Lee Clarke
Rutgers University

KILL THE NETWORKS, SAVE THE PEOPLE©

From the earliest moments after the grotesque Attack on America, officials have been pointing fingers at the terrorist "networks." Americans have been warned that to root out terrorism will require destruction of those networks and doing *that* will mean a new kind of war. The war will be "unconventional" and "long" and require great sacrifices from Americans. All that is deadly true. But none of the actions being bandied about will do much about the "network problem."

Our leaders have named the problem correctly but their solutions are old and dangerously mismatched to the problem. The claims to end terrorism are over-promises, leading to what I call "fantasy documents"—plans that guarantee things that can't be guaranteed. It saddens me to predict that such promises will lead to frustrated military efforts and more needless killing.

Our leaders are clearly aware of the network issue, though it's not clear they really understand how networks operate. President Bush says our goal is to destroy and "defeat of the global terror network." General Anthony Zinni, former commander in chief of the US Central Command has said that "You need to go after the network that is collecting money, his investments in legitimate companies, the laundering of money, and the banks that look the other way." That sounds great, but we have to remember that these leaders, and their organizations, are the same ones who couldn't detect a massive terrorist effort that was years in the making; the terrorists even gave lots of warning. They don't inspire a lot of confidence. The more daunting problem is that networks of small terrorist cells aren't easy targets, which everyone solemnly acknowledges. What's the next best thing?

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld says we have to "drain the swamps they live in." It would be nice—because it would be easy—to think that simply destroying the terrorists' environments would solve the problem. But if "the networks" are as wide and deep as alleged then they use the world's key financial and political, perhaps even military, institutions. Those institutions are the environment, the swamp, that would have to be destroyed. It won't work.

In the same Pentagon news conference Rumsfeld allowed that terrorists don't have value-targets, but at least "those countries that support them do have those targets." Punishing those who harbor terrorists is clearly the right thing to do, but it won't kill terrorism. Besides, are our leaders really proposing that we fight this battle in 50 to 60 countries? It doesn't sound plausible.

In addition to failing to target the networks correctly, there is another problem. We tend to look to technology to solve major problems. For energy problems we look to nuclear power and more oil drilling in Alaska. For international security we look to missile defense shields. We're doing the same kind of thing in the response to the worst terrorist attack in American history. We're proposing Star-Trek like solutions: "smart cards" that track everyone's movements and record their facial characteristics, retina scans, electronic eavesdropping. Some have even talked seriously about using the ultimate technological fix: tactical nuclear weapons.

But the terrorists were not blazingly successful because they could fly jetliners, or travel undetected, or encrypt communications. There was little *Mission Impossible* electro-skullduggery. It was a very low-tech attack. They succeeded because their social networks were strong, and their commitment to each other and to their cause was so overwhelmingly powerful that they would readily sacrifice their own lives to advance it. You can't kill that kind of thing with technology. You can't starve such commitment with economic and political sanctions. The only chance of killing the networks is to compromise the basis of them: the social ties that hold the terrorist cells together. Technology can't solve a social problem.

The vaunted "solutions" to the terrorist issue will make us feel good. Who among us wouldn't savor the moment of Osama bin Laden's comeuppance? It would also be immensely satisfying to hurt his helpers, who have so often turned a blind eye to the suffering he causes.

But the only long-term solution involves diminishing terrorists' commitments to each other. How do you attack the social ties that bind the networks? Burrowing from within will make a small, yet non-trivial difference. After that, we must understand that the kind of networks that need killing are possible only among people who are extremely socially similar and who strongly hold the same commitments. So, a larger difference will come from providing allegiances that will compete with those that bind terrorists. The final solution to the terrorist problem is the creation of wealth and modern society. Nothing tears up networks of similarly minded people more effectively.

The most important target isn't those who harbor terrorists. It isn't even the evil Osama. It's the networks.

Lee Clarke is author of *Mission Improbable* from the University of Chicago Press.