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City's best weapon vs. fear is vigilance

By JEROME HAUER

The attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon highlighted a gross underestimation of the level of sophistication terrorist groups possess. Planning for terrorist strikes in the United States has been along linear paths, sometimes accounting for multiple strikes around the nation. But until Sept. 11, no one thought these groups could pull off such a well-orchestrated attack with multiple strikes within the same city and in other parts of the nation.

That level of sophistication is not initially apparent in the anthrax incidents that came to light this week, leading me to doubt they are the work of Osama Bin Laden.

However, if it was not already clear, those scares crystallize the realization that now we are forced to look at threats that we might have felt to be the stuff of the future as part of our reality today, next week or next month.

More threats and hoaxes will come, but the city will remain brave

At least at first blush, these anthrax incidents appear to be the work of a person or persons within the United States intent on increasing fear.

The people bent on the type of destruction that we saw Sept. 11, however, would not hesitate to include chemical and biological weapons in their terror arsenal. In fact, the success of the attacks Sept. 11 could energize and encourage them. Bin Laden's taped message calling on his followers to go forward opened the doors to even more terror and put us in an environment where the concept of terrorism against Americans does not necessarily have to involve killing a lot of people.

We must not succumb to the fear.

It is time for this city, indeed the United States, to be vigilant, which is a very different thing from being afraid.

The FBI was prudent in issuing its high-alert warning Thursday, and every individual should heed it. Report suspicious packages. If you notice people in your neighborhood or around your office who do not fit into the normal scene, report them. Something that we might have ignored six weeks ago should not be ignored today.

Putting every person on high alert empowers people to take back some control of their activities, of their lives. The knowledge that each person can help is a powerful antidote to fear.

Throughout the frightening and sobering events of the last weeks, Mayor Giuliani has done an excellent job of getting out all the information that is humanly possible. This has been this mayor's style, and it is clearly the right thing for him to do. Other agencies and departments would do well to follow his and this city's example.

The hoaxes and the threats — some credible — will continue. Israelis, used to the scares and real terror that we are just beginning to live with, have armed themselves since the Persian Gulf War with gas masks and auto-injectors for antidotes. We are not there yet. New York City has the best emergency services in the world. They have met the challenges of terror day in and day out since Sept. 11, and there is no question in my mind this will continue.

More than ever, it is time to be strong. It is our best weapon.

Hauer, an expert in chemical and biological warfare, was the first director of the city's Office of Emergency Management.

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