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We Must Act As If He Has The Bomb

By Graham Allison

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The question is suddenly urgent: Could the inconceivable happen? President Bush has previously warned the world that Osama bin Laden is seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction. Now, bin Laden himself claims to have chemical and nuclear weapons -- and "the right to use them." We cannot know for certain whether he is bluffing, but Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge has confirmed that documents detailing how to make nuclear weapons have been found in an al Qaeda safe house in Kabul. And we can certainly expect that as the noose tightens around the terrorist's neck, he and his associates will become increasingly desperate.

All of this means that, incredible as the possibility remains even in the aftermath of Sept. 11, we must now seriously contemplate that bin Laden's final act could be a nuclear attack on America.

The consequences of such an attack would far outstrip the horror we have already witnessed. Imagine that al Qaeda had struck the World Trade Center not with a van filled with explosives, as in 1993, nor with planes fully loaded with jet fuel, but with an SUV containing a nuclear device. Even a crude device could create an explosive force of 10,000 to 20,000 tons of TNT, demolishing an area of about three square miles. Not only the World Trade Center, but all of Wall Street and the financial district and the lower tip of Manhattan up to Gramercy Park would have disappeared. Hundreds of thousands of people would have died suddenly. In Washington, if such a vehicle exploded near the White House, an area reaching as far as the Jefferson Memorial would be immediately and completely destroyed, and a larger area, extending from the Pentagon to beyond the Capitol, would suffer damage equal to that caused to the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995.

That same year, in a Post op-ed, I warned: "In the absence of a determined program of action, we have every reason to anticipate acts of nuclear terrorism against American targets before this decade is out." I was fortunately wrong about the timing, but I believe the same estimate can be made with even greater justification today. The question is whether the outrage of Sept. 11 will now motivate the United States and other governments to act urgently to minimize the risk of nuclear mega-terrorism.

Unhappily, the evidence to date is not encouraging.

As the Bush administration took office in January, a bipartisan task force, chaired by former Senate majority leader Howard Baker (now ambassador to Japan) and former White House counsel Lloyd Cutler, presented a report card on non-proliferation programs with Russia. The task force's principal finding was that "the most urgent unmet national security threat [my emphasis] to the United States today is the danger that weapons of mass destruction or weapons-usable material in Russia could be stolen, sold to terrorists or hostile nation states, and used against American troops abroad or citizens at home."

The danger can be summarized in three propositions. First, attempts to steal nuclear weapons or weapons-usable material are not hypothetical, but a recurring fact. The past decade has seen scores of incidents in which individuals and groups have successfully stolen weapons material from sites in Russia and sought to export it -- but have been caught. Just in the past month, the chief of the Russian defense ministry directorate responsible for nuclear weapons reported two recent incidents in which terrorist groups unsuccessfully attempted to break into Russian nuclear storage sites. In the mid-1990s, more than 1,000 pounds of highly enriched uranium -- enough material to allow terrorists to build more than 20 nuclear weapons -- sat unprotected in Kazakhstan. Recognizing the danger, the American government purchased the material and removed it to a Department of Energy facility in Oak Ridge, Tenn.

Second, if al Qaeda or some similar group obtained 40 pounds of highly enriched uranium, or less than half that weight in plutonium, it could, with materials otherwise available off the shelf, produce a nuclear device in less than a year. Obtaining such fissionable material -- an ingredient that is fortunately difficult and expensive to manufacture -- is in fact the only high hurdle to creating a nuclear device. But as a director of the Lawrence Livermore Laboratories wrote a quarter of a century ago, "If the essential nuclear materials like these are in hand, it is possible to make an atomic bomb using the information that is available in the open literature." An even easier alternative is a radioactivity dispersal device, a conventional bomb wrapped in radioactive materials that disperse as fallout when the bomb explodes.

Third, terrorists would not find it difficult to sneak such a nuclear device into the United States. The nuclear material required is actually smaller than a football. Even a fully assembled device, such as a suitcase nuclear weapon, could be shipped in a container, in the hull of a ship or in a trunk carried by an aircraft. Since Sept. 11, the number of containers arriving at U.S. points of entry that are being X-rayed has increased to approximately 10 percent: 500 of the 5,000 containers currently arriving daily at the port of New York/New Jersey, for instance. But as the chief executive of CSX Lines, one of the foremost container-shipping companies, put it: "If you can smuggle heroin in containers, you may be able to smuggle in a nuclear bomb."

If bin Laden and other terrorists have not so far succeeded in acquiring nuclear weapons, or materials from which to assemble them, we should give thanks for our great good fortune. If they have acquired them -- as bin Laden now claims -- most people will quickly conclude that, under existing conditions, this was bound to happen.

There can be little doubt that bin Laden and his associates would carry out a nuclear assault were they capable of doing so. Last year, the CIA intercepted a message in which a member of al Qaeda boasted of plans for a "Hiroshima" against America. According to the Justice Department indictment for the 1998 bombings of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, "At various times from at least as early as 1993, Osama bin Laden and others, known and unknown, made efforts to obtain the components of nuclear weapons." Additional evidence supplied by a former member of al Qaeda describes the group's attempts to buy uranium of South African origin, repeated travels to three Central Asian states to try to buy a complete warhead or weapons-usable material, and discussions with Chechens in which money and drugs were offered for nuclear weapons. Bin Laden himself has declared that acquiring nuclear weapons is a "religious duty."

Preventing nuclear terrorist attacks on the American homeland will require a serious, comprehensive defense -- not for months or years, but far into the future. The response must stretch from aggressive prevention and preemption to deterrence and active defenses. Strict border controls will be as important to America as ballistic-missile defenses.

To fight the immediate threat, the United States must move smartly on two fronts. First, no effort can be spared in the military, economic and diplomatic campaign to defeat and destroy al Qaeda, and in the international intelligence

and law-enforcement effort to discover and disrupt al Qaeda sleeper cells and interrupt attempted shipments of weapons.

Second, the United States must seize the opportunity of a more cooperative Russia to "go to the source" of the greatest danger today: the 99 percent or more of the world's nuclear, biological and chemical weapons that are stored in Russia and the United States. The surest way to prevent nuclear assaults is to prevent terrorists from gaining control of these weapons or materials from which to make them. President Bush acknowledged this in his joint news conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin last Thursday, declaring that "Our highest priority is to keep terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction."

What the two presidents failed to announce, however, are concrete actions to achieve this objective. While their success in agreeing to cut the number of operational strategic nuclear weapons cannot be gainsaid, the stark reality is that this reduction has no effect on our most urgent unmet national security threat.

Bush and Putin should have announced that the United States and Russia would lead a new joint international undertaking to minimize the risks of nuclear terrorism, as well as terrorism by means of other weapons of mass destruction. They should have pledged to ensure that their respective governments will do everything physically and technically possible to prevent terrorists or criminals from stealing weapons or weapons-usable material from their stockpiles. They should have instructed their governments to develop a joint plan of action to concentrate weapons and materials in the fewest possible sites, secure them by the most technically advanced means, and neutralize highly enriched uranium by blending it down for subsequent use in civilian nuclear power plants. Within Russia, such a program should be jointly financed by the United States, its allies in the war against terrorism and Moscow.

Despite the successes of the past week, the long-term goals of our war on terrorism remain elusive, and the future no doubt holds frustrations as well as celebrations. In that light, calling upon leaders to act to prevent attacks of a kind that have not yet occurred may seem overly demanding. But if we fail to act on this agenda now, how shall we explain ourselves on the morning after a nuclear Sept. 11?

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