

Plotters Found the Flaw In Nation's Defense Plans

Debate Revived on Sharp Rise of Counterterrorism Spending

By MICHAEL DOBBS
Washington Post Staff Writer

Over the last few years, as concern grew about the possibility of a large-scale terrorist attack against the United States, senior U.S. officials and counterterrorism experts warned about a "digital Pearl Harbor," a "nuclear Pearl Harbor," even a "biological Pearl Harbor."

But no one predicted the catastrophic event that actually took place: hijacked airplanes crashing into the centers of American financial and military power.

Like President Bill Clinton before him, President Bush has focused extraordinary attention and national resources on dealing with new "asymmetric threats" to American national security following the end of the Cold War. In the process, a generation of Americans who grew up in the shadow of nuclear tension with the Soviet Union have been educated in a multitude of new national security dangers, ranging from the release of biological agents in a crowded subway to a missile attack by a "rogue state."

Spending on counterterrorism programs doubled from under \$6 billion at the end of 1995 to about \$12 billion this year, and more than \$13 billion has been requested for 2002. The Bush administration has also earmarked \$8.3 billion next year for preliminary work on defenses against a missile attack. In the wake of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995, billions of dollars have been spent protecting key installations from terrorist attack.

In spite of all these precautions, those who orchestrated yesterday's attacks discovered and exploited a huge vulnerability in the nation's defenses, in a way that no one in either the Clinton or Bush administrations quite foresaw.

"This goes beyond anything we've faced before, both in sophistication and scope," said Samuel R. "Sandy" Berger, national security adviser to Clinton. "It certainly indicates that the focus should be on this kind of threat."

"People both inside and outside the government would think this is more the stuff of a Tom Clancy novel than reality," said James M. Lindsay, a member of the Clinton administration national security team that began issuing warnings in the early 1990s of major terrorist attacks on American soil.



FILE PHOTO/By CRAIG HERNDON—THE WASHINGTON POST
**Former national security adviser
Sandy Berger says nation's focus
must shift to a new kind of threat.**

Several politicians and terrorism experts suggested yesterday that the government has been preparing for the wrong kind of attack. Political and media attention has tended to focus on the acquisition by terrorists of weapons of mass destruction, such as a crude nuclear bomb or a biological weapon. This came on top of a traditional focus on conventional terrorist attacks, such as car bombs and airplane hijackings.

"We focused on the low end—the car bomb and the truck bomb—and the more exotic high-end threats like [biological warfare], but we neglected the middle," said Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism expert for Rand Corp., a Washington think tank. Hoffman said the government's success in protecting public buildings from car bombs may have encouraged terrorists to devise new and even more destructive methods for attacking high-profile targets.

Within hours of the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, politicians and missile experts were arguing over whether successive administrations have allocated sufficient resources to counterterrorism, and whether the money has been well spent. Some Democrats took aim at the Bush administration for its alleged preoccupation with missile defense at a time when the country is facing more immediate threats from conventional terrorism.

"We need to devote much more attention to conventional threats," said Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.), a sponsor of legislation designed to strengthen security in

the nation's transportation networks, including airports. "Our resources are finite, as is our attention span. We have more urgent priorities" than missile defense.

Rep. Curt Weldon (R-Pa.), a leading proponent of missile defense and increased Pentagon budgets, rejected that view. "It is not either-or," he said. "We need to do both. . . . Our number one priority, according to the Constitution, is to provide for the common defense of the American people."

Despite a new emphasis on missile defense, the Bush administration has embraced many of the counterterrorism programs initiated by the Clinton administration, and has yet to introduce any significant changes. Richard A. Clarke, who has coordinated U.S. counterterrorism efforts from the National Security Council for the past eight years, was one of the few senior White House officials to survive the change of administration.

In May, Bush appointed Vice President Cheney to review programs to protect the United States from "the threat of weapons of mass destruction," and announced the creation of an Office of National Preparedness to deal with terrorist attacks. But officials said that the Cheney task force has made little progress, and the establishment of the preparedness office is bogged down in turf fights between the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Justice.

Some terrorism experts depicted yesterday's attacks as a cata-



FILE PHOTO/By ROBERT A. REEDER—THE WASHINGTON POST
The barricades installed on Pennsylvania Avenue to protect the White House from a possible terrorist attack were typical of the precautions taken after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

strophic intelligence failure, despite major efforts by the CIA and other U.S. government agencies to track the movements of terrorist leaders such as Osama bin Laden and eavesdrop on their conversations. "How nothing could have been picked up is beyond me," said Kenneth Katzman, a terrorism expert at the Congressional Research Service.

Others defended the counterterrorism efforts of successive administrations, arguing that U.S. intelligence has foiled numerous plots, including a plan for bin Laden supporters to bomb targets in the United States and the Middle East on New Year's Day last year. "Many terrorism cells have been

rolled up in many countries, and this has often been done quietly," said Daniel Benjamin, who worked with Clarke in the Clinton White House. "Unfortunately, if just one conspiracy succeeds, it looks as if America has fallen down on the job."

A detailed breakdown of counterterrorism budgets shows that much of the increased funds went to strengthening protection around government buildings, as well as the defense of computer networks and other "critical infrastructure." Of the \$13 billion requested for counterterrorism spending next year, \$1.7 billion has been earmarked for "weapons of mass destruction" and about

\$2.6 billion for critical infrastructure.

"To a certain degree, some good stuff has gotten in place, and we are seeing the benefits of that," said John Parachini, head of the Washington office of the Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. "But the question is whether we have spent too much money preparing for high-consequence, low-probability incidents, and not enough on things that are much easier for terrorists to do."

Staff writers Vernon Loeb and Bradley Graham and researcher Robert Thomason contributed to this report.

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