

The Forum

Should U.S. forces strike back hard?

By Stephen Zunes

The anger Americans of all backgrounds and political persuasions feel right now over the tragic events of Sept. 11 is justified. A military response, however, is not.

Terrorism is an emotive reaction by frustrated and angry people. The terrorists must be brought to justice, but this cannot happen if the USA also responds out of frustration and anger. If we sink to that level, the terrorists have essentially won, both tactically and morally.

A military response holds many dangers:

► **Mistaken targets.** In 1998, in retaliation for terrorist attacks on two U.S. embassies in Africa, the USA bombed a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan that supplied much of the antibiotics and vaccines for that impoverished country. The Clinton administration had erroneous reports that it was a chemical weapons plant controlled by Osama bin Laden. This led to a dramatic growth in anti-American resentment in Sudan and increased support for that country's fundamentalist dictatorship.

► **A spiral of violence.** In 1986, the USA bombed two Libyan cities, killing scores of civilians. Although we claimed this would curb Libyan-backed terrorism, Libyan intelligence operatives blew up a U.S. airliner in retaliation. Simply bombing other countries likely will result in the deaths of more civilians just as innocent as those murdered Sept. 11 — and in more survivors bent on revenge.

► **Misplaced world focus.** A military response would distract world attention from where it belongs — the crimes of last week — and onto the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the American attack.

► **Collapse of unity.** To fight international terrorism, we need an international response. Precipitous military action could threaten the unity needed to deal with this very real threat.

► **Ineffective or disastrous results.** A loose network of terrorists does

not have the kind of tangible assets that can be seriously crippled by military strikes. If the USA broadened its targets to include Kabul or other Afghan cities, the leaders of the totalitarian Taliban regime would likely escape harm in their bunkers or in remote mountain outposts. Instead, such an attack would kill innocent civilians and likely solidify support for the regime and even bin Laden. And a ground invasion, as the Soviets learned all too well, would put the USA in an unwinnable counterinsurgency war.

To win the war against terrorism, we need to re-evaluate our definition of security. The more the United States militarizes the Middle East, the less secure we become. All of the sophisticated weaponry, all of the brave fighting men and women, all of the talented military leadership we may possess will not stop terrorism as long as our policies cause millions of people to hate us.

President Bush is wrong when he claims we are targeted because we are a "beacon for freedom." We are targeted because the support of freedom is not part of our Middle East policy, which instead has been based upon alliances with repressive governments and support for military occupation. If the United States supported a policy based more on human rights, international law and sustainable development, and less on arms transfers, airstrikes and punitive sanctions, we would be a lot safer.

In short, it is not our values, but the abandonment of our values that made last week's horrific attacks possible. Even if military action eliminated bin Laden, there would be new terrorists to take his place, unless we looked at the underlying grievances that give him power. His methods are evil, but his grievances, such as the oppression of the Palestinians, the humanitarian consequences of the sanctions against Iraq, the U.S. support for Arab dictators and the ongoing U.S. military presence in the Middle East, have a strong resonance among ordinary Muslims and Arabs.

Instead of focusing on further militarization, we need to improve intelligence and interdiction. Instead of lashing out, we need to reconsider policies that lead others to hold such anger and resentment toward us. Instead of continuing the cycle of violence, we need to recognize that America's greatest strength is its fortitude, the caring and noble values of its people.

The widespread call for a military response, while understandable in tragedy's aftermath, is simply wrong. As the world's one remaining superpower, we must not have a foreign policy by catharsis, but one based on strategic thinking about how to advance our legitimate security interests.

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