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CONFLICT WITH LIBYA: USE OF MILITARY FORCE AGAINST TERRORISM

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

CONFLICT WITH LIBYA:
USE OF MILITARY FORCE AGAINST TERRORISM

The United States attack on Libya on April 15, 1986 was the culmination of a series of developments in U.S. foreign policy and military strategy intended to combat international terrorism. It was the culmination of the U.S. attempt to use both non-military and military methods to combat terrorism. This paper examines the use of military force as an appropriate means to combat terrorism. In particular, the 1986 conflict with Libya is examined concentrating on the following aspects: whether operational level objectives contributed to achievement of strategic goals; and the use of military force as an effective instrument in the war against terrorism. This paper concludes that the use of military force (along with the European non-military responses) was an effective instrument in the war against terrorism as measured by the decrease in Libyan sponsored attacks from 1986 to 1991. However, the U.S. attack on Libya is still an isolated event and does not provide a sufficient basis for a doctrine of military retaliation against terrorism.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
ABSTRACT		ii
I	INTRODUCTION	2
II	POLICY/STRATEGY	4
	Policy	4
	Strategy	6
III	HISTORICAL OVERVIEW	9
IV	OPERATIONAL OVERVIEW-MILITARY RESPONSE	12
	Operation Attain Document	12
	Operation Eldorado Canyon	13
V	RESULTS	16
	Operational Level	16
	Strategic Level	18
VI	CONCLUSIONS	23
NOTES		26
BIBLIOGRAPHY		28

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

International terrorism is a phenomenon that has not been clearly understood, adequately explained, or effectively controlled. Terrorism is not a new form of conflict, but the increased degree to which certain states sponsored these operations against the West starting in the 1970's was new. The relative newness of this warfare and the post-Vietnam distaste for the use of military power as an instrument of statecraft, resulted in the U.S. policy and strategy on terrorism to lean heavily towards non-military responses in the 1970's and early 1980's. According to some, this policy and strategy is consistent with America's laws and basic values. According to Niel Livingston this mindset has resulted in U.S. paralysis in dealing with terrorism.

> "... some have argued that the United States does not need to respond to so-called dirty forms of warfare (terrorism), even in self-defense, because to do so would compromise its own values and standing in the world community... Transnational terrorists have added a new dimension of instability and peril to the international scene. To maintain a posture of national innocence and inaction in the face of such threats is to run the risk of catastrophe."[1]

The United States attack on Libya on April 15, 1986 was the culmination of a series of developments in U.S. foreign policy and military strategy intended to combat international terrorism.

It was the culmination of the U.S. attempt to use both non-military and military methods to combat terrorism. This paper examines the use of military force as an appropriate means to combat terrorism. In particular, the 1986 conflict with Libya is examined concentrating on the following aspects: whether operational level objectives contributed to achievement of strategic goals; and the use of military force as an effective instrument in the war against terrorism.

Chapter II reviews the U.S. policy and strategy in regard to terrorism. Chapter III is a brief synopsis of the events leading up to the Libyan conflict in 1986, and the fourth chapter provides an operational view of the military responses. Chapter V discusses the results from a strategic and operational level. The final chapter discusses the long-term impact of the operations against Libya and the implication of military responses to terrorism.

CHAPTER II

POLICY/STRATEGY

Policy. The U.S. policy on terrorism prior to 1984 was based on a passive and reactive defense.[1] The policy emphasized the safe release of hostages and urged other governments to make concessions if necessary. This policy has transitioned from a "safe release" policy to a "no concessions" policy to a "flexible response" policy with emphasis on the host government's responsibility for the safety of American diplomats; concessions were acceptable as long as the U.S. did not make them.[2]

However, the policy appeared ineffective in view of the increasing incidents of terrorist attacks. In 1970 a total of 293 terrorist attacks were recorded worldwide. By 1979 the figure had increased to 2,585 and during 1984 the count had reached 3,010. In that span a grand total of 28,268 incidents were recorded and over 52 per cent of that total occurred between 1979 and 1984.[3] There have been over 200 recorded incidents against DOD personnel alone resulting in almost 400 deaths.[4] The 241 Marines who died in Beirut in 1983 comprise more than half this figure.

In response to the increase in terrorism, the current policy regarding terrorism was articulated in April 1984 in the National Security Directive 138.

* The U.S. Government is opposed to domestic and international terrorism and is prepared to act in concert with

other nations or unilaterally when necessary to prevent or respond to terrorist acts.

* The U.S. Government considers the practice of terrorism by any person or group a potential threat to its national security and will resist the use of terrorism by all legal means available.

* States that practice terrorism or actively support it will not do so without consequence. If there is evidence that a state is mounting or intends to conduct an act of terrorism against this country, the United States will take measures to protect its citizens, property, and interests.

* The U.S. Government will make no concessions to terrorists. It will not pay ransoms, release prisoners, change its policies or agree to other acts that might encourage additional terrorism. At the same time, the United States will use every available resource to gain the safe return of American citizens who are held hostage by terrorists.

* The United States will act in a strong manner against terrorists without surrendering basic freedoms or endangering democratic principles, and encourages other governments to take similar stands.[5]

The policy appeared to signal a shift from a reactive mode to the recognition that pro-active steps were needed. However, the U.S. has also clearly stated the policy countering terrorism must be consistent with international/domestic law. Unlawful action against terrorists would be untenable for three reasons: first, it would undermine international law and order; it would not enjoy domestic support; and finally, it would be inconsistent with U.S. democratic values and norms. According to then Secretary of State George Schultz:

"Our response will have to fit the precise character and circumstances of the specific threats, but it must be within the rule of law, lest we become unwitting accomplices in the terrorist's scheme to undermine civilized society."[6]

This legal aspect of combatting terrorism has often been the source of frustration when trying to apply military responses to terrorism because the U.S. must consider in detail each legal issue if our policy is to be effective.

Strategy. The national strategy to combat terrorism was stated in the final report of the Vice President's Task Force on Combatting Terrorism in February 1986.

International Cooperation Initiatives.

* Pursue Additional International Agreements.

  o Pursue multilateral and bilateral agreements for better international cooperation.

  o Pursue general resolutions and agreements in the United Nations and other specialized international organizations.

  o Pursue less formal agreements that illustrate an international consensus to take effective action against terrorism.

* Close "Political Offense Exception" extradition loopholes.

* Strengthen airport and port security.

Domestic Legislative Initiatives.

* Make murder of U.S. citizens outside the country a federal crime.

* Establish death penalty for hostage murders.

* Establish incentives for terrorist information.

* Stop terrorist abuse of the Freedom of Information Act.

Intelligence.

* Use consolidated intelligence center on terrorism.

* Increase collection of human intelligence.

* Exchange intelligence with other governments.

Military Response.

* Review and update criteria for deciding when, if, and how to use force to preempt, react and retaliate against terrorist incidents.

* Develop response options,

* Maintain military response capability.[7]

Even though there was a predomininance of non-military initiatives, the preemptive use of military force was now an explicit consideration. The Reagan administration began to improve U.S. military counterterrorist capability. The strategy was shifting to an active defense posture. According to Secretary of State Shultz the strategy change was overdue:

"It is time to think long, hard, and seriously about more active means of defense, about defense through appropriate preventive or preemptive actions against terrorist groups before they strike. One of the best deterrents to terrorism is the certainty that swift and sure measures will be taken against those who engage in it. Resort to arms in behalf of democracy against repressive regimes or movements is indeed a fight for freedom, since there may be no other way that freedom can be achieved."[8]

This strategy shift was necessary in view of the great deal of conflict involving terrorism in the international arena. However, there still existed ambivalence and reservations in regard to the use of military power during the latter half of the 1970's and the first half of the 1980's. The U.S. intervention in Grenada is one notable exception. Due to the post-Vietnam

syndrome the role and utility of force was viewed to be on the wane; and the growing economic interdependence of states rendered military force a self-punishing instrument. With this backdrop, the revised National strategy, notwithstanding, there appeared to be a lack of a clear cut way to combat state sponsored international terrorism like that perpetrated by Libya.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

This brief view of the historical legacy of the Libyan conflict is presented as a foundation upon which to better build an understanding of the roots of the problem. Colonel Qaddafi came to power through a bloody coup on September 1, 1969. This coup, his military and anti-western rhetoric, and reemphasis on Islamic law has been viewed more than any other single event as the beginning of the Islamic revival.[1]

The relationship between the United States and Qaddafi was hampered by the presence of U.S. bases and oil companies in Libya, and America's continued support of Israel. Despite these differences, U.S. policy remained conciliatory until discovery of Libyan involvement in several terrorists attacks against Americans and U.S. interests overseas. As a result, in 1973 President Nixon ordered an arms embargo of Libya. The sanctions represented the opening round in a state of low intensity conflict that has existed between the U.S. and Libya ever since.[2]

The Carter administration eased sanctions, hoping this would improve relations and prevent further terrorist attacks. However, this initiative was hampered by President Carter's rigorous pursuit of a peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, and doomed by Qaddafi's support of Iran's seizing of American hostages. The Reagan administration ushered in an era of renewed

U.S. assertiveness in the international arena. President Reagan saw Libya as an opportunity to launch a new policy of aggressively countering regimes hostile to the U.S. What would become the "Reagan Doctrine" was a reaffirmation that America must actively support allies and friends through a variety of ways and means, and, if necessary, defend her own national security interests through unilateral military actions.[3]

Libyan sponsorship of terrorist activity continued to permeate the international arena. The U.S. non-military responses appeared inept. Diplomatic pressure and public disclosure were attempted to expose Qaddafi's role in promoting and supporting international terrorism. Unfortunately, those in the West who were not direct targets ignored the evidence in the hope that by "sitting it out" they would not be attacked.

Economic sanctions were also attempted by the United States. The administration cut off imports, curtailed exports, and froze Libyan assets. Here again the Europeans chose to "sit it out." The economic import and export ties a number of West European states had to Libya were stronger than there political and moral commitment to oppose terrorism, especially if terrorism was directly not aimed at them.

Political influence operations/covert action was also tried. There was a strong military opposition in Libya in the early 1980's, however, due to termination of a significant portion of U.S. human intelligence and covert action capability in the late 1970's, the U.S. was unable to exploit the covert option. There

was also little support for pressuring and isolating Qaddafi among moderate Arab states.

In 1983 Qaddafi declared his "line of death" in the Gulf of Sidra. Reagan began to exercise the military option as the U.S. continued with the freedom of navigation (FON) operations in the Gulf. In addition, contingency plans for a strike against Libya would be carried by every U.S. battle group in the Mediterranean.[4]

Qaddafi continued with his activity during 1984 and 1985, culminating in the revelation that Libya aided the terrorists who staged the Rome and Vienna airport assaults in December, 1985. There was of course worldwide condemnation of there acts. However, Qaddafi "reproached pro-Western Arab regimes for condemning the massacres and termed them instead heroic actions."[5]

CHAPTER IV

OPERATIONAL OVERVIEW-MILITARY RESPONSE

The bombings in Rome and Vienna galvanized the American public and the Reagan administration proceeded to fully plan for a military response. General Bernard Rogers of EUCOM was directed to devise aerial attack plans using organic resources under the course of scheduled peacetime exercises. In addition, evaluations were conducted on target possibilities and Libyan defenses in early January 1986.[1] However, politically, it was difficult to justify a U.S. unilateral preemptive strike against Qaddafi. Although the administration was certain that Qaddafi was behind Abu Nidal's activities, more direct proof was needed to insure domestic support for any military operation. Allied backing was unlikely. As a result, it was decided FON operations would be conducted near Libyan-claimed waters.[2]

Operation Attain Document. The operations in the vicinity of Libya, called Operation Attain Document, commenced in late January. Initial phases (I: 24-31 January; II: 10-15 February) were routine surface and flight operations in the Tripoli flight information region (FIR) carried out by the U.S.S. Coral Sea and U.S.S. Saratoga. Attain Document III was to be a deliberate FON operation south of the "line of death" to continue to demonstrate U.S. resolve and capability.[3]

Attain Document I and II were conducted without any incidents. There were several intercepts made by U.S. planes on

Libyan aircraft but no shots were fired. The Libyan pilots were observed to be fairly poor and rarely launched after dark. The task force was also able to gather intelligence on the Libyan air defense system. Flight operations were discontinued south of the FIR on 15 February.[4]

Attain Document III began on 23 March. The three carriers (Coral Sea, Saratoga, and America) were operating 150 miles north of the "line". Navy aircraft penetrated the "line" with no incident. The next day a three-ship surface action group (SAG) moved south of the "line" and within hours the long anticipated Libyan response materialized.[5] During the confrontation one Nanuchka-class missile corvette was sunk, another was severely damaged, and a SA-5 site was successfully struck. After the first day no Libyan military aircraft or ships ventured more than a few miles from the beach. The operation ended with the U.S. withdrawing on 29 March suffering no damage or casualties.

Qaddafi's response was not long in coming. On 5 April, the La Belle discotheque was bombed. Two days earlier, a bomb had exploded on board a TWA flight enroute from Rome to Athens, killing four U.S. citizens. Although that bomb appeared to be the work of Syrian-backed terrorists, Qaddafi congratulated them on their work and warned that, "we shall escalate the violence against American targets, civilian and non-civilian, throughout the world." With the La Belle bombing, Qaddafi had made good on that promise.[6]

<u>Operation Eldorado Canyon</u>. The evidence tying Libya to the

West Berlin bombing and as a result the British decision to lend support provided the impetus for the Eldorado Canyon air strike. Strategic objectives of the operation would have both political and military elements. The political goal was not solely to punish Qaddafi for the Berlin bombing, but to also preempt future attacks by demonstrating U.S. resolve in a decisive way. Militarily, the raid would strike a direct blow against Libya's terrorist sponsorship capability by attacking barracks, training facilities, headquarters, and aircraft that were used for terrorist support. Operational goals would include attrition of the Libyan air defense network and destruction of specific military targets at Tripoli and Benghazi.[7]

The Coral Sea and America were to concentrate on Libyan targets, while sharing fleet defense responsibilities. The Coral Sea was to strike the Benina airfield outside Benghazi on the eastern side of the Gulf. The America would strike targets in downtown Benghazi. The U.S. Air Force was to strike Tripoli.

The attack was initially viewed as highly successful. Although antiaircraft fire and missile launches were reportedly heavy at each target, the element of surprise, the darkness, jamming by the EA-6B/EF-111 force against the Tripoli defenses and air defense suppression by the A-7 and F/A-18 support aircraft rendered the Libyan defenses ineffective. All aircraft returned(one F-111 was lost enroute) without battle damage.[8]

When President Reagan addressed the American people he emphasized the successfulness of the operation and summarized the

resort to use military force:

"We Americans are slow to anger. We always seek peaceful avenues before resorting to the use of force--and we did. We tried quiet diplomacy, public condemnation, economic sanctions, and demonstrations of military force. None succeeded. Despite our repeated warnings, Qaddafi continued his reckless policy of intimidation, his relentless pursuit of terror. He counted on America to be passive. He counted wrong."[9]

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

The question of how much of a success the air strikes against Libya were will probably long be controversial. Since the attack was such an unusual event, no generally accepted criteria for measuring its success exists, leaving the choice of criteria a subjective matter. Given this and the fact that the Reagan administration both publicly and in private indicated Eldorado Canyon would not dramatically change the world all by itself, the effectiveness of the operation will be measured against whether the operational and strategic objectives were obtained.

Operational Level. On the operational/tactical level the U.S. was able to demonstrate U.S. resolve while operating in the Gulf of Sidra during Attain Document. However, during the strike the bombing caused extensive damage, but not all intended targets were hit as thoroughly as initially reported. While the military barracks in Benghazi and the military airfield east of it received considerable damage (including destruction of at least four MIG-23s, two HIP helicopters, one or two F-27s, and three to five IL-76 transport aircraft) the strikes on the military barracks in Tripoli and the training facilities in the port area of Sidi Bilal were not as successful. In the case of the former, the bombs cratered the compound, blew out windows and caved in a few walls, but did not destroy the barracks. With respect to the

latter, cloud cover was cited as the reason for the lack of precision.[1]

Additionally, there was collateral damage and civilians were hurt. The French and Iranian embassies and the Swiss ambassador's residence were damaged. There was speculation that this was due to the headquarters of Libya's central security organization, which apparently also served as the residence of Abu Nidal. Part of the collateral damage may have resulted from Libyan action. Some reports indicate that the Libyan military employed SAM missiles even though their radars were either knocked out or turned off for fear of being targeted by HARM missiles. This may have resulted in damage to urban areas and injury to civilians.[2]

Operationally, the strike dealt a blow to both the confidence and credibility of Qaddafi's armed forces by destroying a significant amount of military hardware, but the attack did not severely degrade Libya's physical ability to support terrorism. In summary, it might be said that the attack was a conditional operational success. The interservice joint planning and execution of the mission, on the whole, was a success. The performance of "smart weapons" was also a noteworthy achievement. However, few can claim that the Navy and Air Force fully met their pre-raid objectives, except to the extent that some visible damage was achieved at each of the five target complexes engaged. However, recalling that the operation was as much a strategic and political act as it was military, the

next question must be, how effective was the raid strategically?

Strategic Level. The effectiveness of Eldorado Canyon at the strategic level is more difficult to assess. Would the U.S. be able to preempt future attacks by demonstrating U.S. resolve in a decisive way? Is the use of military force an effective instrument in the war against terrorism?

Immediately after the mission there was some significant doubt that it could be considered anything but a political disaster. It was speculated by some that major damage had been done to the NATO alliance; to our relations with the Arab world; and to U.S. bilateral relations with Italy, France, Spain, and England among others. A wave of revenge attacks was predicted, not only against U.S. bases and interests overseas, but also in the streets of the U.S.[3] In the U.S. popular opinion polls were extremely high for the decision to strike. However, the widespread, almost unconditional support in the U.S. was marked in contrast to the reaction in Europe. The attack on Libya was widely rejected by Europeans as a useful tool against terrorism.

Immediately, after the raid there was reaction from the international terrorist community. On April 15 a U.S. communications officer, William Cokals, was shot and paralyzed in Khartoum near the Libyan people's bureau. Khartoum had been near the top of the list of over thirty sites of Libyan terrorist plotting against Americans, and U.S. officials had evidence that an attack against embassy personnel was imminent the day before the air strike. In a similar incident on April 25, five to seven

shots were fired from a passing car at another U.S. embassy communications officer in Yemen. The State Department believed the attack was instigated by Libya. Finally, on April 17 the bodies of three Englishmen were found in Beirut each killed by a gunshot to the head, with a note beside their bodies claiming they were killed in reprisal for the U.S. attack on Libya.[4]

There was some posturing on the part of the Soviet Union after the raid, including accusations that the bombing was a "criminal action." But despite those public outcries, the Russians took no major action to reassure Qaddafi concerning their intentions, or lack of same, to defend his country. His subsequent plea to enter the Warsaw Pact was largely ignored by the Soviets and the other pact nations. The cold shoulder he received form the Russians was the first of many Qaddafi would experience after the bombing. Instead of widespread, support, the Arab world provided only minimal public expressions of sympathy; and even those statements were balanced by reported private assurances of understanding for the U.S. stance. Neither did the Third world seem to respond too vigorously to Qaddafi's cries for solidarity. All in all, the new coalition against the West and the U.S. that many assumed would form in the wake of the bombing never took shape. Instead, Libya found itself abandoned and isolated. This turn of events was described in detail in reports that developed within six months of the attack. They disclosed the mental state of Qaddafi, the status of his changed political power within Libya, and a growing consensus that the

mission had been a resounding political success.[5]

During the period two to six months after the raid, observers noted a dramatic change in the statements and actions emanating from Tripoli. Reports of Qaddafi's weakening at home included comments on his country's diplomatic isolation, the Soviets' "arm's length" treatment of their erratic ally, and the virtual absence of terrorist activity attributable to Libya.[6]

The reduced sponsorship of terrorism by Libya was confirmed by an Israeli study published in August 1986. That study gave optimistic assessments of the mission's effects on both worldwide terrorism and on Libya-sponsored terrorism. Unfortunately, only the latter has been in decline in the years that have passed. As reported in the May 1989 Department of State Bulletin, Libya was deemed responsible for nineteen terrorist attacks in 1986, but had only directed six attacks each year in 1987 and 1988. Other nations thought to sponsor terrorism, and considered to be possible targets for similar retaliation, showed similar trends. The numbers in Syria, for instance, were thirty-four attacks in 1985; six in 1986; one in 1987; and none in 1988. In 1987, Syria went so far in its efforts to lower its pro-terrorism profile that it expelled the Abu Nidal organization. Nevertheless, overall terrorist activity worldwide continued to rise--records were set for total numbers of attacks in both 1987 and 1988. However, in May 1991, the U.S. State Department reported that a thirty-eight percent drop in terrorist attacks from 1988 to 1989 had been followed by a fifteen percent drop in terrorism from

1989 to 1990.[7]

It would be presumptuous to claim the drop in international terrorism over this time frame was directly a result of Operation Eldorado Canyon. Other events, including the dismantling of the Soviet Union and there subsequent withdrawal of support to client states, the concerted Western economic and political actions against terrorism, and the growing economic interdependence of states helped to change the political balance in the Middle East away from radicalism and toward moderation. This moderation and restraint may be one of the primary reasons for this slight decrease in international terrorism.

Also, to the great relief of many Americans, bloody anti-American episodes became less common: international terrorist incidents directed at U.S. targets declined by over 25 percent from 1986 to 1987, and terrorism fatalities for Americans dropped from thirty-eight in 1985 to twelve in 1986 to seven in 1987.[8]

The U.S. attack on Libya precipitated West European willingness to direct diplomatic and economic sanctions at Libya. The expulsion of Libyan envoys across Europe, (which many thought severely effected Libya's terrorist network) formal condemnations of Libya's role in sponsoring terrorism, and various other defense measures were initiated. Operation Eldorado Canyon was undoubtedly responsible to a significant extent for creating the atmosphere in which Great Britain and West Germany publicly stigmatized Syria in 1986 for the two Hindawi brothers' cases. They were certainly not the first instances in which European

governments had solid evidence of complicity of a state in terrorist acts in Europe; such evidence had in the past been downplayed or deliberately concealed.

Finally, the U.S. attack on Libya damaged Qaddafi's prestige in the Arab world and in a broader international basis, and weakened his position in Libya. While Libyan terrorism had not halted, it had certainly been curbed. This reduction in terrorist activity was not a direct result of the bombing, but an indirect result of the Western economic and political actions that followed the raid. On the strategic level one may conclude that the attack indirectly was effective in reduced Libyan activity.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

There are still those that question whether the air strike was the right measure to undertake. Within the context of the failure of non-military options, escalating terrorist operations sponsored by Libya and directed against U.S. officials and civilians, plus evidence linking Qaddafi to the West Berlin bombing, the administration was left with little choice. The diplomatic, economic and other non-military measures failed. The decision was the right one, but in the overall strategy it has to be integrated within a broader strategy to counter state-sponsored terrorism.

In regard to Libya the use of military force (along with the European non-military responses) was an effective instrument in the war against terrorism as measured by the decrease in Libyan sponsored attacks from 1986 to 1991. However, as the statistics indicated overall terrorism activity worldwide continued to rise between 1986 to 1989, and finally began to drop from 1989 to 1990. This underlies the difficult nature of dealing with this phenomenon. The U.S. attack on Libya is still an isolated event and does not provide a sufficient basis for a doctrine of military retaliation against terrorism. The Libya strikes and the clashes with Iran in the Persian Gulf demonstrated that there can be situations in which the U.S. can use military force in the Middle East without catastrophic consequences for its interests.

However, it is certainly an open question as to what effect an escalatory retaliation would have when applied to Iran or Syria.[1]

All this points to something even the strongest believers in military retaliation against terrorism agree upon; the high desirability of finding non-military means of making state support for terrorism costly, which again turns the attention to America's allies. There has definitely been progress in the willingness of the Western Europeans to stand up to Middle Eastern terrorism, and the overall multi-national coalition cooperation has had an impact as evidenced in the last years of the Iran/Iraq war and Desert Storm.

The direct use of military force against terrorists or their state sponsors is but one option available to the United States. There are, in reality, a number of military and non-military options that should be considered as part of a collection of offensive and defensive measures such as economic sanctions, political/diplomatic actions, internal security measures, covert operations, and the use of Special Operations Forces (SOF). There are no "one shot" solutions, and ignoring the problem will not make it go away.

The military response must be a viable option. Those that argue that it goes against our moral and democratic values risk an ineffectual policy. According to Admiral James Watkins, "no response to terrorism ever will be absolutely clean or pure in its morality to all people. We do not live in a world of perfect absolutes, so we must do the best we can with the information

available to us."[2] When judiciously used military responses enhance the efficacy of economic, diplomatic, and legal instruments. In the Libyan case, it made a contribution by indirectly deterring Libya's support for terrorist activities against the West.

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