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Ombudsman

The 'Dirty Bomb' and the Alert

By Michael Getler  
Sunday, December 9, 2001; Page B06

The Post had a pretty scary front page Tuesday.

At the top of the page, in the lead position, was an exclusive story from three of the paper's top guns -- reporters Bob Woodward, Robert Kaiser and David Ottaway. The main headline said, "U.S. Fears Bin Laden Made Nuclear Strides," and the smaller head underneath said, "Concern Over 'Dirty Bomb' Affects Security."

The story reported that U.S. intelligence agencies recently had concluded that Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda terrorist network "may have made greater strides than previously thought toward obtaining plans or materials to make a crude radiological weapon that would use conventional explosives to spread radioactivity over a wide area, according to U.S. and foreign sources."

The story also reported that "the worry about al Qaeda's efforts to obtain a nuclear capability was a factor in the decision" by the White House the day before "to issue another national alert about possible terrorist attacks," according to "a senior source."

Next to the triple-byline account was the news story about Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge's issuance of that new warning. "Ridge Issues 3rd Alert of New Attack Threat" was the headline. As with past warnings, Ridge said the signs were credible but not specific. But that Post story included a line written into it that repeated the point of the accompanying article, that "there is also increased worry that bin Laden may have made greater strides than previously thought" to make a crude radioactive weapon.

Wednesday, an article by Post reporter Guy Gugliotta appeared, explaining that while finding enough radioactive material to make a dirty bomb might be relatively easy, "the effects of such a weapon could never remotely approach those of a nuclear explosion." Inside that same article, it was reported that Homeland Security Director Ridge said that the latest anti-terrorist alert had nothing to do with the threat of a dirty bomb. That story appeared on Page A12. There was no mention of Ridge's comments on the front page, despite the big play of the bin Laden story on Tuesday's front page.

Also on Tuesday, Ridge was asked directly by CBS's Bryant Gumbel if the alert, as The Post reported, was tied in any way to the fears about a dirty bomb, and Ridge replied "absolutely not." At the Pentagon, spokeswoman Victoria Clarke said the Defense Department was "not aware of anything new or different. He [bin Laden] made clear his desire to have such weapons, so we need to be very attentive, very concerned. . . . But I don't know what prompted that particular story." Those comments weren't in The Post on Wednesday.

The ombudsman has no sources of his own on such matters. So I pay close attention, as a news consumer and Washington resident, to everything Woodward and company report. I trust him and his colleagues. But that was a scary combination of stories, and because the super-sourced Woodward was associated with the lead story, it adds an extra dimension that gets the readers' attention.

Considering the emotional baggage that mention of radioactive and nuclear capabilities carries with it, it would have been proper, in my view, to give more prominence to the following day's denials and comments by Ridge and Clarke, and to Gugliotta's more detailed explanation of the difference between a dirty bomb and a nuclear bomb.

The initial story did explain that a dirty bomb is made by taking highly radioactive material, such as spent reactor fuel rods, and wrapping it around readily available conventional explosives. That is bad enough, killing by radiation in a zone that could amount to several city blocks. But a real atomic, or fission bomb, is vastly more devastating, killing over a much larger area by blast, heat and a variety of long-lasting

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radioactive elements. Explaining the difference more thoroughly in the initial story might have helped readers who can be forgiven for thinking of dirty-bomb radiological weapons as atomic bombs.

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