By Fred Burton and Ben West

In the evening of March 4, as U.S. Department of Defense workers were wrapping up their day, a man wearing a suit and displaying what guards later referred to as a "nervous intensity" approached the entrance to the Pentagon. As he walked up to the guard booth, he reached into his pocket and took out a semi-automatic 9 mm pistol and began firing at the two security personnel stationed at the entrance. The guards retreated behind ballistic glass and returned fire at the man, who rushed the entrance. Seconds later, a third guard armed with a .40-caliber submachine gun confronted and shot the gunman, delivering a fatal head wound that ended the incident.

The gunman in this case was John Patrick Bedell, a native Californian who had driven from California to Washington to carry out his one-man attack on the Pentagon. Given the available details (e.g., a cross-country trek, business attire), it appears that Bedell had planned his attack well ahead of time. He had a history of mental illness as well as minor criminal offenses, such as growing marijuana and resisting arrest. More notable, though, is a series of recordings and writings he posted on the Internet in November 2006 in which he criticized the federal government and said the 9/11 attacks were a government-led conspiracy.

The March 4 shooting came right on the heels of another attack against the U.S. government, this one in Austin, Texas, where software engineer and pilot Joseph Stack crashed his single-engine Piper Cherokee into a building Feb. 18 that housed offices of the Internal Revenue Service. In another previous attack, Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan, a U.S. Army psychiatrist, opened fire at a troop processing facility at Fort Hood, Texas, killing 13 people. While many government officials are denying that these incidents were terrorist acts, we at STRATFOR disagree. Arguments used to not classify these attacks as terrorism include the failure to generate large numbers of casualties, a lack of foreign ties and the absence of a larger conspiracy. This dismissal of terrorism as a factor in these attacks ultimately has a long-term impact on past and future investigations, and it also seems to ignore the legal definition, as set out in Title VIII, Section 802 of the USA PATRIOT Act:

[An] act of terrorism means any activity that (A) involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life that is a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or any State, or that would be a criminal violation if committed within the jurisdiction of the United States or of any State; and (B) appears to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by assassination or kidnapping.

It is important to note that this definition does not include the magnitude of the violence involved in the attack — it does not have to be a catastrophic event. The word "terrorism" has taken on a lot of inflated connotations as Islamist militant groups, among others, have used it as a tactic to cause high (often civilian) casualty rates in complex, well-orchestrated attacks.

Attacks like 9/11, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, the 2005 London bombings and the 2008 Mumbai siege were all catastrophic in terms of physical damage and loss of human life. But they also became massive media events that ensured that the Islamist extremists behind the attacks remained in the spotlight for months, if not years — an effective way to publicize their ideology and objectives.

But attacks do not have to be huge and catastrophic to be considered acts of terror. Consider the statement from the October 2009 Echo of Battle (11th edition), in which al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula leader Nasir al-Wahayshi advocated using simple attacks against a variety of targets. It was significant that al-Wahayshi said this, but it was certainly not a novel idea. Numerous attacks previously considered acts of terrorism had been committed following this small-scale model: Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad opened fire on a U.S. Army/Navy career center in Little Rock, Ark., on June 1, 2009, killing one soldier and critically wounding another. The attack was considered an act of terrorism because Muhammad was protesting the presence of U.S. forces in Islamic countries. An even earlier example is the case of Hesham Mohamed Hadayet, an Egyptian who opened fire on the El Al Airlines ticket counter at Los Angeles International Airport in 2002, killing two people before being killed himself. His shooting was ruled an act of terrorism because investigators concluded that he was striking out at Israel on behalf of Palestinians.

Looking back over the last 100 years or so of terrorist attacks in the United States, there are many examples of small, non-catastrophic events. Often these events are no more violent or consequential than a common criminal incident — what sets them apart are the political motivations of their perpetrators. Indeed, catastrophic attacks are the exception to the rule, though the memory of these spectacular incidents is burned indelibly into the public mind.

Terrorist attacks also do not need to have foreign links. Again, the dominant trend over the past decade has been that such attacks are linked to radical Islamist groups based in the Middle East and South Asia. But terrorism does not belong to any set ideology or group. It is a tactic, one that can be used by anyone to pursue any political goal. In fact, looking back over the history of terrorism in the United States, most attacks have been generated and carried out by domestic groups. Militant entities like the Order of the Covenant (a white supremacist group), the Black Liberation Army, the Earth Liberation Front, anarchist groups and anti-abortion groups have more often than not been the perpetrators behind terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. Foreign-based terrorism in the United States is fairly rare, and the most recent extremist Islamist attacks have been "home grown," with the ideology and perhaps inspiration coming from abroad but with the actual materials being collected and the preparation conducted in the United States.

Finally, in order to be considered terrorism, an attack does not have to be part of a larger conspiracy — it can be carried out by a single individual. The lone-wolf attack is actually the most dangerous because it is not part of a larger conspiracy, which can make a plot more vulnerable to discovery. Often a single individual will carry out a terrorist attack based on a political ideology shared by a larger group, which can blur the lines of what constitutes a lone-wolf attack. Incidents like the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing are consistent with this type of attack. Theodore Kaczynski (aka the "Unabomber") is the archetypal lone-wolf operative who

used violent attacks to publicize a social and political message. Therefore his violent acts qualify as terrorism.

When thinking about Bedell, Stack and Hasan, it is important to view their actions in the context of the longer history of terrorism, not just over the past decade. The attacks these individuals carried out appear to match the conditions specified in the USA PATRIOT Act in that they were violent and appear to be politically motivated. All three perpetrators had exhibited overt disapproval of U.S. government policies in writings and communications prior to their attacks. While this isn't enough to prove that the attacks were politically motivated, it certainly provides a reason for further investigation.

Instead, authorities have dismissed these cases as criminal acts due to the lack of foreign involvement or outside help. In the Hasan case (which would be the deadliest terrorist attack on U.S. soil since 9/11), the FBI has ceded investigation of the case to the Defense Criminal Investigative Service (DCIS), the Department of Defense's internal investigative unit. Certainly, the DCIS has jurisdiction over the case because it took place on a military base, but considering that the FBI's current top priority is protecting the United States from terrorist attacks, its low profile in this case seems to run counter to that mission. As a criminal case, Hasan's attack is pretty straightforward. It can be easily proved that he shot and killed the 13 people, and this is exactly what the DCIS will do because that is its job. An FBI counterterrorism investigation, however, would provide a more in-depth look at other connections that Hasan may have had that could shed light on other militant activities. For example, what is the significance of reports of Hasan's correspondence with Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S.-born imam who is currently living in Yemen recruiting operatives for al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and who is also believed to have ties to Christmas Day bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab? Without conducting a terrorism investigation into his activities, questions like these may go unanswered.

The denial of terrorist links in such cases is similar to denials surrounding the 1990 assassination of Rabbi Meir Kahane in New York by El Sayyid Nosair, an Egyptian with U.S. citizenship. Initially, the FBI denied that the case was terrorism and Nosair was acquitted of the murder charges brought against him. Following the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the FBI re-labeled the Kahane assassination an act of terrorism and re-charged Nosair after it learned of his relationship to Omar Abdul-Rahman and of his involvement in the World Trade Center attack. Had authorities pursued the terrorism angle following Kahane's assassination, perhaps more information would have been known about the individuals plotting the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

But getting the FBI involved in cases like those of Hasan, Stack or Bedell sends the clear signal that the federal government suspects terrorism, and sending that signal is politically inexpedient right now. Suggesting that an act is terrorism automatically draws more attention to the incident, causing more fear among the population and giving the actors and their political messages more publicity. Moreover, the political sensitivity surrounding the investigation of Muslims (especially those serving in the U.S. military) means that avoiding the issue is politically less risky. The FBI was given the responsibility of preventing terrorism because it was one of the only existing agencies after 9/11 that had the resources and manpower to address

it. However, the FBI has a stronger background in, and institutional culture based on, investigating criminal cases (especially organized crime) and traditionally has not been focused on counterterrorism. Moreover, given the boom-and-bust cycle in funding counterterrorism operations, those involved in the field don't view it as being necessarily good for their national security careers.

According to the definition of terrorism laid out in the USA PATRIOT Act, the cases of Hasan and Stack clearly fit the label of terrorism and Bedell's is certainly looking that way. But not examining the possibility of terrorism in the first place risks overlooking important pieces of information that could prove useful in preventing the next attack, or fully understanding the last one.

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