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The First Line Against Terrorism

By Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin
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In the spring of 1946, J. Robert Oppenheimer was asked in a closed congressional hearing room "whether three or four men couldn't smuggle units of an [atomic] bomb into New York and blow up the whole city." The father of the atomic bomb answered, "Of course it could be done, and people could destroy New York."

When a nervous senator then asked how such a weapon smuggled in a crate or even a suitcase could be detected, Oppenheimer quipped, "With a screwdriver." A few years later, he persuaded the Atomic Energy Commission to write a top secret study on the dangers of nuclear terrorism. The document, known as the "Screwdriver Report," remains classified to this day. Our leaders realized then that there was no defense against such an attack and, because we were defenseless, chose to play down its possibility.

But on Sept. 11 Islamicist terrorists used knives and box-cutters to turn commercial aircraft into weapons of mass destruction. And then there was anthrax. The next time they could use spent nuclear reactor fuel wrapped in explosives. And if they are determined to sacrifice their own lives, the assassins will achieve a high degree of success.

Oppenheimer understood a half-century ago that by unlocking the power of the atom he and his colleagues had suddenly made the world a smaller place. That's why in 1946 he proposed banning nuclear weapons.

The globalization of science and technology has now reached a point where weapons of mass destruction really can be wielded by a handful of individuals. In such a world, our military prowess is our very last line of defense.

To our own peril in this interdependent world, we are foolishly squandering our first and strongest line of defense: the imponderable that the venerable World War II secretary of war, Henry L. Stimson, called our reputation for fair play. In this sense Sept. 11 was the ultimate failure of a foreign policy that has systematically sullied our reputation.

For a half-century our foreign policy establishment complacently assumed that America could act with impunity in the Third World. We fought the Cold War on Third World battlefields; the list of our interventions is staggering: Iran, Korea, Guatemala, Congo, Cuba, Vietnam, Chile, Nicaragua and, of course, the entire Middle East. Millions died.

In the decade since the collapse of the Soviet Union, our policymakers have pursued a "triumphalist" stance based on America's invincibility as "the world's only superpower." They told us that the smoldering ethnic and tribal conflicts in Bosnia, Rwanda, East Timor, Congo, Sudan, Chechnya, Afghanistan and dozens of other places were not America's business.

They were wrong. America needs a radically new foreign policy. The artificial Cold War dichotomy between realism and idealism must be abandoned. No foreign policy devoid of sound moral principles is realistic today. Even a "victory" in Afghanistan will do little to protect us from terrorists if we once again become complicit with authoritarian regimes that abuse their own people.

We need a smart foreign policy that addresses the underlying grievances that foster suicidal rage. We need to go back as a nation to where we were in 1945 -- before Hiroshima, before we took the road to a permanent national security state. Most Americans have no memory of the designs Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Dealers had for postwar American foreign policy. Human rights, self-determination, an end to colonization in the developing world, nuclear disarmament, international law, the World Court, the United Nations -- these were all ideas of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party.

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We need to return to this Rooseveltian vision of a foreign policy based on human rights. We need to encourage the weak and afflicted to take their grievances to the United Nations, the World Court and the new International Criminal Court. And that means we too must abide by U.N. and World Court decisions.

We desperately need to engage with the world -- and not just dominate it with dollars, cruise missile diplomacy and secret military courts. The billions we contemplate spending on missile defense should instead be invested to promote peace agreements and meet basic human needs in the world's poorest societies. And right now, we need to end our long illicit affair with nuclear weapons.

In 1948 Oppenheimer observed that nuclear weapons -- born in secrecy and designed as "unparalleled instruments of coercion" -- were by definition antithetical to a free society. And so paradoxically he insisted that even a nuclear-armed America must nevertheless remain loyal to two mutually interdependent ideals, the minimization of secrecy and coercion: "We seem to know, and seem to come back again and again to this knowledge, that the purposes of this country in the field of foreign policy cannot in any real or enduring way be achieved by coercion."

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