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THE EMBASSY BOMBINGS: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN RHETORIC AND ACTION

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Vowing to bring the terrorist bombers to justice, Clinton Administration officials harshly condemned last week's attacks on U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The nearly simultaneous nature of these powerful attacks strongly suggests the involvement of a sophisticated terrorist group, perhaps backed by one or more state sponsors. Once the perpetrators have been identified, the Administration should match its tough rhetoric with meaningful action. If there is no effective retaliation, these bombings will claim yet another casualty: the credibility of U.S. counterterrorism policy. This, in turn, will engender still more terrorist attacks against U.S. citizens and property abroad.

THE ADMINISTRATION'S TRACK RECORD

Despite its denunciations of international terrorism, the Clinton Administration's track record of meaningful action is poor. President Bill Clinton also issued strong words after the June 1996 terrorist attack on Khobar Towers near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, that killed 19 U.S. airmen and wounded 500 more. Yet, more than two years later, the investigation into this deadly assault has ground to a standstill, as cooperation between U.S. and Saudi officials has broken down.

The United States also has fallen into the trap of seeking legal redress in situations in which state sponsors of international terrorism consistently operate outside the rule of law. A decade after

Libyan terrorists blew up the Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, legal wrangling continues over where to try the suspects. The tortured attempts of the United States to negotiate Libya's surrender of the suspects (who are Libyan nationals) have served the interests of neither justice nor deterrence. The United States should avoid becoming entangled in a similar morass if any state refuses to turn over terrorists wanted in connection with the Africa bombings. Instead, the United States should take whatever overt and covert measures are necessary to punish both the suspects and any state sponsor of international terrorism.

SETTING THE STANDARD FOR RETALIATION

The United States should not seek retribution without evidence of culpability, of course. But neither should it burden itself with establishing guilt for international terrorist attacks "beyond a reasonable doubt." This standard, although desirable in domestic criminal cases, seldom is attainable in the international arena. On rare occasions,

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incontrovertible evidence of culpability may be available, as when radio intercepts tied the 1986 Berlin disco bombing to Libya. In most cases, however, terrorists will take pains to cover their tracks, even if they voice support for the attacks. Thus, the standard of establishing guilt "beyond a reasonable doubt" is unrealistic for a counterterrorism policy designed to punish and deter international terrorists. Too often, this standard has become a convenient excuse for inaction. Instead of seeking the evidentiary certitude required in domestic courtrooms, the Clinton Administration should be satisfied if the evidence reasonably implicates those suspected of international terrorism. Once this standard has been met, the United States should act swiftly and decisively to punish those responsible.

THE NEED FOR ROBUST REPRISAL

Pinprick retaliatory strikes will not suffice if the evidence points to state sponsorship of the recent terrorist attacks in Africa. The Clinton Administration has made this mistake before with respect to Iraqi terrorism. After the abortive attempt to assassinate former President George Bush in Kuwait in April 1993, the Administration equivocated before lobbing 24 cruise missiles at the headquarters of Iraq's intelligence agency in Baghdad. Launched in the dead of night when the responsible officials were well away from the targeted building, this reprisal failed to punish Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, let alone the officials directly involved in planning the assassination.

WILL RETALIATION PROMPT MORE VIOLENCE?

Whenever the issue of military retaliation arises, as it surely will during the coming weeks because of the Africa bombings, skeptics invariably argue that such action serves only to escalate the cycle of violence. The "cycle-of-violence" argument is a convenient excuse for policy paralysis. Contrary to popular mythology, few terrorists are driven by suicidal motivations; most respond to incentives, especially when they believe their lives are endangered. Effective counteraction, such as President Ronald Reagan's strike against Libya in April 1986, can help to deter terrorist aggression. An ineffective policy,

however, encourages terrorist groups to make even more egregious attacks against U.S. targets.

BRIDGING THE GAP

After several terrorist attacks in the 1980s, the United States initiated a number of defensive measures to harden U.S. embassies. These measures, along with the intelligence community's ability to anticipate terrorist attacks, should be reviewed carefully in the aftermath of the recent Africa bombings. It is not enough to rely on defensive measures alone, however. U.S. counterterrorist policy should aim to put terrorists—and the states that sponsor them—on the defensive. Wherever possible, the United States should move to disrupt terrorist networks *before* they attack U.S. interests.

But if terrorists succeed in hitting U.S. targets, as happened with the embassy attacks in Africa, the United States should punish the perpetrators. Ideally, the United States will enlist international support, perhaps even coordinated action, before taking military retaliation against terrorists. Nevertheless, the United States should not hesitate to act alone if such support does not appear forthcoming. To maximize the deterrent impact of a retaliatory strike, prompt unilateral action is preferable to a tardy multilateral one.

Last week's Africa bombings were not the first attacks on U.S. embassies, and they are not likely to be the last. The United States must redouble its efforts to limit the scourge of international terrorism by raising the costs of terrorist activity. It is not enough to condemn terrorist acts with words, for the gap between U.S. rhetoric and effective retaliation merely invites derision. Nor should policymakers shackle themselves by seeking to apply exacting domestic legal standards in cases in which U.S. national security clearly is threatened by international terrorists. Once the perpetrators of the African terrorist bombings have been identified, the United States must move with dispatch to punish those responsible.

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