

A Shock To The System:

Watch Out For A Foreign-made Pre-election Surprise

Could the U.S. presidential election be affected by a terrorist attack or some other foreign-made surprise?

A growing number of intelligence experts are convinced the danger is real and that the most likely timing would be in the period before the August Democratic convention or just before the November 4 election.

The intent would be obvious: Deliver a shock to Americans at a critical moment in its history, enhance the image of the terrorist movement and possibly cause disruptions between the U.S. and its allies.

The potential perpetrators range from the usual suspects – Islamic extremists and their terrorist kin – to foreign powers and mini-powers that have their own economic and political agendas.

One possible terrorist target: Benedict XVI who is scheduled for his first papal visit to the United States April 15-20. The Pope has come under direct threat from al-Qaeda's Osama bin Laden, who in his first publicly released message of the year denounced the "new crusade" against Islam. He added ominously that both the U.S. and "the Pope of the Vatican had a significant role" in this fantasized crusade. The already heavy security measures for the Pope's visit are being tightened further by the Secret Service.

Bin-Laden's deputy, Ayman al Zawahiri, has issued his own threats. "Western targets must be attacked," he said in a taped message in late

March. "Strike the interests of Jews and Americans and all those who wield aggression against the Muslims."

Some senior Mideast diplomats and intelligence sources see yet another terrorist threat to the US from Iran and its Lebanon-based agent, Hezbollah. The Shi'ite terrorist group's leaders, still smarting from their questionable and costly "victory" in the 2006 war with Israel, have been sounding increasingly desperate of late. Their frustration was intensified by the recent assassination in Damascus of their military commander, Imad Mughniyeh. Although Israel denies any responsibility, Hezbollah blames it directly for his death, and when the traditional 40 days of mourning for Mughniyeh ended, Hezbollah's spiritual leader, Hassam Nasrallah, openly threatened revenge.

Israel has raised security levels worldwide out of concern that Hezbollah will try to strike at a Jewish or Israeli target. Senior Israeli officials say that could include an attack in the U.S similar to the horrific bombings Hezbollah, abetted by its Iranian patrons, carried out in Argentina a few years back. One against the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires on March 17, 1992, killed 29. The other at the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires on July 18, 1994, killed 87 and destroyed the building.

Iran itself, angered over the American-led opposition to its nuclear arms program, could conceivably be a direct source of a terror attack on U.S. soil.

Dangers of a different kind arise from Iran's growing influence in Latin America, particularly Venezuela, the U.S.'s third largest supplier of oil. President Hugo Chavez already backs Iran's plan to issue oil contracts in euros, not U.S. dollars, a move that would further weaken the dollar and hurt the U.S. economy. An oil export freeze or even a cutback in production might also have a severe effect on the U.S.

Intelligence sources point to other events short of a terror attack that could create disruptions during the American political season. "Imagine if Mr. Putin decided to flex Russian political and economic muscles just before the conventions or the election itself," suggested one senior foreign diplomat. "Suppose Russia played with international gas or oil prices or made aggressive new missile control demands. The shock waves in America could be enormous."

Implications For Business

Preparing for the unpredictable is extraordinarily difficult, of course. But business leaders need to factor in the very real possibility of a pre-election assault somewhere or somehow against a U.S. target.

One area of concern involves security measures and emergency procedures. They need to be reviewed, rehearsed and intensified.

Another area of concern is communications. How thorough and reliable are networks, and what backup systems are in place?

Yet another area involves financial and economic issues. The 9/11 attacks staggered the U.S. economy for a period of time. It is impossible to foresee what impact another attack might have. But CEOs, CFOs and others with financial responsibilities need to think through issues like cash reserves and access to capital in a variety of emergency scenarios.

The ultimate target of any attack, of course, would be the election itself – an attempt to somehow distort the outcome. Business leaders have no direct way of countering such a game plan. But they most certainly can help get a crucial message out. And that is that Americans will never let themselves be suckered into acting against their own interests by the enemies who hate us.