

Will Terrorism Go Nuclear?

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Over the years beginning around in the early 1970s, through the '80s and then into the '90s we kept on coming across reports through intelligence and through other sources of red mercury.

We kept hearing about red mercury. Red mercury was a mysterious substance that was a possible source of neutrons for a nuclear explosion. It would, according to the advertisements that came along with red mercury enable terrorists to construct tiny little nuclear weapons the size of a baseball. Or, as one informant put it, "the size of a small cup of Italian coffee."

When the Soviet Union fell there were numerous reports coming out of red mercury being offered for sale. There were people who were smuggling red mercury. There were people who were killed in back alleys in Vienna, and in Prague and even in Johannesburg, making red mercury deals. Keep that in mind.

There were also reports, beginning in the early '90s, shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, of missing "suitcase nukes." These were supposed to be small nuclear weapons in suitcases that the Soviet Union had developed and, in fact, one of the sources for the story was a General Lebed – a former Soviet general, who announced to an astonished group of visiting U.S. Congressmen that the Soviet Union – or actually Russia, as it was then – was missing 84 suitcase nuclear weapons.

Now we weren't quite sure what one looked like but in a Congressional hearing a congressman, holding hearings about this topic actually held up a "suitcase nuke" and it became an iconic photograph of what we think a suitcase nuke might look like.

These stories all have something in common. None of them have any truth associated with them. Now, I want to hedge that a little bit: insofar as we know. Almost every answer that you give in the realm of nuclear terrorism is "insofar as we know."

With regard to red mercury – fascinating subject – I have several boxes with files on red mercury deals. I have actually been offered red mercury deals. Red mercury does not exist. It is a complete fabrication. There is no such thing as red mercury. With regard to General Lebed and his missing nukes, the first part of the story that struck me as strange is, why the hell would a Russian general inform visiting U.S. congressmen that "gee, we happen to be missing some nuclear weapons?"

It turns out that that story does have a reason behind it. General Lebed had been a candidate for president of Russia. He lost the first round of the election and threw his support to President Yeltsin who, as a repayment, made him a national security advisor. But the two were still quarreling and Lebed still had presidential ambitions, and wanted to signal to the Americans that he was the more reliable guy. In other words, "I will be the guy who won't lose these nukes. I

will keep control of things.” He was put on *60 Minutes* and the 84 nukes went up to 100 nukes. It just so happens, by the way, that the producers of that segment on *60 Minutes* were the authors of a recent book on nuclear terrorism, and also just happened to be the co-producers of a movie that had just come out called *The Peacemaker* which is about nuclear terrorism. This was a case of art imitating life imitating art imitating life, but it’s more complicated than that.

The Congressman’s suitcase nuke was in fact an imaginary invention by his staffer, as to what the staffer thought one might look like. Now, there were “man-portable” nuclear weapons that were in the arsenals of both the United States and the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War. These were small devices that weighed somewhere between 70 and 100 pounds, had a small nuclear core that would have made a very small nuclear yield and they were to be used as a demolition device, for example to blow up a bridge or a tunnel.

But insofar as we know none were missing, but nonetheless a lot of people took up the story. It transformed into a story that corrupt Russian officials had sold them to Bin Laden. Bin Laden actually has them, was a further version of the story, and the fellow testifying before the Congressional committee – a Soviet defector, by the way, who also was writing his memoirs at the time, said that they were already here; they had been pre-deployed. Well now we’re off and running – it’s a helluva story.

An author, who between 2004 and 2007 wrote four books on nuclear terrorism, with great titles, by the way. I had a recent disappointing discussion with my publisher, because we were talking about sales of my book, *Will Terrorism Go Nuclear?*

She said, “You know they did a lot of marketing research,” and quoted the appearances I had given on C-Span and Book Channel and various television channels and shows as part of the book’s promotional campaign. They have focus groups where they actually sit down and score you on these things.

She said, “You score high on intelligence.” And I said, “That’s good.”

Then she said, “You score high on being articulate.” And I said, “Terrific.”

Then she said, “And you’re reassuring.” And I said, “That’s good,” and she said, “Not so good.”

The same publishing company, this fellow who had published these four books, they had titles like: *Osama’s Revenge: The Next 9/11, What the Media and Government Haven’t Told You*. That was the 2004 book.

The 2005 was: *The Al Qaeda Connection International Terrorism, Organized Crime and the Coming Apocalypse*.

The third one in the series was: *Doomsday: Ten Blunders that Gave Rise to Radical Islam and the Threat of an American Hiroshima*.

And the last one was: *The Day of Islam, the Annihilation of America and the Western World*. Well you get the idea. And she said, “When he was on television, he sold books.” Doom sells in this country. But it’s not just authors that do this. There are some disturbing reports. In October, 2001 a CIA source reported that Al Qaeda had a ten-kiloton nuclear bomb stolen from Russia, and had smuggled it into New York City. Federal authorities didn’t tell New York authorities but

they did initiate a surreptitious search by the Nuclear Emergency Search Teams. These are teams that we have that have all sorts of exotic detection equipment but it can be disguised in ordinary looking civilian vans and things of this sort, to search the city. Turned out later that the story was a complete fabrication.

But I just was reading a book by Richard Meyer, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, just came out a few weeks ago. Good book – that’s one you should read – and he said that in an October, 2002 NSC meeting, President Bush informed the members of the National Security Council that Bin Laden may have a nuclear device that could destroy half of Washington, D.C. That report also turned out to be wrong. But this is really where we run into the problem, because in dealing with the topic of nuclear terrorism there are some truly worrisome particles of information. It’s also, at the same time, a world of fantasies, nightmares, urban legends, fakes, hoaxes, scams, stings, mysterious substances, terrorist boasts, sensationalist claims, descriptions of vast conspiracies, allegations of cover-ups, lurid headlines and layers of disinformation and misinformation.

The terror, however, is real here, and the problem that we deal with in trying to assess this threat is that we’re dealing first of all with a cataclysmic event. A nuclear explosion would be a cataclysmic event. It would be something that would be a human tragedy that would be ten times or perhaps 100 times that of 9/11 in terms of fatalities. It’s also a cataclysmic event in the shadow of a cataclysmic event: that is, we are thinking about these things in the wake of 9/11.

Interesting thing happened in the world of intelligence analysis on 9/11: it fundamentally altered our perceptions of plausibility. A lot of the terror scenarios that were dismissed as far-fetched on September 10th became operative presumptions on September 12. If terrorist could do this, what could they not do? And so, we became worried about a lot more things. Now, the problem is complicated by intelligence. First of all, it’s inherently difficult to estimate the probability or assess the threat of low probability/high consequence events. Experts aren’t very good at this, and there’s no easy way of doing this. There’s also no confidence in our intelligence. Everything has to be paraphrased with that comment I made before: insofar as we know. And we don’t think we know enough.

Is the threat increasing or decreasing? Now it is clear, however that the stories about the terrorism are very, very difficult to assess. The terror is real. According to some intelligence reports, there’s a better than 50% chance that terrorists will detonate a nuclear bomb in the United States within ten years. I think that’s an extraordinary and astonishing statement. People ask me, “What is your estimate?” I’m not nationally recognized in the field of prophecy.

The CIA said in September of 2008, that Al Qaeda is our #1 nuclear concern. Now think about that for a minute. We know that North Korea has nuclear weapons. We know that Iran has nuclear ambitions and lots of centrifuges and scientists. But our #1 nuclear concern is Al Qaeda, and it’s our #1 nuclear concern based upon intentions not capabilities. We believe that if Al Qaeda had a nuclear weapon they would use it, and therefore that makes them more threatening than these other actors. Certainly the terror is real.

Let me give you an astonishing figure: four out of ten Americans, in fact precisely 42% of Americans – according to a recent public opinion poll – believe that terrorists will detonate a nuclear weapon in an American city within five years. Now that was a 2007, poll so we’ve got three years to go. Now that’s obviously disconnected from our behavior but nonetheless reflects an astonishing level of terror. And this brings me to a point: There is a difference between nuclear

terrorism and nuclear terror. Nuclear terrorism is about the very frightening possibility that terrorists may acquire and use a nuclear weapon. Nuclear terror is about our apprehension of that event. Nuclear terrorism is about intelligence; about capabilities; about assessments. Nuclear terror is driven by our imagination.

The history of nuclear terrorism can be briefly summarized. Fortunately, there hasn't been any, and many would hasten to add: yet. But nuclear terror has a rich history. It's deeply embedded in our popular culture, and in our policy-making circles, and there isn't always a hard line between them. I have actually heard a member of Congress say that if we face the threat of nuclear terrorism in this country, then our policy guide must be Jack Bauer. 24! Riveting television show; exciting to watch. His cell phone works everywhere. I wanted to whisper to the congressman: "It's a television show."

Now, how did we invent this nuclear terror? What's interesting is that we are really the inventors of this. I'm not dismissing nuclear terrorism as a threat but think about the terror for a minute. Long before the Manhattan Project; long before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, people talked about super villains with weapons of mass destruction. In fact, the term "atomic bomb" was invented by H.G. Wells, science fiction writer, in 1913. That's where the term atomic bomb comes from, although the bomb he had in mind was not an explosive device, it was more like a dirty bomb with a continuing source of radioactive emissions.

But the Manhattan Project scientists themselves; the minute they tested the first bomb and saw that it worked, they began to worry: what have we done here? What have we done? What have we let loose here? And they worried about that falling into the hands of wrong people. There was a 1967 report by something called the Lum Panel, named after Doctor Lum, that looked at nuclear safeguards. In that report they said that if we have increasing nuclear traffic as a consequence of spreading nuclear energy plants around the world then we have to take into account the possibility that this nuclear material may fall into the hands of terrorists or criminals.

Now I was curious when I first began writing about this a long time ago: who were they thinking about in 1966 when they wrote this? This was prior, really, to the current wave of terrorism, so what was on their mind? I called Dr. Lum and asked him, "What were you thinking about?" And he said, "Well, one of the lawyers on the commission had a lot of experience with commodity diversions; soy beans and thing of that sort. Having spent ten years in the private sector, by the way as deputy chairman of a PI firm, we dealt with a lot of commodity diversion. That's not uncommon at all. So that was understandable, but then I said, "But what about terrorists? What did you have in mind?" And he said, "We didn't have anything in mind, we just took a shot," which was very, very interesting.

The other thing is that we are complicit consumers. As I said before: doom sells. The United States, even with its characteristic optimism, is a country obsessed with doom and decline. Look at what you're reading in the newspapers right now about the economic crisis. I have no predictions on the economic crisis, but we are all contemplating: is this the decline of America? Is this the end of America? This is the constant pitch, no matter which one of the cable networks you watch, the decline and doom picture is very, very popular.

A lot of this just reflects apprehensions left over from the Cold War, underscored by 9/11 nightmares. Interestingly enough, it also reflects a deep religious faith. There are a large number of people – and I say this without any sense of derision or criticism – a large number of people in this country believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible, from the creation of it all to the end

times; to the apocalypse. To see the signs of the end times is a confirmation of faith. Nuclear destruction has been interpreted now as the end times – it will bring about the apocalypse. That has real resonance with many people.

Nuclear terrorism certainly figures in our popular culture. James Bond in *Thunderball*, and we do have 24-hour TV and we have *The Peacemaker* and all of these other movies that are a rich source of fantasy for us. Unfortunately – and I say this as a ferocious non-partisan – I work with all administrations and I have no political positions. That doesn't mean I'm not critical, and one of the things I'm critical of is our performance over the past number of years (and by the way it falls on both parties) is the relentless message of fear from Washington. We have all been told repeatedly since 9/11 that we should be very, very afraid. Unfortunately some of these breathless announcements come along with the concurrent instructions to be vigilant, but keep shopping. That is a schizophrenic message that only cranks up the anxiety. What you're telling people is: you are in danger, but there's not a damn thing you can do about it.

That is a source of deep, deep apprehension, and that has been amplified an increasingly sensationalist news media. Now that broadcast news has become a profit center as opposed to a public service; now that we get an increasing portion of our news by watching, rather than reading newspapers, that fundamentally changes the way we receive news. Watching news on television is a passive process – it's an audience process. Writing news and reading news is an interactive process that demands a certain amount of thought, and we have moved away from that.

It's also a problem in the analytical realm. We have had, since 9/11, a fundamental shift in the way we assess threats. Assessing threats traditionally was done by looking at your adversary's intentions and capabilities. During the Cold War this was pretty straightforward. We could count Soviet missiles. We could count Soviet tank divisions. We could count Soviet warheads. We knew they weren't pointed at Paraguay, they were pointed at us. So much for capabilities and intentions. With terrorists, that's extremely difficult to do. We don't necessarily know what their capabilities are. We don't really know what their intentions are. Terrorists can attack anything anywhere at any time, and so we shifted over to vulnerability based analysis instead of threat-based analysis.

So what's the difference? In vulnerability based analysis you start with the vulnerability. At this point, select your favorite vulnerability – nuclear reactors, the Port of Los Angeles, surface transportation, commercial aviation, whatever it is. Postulate a hypothetical terrorist foe, and begin to outline a scenario – usually a worst-case scenario. These things usually begin with something like: “suppose a terrorist were to...” and at this point fill in your most diabolical scheme.

Now, when it comes to diabolical schemes I've come to recognize something. It is rare that I am not approached, during the q&a or afterward by someone who says, “You know, if I were a terrorist, I would...” and they proceed to outline the most extraordinary schemes. I mean people – perfectly normal-looking people – librarians, bankers, all have inside of them this little tiny armchair terrorist, that is inventing this, and some of these are really quite frightening. The problem with vulnerability based assessment is that in our society; our open society; our technology-dependent society the vulnerabilities are almost infinite.

I was once asked by a senator, he said, “Mr. Jenkins, could you give us a list of the top ten vulnerabilities in this nation?” I said, “Hell, senator, I could give you five volumes and it

wouldn't even be outside the state of Delaware." Vulnerabilities are infinite. And that creates a problem, because it leads to something called "threat advocacy." Select your favorite vulnerability and whether you select it on the basis of your congressional district or on the basis of your congressman or on the basis of some technical knowledge, people say that you have to compete for resources. I want finite security resources to go to my problem. Now the way I'm going to compete with all the other people that want resources to go to their problem is I have to persuade everybody that my problem is ever so much worse than their problem.

So we get this competition among champions of threats and being a democracy we do all of this in public. It's all on CNN and CNBC, Fox News – endless, endless scenarios. Our terrorist foes do not live on Mars. They watch what we watch. They read what we read, and they speculate about what we're talking about. So when we say, "Gee, terrorists are going to poison the city's water supply," there's chatter on the internet on the terrorist's web sites: "Gee, can we poison their water supply? How do you poison a water supply? Anybody got any ideas how we can do this?"

And, of course, we listen to them. We're constantly monitoring them so we say, "Oh my God, they're talking about poisoning our water supply. Our worst fears are confirmed." It never touches the road of reality here; it's just a feedback loop. Of course, in that realm, nuclear almost always wins. What threat can really match the massive destruction of a nuclear device? Whereas the front end of this threat – intentions and capabilities – may remain somewhat a mystery, we have detonated nuclear bombs, and we know what the effects are, from places like Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and other test sites.

So what we get is a very rich description of the consequences. And since that is real and that is accurate, that lends a certain sense of reality to the rest of it. Now all of this is disseminated in a media deluge of books about doom sell. By the way, one of the best selling books in modern American history is *The Late, Great Planet Earth* – a book about the end of the earth. It came out in 1974. It has sold 50 million copies. This is an extraordinary thing, and as I say the line between news and fiction is blurred.

What's more, there's a funny phenomenon that's been going on. Now I regularly appear, as some of you know, as a talking head on television. I hate being a talking head on television, because I'm not good at giving glib, 10-second answers to stupid questions. Every anniversary of 9/11 they haul out the usual talking heads, and you get these questions. I was actually asked on national television a number of times, "Mr. Jenkins in the global war on terror, what's the score?" I got tired of this after many, many times, so the next time I was asked, I said, "three-to-two." He went on for a few seconds before it hit him and then he said, "Who's winning?" And I said, "Well, that's a much more complicated question."

Really, the talking heads, one of the things they do now in order to kind of increase the liveliness of the conversation, is you're not going to put a RAND Corporation wonk up there alone to talk about policy. You want balance. So you're going to find some true crackpot whose message is: "We're all gonna die by Tuesday!" And you get equal time, by the way. It's interesting, you can be a nuclear physicist, and you can be a complete lunatic, and your pictures are the same size on television, and you get the same amount of time, and you know who has the dramatic advantage. It's not the physicist.

Our terrorist foes are not stupid and what they have learned is that they can create nuclear terror without even having nuclear weapons. So in a certain funny way, Al Qaeda has become the

world's first terrorist nuclear power – without nuclear weapons – insofar as we know. They have gotten the attention of the CIA, they've got the attention of the National Security Council, and I'm not diminishing the threat. This is serious stuff. Now, what do we know about them? We do know that they have an interest in acquiring nuclear materials. We know that Bin Laden himself said that acquisition of weapons of mass destruction is a religious duty.

We did discover documents in the Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan in 2001 when we overran them and these have been carefully examined by the people who design nuclear weapons. We found no evidence of nuclear material, and on the basis of the documents, they do not know how to make a nuclear bomb. They do not have that knowledge. There's nothing in those documents that indicate that they know. In fact, there's stuff in the documents that indicate they don't know. They're not even close.

We do know, however, that Bin Laden tried to improve his hand and discussed nuclear weapons with a couple of Pakistani scientists in August of 2001. They are now under arrest, and they told him he probably couldn't do it. We do know that in November of 2001 Bin Laden and his sidekick Zawahiri gave an interview in which they claimed to have nuclear weapons. But we're not so sure about that interview because that interview has been repeated by this one reporter who was there – a Pakistani reporter, and every time it's repeated over the years it gets better and better; embellished.

We do know that Al Qaeda has commissioned fatwas – religious rulings – that say Al Qaeda has the right to kill four million, and later amended by another religious figure, 10 million Americans. The second one was a fascinating piece of lawyer's work, because at the end of it, it says, "If you should need more, come back to me and we'll look at it again. We can work this out."

We also know that Al Qaeda's followers on the internet, this is another problem that we have, are excited by this idea. So for some notion, either by Al Qaeda leadership or from ourselves about this issue, they're like bees in a hive. They begin to buzz and talk about this and they embellish it with words and graphics. Some of the graphics are very, very rich. There's this one that has Bin Laden looking over a map table. When you look closer the map table is really midtown Manhattan. It has little orange blobs and you look closer and the little orange blobs are mushroom clouds at Rockefeller Center and Wall Street and all of the iconic targets. It's a complete fantasy by the powerless masses.

So as I say, I'm not dismissing the threat of nuclear terrorism. It is a concern. We're doing a lot of sensible things to deal with it, as we should. What we should not do – we should respond to the threat, not to the terror that terrorists try to breed. Because that's what terrorists are very, very good at. Some people say, "Why not? Why not fear? Fear gets things done. In a noisy democracy, that's the way you get things done. You scare the hell out of people."

Fear isn't afraid. Fear creates its own orthodoxy of belief. Fear demands constant visual evidence of unanimity of belief. Fear demands allegiance. Fear dismisses criticism as unpatriotic. Fear can have a corrosive effect on our own democracy. We already have people – I mean, serious scholars – making statements that, were the United States faced with a nuclear threat, we would have to suspend the Constitution. You ask yourself the question: "Why?" Are the courts not operating? Have our local and state and federal government all shut down? It would be a tragedy; it's not going to bring down the republic. So why are we suspending the Constitution? We're doing that in an atmosphere of fear and alarm, and that's precisely what terrorism is all about.



Look, we are going to do the smart things to prevent nuclear terrorism. We are locking up, as best we can, highly enriched uranium and plutonium. We are deploying detectors. We are making deals with Russia to improve, and we have improved their security. We're doing a lot of things and we'll keep on doing these things.

But at the same time, we realize that our defense against that terror that they hope to create is ultimately not going to be the fences, the walls, the detectors, closed-circuit TV, the searches and seizures. It's going to be, ultimately, our own courage; our own sense of self-reliance; our own sense of community; our own resiliency. In other words, the very values that have held this nation together for the lifetime of this nation.

Thank you very much.

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