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Taking seriously the nuclear threat

The seriousness of the terrorism threat to the United States is revealed in the chilling - but appropriate - action taken by President Bush within hours of the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Bush ordered execution of a highly secret plan designed to ensure continuity of the federal government in case of an attack that killed the president and other members of the government in the line of succession to the presidency.

The "Continuity of Operations Plan" is a holdover from the Cold War days, when the fear was that a sneak attack by the Soviet Union with nuclear-tipped missiles on Washington could decapitate the government.

Now the fear is that terrorists armed with a portable nuclear device could do much the same.

Yes, it's a worst-case scenario. But in today's world it is prudent to plan for such an event.

The government says there is no evidence that such a weapon is in the hands of the al-Qaida network or anyone else. But proving a negative - that al-Qaida does not have such weapons - is impossible.

Recent reports revealed that there have been thefts of weapons-grade nuclear material from within the former Soviet Union. Officials say they don't know where the stuff might be. Also, they say almost every black market sale of nuclear material that intelligence agencies have been able to document has turned out to be either a scam played on unsophisticated buyers, or very low-level nuclear material. No sale of weapons-grade material has been proven.

Given the seriousness of the situation, the government cannot afford to assume that no terrorist has, or can get, a nuclear weapon.

News of the plan's operation sends a message to any potential enemy that there is no hope of eliminating the government's ability to function. That means retaliation for any attack with weapons of mass destruction is assured.

Meanwhile, the United States should make it clear to nations like Iran and Iraq that if the United States were to be subjected to a nuclear attack, the "level of proof" required for retaliatory strikes would be lowered.

Any nation today that is - or is thinking about - helping Osama bin Laden or other terrorist groups in any way will be on the target list in such a case. Perhaps it will help focus their attention on helping us find bin Laden and destroying his network instead of playing the dangerous game of helping him.

It's time that more nations grasp that worldwide terrorism is a destabilizing force, and that it is in their interest to work for stability. An unstable world is a dangerous world, and a United States forced to defend its very existence would be a terrible and lethal threat to any nation identified as an active enemy.



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