In Afghanistan, the targets are running out. Such are the frustrations of the powerful; Joseph Conrad, writing of an African "heart of darkness" a century ago, well understood: "Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. . . . In the empty immensity of earth, sky, water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent."

What "high-value targets" remained in the wasteland of Afghanistan, American warplanes have destroyed. The rabble of mullahs and seminarians known as the Taliban is fleeing the battered cities. To replace the Taliban with an enduring order, to build something where now there is nothing ó that likely will require much greater power than America has shown itself to possess. To make America once again safe from terrorism certainly will.

For Americans, Conrad's "incomprehensible" looms near, for cruise missiles and laser-guided bombs will not protect them from terrorism nor shield them from the political challenge they face. The battleground of the new war is not Afghanistan but here, and in his very choice of weapons our enemy has left America at a grave disadvantage, one the country has not begun to grasp, let alone confront.

For at least a quarter-century American power has coexisted with American inconstancy and capriciousness. Alongside the triumphant cold war narrative we have shaped for ourselves one can easily trace another story, one of bluster and flight and uneasy forgetting: the Bay of Pigs debacle of 1961; the panicked retreat from Saigon in 1975; the humiliation at the hands of the Iranian "students" in 1979; the wholesale flight from Beirut after the American Embassy and Marine barracks bombings in 1984; the abandonment of Mogadishu, Somalia, after the death of 18 American servicemen in 1993 ó this last an event that led not only to the retreat of the U.S.S. Harlan County from Haiti, but to the American refusal to act to halt the Rwandan genocide the following year.
This litany points not to any lack of American courage but to a lack of political grounding that has haunted the country's foreign policy for a half-century. America's power has been technologically robust and politically fragile. Since Vietnam this paradox—the country's enormous power and the suspicion and impatience of its citizens when confronted with its use has bedeviled American politicians, who with few exceptions have been unwilling to expend the political capital required to convince the country to act decisively when its interests are at stake. It is no wonder that the terrorist operatives of Al Qaeda, whose true genius has been an ability to search out their victims' points of vulnerability, chose to attack America at its weakest point: its political psyche. With 18 deaths the world's only superpower was chased from Somalia; why should 5,000 not chase it from the Persian Gulf?

The 19 men who changed the world on Sept. 11 used as their primary weapon not box cutters or jet airliners but something more American and much more powerful: the television set. The box cutters and the planes were tools in constructing the great master image, the Spectacular; the television set was their delivery vehicle. In an instant, the Spectacular altered the terms of debate, creating a sense of pervasive and unprecedented vulnerability among Americans, a sense revivified by each new report of anthrax, each fresh incident of a deranged assailant on a plane or a Greyhound bus. And the Spectacular thereby transformed American foreign policy, heretofore a matter of disregard among most Americans, into a vital question of their own security, a matter of their own life and death.

However ardently we stare at the blurry night-vision photographs from Kabul, the battlefield is here, in the American mind. The anthrax incidents, in bringing to the surface a latent hysteria, are more important skirmishes in this new war than anything that happens in the Afghan mountains. The Spectacular of Sept. 11 prepared the battlefield; the blows that are sure to come will strike more effectively at the true target: Americans' commitment to the country's role in the world, and particularly the Persian Gulf.

"This is not aimed at our policies," Henry Kissinger said after the attacks. "This is aimed at our existence." That is precisely wrong. The "evildoers" who gave their lives on Sept. 11 and those who sent them have precise objectives and a clear plan to achieve them.

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They want to bring about a new order of purity and righteousness in the Islamic world and particularly in the moderate states of the gulf, where they see only wealth and corruption and autocracy, all of it held in place by the power of America, the inheritor of the old colonial order. They see American planes and ships not as symbols of freedom but as the mainstay of the corrupt order they seek to replace – the obstacle standing between the corruption and oppression of the present and the new Islamic order that lights the way to the future.

Gazing at this corrupt world, these men believe they have found its point of vulnerability in the American mind – in the fragile commitment of the American people to a permanent role in the gulf. Given recent history, their analysis is not at all unsound. In the triumphant aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, Saddam Hussein's taunt that American society "cannot accept 10,000 dead in one battle" seemed an empty boast. Ten years later, as he sits in power in Baghdad watching his adversary's son struggle with the consequences of an uncompleted war, the remark seems not quite so ridiculous. The first President Bush's refusal to go to Baghdad and remove Saddam Hussein – a decision in good part based on worries that Americans' satisfaction with an easy victory would turn to anxiety over a possible quagmire – meant that the threat from Iraq remained. In countering that threat by stationing American troops permanently in Saudi Arabia, the president traded one political risk for another. For it was the Saudi monarchy's acceptance of those troops that led to the permanent break with Osama bin Laden, their prodigal son, and brought his unforgiving wrath down upon them ó and now upon us.

America had no choice but to respond militarily. Yet with each air strike, it condemns itself more vividly to the role that its enemies have chosen for it: the violent, blundering superpower dominating the gulf, its fragile allies cowering in its shadow.

Our enemies understand this: their greatest strength is their clear conviction that this war is political and psychological. For this their weapon, terror, is precisely chosen and, in its impact, enormously powerful. Faced with the spectacular use of terrorism intended to weaken American resolve, American leaders have emitted a barrage of rhetoric about "attacks on freedom" and the fight between good and evil, demonstrating once again what has been a longstanding preference, in times of crisis abroad, for stock ideology over a clear and honest defense of our interests and our commitments. Deeply
apprehensive about America's commitment to a vigorous and permanent role in the world, our presidents have habitually turned to ideology to rally the citizenry.

President Bush follows in this tradition as he calls on Americans to battle a vast, worldwide enemy – an enemy of apocalyptic proportions that hates "our freedoms" by appealing to them as representatives of an indispensable nation: the city on a hill. Unfortunately, as we know from the last quarter-century or more, political support thus purchased tends to be brittle and weak, having been built on emotion. In the days and hours following the next terrorist Spectacular, or the next, Americans may well begin to ask themselves why exactly they are being targeted and what exactly it is they are risking their lives for. Crusading against evildoers is likely by then to seem a less satisfying answer.

The American troops and warships in the gulf, the unpopularity of our presence there, the fragility of the regimes we support these facts are not secrets, but among Americans they are not widely known. In the gulf, as in other places and at other times, America stands not for freedom but for stability. Its interest is in the unfettered flow of oil from the gulf to the industrialized world. Now, as in 1991, American policy makers will struggle to achieve this interest within the bounds of the forbearance of the American public. We should be aware that it is precisely that forbearance that the terrorists have begun to attack. That they have chosen a point of vulnerability is incontestable; that our leaders are prepared to defend against that political vulnerability – rooted in a longstanding refusal to speak honestly about the country's interests – even now is less clear.

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