

Letters

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The World Trade Center Bomb:

L AURIE MYLROIE'S perceptive article on the World Trade Center bombing (Winter 1995/96) raises issues that go beyond the details of that particular case. I refer to a disturbing new trend, "megaterrorism"—acts of violence designed to kill hundreds, possibly thousands of civilians. Recent examples would be the attacks by the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo cult group with sarin nerve gas on the Tokyo subway in April 1995; Chechen rebels seizing thousands of hostages in their war against Russia; the attempt in late 1995 by Algerian extremists to sabotage a super-fast passenger train in France; and, most recently, Hamas suicide bombers in Israel.

What is unnerving about these particular events is that they could have been much worse. What would happen if a suicide bomber strapped chemical, biological, or even nuclear agents to his body prior to attacking civilians? Thousands of people could be killed in one attack, and, in the short run, there would be virtually no way to stop them.

The only comforting news is that several of the would-be perpetrators of megaterrorist acts have so far proven to be woefully incompetent. It turns out planning and executing dastardly deeds is not easy. Megaterrorists are most likely to succeed when backed by the full resources of a state. Thus state-sponsored terrorism remains the number one danger. Iraq, Iran, Syria, Sudan, Libya, and North Korea are pariahs for good reason. If their support for terrorism is not ended, the chances are that sooner or later a truly horrific event will occur. Predictably, at that point, Congress will take the subject seriously, and we will worry less about how proposed anti-terrorist legislation intrudes on our civil rights and more about how it assures our physical security.

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Mylroie replies:

Geoffrey Kemp rightly emphasizes the uniquely dangerous role that states play in terrorism. But he is probably in a minority. The latest fad is "loose networks." Yet we had better straighten that one out. As my article explained, the question of state sponsorship was not properly investigated then. The FBI refused to share the evidence with any other bureaucracy, but failed to investigate the question of state sponsorship properly itself.

There is rightly a growing concern about the use of unconventional agents in terrorism. But will that be done by states or "loose networks?" Aum Shinrikyo was an extraordinarily well-educated group, but they failed. Their sarin was poor quality, poorly disseminated, so "only" twelve people died and the group was caught almost immediately. It could have been much worse—if a state had been behind the attack.

The idea that "loose networks" have replaced states as the main sponsors of terrorism is a fraudulent issue, put on the national agenda partly by the FBI's failure to conduct a proper investigation of the Trade Center bombing. We must urgently determine whether megaterrorism, as Kemp defines it, is more likely to be carried out by states or "loose networks." I am inclined to think the former. □