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BUILDING SAFETY IN AN AGE OF TERRORISM

By Richard Schulte

On Friday, October 29, it was reported that a number of cargo aircraft were grounded in Europe and in the US and being searched for packages which contained explosive devices. In this case, the explosive devices were thought to be hidden in toner cartridges for laser printers. Apparently, the packages originated in Yemen and were to be delivered to targets in the United States.

Such is the problem with terrorist attacks. The United States is a “target rich” environment. Attacks on Americans, or the infrastructure in the country, can come at anytime and any place. Given the vast size of the United States, its lengthy coast line and borders with its neighbors to the north and south, along with densely populated cities and it easy to see that defending all of America is virtually an impossible task. Even though the attack was unsuccessful, the October 29th attempt simply served as a reminder of the difficulty of the task of defending America.

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While our memories of 9/11 may be fading, that attack was focused on large buildings in Manhattan and in Washington, DC. The 9/11 attacks were spectacular and resulted in relatively large life loss and disruption, but the purpose of the 9/11 attacks was more than just to kill a large number of Americans, disrupt life for a time and terrorize the nation. The 9/11 attacks were a form of “economic warfare”. Recall that the nation’s economy was essentially paralyzed after the attacks.

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While the nation’s economy faltered immediately after the 9/11 attacks, the damage to America’s and the world’s economies from 9/11 continues even today. Our response to the 9/11 attacks has cost this nation dearly. In addition to our military men and women who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq and Afghanistan and other parts of the world, the cost of the additional security put in place after the 9/11 attacks is astronomical.

The real success of the 9/11 attacks from the terrorists' point of view was not the fact that the World Trade Center towers were destroyed-the towers can be re-built. The success of the attacks on 9/11 can be seen at every airport around the country everyday. It can be seen at the extra security precautions taken at any large event or taken in the downtown districts of major metropolitan centers around the country.

The terrorists cannot defeat the United States in a head-on war-that much is obvious. The war in Iraq demonstrated that the militaries of small countries are no match for the US military and European military forces. That is not to say that the United States cannot be defeated in extended warfare by irregular forces.

In the American revolution, a rabble army of colonists, with the help of the French Navy, defeated the military might of the British Empire. In Viet Nam, Vietnamese's guerillas defeated the US military with the help of the Chinese and Russian militaries. Another example is the defeat of the Soviet military in Afghanistan by a guerilla army supported by the United States.

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al security measures which have been enacted since 9/11 have to be paid for in one way or the other, resulting in the higher cost of good and services. Delays at airports due to security concerns not only damages the passenger air transportation companies, but increases the cost of doing business where air travel is involved simply by increasing travel time. Perhaps we have been able to minimize the travel time costs by the use of laptop computers, portable phones and other communication devices, but, at the same time, the use of these devices also increase our vulnerability to terrorist attacks by increasing our reliance on electrical power.

How do we defend against an enemy who is utilizing "economic warfare" tactics against us? That is certainly a good question. Given that we simply do not have the capital to harden all of the potential targets in the United States, it seems reasonable to conclude that "playing defense" is the wrong strategy. If we "harden" high rise building against attack as suggested by some, the terrorists simply find a "softer" target to attack.

Understanding that we are engaged in a battle where “economic warfare” tactics are being utilized against us is helpful in determining what tactics need to be used to combat the terrorists. Adopting more stringent or restrictive requirements for high rise buildings in response to the events of 9/11 will not necessarily make America more safe against terrorism. In fact, that reaction to the events of 9/11 is exactly what the terrorist wanted us to do. The more capital we expend on making high rise buildings safer against terrorist attacks, the less capital we have to spend on offensive operations against terrorists.

The history of World War II, and many other wars, shows that a defensive strategy is doomed. In World War II, the German and Japanese militaries were successful when on the offense in the early years of the war, but failed when they went from offensive operations to defensive operations.

While fighting an offensive war against terrorism might be distasteful to many Americans, a good offense is always the best defense, regardless of whether it is on the battlefield or on the football field. While fighting a war that may be decades in length is not something that any American relishes, it seems necessary unless we want to “die a death of a thousands cuts”.

And now you know the rationale for my opposition to the recommendations for making high rise buildings “safer” contained in NIST’s World Trade Center towers investigation report. The scientists at NIST have fallen into the trap of wanting to fight a defensive war against terrorism, without considering that their recommendations will accomplish little in the overall battle, other than to play into the hands of the terrorists.

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While the adoption of the NIST recommendations is a *fait accompli*, there is still time to reverse course and repeal the code provisions based upon the NIST recommendations. The implementation of the NIST recommendations will not make high rise buildings in any measurable way “safer”, but the cost of complying with these recommendations will cost Americans in the aggregate billions of dollars annually. While a few billion here and there every year might not seem like a whole lot considering that the population of the country exceeds 300 million, after awhile it begins to take its toll.

Will high rise buildings be the terrorist's next target or will the terrorist choose to attack other parts of our infrastructure-perhaps our electrical grid, dams, water and sewer lines or our telephone system? As they say in the Midwest, "there is more than one way to skin a cat". How does it feel to be the "cat" about to be skinned?

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It's time to repeal the building code provisions resulting from the NIST recommendations before we go too far down the road and actually begin designing and constructing buildings which comply with those recommendations. We can find far better ways to invest our nation's capital with a far greater rate of return from a standpoint of the safety of the American public against the threat of terrorism.

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