



Words Have Meaning, but Actions Have More

By Mark Zaccaria

President Obama's speech to the nation on Thursday, January 7th, 2010, contained a great deal of right-sounding oratory. He spoke at last of Terrorism and he identified Al Qaeda as the enemy when he said perhaps the most important words of his administration thus far: "We are at war."

I congratulate the president on his forthright and direct assessment of global politics. It has taken a while for him to acknowledge that fact publicly. That he's now done so indicates a shift in Mr. Obama's position, and it is one I consider positive on two levels. First, he has acknowledged reality and as a result he's forsaken a long held illusion that an open hand will be greeted in return by another. Second, he has begun a demonstration to both the nation and its adversaries that America can be pushed only so far.

Terrorism is a strategy of provocation that depends on triggering reprisals. Our enemy in the Christmas Day attempt on Flight 253 will measure its success by what kind of response it elicits. President Obama is learning that he has several audiences as he reacts to this attack. He will be graded by Americans who are seeking reassurance and leadership. He will be closely watched by our enemies who want the dramatic worldwide press they crave as validation of their accomplishment. He will be analyzed by allies and non-aligned countries, alike, as they try to decide which America they are about to see taking the field.

The President of the United States is an executive, though. An executive is one who *does* something, who accomplishes some stated goal. President Obama's words were a good start but he now has to follow them with action. Terrorism is intended to impact public opinion. For that very reason the actions the president takes to back up his words will be best if they are invisible to the press and the worldwide public. American retaliation will be most effective if it physically punishes our enemy while also denying them any sympathy that might be the by-product of much publicized military action.

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If a Predator strike falls deep in the forest where none but its target can hear, was there actually a noise?

Now that a state of war has been acknowledged might it not be prudent to employ new weapons that will punish the resurgent Al Qaeda without leaving a trace? The president's remarks last Thursday were made in response to a failure of US intelligence systems. In his speech Mr. Obama pledged to streamline and correct those systems. When he does we will have the information we need to identify individual terrorists. In an information age should we not employ military disciplines to counterattack using the very data systems everyone relies on? If an individual's credit card is declined or their bank account is suddenly empty he or she will not be able to purchase the airline ticket needed to carry out an attack. If a person's identity account carries with it numerous open arrest warrants they will be challenged at every international border. These kinds of counterattacks are far less messy than the aftermath of a Hellfire missile. They are silent individual electronic transactions that would never attract the attention of a worldwide media which feeds on dramatic events.

President Obama has made a good start at demonstrating America's resolve to respond to this newest terrorist threat. The demonstration must now continue with action. As the president considers the range of options available to him I sense that he's becoming aware that there's more than one way to defeat a terrorist.

I, for one, am pleased to see that growth. We all want our president to succeed. The down-side of failure is just too great in today's world.

Editor's Note: Mark Zaccaria is a small businessman and former elected official who was Congressman James Langevin's GOP Opponent in the 2008 election. Mr. Zaccaria plans to run again for the seat in 2010.

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