

George Shultz Vs. “Hamlet”

George P. Shultz was President Reagan's Secretary of State on Oct. 23, 1983, the day 241 US troops died in a truck bombing of their Beirut barracks. The disaster turned him into the hardest of hard-liner anti-terrorists. One year later, Shultz gave a memorable speech calling for military action—even pre-emptive strikes—to defeat terrorists. He famously warned the US was becoming “the Hamlet of nations,” frozen by uncertainty. At the time he spoke, Shultz was losing the bureaucratic debate on use of force. Today, though, the Shultz view prevails, as the US has progressively lowered the threshold for military action against terrorists abroad.

The magnitude of the threat posed by terrorism is so great that we cannot afford to confront it with half-hearted and poorly organized measures. Terrorism is a contagious disease that will inevitably spread if it goes untreated. ...

We have to be stronger, steadier, determined, and united in the face of the terrorist threat. We must not reward terrorists by changing our policies or questioning our own principles or wallowing in self-flagellation or self-doubt. Instead, we should understand that terrorism is aggression and, like all aggression, must be forcefully resisted.

We must reach a consensus in this country that our responses should go beyond passive defense to consider means of active prevention, pre-emption, and retaliation. ...

A successful strategy for combating terrorism will require us to face up to some hard questions and to come up with some clear-cut answers. The questions involve our intelligence capability, the doctrine under which we would employ force, and, most important of all, our public's attitude toward this challenge. ...

The heart of the challenge lies in those cases where international rules and traditional practices do not apply. Terrorists will strike from areas where no governmental authority exists, or they will base themselves behind what they expect will be the sanctuary of an international border. And they will design their attacks to take place in precisely those “gray areas” where the full facts cannot be known, where the challenge will not bring with it an obvious or clear-cut choice of response.

In such cases, we must use our intelligence resources carefully and completely. We will have to examine the full range of measures available to us to take. The outcome may be that we will face a choice between doing nothing or employing military force. ...

We can expect more terrorism directed at our strategic interests around the world in the years ahead. To combat it, we must be willing to use military force.

What will be required, however, is public understanding before the fact of the risks involved in combating terrorism with overt power. The public must understand before the fact that there is potential for loss of life of some of our fighting men and the loss of life of some innocent people. The public must understand before the fact that some will seek to cast any pre-emptive or retaliatory action by us in the worst light and will attempt to make our military and our policy-makers—rather than the terrorists—appear to be the culprits. The public must understand before the fact that occasions will come when their

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government must act before each and every fact is known—and the decisions cannot be tied to the opinion polls.

Public support for US military actions to stop terrorists before they commit some hideous act or in retaliation for an attack on our people is crucial if we are to deal with this challenge.

Our military has the capability and the techniques to use power to fight the war against terrorism. This capability will be used judiciously. To be successful over the long term, it will require solid support from the American people. ...

We will need the flexibility to respond to terrorist attacks in a variety of ways, at times and places of our own choosing. ... If we are going to respond or pre-empt effectively, our policies will have to have an element of unpredictability and surprise. And the prerequisite for such a policy must be a broad public consensus on the moral and strategic necessity of action.

We will need the capability to act on a moment's notice. There will not be time for a renewed national debate after every terrorist attack.

We may never have the kind of evidence that can stand up in an American court of law, but we cannot allow ourselves to become the Hamlet of nations, worrying endlessly over whether and how to respond. A great nation with global responsibilities cannot afford to be hamstrung by confusion and indecisiveness. Fighting terrorism will not be a clean or pleasant contest, but we have no choice but to play it. ■