

We must beware what's in the cargo hold

Al-Qaida attacked the economy by exploiting shipping weaknesses

BY MICHAEL BALBONI

The effort by al-Qaida to ship explosive-laden toner cartridges to the United States shows that U.S. voters aren't the only ones who have focused on the economy. The placement of bombs on cargo planes was not designed to cause indiscriminate death in a sensational way — it appears to have been designed to demonstrate the vulnerability of the world's supply chain.

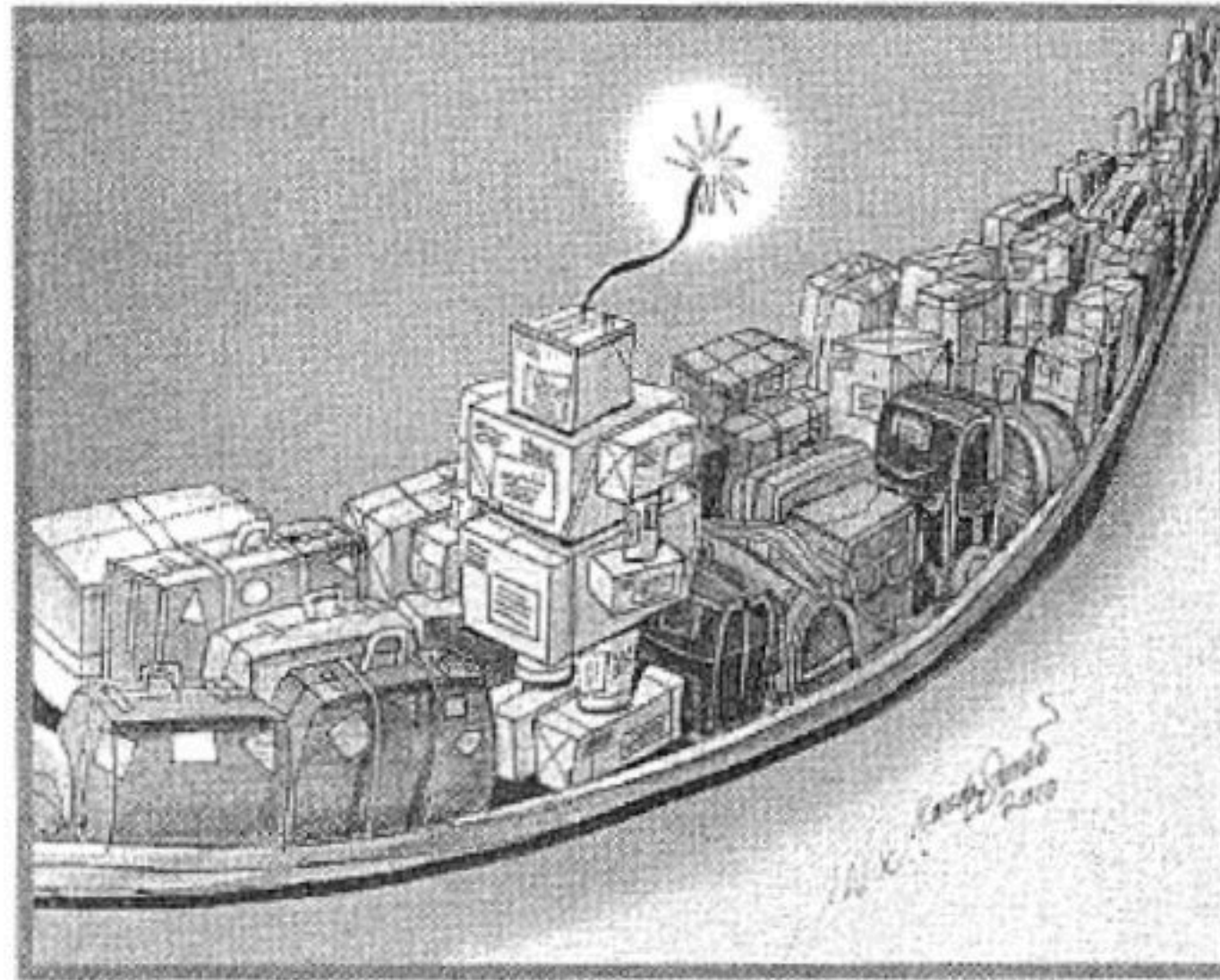
After several unsuccessful plots, such as the Christmas underwear and last May's Times Square bombing attempts, al-Qaida is desperate for a win. How else can it recruit soldiers to the fight? This time, it has chosen to exploit the weaknesses in the way cargo is shipped by air. Given the vast amount of cargo that is shipped annually, it is virtually impossible to ensure that every package will

be screened every time. Economics are also on al-Qaida's side: A couple hundred dollars worth of explosives can take down a multimillion dollar airplane — and halt the operations of multibillion-dollar shipping companies.

We are not going to win simply by playing defense.

Though the intelligence network provided the information needed to discover these bombs last week, the fact is that the bombs still made it onto the planes. Just like with the earlier Christmas and Times Square attempts, it's hard not to imagine what could have happened. We would be combing through wreckage and mourning the dead.

As much as we have done to make our nation safer, we can't



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project that safety everywhere else. Even for containerized cargo, the programs that have been established — such as the Container Security Initiative, which combines intelligence to identify risky cargo, screening technology and more secure containers, and is mandated for certain U.S. shippers — don't reach into each corner of the globe. There still is no worldwide security agreement for

would suffer dramatic economic effects. So there is no better time to push for global agreements and to apply universal responsibility for the goods that are shipped into the world market. That would mean, if it blows up and it comes from your country, you are responsible for helping to pay the bill for the damage.

Even though it's unrealistic to believe we can develop, dictate and oversee a uniform se-

countries that ship cargo to the world's markets. But while terrorism has been seen by many nations as a U.S. or European problem, an attack like this on the supply chain makes it everybody's problem.

In this global economy, every nation has "skin in the game." If shipping cargo became unreliable, every nation

security standard for the world, the penalty must be harsh enough so that exporting countries take security and intelligence-sharing seriously. Countries that don't play by these rules and have a history of terrorist activities must be isolated by the rest of the world.

What's more, all nations must understand the importance of feeding the intelligence networks; it is clearly in every country's interest to do so.

And we must continue to strike at the head of the snake and target the leadership of al-Qaida. It's impossible to prevent every attack. But these recent attempts show that the rest of the world has to make more of an effort to reduce the risk.



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