

TERRORISTS AND MADMEN

by Stephen R. Shalom

The official U.S. explanation for the missile strikes on the Sudanese pharmaceutical plant last summer was so transparently bogus that even the New York Times—after its initial approving editorial—was forced a few days later to run a skeptical report. One hardly needed Seymour Hersh's thorough debunking in the New Yorker (12 Oct. 1998) to dismiss Washington's rationale.

So why, then, did the United States launch its attack?

Some pundits were quick to charge that this was a case of "Wag the Dog"—a manufactured foreign policy crisis to distract attention from the President's impeachment difficulties. Such an interpretation cannot be ruled out on the grounds that Clinton is morally incapable of such perfidy. A man who interrupts his campaigning to rush home to ratify the execution of a person missing half his brain and who signs the Defense of Marriage Act despite his own rather tenuous marital commitments is hardly above manipulating human suffering for his own self-interest.

But the "Wag the Dog" thesis fails for another reason. It is implausible that the top policymakers involved in the decision to attack Sudan were willing to compromise the overall interests of the U.S. government to bail out Clinton. Like Clinton, those who determine U.S. foreign policy are capable of lies, deceit, and brutality. It is unlikely, however, that they would apply these considerable talents to protecting Clinton's career at the expense of the larger state interests which they serve.

There is a far more compelling explanation for the missile strikes and it was well expressed in a letter to the New York Times on February 13. Commenting on a news report that experts had found no evidence of chemical weapons at the devastated pharmaceutical plant, the letter writer pointed

out that the strikes (which he supported) were not specifically intended to destroy VX nerve gas. "The objective was to display American resolve to combat terrorism." Thus, the "report that chemists found no chemical precursors to VX at the Sudanese plant is of little importance. The message to terrorists was loud and clear."

One might wonder what kind of message is sent when the victim of the bombing bears no responsibility for the events allegedly inducing the bombing. This seems utterly irrational. But conveying an image of irrationality is precisely what is intended. As a 1995 Pentagon Planning document stated:

Because of the value that comes from the ambiguity of what the U.S. may do to an adversary if the acts we seek to deter are carried out, it hurts to portray ourselves as too fully rational and cool-headed. The fact that some elements may appear to be potentially "out of control" can be beneficial to creating and reinforcing fears and doubts within the minds of an adversary's decision makers. This essential sense of fear is the working force of deterrence. That the U.S. may become irrational and vindictive if its vital interests are attacked should be a part of the national persona we project to all adversaries. (Excerpts available at <http://www.basicint.org/nfuture2.pdf>.)

This notion of appearing out-of-control did not originate during the Clinton administration. It has a long and sordid history in U.S. foreign policy, sometimes successful, sometimes not.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Attorney General Robert Kennedy told the Soviet ambassador that the President had no intention of risking a nuclear war, but there was the possibility of a military coup against his brother if Soviet concessions were not forthcoming, and who knew what the military might do. Fortunately, Soviet officials didn't conclude from this threat that their best hope was a preemptive nuclear strike before the U.S. military took over and started a war.

During the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon also tried this strategy. As his Chief of Staff H. R. Halderman wrote in his memoir, *The Ends of Power*, Nixon told him:

I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do *anything* to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button'—and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.

George Shultz, Ronald Reagan's Secretary of State, reports that after the 1983 Grenada invasion (in which the United States was able somehow to defeat a country with a population less than that of Peoria, Illinois) French officials told him that Syria feared a U.S. attack. The French pressed Shultz for reassurance that Washington would not strike Syria. "Let Damascus worry," Shultz said. "It was fascinating," Shultz recalled in his memoir *Turmoil and Triumph*, "to see this sudden effect of our Grenada operation halfway around the world. I assured my colleagues privately that we had no plan to retaliate against Syria, but 'I would not want to reassure the Syrians.'"

This fascination with terrifying adversaries showed up numerous times during the Reagan administration, from provoking—and then attacking—Libya to conducting reckless military exercises off the Soviet coast. In September 1986, for example, a

U.S. naval battle group, including a nuclear-missile-armed battleship, sailed into the Sea of Okhotsk for a simulated attack on Soviet territory; and in November 1987, in Operation Shooting Star, A-6 Intruders flew mock bombing runs toward a large Soviet naval base.

So when Clinton unleashed his barrage of cruise missiles on Sudan he was following the well-established policy of the United States. His impeachment troubles may have encouraged the attacks—not as a diversion, but rather to send a message that his domestic difficulties would not restrain U.S. ferocity.

Clinton, like his predecessors in the White House, used force and the threat of force to scare and intimidate all who might reject U.S. dictation. The technical term for such a policy is "terrorism." Impeachment anybody? (See the petition at http://www.ccnnet.com/~suntzu75/news_archives/1999/political/pdot9908.htm.)

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