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The Military Response to Terrorism

Captain Mark E. Kosnik, U.S. Navy

OVER THE PAST THIRTY YEARS, INTERNATIONAL state-sponsored terrorism has emerged as a concern for the United States. Although the number of terrorist acts varies from year to year, even during periods of minimal activity terrorism remains a frequent topic in the media and an issue for policy makers. The 1998 bombings of two embassies in Africa, resulting in over two hundred deaths, reminded the American leadership and public that terrorism remains a danger in an increasingly unstable world.

Of all the tools used by the United States to contain terrorism, none has been more controversial than military force. Skeptics argue that military force does not deter terrorism and in fact only results in more violence, when the terrorist retaliates. Certainly, collateral damage, casualties to innocent civilians and U.S. servicemen, damage to international alliances, and other undesirable outcomes can result from any military operation. Nonetheless, the record supports the view that military force can be a valuable part of the U.S. strategy to contain terrorism: under certain conditions, the political and strategic gains justify employment of military force against terrorism, as a complement to efforts in the political, economic, and law enforcement arenas.

This article presents three historical cases: the U.S. air strikes in Libya in 1986, the cruise missile attacks on Iraq in 1993, and the cruise missile strikes against Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998. We will examine the military, political, and strategic outcomes from each of these incidents, asking in each case exactly what the use of military force accomplished.

Why were these particular cases selected? There are few from which to choose; the United States has seldom used military force to counter terrorism. The Iraqi case is somewhat problematic, because

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although the U.S. military action was specifically a response to a terrorist threat, it is more properly viewed as part of the larger confrontation between the United States and Iraq, unrelated to terrorism; the Sudan and Afghanistan strikes are very recent, and their long-term results are yet to unfold. Nonetheless, these uses of military force were responses to three of the most significant terrorist acts committed against U.S. interests in the past thirty years, and they are among the clearest examples available.

Case One: Libya, 1986

Colonel Muammar Qaddafi rose to power in Libya by a coup, overthrowing King Idris I in September 1969. Almost from the beginning, Qaddafi extended support to terrorist or guerrilla groups across the globe that were anti-Western or anti-American. Throughout the 1970s, Qaddafi sponsored terrorists as diverse as the infamous "Carlos," the Red Brigades of Italy, the Red Army in Germany, Direct Action in France, FP-25 in Portugal, neo-Nazi activists in Spain, and right-wing terrorists in Italy and Germany.¹ He also built a highly effective terrorist organization within Libya, responsible for the 1973 attack on the Information Service installation at the American consulate in Morocco and for the seizure (in which two Americans were killed) of the U.S. embassy in Khartoum, Sudan.² Qaddafi developed ties with the most extreme and violent terrorist groups of the day, including Abu Nidal, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and state-terrorist organizations in Syria and Iran.³

Ronald Reagan's administration saw Libya as the primary terrorist threat. Qaddafi was contributing to a new and increasingly more

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any of its agencies.

violent wave of terrorism, and he was openly calling for attacks on the West, and praising even the most brutal actions. Qaddafi had become both the personification and symbolic leader of an emerging international terrorist threat.

For the Reagan administration, the increasingly frequent and violent terrorist acts of Middle Eastern groups took center stage. There was clear evidence that three countries—Libya, Syria, and Iran—were responsible for this wave of violence. It appeared, however, that Iranian and Syrian activities were for the most part limited to the Middle East itself, while Libyan terror had a more international orientation. Iran and Syria tried to distance themselves officially from terrorism. Libya, in contrast,

provided the bulk of funding for the hard-line Palestinian groups, while Syria was comparatively poor and therefore expended far less money on terrorism; the two countries shared the arming and training; Syria played host to the headquarters of most of these groups after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982; and Syrian intelligence apparently tended to work more closely with these groups than did Libyan intelligence, whose technical expertise was no match for that of the Syrians. Libya's contribution to the overall infrastructure of international terrorism was greater than [those of] Syria and Iran and possibly of any other country. The Qaddafi regime was the closest thing in existence to a missionary society for world terrorism; the role of Syria and Iran with terrorism outside the Middle East was much smaller.⁴

In the mid-1980s, Libyan terrorism grew more public and threatening. For instance, in 1984 personnel inside the Libyan embassy in London fired upon anti-Qaddafi demonstrators, killing a policewoman and injuring several other people. Later that year, Libyan responsibility was established for the laying of mines that had damaged nineteen ships in the Red Sea.⁵ In retrospect, the Reagan administration may have overestimated the danger from Libyan terrorism in comparison to that which Iran and Syria represented, but the likelihood of a Soviet reaction to any operations against either Iran or Syria made it easier to focus on Qaddafi.

On 21 December 1985, as the White House was struggling with options for how to deal with Libya, simultaneous attacks by

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Palestinian extremists using AK-47 assault rifles and grenades at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport and Vienna's Schwechat Airport killed nineteen people, including five U.S. citizens. The brutality of the attack was made particularly vivid to the American public: "One of the American victims was eleven-year-old Natasha Simpson, who after being blasted to her knees [had] received an additional burst of gunfire aimed directly at her head; she became a symbolic martyr of terrorism. . . . Vivid television footage showed corpses and huge pools of the victims' blood on the airport floors, and President Reagan and the American people were enraged."⁶ Libya's state news agency praised the attacks. The U.S. government gathered information that, although never made fully public, led it to believe that Libya may have sponsored them.⁷

The American people were becoming increasingly convinced that Qaddafi was responsible, and many voices demanded a response. The administration considered military options but put them on hold, hoping instead to generate European support for economic sanctions and political initiatives; these began with the freezing of a billion dollars in Libyan assets in the United States. Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead went to Europe seeking commitments to, among other initiatives, a reduction in the importation of Libyan oil and a halt in sales of military equipment to Libya. His mission was unsuccessful.⁸

The United States then revisited its military options. In March 1986, the aircraft carrier *USS America* (CV 66) was sent to join the carriers *USS Saratoga* (CV 60) and *USS Coral Sea* (CV 43) in the Mediterranean. The three carriers, with twenty-seven other warships, were ordered to operate north of Libya to intimidate Qaddafi and demonstrate U.S. resolve. In a mission designated PRAIRIE FIRE, U.S. naval forces entered the Gulf of Sidra and sent aircraft toward the coast, where they were fired on by Libyan SA-5 missiles. Several hours later, when the same missile fire control radar tracked other U.S. planes, two Navy A-7 attack aircraft fired antiradiation missiles at the site, and the emissions ceased. Later that evening, two Libyan patrol boats were destroyed and one damaged as they approached a surface action group in the Gulf of Sidra.⁹ There were no more aggressive movements by Libyan military forces, and the U.S. fleet withdrew from the Gulf of Sidra without damage.

Tensions between Libya and the United States, however, were at an all-time high. The U.S. armada had done little to intimidate Qaddafi, who now ordered the “People’s Bureaus” (Libyan embassies) in East Berlin, Paris, Rome, Madrid, and other European capitals to undertake terrorist acts against American targets.¹⁰ Less than two weeks later, on 5 April 1985, the La Belle Discotheque in Berlin was bombed, killing two American soldiers and a Turkish woman. There were 229 additional casualties, including seventy-nine Americans, most of them soldiers. Independent communication intercepts by U.S., British, and German intelligence groups immediately confirmed Libyan sponsorship of the bombings.¹¹

The Reagan administration decided that the attack demanded a response. Having been unable to generate the European support necessary to implement meaningful economic or political sanctions, President Reagan turned to what he deemed his only remaining option—unilateral military action.

The Strike. Nine days after the La Belle disco bombing, U.S. military forces conducted Operation ELDORADO CANYON, a night air strike against five targets in Libya. Eighteen Air Force F-111s from the 48th Tactical Fighter Wing bombed three targets in Tripoli, while a force of over seventy Navy and Marine Corps strike, fighter, and support aircraft from the carriers *Coral Sea* and *America* simultaneously struck two targets in Benghazi.

The F-111s, flying 2,500 miles from their base at Lakenheath, in the United Kingdom, had been assigned three targets in downtown Tripoli: the Azziziyah military barracks, the Sidi Balal terrorist training camp (near the harbor), and the military section of the Tripoli airport. These targets had been selected because of their suspected involvement with Qaddafi’s terrorist organization.¹² The aircraft arrived over Tripoli in the early hours of 14 April; nine F-111s attacked Azziziyah, six the airport, and three Sidi Balal.¹³ The raid caught the Libyan military by surprise, but surface-to-air missile and anti-aircraft artillery fire increased as the raid progressed. At the same time, carrier aircraft were attacking their targets at Benghazi. Six A-6 bombers attacked military targets at Benina Airport, while another six dropped ordnance on the Jamahiriyah military barracks.¹⁴

In several respects, ELDORADO CANYON was a remarkable testimony to the capabilities of the U.S. military: it was a highly complex

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mission, involving elaborate coordination between the Navy and Air Force, extreme ranges for the F-111s (which flew what was then the longest combat mission in the history of military aviation, in terms of both time and distance), and precise air strikes at night against substantial defenses.¹⁵ Judging, however, by the actual damage inflicted on the five targets, the strike was only marginally successful. In Tripoli, all three targets were hit, but the damage achieved was less than had been anticipated, and many of the specific “aimpoints” were missed entirely. Many of the planes suffered equipment or navigation problems, and only two of the nine F-111s that flew against Azziziyah actually delivered ordnance.¹⁶ Apparently only four of the eighteen aircraft actually hit their assigned targets.¹⁷ Additionally, one of the Air Force aircraft was lost (presumably shot down) during the raid, and both crewmen were killed.

Results at Benghazi were only slightly better. Although both targets were hit, the damage done was also below expectations. The Jamahiriya barracks were heavily damaged, and many of the targets at the Benina Airfield were damaged;¹⁸ however, as in Tripoli, many of the aircraft did not deliver their weapons. Rear Admiral Jerry C. Breast, commander of the *Coral Sea* battle group, speculated that only about 10 percent of the assigned aircraft actually got weapons on target.¹⁹

Disappointment in the military effectiveness of the strikes was deepened by the collateral damage they caused. In the Benghazi region, bombs fell on a gas station and a dispensary, killing innocent civilians. At Jamahiriya, a warehouse that was not on the target list was destroyed. In Tripoli, the collateral damage was substantial; bombs falling in the city’s Bin Ashur region damaged the French embassy and numerous other structures. Reports varied, but the raids killed approximately thirty-seven people and injured ninety-three, most of them civilians.²⁰

The Libyan regime wasted no time in using the collateral damage in an attempt to generate sympathy for Libya and condemnation of the United States. Within hours of the strike, foreign journalists were taken to the scenes of the damage and to hospitals to witness the death, injury, and destruction inflicted on innocent civilians.²¹ These unintended human costs were to become a major part of later criticisms of Reagan’s decision to use armed force against the Libyan regime.

The raid did appear to have had a personal impact on Qaddafi, who is believed to have been in the Azziziyah compound when the bombs fell. He was not injured, but Libyan sources reported that his adopted fifteen-month-old daughter had been killed and two of his sons seriously injured.²² Qaddafi did in fact seem distracted for a period of time following the strikes; he made few public appearances and considerably reduced his terrorist rhetoric.

Colonel Qaddafi [was] seen only fleetingly in the weeks afterward, and even then only in controlled situations. He canceled public appearances and, to all intents and purposes, seemed to vanish into the desert for days at a time. According to some observers who saw him after the mission, he seemed extremely quiet, distracted, and even “unhinged.” No Western reporter was granted an interview until over two months had passed.²³

The Results. ELDORADO CANYON is perhaps the most valuable of the three case studies, because enough time has elapsed to discern its long-term effects. From that perspective, the clearest and perhaps most important outcome of the U.S. military action was that it weakened Qaddafi’s ability to intimidate through terrorism. After almost sixteen years of violence and bluster, his image as a feared and powerful adherent of international terrorism had been challenged.

The strike aggravated, or helped expose, a weakness that previously had been latent or not apparent to outsiders. The bombing did not cause the Libyan people to rally around their leader; rather, in the months following the raid many Libyans began to question openly Qaddafi’s authority for the first time. There were reports that force had to be used to put down rebellious Libyan military units. It appears that Qaddafi’s hold over both the military and intelligence establishments was weakened in the aftermath of the strike;²⁴ additionally, the U.S. attack put the Libyan terrorist apparatus on the defensive, less able to focus on new activities.

Libyan isolation on the international scene also became apparent. The strike had exposed Qaddafi’s vulnerability, and his credibility and influence on the world stage began to erode. There was little public sympathy for him in Arab capitals. Most moderate Arab nations had apparently tired of Qaddafi’s extremist views and his campaign of terror. The U.S. raid may have helped convince some of

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these nations that it was time to distance themselves. In addition, the Soviet Union—previously one of Libya's closest allies—began to back away. The Libyan-Soviet political and military cooperation that had existed prior to the raid now slowly deteriorated, and it would never again be as strong. It would be difficult to prove that the strike, by itself, left Qaddafi broken and isolated. Clearly, however, it was an important first step in the eventual erosion of his agenda.

After almost sixteen years of violence and bluster, his image as a feared and powerful adherent of international terrorism had been challenged.

A third major result of the air strike was the emergence of a new degree of cooperation between America and Europe in diplomatic and economic measures against Libya. Whether out of a genuine desire to take strong action against Libya or of fear that failure to cooperate would result in additional U.S. military action, European nations now supported nonmilitary options that they had earlier rejected.²⁵ In the days following the bombing a number of nations, including Germany, Great Britain, Spain, and Ireland, placed restrictions on Libyan diplomats and employees of the Libyan embassies. In the next months, over a hundred Libyan diplomats and four hundred other Libyan citizens were expelled from Europe.²⁶ The removal of these individuals, who had long been suspected of supporting terrorism throughout Europe, severely hampered the operation and effectiveness of Qaddafi's international terrorist apparatus. Also, in a distinct reversal, most Western European countries ended airline service with Libya, and some took strong steps to reduce trade. During the summer of 1986 several European nations began to reduce imports of Libyan oil and to cut off financing they had previously extended to that country.²⁷ Many believe that this new cooperation with Europe, stimulated by the American air strike and extending across a broad spectrum of political, diplomatic, and economic fronts, was to have a most positive impact on the war against terrorism.²⁸

In the United States, there was staunch support on Capitol Hill, and polls found that 77 percent of the public approved the raid.²⁹ The importance of these polls should not be overstated, but they did

suggest that the American public saw Qaddafi as a growing danger and that Americans generally felt that military force could be an acceptable response to a terrorist threat.

Notwithstanding, the immediate reaction overseas was negative. President Reagan received intense international criticism, particularly from Europe.³⁰ Europeans opposed the strikes, fearing they would incite an escalation of terrorism, with the European Community (as the European Union was then known) a likely target. However, as time passed and the expected escalation never developed, European outrage waned.

This strike, then, had demonstrated American resolve to take strong action against terrorism and had not permanently damaged European relations. Fundamentally, however, it had been aimed at Qaddafi as a terrorist. Did these military strikes deter or encourage Libyan terrorism? Even today this issue is subject to considerable debate. Cause and effect are extremely problematic; in the wake of the strike, several influences—the military effects, diplomatic action, and economic sanctions—were acting simultaneously.

The conventional wisdom had been that military action against Libya would only lead to further terrorism in reprisal. What actually happened provides little support to that theory. In the weeks following the raid there were in fact shootings involving American and British citizens in Sudan, Yemen, and Lebanon, apparent reprisals for the air strike; thereafter, however, there was a sudden and dramatic decline in Libyan-sponsored terrorism.³¹ The U.S. State Department assessment was that “although detectable Libyan involvement in terrorist activity dropped significantly in 1986 and 1987 after the U.S. air raids in April 1986, Qaddafi shows no signs of forsaking terrorism.”³² Ultimately he would indeed resume it, but in far more covert and less confrontational ways. Libya was to be involved, for instance, in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing all 259 persons aboard and eleven on the ground. Some contend that this particularly shocking act was a direct retaliation to the U.S. strike and is in itself sufficient proof that the use of force against Qaddafi was a mistake. It is essential to remember, however, that Qaddafi was already a committed terrorist; the historical record suggests that his attacks against innocent civilians would have continued even had the United States not acted militarily. As it was, the trend of escalating Libyan terrorism had been

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broken; after the strike, that threat was neither as severe nor as pervasive as it had been.

The view that the U.S. raid actually reduced Libyan terrorism has not received universal assent. It has been argued, on the basis of a complex empirical approach known as vector-autoregression-intervention analysis, that the strike actually resulted in an increase in Libyan terrorism. However, the data set used is questionable, because it counts verbal threats as "terrorist acts"; the reported increase in terrorism is directly accounted for by more such threats.³³ The conclusions of that particular study are therefore suspect.

Whether the U.S. air strike actually decreased the number of Libyan terrorist acts, it definitely did not lead to a spiraling escalation of violence between the United States and Libya. As one observer sees it, "Over against the rigid assertion that military force cannot possibly accomplish anything against terrorism, and in fact will only create a cycle of worse violence, it appears that the U.S. attack may have helped break the cycle of accelerating Middle Eastern terrorism dating from 1983."³⁴

In summary, ELDORADO CANYON stands as a significant event in the U.S. war against terrorism. For the first time, U.S. military force was employed in direct retaliation to state-sponsored terrorism. Despite the only moderate military effectiveness of the attack, the accompanying severe collateral damage, and the initial condemnation by European allies, the Air Force and Navy bombing challenged Qaddafi's standing as an international terrorist, exposed and exacerbated his domestic weakness and international isolation, and left him less willing to encourage international terrorism openly. Most significantly, it did all this without producing a new cycle of terrorism against Americans, thereby dispelling a myth widely held in the West disparaging the value of military force against terrorism.

Case Two: Iraq, 1993

The Persian Gulf War left unresolved a number of important differences between the United States and Iraq. Iraq viewed the United States as responsible for the death and destruction inflicted by the coalition in 1991. Saddam Hussein, who remained in power, nursed a great personal hatred for the country that led the coalition that had just defeated him in battle. In turn, the United States viewed

Hussein as an irrational despot who threatened the security of the entire Gulf region, and it argued in the United Nations for the maintenance of economic sanctions, a no-fly zone, and a rigorous weapons inspection regime. All these were viewed by Iraq as primarily U.S. initiatives, further deteriorating relations between the two nations.

Within this context the United States and its newly elected president, Bill Clinton, were again faced with the question of how to respond to terrorism. In May 1993, just months after Clinton had assumed office, reports began to surface that Iraqi terrorists had plotted to assassinate former president George Bush. The Kuwait government arrested sixteen individuals, including eleven Iraqi nationals, on charges that they had conspired to assassinate Bush with a car bomb during his visit to Kuwait City on 14 April 1993. The Kuwaitis also seized two cars with remote-control devices and several hundred pounds of explosives.³⁵ The Kuwaiti government announced that at least one of the suspects had confessed to being an officer of the Iraqi intelligence service. There was also evidence that the bomb to have been used was of Iraqi design and origin.³⁶

The White House initially expressed caution, declaring that direct Iraqi sponsorship had not been established and that it would review all the evidence before deciding what action to take. The administration immediately sent investigators from the Secret Service and Federal Bureau of Investigation to conduct an independent investigation.³⁷

Almost immediately, pressure was put on the new president to take action. Although the Kuwaiti government had foiled the plot and Bush had never been in any real danger, many Americans perceived the threat of violence against a former U.S. president as so egregious as to require a swift and condign response. Several members of Congress urged President Clinton to take military action if the Iraqi government were found to be responsible for the assassination plot.³⁸ It was the first serious foreign policy crisis faced by the Clinton White House.

For the next two months, law enforcement experts examined the evidence. The administration began to believe the allegation, on the basis of two pieces of evidence. The first was the confessions of the conspirators themselves. There had been suggestions that the Kuwaiti authorities had coerced the confessions, but subsequent interviews by U.S. agencies had reduced the administration's skepticism

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and strengthened the view that Iraq had sponsored the plan. (Details of these interviews have never been released, but U.S. sources reported at the time that more than one of the suspects admitted to working for Iraqi intelligence and that other members of the group had also received Iraqi government assistance.)³⁹ Secondly, American investigators became convinced that the design of the bomb indicated Iraqi involvement.

However, the evidence of Iraqi involvement in the assassination attempt was far from the proof needed before opting for military retaliation. A final decision was therefore delayed until the FBI could examine all the evidence, interview the suspects, and provide a final assessment to the president. Indeed, this case highlights how difficult it can be to establish culpability in cases involving terrorism; evidence may be either circumstantial or difficult to obtain quickly, if it is available at all. In this case, many would later question whether the evidence had been sufficient.⁴⁰

By late June 1993 the FBI had concluded that Iraqi intelligence had indeed been responsible for the assassination plot. Still facing domestic pressure to take strong action, President Clinton's options were limited: Saddam Hussein was already isolated, there were no diplomatic measures that would punish him meaningfully, and severe economic sanctions were already in place. Finally, although the agents who were actually to have carried out the plot would be tried by the Kuwaiti courts, there was no legal recourse with respect to the Iraqi leadership. Faced with the choice between doing nothing and using force, President Clinton approved a retaliatory cruise missile attack against the Iraqi intelligence service headquarters.

The Strike. On 27 June 1993 the destroyer USS *Peterson* (DD 969) in the Red Sea and the cruiser USS *Chancellorsville* (CG 62) in the Arabian Gulf fired a total of twenty-three Tomahawk cruise missiles at the headquarters, in downtown Baghdad.⁴¹ Twenty of the missiles hit and heavily damaged the headquarters complex; the other three missed the target and struck in the neighborhoods around it, damaging homes and killing eight civilians.⁴²

From a military perspective, the missile strike was highly effective. All the major aimpoints were hit, and the headquarters building was heavily damaged; in fact, its main wing was totally destroyed. As Secretary of Defense Les Aspin put it, "Damage was very extensive.

There is no question that the strike was a success. . . . It is definitely out of business when you see the photographs."⁴³

The success of the military operation was tempered, however, by the extent of collateral damage. Military planners had been given direction by the civilian leadership to make the minimization of collateral damage a priority. Now, although the collateral damage did not approach that inflicted in Tripoli in 1986, the White House quickly began a public-relations campaign to make the case that every reasonable step had been taken to lessen civilian casualties. For instance, administration officials declared that the attack had been conducted in the middle of the night for that reason.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the White House attempted to minimize its own domestic political risks in another important way: cruise missiles, spokesmen emphasized, had been selected for the operation specifically to ensure that there would be no casualties to U.S. servicemen. As one Pentagon official acknowledged, "The military chose the missile to avoid risks to U.S. pilots even though manned bombers generally have greater accuracy."⁴⁵

The day after the strike, in a gesture aimed at winning international support, the American delegate to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright, presented to a special session of the UN Security Council the evidence that the United States had been legally justified in conducting the strike.⁴⁶ Albright argued that the U.S. action had been an act of self-defense, permissible under Article 51 of the UN Charter. The Reagan administration had also appealed to Article 51 after the Libyan raid, although in a far less formal and public way. The decision by the Clinton White House to present its case before the UN was a clear attempt to seize the political high ground and preempt international criticism.

The Results. The impact of this Tomahawk strike with respect to terrorism was less dramatic or obvious than that of the air raid on Libya in 1986. There was near unanimous support from America's European allies for the missile strike.⁴⁷ There was some criticism from Arab governments, but opposition quickly evaporated. The U.S. strike generated little sympathy for Saddam Hussein. It did not enhance his standing in the Arab world, nor did it alienate the United States from either its European allies or the Arabs. However, the strike cannot be said to have had much impact with respect to

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international terrorism, for Iraq had not been perceived as an international terrorist threat. The strike did not stimulate an Iraqi reprisal, but there had never been active Iraqi terrorism against Americans. The Iraqi intelligence service had surely been involved in violent acts, but mostly against the Iraqi people themselves.

The American public supported the strike. Initial polls showed 66 percent approval of the president's decision to use military force against Iraq, and the decision drew bipartisan support from Congress.⁴⁸ Although these poll numbers were not as strong as those following ELDORADO CANYON, they did suggest that a majority of Americans continued to support the notion that military force is an appropriate response to significant acts of terrorism. In this case, the general feeling was that the United States could not stand by and ignore an assassination plot on a former president.

Case Three: Sudan and Afghanistan, 1998

In the 1990s a new terrorist threat to U.S. interests emerged, actions sponsored by an Islamic extremist, Osama bin Laden. The son of a Saudi billionaire, bin Laden had gone to Afghanistan in the 1980s to fight the Soviets alongside the mujaheddin. Over time, bin Laden had built up a quasi-military organization that had become militant and dedicated to driving Western influences out of the Arab world. The group, which became known as "al Qaida," the Base, remained in the shadows, but its cells operated throughout the Middle East.

Although Osama bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia following the war in Afghanistan, he was exiled in 1991 after he began his radical campaign against the United States. With his group of guerrilla fighters and his considerable wealth, estimated by some at over \$300 million, bin Laden quietly began a war of terrorism against the United States.⁴⁹ Operating primarily out of the rural regions of Afghanistan and Sudan, he provided funding, support, and training for groups willing to strike out against the United States. He allegedly assisted terrorist groups in buying weapons, equipment and computers, and he financed terrorist training camps in Sudan. He was also suspected of having provided support to the terrorists arrested in the 1993 bombing of New York's World Trade Center and of

funding the warlords in Somalia that battled U.S. military troops in 1993.⁵⁰

Bin Laden was different from other state-sponsored terrorists. Personally secretive and seldom seen, he exerted a terrorist influence that was far less public than Muammar Qaddafi's. He had come to the attention of U.S. law enforcement agencies, but the American public knew little about him before 1998. His terrorist organization was not dependent on, or concerned with achieving the aims of, any single state; instead, it was driven by fundamentalist religious objectives. A former CIA official wrote that Osama bin Laden's group,

such as it is, is unlike any other. It has no real headquarters and no fixed address to target. It is a coalition of like-minded warriors living in exile from their homes in Egypt, the Sudan, Pakistan and other Islamic nations riven by religious and political battles. The bin Laden organization is global and stateless, according to the United States intelligence analyses, more theological than political, driven by a millennial vision of destroying the United States, driving all Western influences from the Arab world, abolishing the boundaries of the Islamic nations and making them one, without borders.⁵¹

In 1996, frustrated by the continued presence of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia, bin Laden called for a holy war against them.⁵² He is suspected—although he has not yet been formally charged, and the cases are still being investigated—of having supported the 1995 bombing of a building in Riyadh used by the American military, killing seven people, and the 1996 Khobar Tower bombing in Dhahran, which killed nineteen American airmen.⁵³

In February 1998, bin Laden issued a *fatwa*, a religious edict, calling on Muslims to kill Americans. During an interview with a London-based Arabic newspaper, bin Laden was quoted as saying, "We had thought that the Riyadh and [Dhahran] blasts were a sufficient signal to sensible U.S. decision-makers to avert a real battle between the Islamic nation and U.S. forces, but it seems that they did not understand the signal."⁵⁴ He told ABC News in June 1998, "We do not differentiate between those dressed in military uniforms and civilians; they are all targets."⁵⁵

Despite these threats, Americans were unprepared for the simultaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi (Kenya) and Dar

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es Salaam (Tanzania) on 7 August 1998. The damage was horrific. In Nairobi, the bomb “brought down half the embassy” and left several square blocks of downtown Nairobi in shambles;⁵⁶ in Dar es Salaam, most of the embassy building and some adjacent buildings were destroyed.⁵⁷ The loss of life was substantial; the final count, which took months to produce, was 224 people killed in the two bombings, including twelve Americans. More than 4,800 persons had been injured.⁵⁸

The Clinton administration quickly found evidence that bin Laden was responsible. The details of this evidence remain closely held. At the time, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Hugh Shelton, would announce only, “As many of you are aware, our intelligence community has provided us with convincing information based on a variety of intelligence sources, that Osama bin Laden’s network of terrorists was involved in the planning, the financing and the execution of the attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.”⁵⁹ Secretary of Defense William Cohen would say only, “There’s been a series of reports that we have analyzed, statements by Osama bin Laden himself, other information coming in as recently as yesterday about future attacks being planned against the United States. We are satisfied there has been a convincing body of evidence that leads us to this conclusion.”⁶⁰

The president was soon convinced that Osama bin Laden was responsible for the bombings and that additional terrorist acts were being planned by his organization.⁶¹ Again, Clinton had few alternatives. Because Osama bin Laden was not a head of state, there were no political, diplomatic, or economic recourses available. Law enforcement agencies were already doing all they could to find and arrest members of his organization, and those efforts would take time. Finally, the bombings of the embassies were seen as direct assaults on U.S. sovereign territory and as therefore requiring a strong unilateral response. Ultimately, Clinton decided bin Laden’s terrorism was a clear threat to U.S. national interests and for the second time in his presidency decided to use military force to counter a terrorist threat.

The Strikes. On 20 August 1998, less than three weeks after the embassy bombings, Operation INFINITE REACH was carried out.⁶² U.S. Navy surface ships and a submarine in the Arabian Gulf and Red Sea fired approximately seventy Tomahawk cruise missiles against

terrorist targets in Khartoum and Khost (in Afghanistan).⁶³ The administration emphasized operational security, with the result that unlike previous cases, few details of the operation or about its outcome have been released.

It is known, however, that the missiles arrived over targets in both countries nearly simultaneously. In Afghanistan, they damaged a series of buildings in four different complexes that constituted a terrorist training camp and bin Laden's main operational base. Reports in the Pakistani press claimed that the camp "had been leveled";⁶⁴ the Taliban regime in Afghanistan reported that twenty-one people had been killed and an additional thirty injured.⁶⁵ Months later, in January 1999, defense officials would release satellite reconnaissance photos showing massive damage.

The conventional wisdom had been that military action against Libya would only lead to further terrorism in reprisal. What actually happened provides little support to that theory.

The camp, they said, was a known terrorist area and far from any civilian population center; in fact, the national security adviser, Sandy Berger, was to explain that the attack had been conducted on 20 August precisely because intelligence sources had predicted a meeting of bin Laden and several of his key deputies at the camp that day. Therefore, all reported deaths and injuries were considered casualties to terrorists and not collateral; "Collateral damage was just not an issue in Afghanistan."⁶⁶ Reports later emerged that bin Laden had indeed been at the camp at the time of the attack, although he was not injured. One official stated, "The Tomahawks wiped out the guards, drivers, vehicles and electrical and water supplies. Bin Laden was there, but he was underground along with others in the terrorist leadership. The attack left him with a ringing head, and he had to walk to the nearest highway to make his way out."⁶⁷ American officials believed about a hundred "terrorists in training" had been killed and that at least one of bin Laden's top lieutenants was among the dead.⁶⁸ Their assessment as of January 1999 was that "the capability to sustain terrorist operations from these facilities for the near term [had been] significantly reduced."⁶⁹

In Sudan, the missiles struck a pharmaceutical factory, known as El Shifa, in downtown Khartoum. Sudan's state-run television

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broadcast images immediately after the raid indicating that the plant had been leveled; it reported that ten people had been injured but that there had been no deaths.⁷⁰ One missile had apparently struck a nearby candy factory, causing light damage.⁷¹

In the aftermath of the raid, White House officials justified the attack on the factory in Khartoum by claims it had been a secret chemical-weapons factory financed by bin Laden.⁷² In support they cited soil samples taken from the plant indicating the presence of Empta, a “precursor” substance used in the production of the nerve gas VX.⁷³ However, in the weeks after the strike many began to question the adequacy of the administration’s evidence. Several critics argued that the evidence both that bin Laden had been associated with the plant and that it had been producing chemical weapons was circumstantial at best.⁷⁴ Seymour Hersh, a well known investigative reporter and author, asserted that the administration’s evidence had not justified the attack on the Sudanese plant, that the decision had been a mistake, “a by-product of the secrecy that marked all the White House’s planning for the Tomahawk raids—a secrecy that prevented decision makers from knowing everything they needed to know.”⁷⁵

The Sudanese government asked the United Nations for an independent investigation to prove or disprove the allegations that the factory had been involved in chemical weapons. Even former president Jimmy Carter would call for an independent technical investigation of the evidence.⁷⁶ However, administration officials continued to argue, without releasing details, that the evidence had justified the raid, and they were able to convince the UN Security Council to shelve discussion of an independent investigation.⁷⁷

The calls upon the Clinton administration to make public its evidence on the Sudanese factory exemplifies one of the difficulties with using military force against terrorism. On one hand, the White House wished to convince the American people and U.S. allies of the legality and legitimacy of the raids; on the other hand, releasing too much information could compromise operational security or intelligence sources. Bin Laden and his group remained a threat, and it was important not to disclose how the United States could detect and thwart their plans for future terrorist attacks.

The Results. It is not possible, so soon after the event, to assess the long-term effects of the August 1998 strikes on Osama bin Laden's terrorism. Nevertheless, the U.S. strikes do appear to have put bin Laden's terrorist organization on the defensive. Instead of focusing resources and attention on planning or executing new attacks, the group must have had to step back and regroup. The United States had threatened it in a new and substantial way. The strikes may not have ended bin Laden's terrorist operations, but they appear to have limited his ability to carry out whatever attacks were being planned to follow the embassy bombings.

A second result of the strikes was in the area of international law enforcement. Just as new cooperation on the diplomatic and economic fronts emerged following the strikes against Qaddafi in 1986, the attacks on bin Laden seem to have generated a higher level of international collaboration against terrorism. For example, within days of the strikes, foreign law enforcement organizations, with support from U.S. agencies, arrested bombing suspects in Pakistan, Kenya, and Tanzania.⁷⁸ In the weeks that followed, several terrorists, including a number of key figures in the bin Laden network, were arrested in Great Britain, Germany, and across Africa.⁷⁹ Most importantly, this new international effort apparently prevented bombings that bin Laden operatives had planned against the U.S. embassies in Tirana, Albania, and in Kampala, Uganda.⁸⁰ These arrests substantiated the administration's claims at the time of the strikes that the group had been planning additional terrorist attacks against American targets. "The FBI has enjoyed unprecedented cooperation from authorities in Kenya, Tanzania and more than a dozen other countries that have assisted in the probe, a sharp contrast from some of its previous investigations of terrorism on foreign soil."⁸¹

The reasons for this new vigor and cooperation are not clear, but perhaps the strikes, by exposing bin Laden's vulnerability, encouraged other nations to overcome the fear of reprisal and to take strong action against bin Laden's organization. In any case, the cruise missile attacks demonstrated that the United States was serious; support, action, and cooperation that had not previously existed within the international law-enforcement community soon followed. Its importance, however, must not be overstated. The missile strikes could only be an opening salvo against bin Laden; it is up to law enforcement to continue the war.

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The new collaboration has kept bin Laden's group on the run. By January 1999 international law enforcement efforts had led to arrests of Islamic extremists linked to bin Laden and, perhaps more importantly, to trials against these operatives in eleven countries.⁸² As the campaign against bin Laden continues, senior U.S. officials suggest, the worldwide effort has stopped at least seven bombing attempts by the bin Laden group—against an air base in Saudi Arabia and the

In each of the three cases, military force against terrorism was either the last resort or the only useful choice.

U.S. embassies in Albania, Azerbaijan, the Côte d'Ivoire, Tajikistan, Uganda, and Uruguay.⁸³ Cooperation between Indian officials and the FBI has led to arrests of a seven-member cell, believed to be funded by bin Laden, that was planning to bomb the U.S. embassy in New Delhi and two consulates elsewhere in India.⁸⁴

The strikes generally received support from the American public. Over 75 percent of the public approved of the attack at the time, and President Clinton's job-approval rating rose to 65 percent.⁸⁵ A few Republican members of Congress questioned the timing of the strikes, suggesting that they may have been used as a distraction from the president's domestic troubles; overall, however, Clinton received bipartisan support as having taken strong action against terrorism.⁸⁶ A majority of Americans still supported military force as an appropriate response to terrorism. The El Shifa controversy that followed did not debate the legitimacy of using military force against terrorism but simply whether that specific factory had been an appropriate target.

Bin Laden's involvement in the embassy bombings has never been questioned. In November 1998, a federal grand jury in New York issued a 238-count indictment against him for acts of terrorism.⁸⁷ Soon after, the U.S. State Department offered a reward of up to five million dollars for bin Laden's capture.⁸⁸

The Tomahawk strikes received strong support from Europe. Most Western European countries, including Great Britain, Germany, France, Spain and Austria, issued statements upholding the right of the United States to defend itself against terrorism.⁸⁹ Russia, which had strongly criticized the use of U.S. military force against

terrorism in the past, now sent confused and mixed signals. President Boris Yeltsin criticized the attacks publicly, but a spokesman later downplayed his remarks. Prime Minister Sergei Kiriyenko called the attacks unacceptable but added that "international acts of terrorism cannot go unpunished."⁹⁰

In Kabul, protesters converged on the American embassy, and large street demonstrations were held in Khartoum.⁹¹ Angry protests were voiced in Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Libya. In contrast, most Arab governments remained "silent or equivocal about their views on the missile strikes."⁹² What public condemnation there was quickly faded. By October, less than two months after the strike, the Sudanese government had dropped calls for an investigation into the bombings and had initiated high-level talks with Washington in hopes of improving relations.⁹³ In February 1999, American representatives met with the Taliban to discuss bin Laden's status in Afghanistan; the Taliban was not willing to extradite bin Laden, but it restricted his access to communications and banned him from making public statements while in Afghanistan.⁹⁴ It would seem, therefore, that the military response did not damage American standing in the international community or substantially change relations with the Arab world or Central Asia.

Finally, there is the question of whether the Tomahawk strikes increased or decreased bin Laden's terrorist activity. There were a few minor incidents immediately following the strike. For instance, an Italian army officer and a French political-affairs officer working for the United Nations were attacked in Kabul. The Italian was killed and the Frenchman wounded in what appeared to be an act of retaliation.⁹⁵ A few days later, a group calling itself "Muslims against Global Oppression" claimed responsibility for bombing the Planet Hollywood Restaurant in Cape Town, South Africa, killing one woman and injuring twenty-four other people. The group said it had carried out the bombing to avenge the U.S. missile strikes.⁹⁶ Neither of these attacks may have been associated with the bin Laden group, and since then there have been no terrorist acts attributed to it. It would be naive to assume that the strikes put bin Laden out of business; in fact, as recently as December 1998 U.S. intelligence agents received indications that he was planning new terrorist attacks against American interests.⁹⁷ Despite such periodic warnings, however, as of early 2000 there have been no new terrorist acts

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attributable to bin Laden. It would appear that for the short term, at least, the missile attacks and law enforcement have put bin Laden on the defensive without igniting a new cycle of terrorism.

A Powerful Tool

A study that does not include analyses of cases in which the United States *did not* respond to terrorism with force can offer no definitive conclusions regarding its efficacy. However, these cases constitute evidence that in some circumstances the use of force can provide the United States with leverage in the war on terrorism and support its national interests, and that it does so in several ways. First, such strikes limit a terrorist's power and influence. In two of our case studies, military attacks left the terrorist isolated and on the defensive (Saddam Hussein was already in that condition). The physical damage itself leaves the targeted group cut off from its resources and distracted from new acts of terrorism; also, military strikes tend to erode the terrorist's standing by exposing him as vulnerable. The evidence is that they tend at least to curtail the actions of the targeted group, for the short term at any rate.

Second, and relatedly, a military counterterrorism response can underscore the fact that under certain conditions the United States is willing to take strong action. Force is not a wise or practical choice against every terrorist threat, but it can be a powerful tool when a terrorist threat seems about to become unmanageable. In such cases, *not* taking strong action can have devastating ramifications, leaving terrorists with the notion that violence and intimidation are effective.

Third, military force encourages international antiterrorism measures in nonmilitary areas, such as diplomatic and economic sanctions and law enforcement. Whether strikes expose the weakness of the terrorist and thereby reduce fear, or create a "vacuum effect" that draws other nations into the cooperative effort, or even because allies fear that failure to cooperate will result in further U.S. military action, these cases show that international cooperation can result and that such cooperation can limit terrorism.

Finally, it appears, perhaps surprisingly, that the use of force against terrorists does not result in a cycle of new violence. A common argument against the option of military force, then, is invalid. While there is nothing to suggest that military strikes have forced

Muammar Qaddafi, Saddam Hussein, or Osama bin Laden to abandon terrorism, the attacks provided the United States some leverage without waves of reprisals.

An argument against the use of force as an option to limit terrorism is that it is counterproductive in a strategic sense, alienating allies and eroding U.S. credibility. In this view, the use of force creates an image of the United States as a “cowboy,” much more willing to employ the military than diplomacy to resolve differences, and this image damages the nation’s standing as a superpower. Indeed, the air strikes on Libya in 1986 certainly created tension between the United States and Europe. Once it became clear that there would be no immediate reprisal from Qaddafi against Europe, however, criticism quickly faded; in 1993 and 1998 there was overwhelming European support for the strong U.S. action. Similarly, the lack of a strong condemnation from Arab capitals following U.S. strikes in both 1993 and 1998 implied tacit approval. Ironically, not even relations with Sudan and the Taliban regime were permanently damaged following the 1998 strikes. The cases suggest that, under certain circumstances, resorting to military force may actually enhance U.S. leadership in the international war against terrorism.

Still, it is critical to recognize that if the United States intends to use military force to modify the behavior of a terrorist group or a state sponsoring it, the group or state must have something to lose. It is in part for this reason that the ability of military force to modify the behavior of a terrorist group, with little targetable infrastructure, is transitory; military force cannot stop terrorism. In contrast, states do have something to lose from military retaliation; not surprisingly, the case studies provide evidence that military force can strike directly at the state sponsorship of terrorism. Without such sponsorship, terrorist groups become less effective.

In each of the three cases, military force against terrorism was either the last resort or the only useful choice. But when employed in the proper context, with due precautions and limitations, and under the right conditions, military force can limit the influence of the terrorist. Military force can demonstrate U.S. resolve to punish those who engage in terrorism; it can keep the terrorist isolated and on the defensive; it can support antiterrorism action in other areas; and it can pressure states from sponsoring terrorism. It can do all this without making the violence worse than it was before. The use of military

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force can contribute to the containment of terrorism and support U.S. national interests. It is not without risk, and it is not appropriate for every terrorist threat, but given the right situation and the proper conditions, military force can provide a powerful option. The war on terrorism continues, and the United States will need every resource and option it has.

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This Issue's Cover

The sixteen-gun sloop of war *Ontario*, Master Commandant Jesse D. Elliott commanding, arrives in the Mediterranean as part of a squadron under Commodore Stephen Decatur formed to suppress depredations upon American merchantmen by corsairs of Tripoli and Algiers. *Ontario* would soon assist in the seizure of an Algerian frigate and thereafter in the blockade of Algiers until a peace was signed later in 1815. The ship would remain on the Mediterranean station until 1817. In 1818, under Captain James Biddle, it would become the first U.S. warship to visit the future states of California, Oregon, and Washington. Built in 1812, *Ontario* would see almost continuous active service, deploying frequently to the Mediterranean and Caribbean, until 1843, when it became a receiving ship; the sloop would be sold in 1856.

Geoff Hunt has been a freelance artist and designer, art editor of the journal *Warship*, and a designer of books on maritime subjects. He is today a full-time painter and a member of the Royal Society of Marine Artists. Aside from the covers of the O'Brian novels, which have made his paintings known to and admired by millions, his work is found in the Royal Naval Museum, the Royal Naval Submarine Museum, the Mystic Maritime Gallery, and private collections worldwide. The artist resides in Wimbledon, England.