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ATTACK ON THE U.S.

Saturday, Feb. 4, 2006

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Action, not overreaction, prudent course

By JOHN IBBITSON
Wednesday, September 12, 2001

WASHINGTON -- Shortly before noon hour yesterday, speaking from an air force base in Louisiana, U.S. President George W. Bush uttered the line that will define his presidency.

"The resolve of our great nation is being tested," he told the American people. "Make no mistake, we will show the world that we will pass this test."

But in truth, this tragedy that surpasses understanding will confront a freshman President with a succession of tests that will fix his place in history, for good or ill.

Mr. Bush was reading to a group of schoolchildren at Emma Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, Fla., yesterday morning when an aide whispered to him word of the first attack on the World Trade Center.

For some reason, Secret Service agents did not bustle him away. Instead, within minutes, even before the attack on the Pentagon, the President made a statement to reporters, promising "to hunt down and to find those folks that committed this act. Terrorism against our nation will not stand."

Later, in his statement from Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, and through briefings by officials, the President and his administration communicated two essential messages. First, the U.S. government continued to function, as though it had heard the frightened woman who asked outside the Pentagon as the building burned, "Are we at war?"

The vital offices of the United States government would be open for business today, Mr. Bush stated in his speech to the nation last night, adding: "A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America."

Second, Mr. Bush wanted to make it clear that the United States would react swiftly and implacably against those who had wounded it.

"We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbour them," he vowed.

But from this moment on, the decisions will become infinitely more complex.

Within hours, senior political leaders, including three former secretaries of state -- Henry Kissinger, George Schultz and James Baker -- were on television demanding swift vengeance.

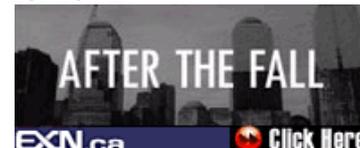
"War has been declared against the United States, and we ought to act accordingly," declared Republican Senator Orrin Hatch.

But act against whom? And how? Pundits and intelligence

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experts have identified Islamic fundamentalist leader Osama bin Laden as the likely suspect, and are already condemning the Taliban regime in Afghanistan for harbouring him. But the Afghan leadership has denied it.

The visceral demand for revenge by Americans will tempt Mr. Bush to act rather than to delay. But overreaction -- killing civilians, attacking groups who turn out not to have been responsible -- could rebound against him over time.

Further, questions will swiftly be asked about what role the Republican administration's Middle East policy might have played in contributing to the tragedy.

Throughout the waves of attacks and counterattacks between Palestinians and Israelis in recent months, the Bush administration has maintained a relatively hands-off policy, urging all sides to restrain themselves, while clearly siding with Israel in its disputes with the Palestinian leadership.

If Mr. Bush orders reprisals against the Taliban, or Hamas, or other extremist Arab administrations, he will enrage more Arabs, creating more potential martyrs and risking more future bombings.

Further, the civil liberties that Americans take for granted will be sorely tested, as blame is apportioned for the failure by U.S. security services to protect its air carriers from terrorist takeover, and the Pentagon from air attack. When tempers moderate, will frustrated travellers protest against Draconian security procedures that disrupt their plans and invade their personal security?

And the allies of the United States will be tested, as the nation demands greater co-operation in hunting down terrorists and protecting its borders.

"We will be able to judge our friends by the kind of support we get," Mr. Kissinger stated grimly on television from Germany.

These attacks will, however, provide the White House with an opportunity.

Mr. Bush, faced with a deteriorating fiscal situation, had said that nothing short of a "national emergency" would justify tapping into surplus funds in the Social Security account to fund defence and domestic spending, though many analysts had said he had no choice. That emergency now exists.

And the President may use the tragedy to push his plans to create a controversial shield against intercontinental ballistic missile attack from a rogue state. On the other hand, Congress might insist he divert funds to antiterrorism and other conventional defences. One thing that is probably certain: Arguments within the administration and in Congress to scale back overall defence spending will fall silent.

In the face of the thousands of deaths we witnessed yesterday, such political speculation may seem obscene. But a presidency hangs in the balance.



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