BLEAK NEW WORLD

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September 11, 2001 ended a unique era of American optimism as the exposure of American vulnerability revealed a new and bleaker world. The United States is now in a state of war with those who attacked New York and Washington. It may soon be at war with those states that, as President Bush said, "harbor them." The politics of the United States have been transformed. More so than his father, and certainly Bill Clinton, George W. Bush will be judged on his national security performance. He starts with strong national and international support but his course will be more difficult than Desert Storm.

WAR WITHOUT A NAME

Since 1991, the United States has enjoyed a unique era of optimism. This was due not only to a brilliant economic performance but also a strong sense of security. The major powers that might do America harm were needy of its goodwill and wealth while the minor powers did not dare a confrontation. For the first time since the late 1930s, foreign policy and national security fell far down the list of American priorities.

lthough experts and politicians knew that the U.S. was vulnerable to terrorist attack (the World Trade Center itself was badly damaged itself in 1993), the means and the motive were deemed unlikely. Surely, anyone daring to assault the U.S. on home ground could only expect a devastating reaction. And why would anyone do it? Could terrorists really intimidate the sole superpower into changing its policy in any area that really mattered to Washington?

There were other reasons to be confident. The U.S. seemed to have perfected a new kind of warfare. We could attack others but not be attacked ourselves. The anti-American terrorists generally restricted their actions against Americans abroad, fitting their geopolitical objectives, and the suicide bombers hurled themselves against U.S. embassies (Kenya and Tanzania), troops (Khobar Towers), or ships (U.S.S. Cole). And even the first World Trade Center attack was not committed by the suicidal.

All of this confidence evaporated in the fire and smoke of the September 11th attack. In an era when we face minimal danger from other major powers, the U.S. was attacked in a way not seen since 1812 when a British fleet bombarded New York City and

burned Washington, D.C. Suicidal agents committed this new assault on the headquarters of American financial, military, and political power. Their superiors have yet to announce either their identities or a specific political purpose. We can conclude only that the objective was to demonstrate American vulnerability while killing the most Americans possible. In this they surely succeeded. America's international supremacy now carries a price measured in blood.

The scale and nature of the targets are therefore not terrorism in the classic sense of attempting to intimidate through violence but rather an attempt to bleed and, in doing so, panic and defeat American leadership. Americans across the political spectrum have correctly defined it as war although we do not yet know the name of the enemy.

A DIFFERENT STRATEGY

War means that the United States' tactics will change, spelling the end of the current judicial-legal approach to the terrorist groups and their state helpers. Until now, the U.S. sought to capture suspects, try them in a court of law, attempt to sustain a capital criminal case, then sentence them accordingly. Washington also imposed economic sanctions on states deemed terrorist. These methods relieved successive administrations of acute problems: how to deal with the states harboring terrorists; how not to disrupt American life and commerce; the always perilous issue of coordinating various agencies, civilian and military. Then there was the intelligence problem: how to manage the dangerous business of "human intelligence" -- agents on the ground, informers and the like, not the sort of people who would stand exposure in Congressional committee investigations.

Much of this approach will now be abandoned. September 11, 2001, like December 7, 1941, means first and foremost a stupendous intelligence and security failure. After all, the plot must have taken many people and many months if not years to execute, yet the U.S. did not know of it. Four airplanes were hijacked from several airports and several airlines all about the same time on the same day. Both knowledge and vigilance were missing in action.

By describing the new situation as war, the U.S. has signaled its intention to use military rather than legal methods to settle various accounts. A jury of the President and his national security team will review the evidence and deem it conclusive. Sentences will not usually include prison terms. There will be no appeals.

This change of strategy brings with it important consequences in our relations with other states. The first task will be to find the enemy. Clearly this was a special group of operatives. They knew how to coordinate times and places, penetrate airport security, hijack aircraft, fly them and be willing to commit suicide. Men with such qualities are in very short supply and would be noticed by governments highly sensitive to their security.

Other nations will be rated for their cooperation with the war. Various leaders in the Middle East and elsewhere are in a delicate position both for what they knew and when they knew it, what they did and what they failed to do. Chief among them is Yasser Arafat. Not many Americans will subscribe to the idea that a pro-Palestinian policy might have spared the attack, or that it is something worth doing now, especially after months of

disdaining U.S. appeals to contain terrorism against Israel. Arafat looked stricken, juxtaposed against pictures of some Palestinians rejoicing while Israelis lined up to give blood. Others more friendly to the U.S. also face difficulties. The terrorists apparently carried a mix of passports from many countries in the area. The Egyptian, Saudi, and Jordanian governments, already troubled by anti-Israeli and anti-American agitation, will now be called upon to cooperate fully; there may be embarrassing revelations. Pakistan is its own special case, its military deeply involved with various Afghan organizations. Others further afield, such as Russia, will be called upon to influence Iran with whom Moscow does important business.

Chips down, all will side with the superpower but rhetoric will not suffice when the U.S. decides to make war on specific targets. Washington will be using its own power and the authority of an international coalition to force strategic choices on governments in Syria, Iran, Sudan, and others who have not paid much of a price for aiding terrorists in the past. As for Iraq (or the Taliban in Afghanistan), only hot lead and cold steel are likely to make any impression.

POLITICS TRANSFORMED

The attack itself, its classification as an act of war, and the change of strategy have transformed politics in Washington. The first change concerns the presidency itself. Bill Clinton, although a frequent deployer of military force abroad, was primarily a domestic president; his political fortune rose and fell on that performance; and his international crises were handled far from the United Stateswith few casualties. But September 11th catapulted George W. Bush from a man who fought a campaign primarily on domestic issues into a different rank. His political future and his mark on history will be determined now by his performance on national security.

The new American priorities also settle the defense budget. The Congress will vote higher levels with enthusiasm. Moreover, the President will be borne aloft by a genuine patriotic consensus that will give him considerable leeway in doing what he wishes to do. As always happens in wartime, the Commander-in-Chief expands his role while the Congress recedes.

Another casualty will be the arcane but politically potent dispute over using the Social Security surplus, the so-called "lockbox." Now the Federal Budget will return to the normal pattern, having used Social Security to finance itself since the 1940s. In war, one borrows first and repays later.

Missile defense is another issue affected by the attack. The President's claim that the country was vulnerable to attack by these weapons has surely been vindicated. Militarily, the airplanes were supercharged cruise missiles launched against their targets under civilian colors to achieve surprise. It is true that had the attacker's intentions been known, it would not have required a sophisticated missile defense system to destroy them. But the attack itself indicates that "rogues," whether states or private groups, are willing to assault the U.S. even if they know we will react. The argument for the missile system thus receives a critical boost: deterrence as we have known it during the Cold War did not work.

President Bush is now engaged in using broad support to organize the government for an unprecedented war, focusing first on the narrow matter of killing or capturing those responsible and second on the longer term struggle against terrorism. Simultaneously he must improve the public's sense of security, which may not be so easy given the normal up and down of warfare. Bush and his team will also have to determine how the U.S. will "settle accounts" with those judged to harbor terrorists, using the international coalition in formation. But there can be no substitute for amilitary victory to galvanize everything else.