

Preventable Nightmare

Al Qaeda wants to nuke a U.S. city. There are simple ways to stop it.

By Graham Allison

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — In October 2001, a top-secret team was dispatched to New York City to search for a nuclear bomb. According to a CIA agent code-named Dragonfire, Al Qaeda had gotten hold of a nuclear weapon produced by the former Soviet Union and had successfully smuggled it into the city. Under a cloak of secrecy that excluded even Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the Nuclear Emergency Search Team, or NEST, began a hunt for the 10-kiloton bomb whose Hiroshima-sized blast could have obliterated a significant portion of Manhattan.

NEST is a SWAT team of "nuclear ninjas." When mobilized, members drop their day jobs as physicists, engineers and explosives experts to search for and dismantle weapons before they explode into mushroom clouds. Often undercover, a "sports fan" may hide his sophisticated radiation-detection equipment in a golf bag, a "businesswoman" in her attache case. If a nuclear device is found, teams compare it with NEST's catalog of existing designs and possible home-made bombs for clues about how to disarm it. But, as one member of the teams has conceded, even locating a nuclear device amid background radiation is like "looking for a needle in a haystack of needles."

As NEST teams scoured New York City, Vice President Dick Cheney left Washington for a secret underground site, later disclosed to be on the Maryland-Pennsylvania border. President Bush was concerned that Al Qaeda might have smuggled a nuclear weapon into the capital as well. Several hundred federal employees joined the vice president in his bunker for many weeks, preparing an alternative government should a nuclear explosion wipe out Washington.

The suspected nuclear device in New York City was never found. But the threat was credible for good reasons. Did former Soviet stockpiles include a large number of 10-kiloton weapons? Yes. Could the Russian government account for all its nuclear bombs? No. Could Al Qaeda have acquired one? Yes. Could it have smuggled a nuclear weapon through border controls and into a U.S. city? Yes. In a moment of gallows humor, one official quipped that terrorists could have wrapped a bomb in one of the bales of marijuana routinely smuggled into cities like New York and Los Angeles.

In the weeks and months following Sept. 11, the U.S. national security community was waiting for the second shoe to drop. In the 1990s, when I served as an assistant secretary of Defense, I prepared a highly classified memorandum on possible terrorist attacks,

ranked in terms of potential damage to the United States, titled "A Hundred Horribles." An attack by a hijacked aircraft on trophy buildings fell in the lower half of the list. First place on everyone's list was the detonation of a nuclear bomb in a U.S. city. Only a nuclear explosion can kill hundreds of thousands of people instantly.

The factors that made Dragonfire's report plausible in October 2001 are even more acute today. Osama bin Laden has declared the production of nuclear weapons "a religious duty." Though New York City is regarded as the most likely target, it is clear that Al Qaeda is not only capable but also interested in mounting attacks on other U.S. cities, where residents may be less prepared.

Imagine the consequences of a 10-kiloton weapon exploding in Los Angeles. From the epicenter of the blast to a distance of approximately one-third mile, every structure and individual would vanish instantaneously. A bomb exploded at the intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Highland Avenue would vaporize the historic Mann's Chinese Theatre and the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Buildings three-quarters of a mile from ground zero, like the Pantages Theater (the former home of the Academy Awards show), would look like the Murrah Federal Office Building in Oklahoma City after it was destroyed in 1995 by a massive bomb hidden inside a rental truck. The fires and radiation of the blast's outer circle would erase the sign in the Hollywood Hills.

Soil incorporated into the fireball would be made radioactive and would return to Earth as radioactive fallout. This fallout would emit gamma, alpha and beta radiation, but the effect on nearby cities would be determined by environmental conditions, weather patterns, rain, wind, terrain, etc.

Where could Al Qaeda obtain a nuclear bomb? Russia is the most likely source in Bin Laden's quest for nuclear weapons. Russia's 12-time-zone expanse contains more nuclear weapons and materials than any country in the world, including 8,600 assembled warheads and enough weapons-usable material for 80,000 more, much of it vulnerable to theft.

Pakistan ranks a close second as a potential source.

When I interviewed Gen. Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's president, earlier this year, he claimed that within his army "even one bolt of a rifle cannot be lost."

But as we now know, the father of Pakistan's atomic program, Abdul Qadeer Khan, was the kingpin of a black market in nuclear technology, fissile material and technical assistance stretching back more than a decade. The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency has called Khan's network a "Wal-Mart of private-sector proliferation." And further potential suppliers, especially North Korea, cannot be ignored.

The largely unrecognized good news about nuclear terrorism is that it is preventable. Unlike bioterrorism, nuclear terrorism is a finite challenge manageable with a finite response. The strategic narrows of the challenge is preventing terrorists from acquiring

nuclear weapons or the materials from which a bomb could be made. It's a fact of physics: no highly enriched uranium or plutonium, no nuclear explosion, no nuclear terrorism.

It is that simple.

A serious campaign to prevent nuclear terrorism can be organized under a new doctrine of "three no's." The first strand of the strategy — "no loose nukes" — requires securing all nuclear weapons and weapons-usable material, on the fastest possible timetable, to a new gold standard. Equally the security of gold at Ft. Knox. "No new nascent nukes" means no new national capabilities to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium. The third no — "no new nuclear weapons states" — draws a bright line under the current recognized nuclear powers and says unambiguously, "no more."

Al Qaeda spokesman Suleiman Abu Gheith has stated Al Qaeda's objective: "to kill 4 million Americans — 2 million of them children — and to exile twice as many and wound and cripple hundreds of thousands."

Nearly 3,000 died in the Sept. 11 attacks. It would take about 1,334 similar assaults to reach 4 million. Or it could take one nuclear weapon.

Al Qaeda has made its intentions clear. America's challenge is to prevent the terrorists from succeeding.