

Evening up the books?

Until the World Trade Center bombing two years ago, federal law enforcement had been complacent about the possibility of international terrorism carried out in the United States. Since then significant efforts by the FBI to increase surveillance of radical cells, including some in Oklahoma City, have been made. Yet they did not result in any warning. There is some indication that the authorities still do not understand the nature of the problem.

The organizers of the Oklahoma City bombing had one objective: Kill as many people as possible. There have been no credible claims of responsibility to date, a possible indication that the motivation for the bombing could have been revenge, a typical Middle Eastern imperative to "even up the books." There are a number of candidates for the sponsorship of the operation, including Saddam Hussein, who has both the motivation to punish the United States and the demonstrated ruthlessness. Saddam's propaganda organs have recently been threatening retaliation against the United States both for Desert Storm and for its continued opposition to lifting United Nations sanctions.

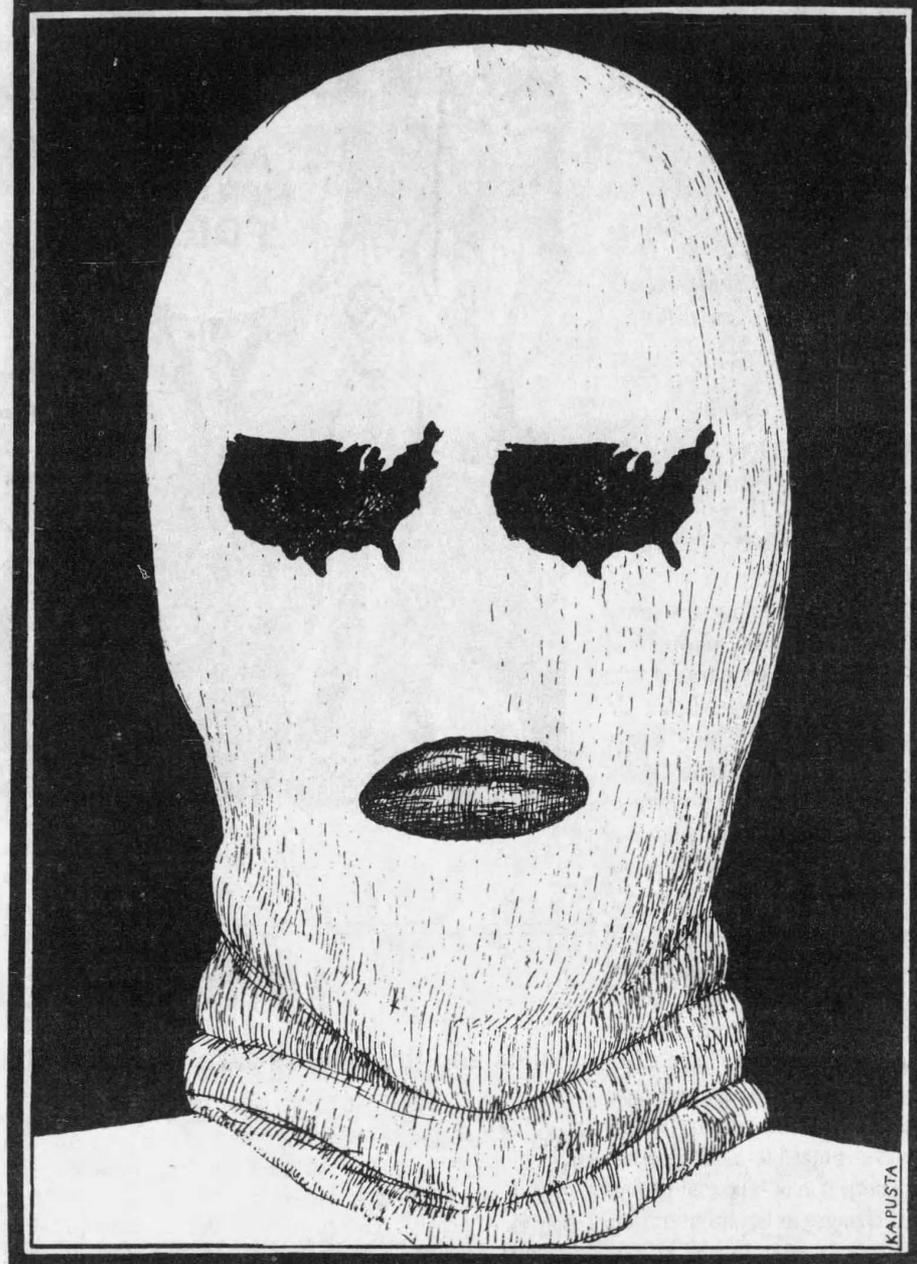
But whoever supported the bombing, domestic cells of alienated and wrathful individuals had to be involved. Chemicals needed to be purchased, storage facilities rented, bombs improvised, vans rented. A principal organizer, the role Ramzi Yousef played in the World Trade Center bombing two years ago, was required.

There is a massive FBI investigation in process, and it is likely that the perpetrators of the bombing — those left behind by a foreign organizer — will be caught. But as in the World Trade Center, the arrest of the perpetrators will not be sufficient to deter future terrorism. The foreign supporters must be identified and both criminal prosecution and political action must be taken against them.

The Oklahoma City bombing will support the contention of some that radical Muslims are planning to destroy American society. This allegation not only adds to the anti-immigrant fervor that is fast becoming a staple of political demagogues, but it also risks overlooking the real sources of terrorism.

Ramzi Yousef, the organizer of the World Trade Center bombing, was an expert bomb maker dispatched to the United States from abroad to organize a terrorist strike. He exploited a small group of Arab immigrants whose zealotry was exceeded only by their incompetence. Yousef had carefully prepared his escape, leaving under another name from New York the evening of the bombing. He abandoned his comrades to the police. If the Oklahoma bombing follows the same pattern, the foreign sponsors will have covered their trail carefully, leaving only the support cells of local adherents to face the prosecutor.

So what can be done? The Immigration and Naturalization Service is overwhelmed, undertrained and still unprepared to regulate legal immigration and track illegals. Local law enforcement units are often not prepared to detect and deter terrorism, and hysterical reaction can lead



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to violation of civil rights and contribute to the kind of alienation that instigates more violence.

Underlying all this is the treatment of terrorism by the US government as if it were simply a law enforcement problem rather than a national security issue. The beginning of an effective approach to the problem is the recognition that this is a national security policy issue. Terrorism is not bank robbery.

The problems for a democratic society in dealing with terrorism are significant. Effective approaches and law enforcement infrastructure to combat domestic terrorism while preserving civil liberties have not been developed. (The pending Omnibus Terrorism Act now wending its way through Congress may prove both ineffective and unconstitutional.)

Foreign counterterrorism, the first line of warning against international terrorism directed at the United States, has been weakened by inept CIA management, demoralized personnel and wavering commitment from the White House. And the entire American intelligence community is in disarray and in need of major reform.

Federal law enforcement agencies, on the other hand, are good at police work but lack the analytical and country expertise to assess the plans of international terrorists. The FBI and state law enforcement bodies must be better educated and trained about the nature of the domestic terrorist threat, and analytical experts with foreign area expertise must be recruited. The Clinton administration is just beginning to focus on the problem.

Two Americans were killed in Karachi perhaps as retaliation for the Ramzi Yousef capture. The trial of Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman in New York may result in his conviction, triggering retaliatory attacks against Americans abroad as well as in the United States. And now, as we near the end of a long watch from the sidelines of the unfolding Balkan tragedy, the terrorist threat is coming home to us in ways we never anticipated.

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