



Terrorism in the US

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By Dan Plesch

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Dan Plesch, senior research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies in Great Britain. Plesch argues that the attacks in the US proved that the Missile Defense system cannot protect against terrorist attacks. Noting that the damage would have been much greater had the airplanes hit nuclear power plants, he calls on Great Britain to develop renewable energy sources to replace nuclear plants and reduce the country's dependence on Mideast oil. He concludes that the US must abandon unilateral efforts at missile defense and instead join multilateral efforts at verification of nonproliferation treaties.

II. Essay By Dan Plesch

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Shock, grief and a sense of our own vulnerability sink in with the news of the terrorist bombings, which have caused more deaths on the US mainland than at any time since the Civil War.

The attacks have a dreadful air of inevitability. For years such bombings have been the stock-i-trade of terrorism conferences. Almost all western security policy has focused on reaction forces using massively expensive weapons systems. This policy now faces terrible setbacks. The US has already spent vast amounts of money and political will against terrorism. There will be an understandable call from Washington for vengeance, and more military spending. But even if the perpetrators are found it will not prevent future actions.

The answer is not just more of the same. We need to implement a new foreign and defense policy focused on domestic and international prevention. We know that a big police force in our cities is no answer to crime arising from poverty and injustice. Prevention is not a complete cure, but it is has been neglected almost completely in the past, as if we tried to run a city with the riot squad and without social security, courts or community policing. We need to reduce our vulnerability and put new effort into working together to prevent the world from being a waking nightmare.

There are other nightmares, even worse, that we can prevent. Those planes could have landed on our nuclear power plants. Such plants built along the coast are especially vulnerable to attack from exocet-style missiles hidden on one of the rusty freighters cruising past. They are fragile eggshells full of radiation that make us potential hostages to any adversary. (And the British government cannot credibly claim to defend Britain and agree to build more such stations.)

Renewable energy poses no security risk, and in fact it can give us more independence internationally. Shifting towards it is also a strategic necessity since by moving to it we can also free ourselves of dependency on Middle East oil and our resulting dependence on US military power to give us access to that oil. Today a large part of Britain's armed forces are in the Gulf to show the US that we are ready to help it control that oil.

The shift will not be quick but it must be pursued urgently. We cannot now just go on in the old way. Such a shift is commonsense but will doubtless be ignored by official thinking in Whitehall.

Old thinking must also be set aside when it comes to nuclear weapons. President Bush vowed to end our vulnerability to attack. But his Star Wars never could cope with terrorist attacks. And a NATO study has now confirmed that missile proliferation is a myth. The only rocket engine rogue states have is the same design as used in the Nazi V-2. The V-2 was used to build the Soviet Scud, which was sold around the world. It has simply been given scary new names by North Korea, Iran, Iraq and Libya. But it can barely reach Europe, let alone the US.

The US obsession with the Star Wars system has prevented efforts to reduce and eliminate nuclear, chemical and biological arms. The US is far from the only culprit but it gave an alibi to the Chinese and Russians. The greatest horror we must prevent is still nuclear war. Russia and America still keep thousands of nuclear weapons ready to fire. This is a Hollywood scenario that we allow to continue at our peril: there needs to be an immediate initiative to take nuclear weapons off alert, and a global effort, now led by the EU, aimed at eliminating all these weapons of mass destruction.

The same effort and resources that went into Star Wars must go into inspections and verification. Inspectors uncovered and destroyed Saddam's arsenal through an international consensus. President Clinton squandered that consensus and Bush had no interest in it. It is clear that our own weapons are almost irrelevant to the threats we may face in the future.

We must hope that the US's experience will make it turn outward and engage the world. The danger is that the events will further encourage the US to go it alone. Bush has been keen to dispense with treaties, his advisors have little time for international law. We in Europe must contain any such tendencies with understanding.

The priority is to build global governance and the rule of law. A policy that sets aside international law will create global anarchy. Historians call our present treaty arrangements the "Westphalian system" from the German town where a deal was done at the end of the devastating wars of the 17th century. If we abandon international law now, we face a return to the Middle Ages.

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