. Ten months later, printer cartridges packed with explosives from Al Qaeda’s affiliate in Yemen were intercepted. Yet it was the nationwide recrimination in the wake of those failed terror attacks that created a sense of terror.

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Al Qaeda has adopted a dual-track strategy. It still seeks a weapon of mass destruction to create mass casualties for mass cost, or at least for mass public effect. In parallel to these efforts at mounting a major attack, Al Qaeda inspires affiliates and disaffected loner jihadists to take fists of pebbles and throw them repeatedly into the cogs of American life and industry. The inevitable calculus is that a few will get through. Done enough times, these small attacks have the impact of a major attack. A terror operation that costs a few thousand dollars, even if it fails, can prompt the targeted government and industry to spend billions in response. And these repeated tiny assaults are exceedingly difficult to thwart. The United States has learned a lot and has been fortunate. But the American military, law enforcement, and intelligence communities cannot be lucky and good all the time. The terrorists have learned, too. They only have to be lucky and good occasionally.

The nation’s top terrorism watchers express a concern that the United States will come under growing attack from the inside; much as the street gang and organized crime problems crest and fall but are never flat for long. The best efforts by law enforcement may be unable to prevent homegrown extremism unless communities step up their efforts to police and care for their own. Short of that, officials expect the IED, the terrorist tool of choice in overseas combat zones, to migrate to the United States, as it already has with the attempted Times Square car bombing in May 2010. Officials have quietly tightened rules on the domestic purchase of explosives and a number

of other critical ingredients for homemade bombs—like the ammonium nitrate used by Timothy McVeigh to bring down a federal office building in Oklahoma City.

So when the terrorists do get through and successfully execute an attack, the United States must deal with it and return to normal that day, as has been the practice in Israel and Britain. Within hours after the transit system attacks in July 2005, the London Underground was packed with commuters. The United States must have in place its own robust system of rapid response, a plan for immediate recovery, and must learn to offer a shrug to terror attack that denies the effect the perpetrators are seeking. That should be front and center in every major speech by the nation's leadership on national security—but it is politically risky, as any president's opponents will charge that the government is offering an implicit acceptance of inevitable attack.

A fundamental message in the battle against violent extremism is that the United States cannot lose sight of its values, as no doubt there will be a growing tension between credible calls for greater surveillance and profiling on the one hand, and full-throated defense for privacy and civil liberties on the other:

“In the months before Fort Hood, I was testifying on behalf of the intelligence community, advocating for the extension of certain aspects of the Patriot Act,” recalled Michael Leiter, former director of the National Counterterrorism Center. “And I think for very good reasons, people had some concerns. And I got a lot of why should we allow you to continue to spy on Americans? Several weeks later in the wake of Fort Hood, I was back up on the Hill. And I will tell you that a whole lot fewer people were complaining about me spying on Americans and a whole lot more people were complaining that I wasn't spying enough. That is a tough line to walk. So these are the sorts of tensions that we have. Being whipsawed between these two extremes can be extremely problematic and very difficult to maintain, either security or protection of civil liberties.”

The United States is without a doubt moving ever closer toward the dangerous precipice of another attack. The length of the journey to that next mass-casualty strike has been extended by years of successful counterstrikes, and it is possible, but not certain, that the severity of the attack—the drop off the cliff—will have been diminished through successful countermeasures. But the attack is coming. The most important thing a nation can do is be resilient. That denies terrorists the strategic victory they seek.

Advocates of a “new deterrence” against terrorism have seen their work embraced, even accepted. Deterrence—updated, expanded, even



redefined—is now official American policy for countering Al Qaeda and its affiliated terrorist organizations. As the Obama administration prepared for the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the White House and the Department of Defense announced that they were adapting the principles of Cold War deterrence in its effort to combat extremists. “Though terrorists are difficult to deter directly, they make cost/benefit calculations and are dependent on states and other stakeholders we are capable of influencing,” declared the National Military Strategy of the United States for 2011. “When directed, we will provide capabilities to hold accountable any government or entity complicit in attacks against the United States or allies to raise the cost of their support. And we must take further steps to deny terrorists the benefits they seek through their attacks.”<sup>4</sup> The United States, the strategy declared, stands ready to retaliate for any attack across the entire spectrum of military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities and at a time and place of the president’s choosing.

**IS THAT ENOUGH?**

With the lessons of an Afghanistan tour still fresh in his mind, Jeffrey Schloesser, the Army TWO-star general who established the first counterterrorism cell within the military’s Joint Staff, voiced concerns last fall that the United States had failed to keep pace with the shifting tactics and strategies of Al Qaeda and the Taliban. “They have been able to innovate faster than we have, and we have been relatively unsuccessful in stemming the recruitment of new terrorist wannabes,” he said. “You now actually have a larger number of Americans who want to be revolutionaries against their own country. We have not done a good job about that.”

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Juan Zarate, who served as one of the United States Government’s top terrorist-hunters at the Treasury Department and on the National Security Council, believes, “Though we are safer now than after 9/11, we still face an adapting terrorist. Hydra AQ remains a serious threat, but the greatest danger we may face now from terrorism is the ability of a small group of individuals to spark geopolitical crises or the renting of societies with a singular terrorist flashpoint.”

John Tyson, a top analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency who agreed to be interviewed on the condition that he be quoted with a pseudonym, was

tracking Osama bin Laden since the 1990s, when most government officials, if they even heard the name Al Qaeda, probably asked, “Al who?” He was the first to raise the alarm back when bin Laden was just a loudmouth with a large bank account. After a decade of conflict since 9/11, he conceded that he remains pessimistic that the United States will ever be able to declare victory in the campaign against violent extremism. The enemy today, he said, is not the enemy of 9/11. It has spread, transformed, and metastasized. The interlocking global network of Al Qaeda is based on pledges of affiliation, as well as by sympathetic action. Terrorism inspired by Al Qaeda cannot be defeated as it is defined today. The task, he said, is to push the threat to a lower level, and manage—and accept—a degree of risk. Even though a Navy SEAL commando raid into Pakistan decapitated Al Qaeda, killing its charismatic founder and strategic leader, the terror network and its affiliates will seek to regroup, adapt and strike again. The scenes of Americans rallying and cheering outside the White House, at the World Trade Center site, and in Times Square to express national relief and jubilation at the death of bin Laden might have resonated like similar images from the end of World War II. But, unlike Nazi Germany and imperial Japan in 1945, religious militancy has not been defeated.

“There is not going to be a V-J Day, there is not going to be a Wall coming down,” Tyson said. “Hopefully it will go out with a whimper and not a roar. But it is not something we can defeat. It is something that is going to have to defeat itself. It is something that is going to have to implode on itself, in terms of its widespread popularity, like how communism imploded on itself.”

He paused, collecting his thoughts. “I would consider it a success if we get back to the point where it is still considered a national security issue but it is far down the totem pole, like it was pre-East Africa embassy bombings, where you had generals saying, ‘Why should I care about terrorism?’ ” ■

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Adapted from COUNTERSRIKE: The Untold Story of America’s Secret Campaign Against Al Qaeda by Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, published by Times Books, an imprint of Henry Holt and Company, LLC. Copyright © 2011 by Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker. All rights reserved.
- 2 “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (The White House, September 2002), 15, [georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002](http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002).
- 3 “National Strategy for Combating Terrorism,” *The White House*, September 2006, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nsct/2006/>.
- 4 *National Military Strategy of the United States of America, 2011: Redefining America’s Military Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Defense, February 8, 2011), 6.