

OLD FEARS AND CYCLICAL LULLS

By Fred Burton and Scott Stewart

Two years ago, Stratfor wrote an article discussing the historical pattern of the boom and bust in counterterrorism spending. In that article we discussed the phenomenon whereby a successful terrorist attack creates a profound shock that is quite often followed by an extended lull. We noted how this dynamic tends to create a pendulum effect in public perception and how public opinion is ultimately translated into public policy that produces security and counterterrorism funding.

In other words, the shock of a successful terrorist attack creates a crisis environment in which the public demands action from the government and Washington responds by earmarking vast amounts of funds to address the problem. Then the lull sets in, and some of the programs created during the crisis are scrapped entirely or are killed by a series of budget cuts as the public's perception of the threat changes and its demands for government action focus elsewhere. The lull eventually is shattered by another attack - and another infusion of money goes to address the now-neglected problem.

On March 13, The Washington Post carried a story entitled "Hardened U.S. Embassies Symbolic of Old Fears, Critics Say." The story discussed the new generation of U.S. Embassy buildings, which are often referred to as "Inman buildings" by State Department insiders. This name refers to buildings constructed in accordance with the physical security standards set by the Secretary of State's Advisory Panel on Overseas Security, a panel chaired by former Deputy CIA Director Adm. Bobby Inman following the 1983 attacks against the U.S. embassies in Beirut and Kuwait City. The 1985 Inman report, which established these security requirements and contributed to one of the historical security spending booms, was also responsible for beefing up the State Department's Office of Security and transforming it into the Diplomatic Security Service (DSS).

It has been 11 years since a U.S. Embassy has been reduced to a smoking hole in the ground, and the public's perception of the threat appears to be changing once again. In The Washington Post article, Stephen Schlesinger, an adjunct fellow at the Century Foundation, faults the new Inman building that serves as the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in New York for being unattractive and uninviting. Schlesinger is quoted as saying: "Rather than being an approachable, beckoning embassy - emphasizing America's desire to open up to the rest of the globe and convey our historically optimistic and progressive values - it sits across from the U.N. headquarters like a dark, forbidding fortress, saying, 'Go away.'" When opinion leaders begin to express such sentiments in The Washington Post, it is an indication that we are now in the lull period of the counterterrorism cycle.

Tensions over security

There has always been a tension between security and diplomacy in the U.S. State Department. There are some diplomats who consider security to be antithetical to diplomacy and, like Mr. Schlesinger, believe that U.S. diplomatic facilities need to be open and accessible rather than secure. These foreign service officers (FSOs) also believe that regional security officers are too risk averse and that they place too many restrictions on diplomats to allow them to practice effective diplomacy. (Regional security officer - RSO - is the title given to a DSS special agent in charge of security at an embassy.) To quote one FSO, DSS special agents are "cop-like morons." People who carry guns instead of demarches and who go out and arrest people for passport and visa fraud are simply not considered "diplomatic." There is also the thorny issue that in their counterintelligence role, DSS agents are often forced to confront FSOs over personal behavior (such as sexual proclivities or even crimes) that could be considered grounds for blackmail by a hostile intelligence service.

On the other side of the coin, DSS agents feel the animosity emanating from those in the foreign service establishment who are hostile to security and who oppose the DSS efforts to improve security at diplomatic missions overseas. DSS agents refer to these FSOs as "black dragons" - a phrase commonly uttered in conjunction with a curse. DSS agents see themselves as the ones left holding the bag when an FSO disregards security guidelines, does something reckless, and is robbed, raped or murdered. It is most often the RSO and his staff who are responsible for going out and picking up the pieces when something turns bad. It is also the RSO who is called before a U.S. government accountability review board when an embassy is attacked and destroyed. In the eyes of a DSS special agent, then, a strong, well-protected building conveys a far better representation of American values and strength than does a smoldering hole in the ground, where an "accessible" embassy once stood. In the mind of a DSS agent, dead diplomats can conduct no diplomacy.

This internal tension has also played a role in the funding boom and bust for diplomatic security overseas. Indeed, DSS agents are convinced that the black dragons consistently attempt to cut security budgets during the lull periods. When career foreign service officers like Sheldon Kryz and Anthony Quainton were appointed to serve as assistant secretaries for diplomatic security - and presided over large cuts in budgets and manpower - many DSS agents were convinced that Kryz and Quainton had been placed in that position specifically to sabotage the agency.

DSS agents were suspicious of Quainton, in particular, because of his history. In February 1992, while Quainton was serving as the U.S. ambassador to Peru, the ambassador's residence in Lima was attacked by Shining Path guerrillas who detonated a large vehicular-borne improvised explosive device in the street next to it. A team sent by the DSS counterterrorism investigations division to investigate the attack concluded in its report that Quainton's refusal to follow the RSO's recommendation to alter his schedule was partially responsible for the attack. The report angered Quainton, who became the assistant secretary for diplomatic security seven months later. Shortly after assuming his post, Quainton proclaimed to his staff that "terrorism is dead" and ordered the abolishment of the DSS counterterrorism investigations division.

Using a little bureaucratic sleight of hand, then-DSS Director Clark Dittmer renamed the office the Protective Intelligence Investigations Division (PII) and allowed it to maintain its staff and function. Although Quainton had declared terrorism dead, special agents assigned to the PII office would be involved in the investigation of the first known al Qaeda attacks against U.S. interests in Aden and Sanaa, Yemen, in December 1992. They also played a significant role in the investigation of the World Trade Center bombing in February 1993, the investigation of the 1993 New York Landmarks Plot and many subsequent terrorism cases.

Boom-and-bust funding

One of the problems problem created by the feast-or-famine cycle of security funding is that during the boom times, when there is a sudden (and often huge) influx of cash, agencies sometimes have difficulty spending all the money allotted to them in a logical and productive manner. Congress, acting on strong public opinion, often will give an agency even more than it initially requested for a particular program - and then expect an immediate solution to the problem. Rather than risk losing these funds, the agencies scramble to find ways to spend them. Then, quite often, by the time the agency is able to get its act together and develop a system effectively to use the funds, the lull has set in and funding is cut. These cuts frequently are accompanied by criticism of how the agency spent the initial glut of funding.

Whether or not it was a conscious effort on the part of people like Quainton, funding for diplomatic security programs was greatly reduced during the lull period of the 1990s. In addition to a reduction in the funding provided to build new embassies or bring existing buildings up to Inman standards, RSOs were forced to make repeated cuts in budgets for items such as local guard forces, residential security and the maintenance of security equipment such as closed-circuit TV cameras and vehicular barriers.

These budget cuts were identified as a contributing factor in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. The final report of the Crowe Commission, which was established to investigate the attacks, notes that its accountability review board members "were especially disturbed by the collective failure of the U.S. government over the past decade to provide adequate resources to reduce the vulnerability of U.S. diplomatic missions to terrorist attacks in most countries around the world."

The U.S. Embassy in Nairobi was known to be vulnerable. Following the August 1997 raid on the Nairobi residence of Wadhi el-Hage, U.S. officials learned that el-Hage and his confederates had conducted extensive pre-operational surveillance against the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, indicating that they planned to attack the facility. The U.S. ambassador in Nairobi, citing the embassy's vulnerability to car bomb attacks, asked the state department in December 1997 to authorize a relocation of the embassy to a safer place. In its January 1998 denial of the request, the state department said that, in spite of the threat and vulnerability, the post's "medium" terrorism threat level did not warrant the expenditure.

Old fears

The 1998 East Africa embassy bombings highlighted the consequences of the security budget

cuts that came during the lull years. Clearly, terrorism was not dead then, nor is it dead today, in spite of the implications in the March 13 Washington Post article. Indeed, the current threat of attacks directed against U.S. diplomatic facilities is very real. Since January 2008, we have seen attacks against U.S. diplomatic facilities in Sanaa, Yemen; Istanbul, Turkey; Kabul, Afghanistan; Belgrade, Serbia; and Monterrey, Mexico (as well as attacks against American diplomats in Pakistan, Sudan and Lebanon). Since 2001, there have also been serious attacks against U.S. diplomatic facilities in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; Karachi, Pakistan; Damascus, Syria; Athens, Greece; and Baghdad, Iraq.

Even if one believes, as we do, that al Qaeda's abilities have been severely degraded since 9/11, it must be recognized that the group and its regional franchises still retain the ability to conduct tactical strikes. In fact, due to the increased level of security at U.S. diplomatic missions, most of the attacks conducted by jihadists have been directed against softer targets such as hotels or the embassies of other foreign countries. Indeed, attacks that were intended to be substantial strikes against U.S. diplomatic facilities in places like Sanaa, Jeddah and Istanbul have been thwarted by the security measures in place at those facilities. Even in Damascus, where the embassy was an older facility that did not meet Inman standards, adequate security measures (aided by poor planning and execution on the part of the attackers) helped thwart a potentially disastrous attack.

However, in spite of the phrase "war on terrorism," terrorism is a tactic and not an entity. One cannot kill or destroy a tactic. Historically, terrorism has been used by a wide array of actors ranging from neo-Nazis to anarchists and from Maoists to jihadists. Even when the Cold War ended and many of the state-sponsored terrorist groups lost their funding, the tactic of terrorism endured. Even if the core al Qaeda leaders were killed or captured tomorrow and the jihadist threat were neutralized next week, terrorism would not go away. As we have previously pointed out, ideologies are far harder to kill than individuals. There will always be actors with various ideologies who will embrace terrorism as a tactic to strike a stronger enemy, and as the sole global superpower, the U.S. and its diplomatic missions will be targeted for terrorist attacks for the foreseeable future - or at least the next 100 years.

During this time, the booms and busts of counterterrorism and security spending will continue in response to successful attacks and in the lulls between spectacular terrorist strikes like 9/11. During the lulls in this cycle, it will be easy for complacency to slip in - especially when there are competing financial needs. But terrorism is not going to go away any time soon, and when emotion is removed from the cycle, a logical and compelling argument emerges for consistently supplying enough money to protect U.S. embassies and other essential facilities.

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