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Civilization Vindicated

It took an advanced society to visit vengeance where it belonged.



By HOLMAN W. JENKINS, JR.

It took steady application and a few tactical insights to pull off the 9/11 attacks. You could get box cutters through security at U.S. airports. Personnel were trained not to worry about box cutters. You could commandeer a passenger plane because airline doctrine was to cooperate with hijackers. You only had to disable two cockpit crew members. You didn't have to fight off a hundred passengers.

In contrast, it took the kind of resources that only the world's richest society could muster to locate one hidden individual and kill him. From a network of operatives and bases around the world, to electronic eavesdropping and spy satellites, to the ability to train and dispatch forces to a suburb of the Pakistani capital, to the facilities to match DNA, to the aircraft carrier over whose side the body was ceremoniously dumped, Operation Get Osama was the feat of an enduring civilization. Though terrorists may have murdered 3,000 Americans in the heart of our biggest city, 9/11 was the act of a passing band of vandals.

All this was easy to overlook at the time, with some seriously fretting that the economy would come to a halt, that no more buildings would be built, from fear of terrorist attack. With America's new domestic philosophy that nothing succeeds like excess, we threw money at the airlines, at people in the vicinity of Ground Zero, at airport security, at free terrorism insurance for one and all.



Columnist Bill McGurn on bin Laden's demise and the 2012 presidential race.

At the time, the latter ploy had a whiff of panic. What perhaps should have been obvious is truly obvious now. The skies were not going to be swarming with terrorist airliners. We were not up against some kind of all-powerful mastermind with billions at his disposal and mastery of biological and nuclear weapons. The U.S. government majestically waving its hand to absolve property insurers of future losses from terrorist activity turned out to be a cost-free exercise in confidence restoration, unlike so many gestures after 9/11 that proved costly and counterproductive.

To give one example, as some pointed out at the time—former Sen. Bob Kerrey was one of them—much of our subsequent investment in airport security was destined to be superfluous. The vital security hole had already been closed by the passengers of Flight 93, which is why we were unlikely ever to see a 9/11-style attack again. Sure enough, in two weak attempts by al Qaeda operatives to ignite bombs in a shoe and underwear (respectively), the first responders were passengers themselves, whose innate decency was all that saved the

would-be culprits from being pummeled to death after they were disarmed.

We'll also cite Warren Buffett, who flogged the inevitability of nuclear terrorism from a podium at his Berkshire Hathaway annual meeting—then turned around and wrote what certainly has proved a very lucrative policy on the Sears Tower in Chicago, which 10 years later stands there as happily and unmolested as ever.



AP

Though celebration of Osama's death has become slightly gooey with overstatement, the technical and tactical achievement should not be overlooked. In an era of chaotic and ungovernable Third World cities, deranged ideologies and fears of megaterrorism, the forces of civilization have a few things going for them. If war is politics by other means, the technological ability to focus America's wars narrowly on the foreheads of enemy leaders is an advantage that's likely already paying invisible dividends. Not only does it alter their calculations. Those preoccupied with remaining hidden and alive are not effective commanders, which perhaps explains why

megaterrorist spectaculars will not become a repeated occurrence after all.

This kind of thing was not in good odor in pre-9/11 America, but as this column noted one day after, "dictators and terrorist chiefs are not the willing victims of the wars they prosecute. They like their lives, their power and their ambitions." President Bush's vow to hunt down and punish those responsible "would be the best defense against future outrages, if carried out."

That scintilla of doubt hasn't been validated by either Mr. Bush or President Obama, who has a true man of the left's appreciation of the necessities of power. He may want to remake America's social contract in a soft and motherly way, but he has shown no untoward inhibition about hunting down and killing America's enemies abroad when and where the opportunity presents itself.

Where cold-bloodedness ends and magnanimity begins is a nice question. To leave some in Pakistan to conclude that cossetting America's No. 1 enemy was not a fatal foolishness on their part might seem a tad unwise. We gain in confidence, however, that this consideration is not absent from White House thinking on its next steps after the killing of Osama.

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