

Not quite jihad

I JUST finished reading reports of Israeli tanks massing on the Gaza border in preparation for a possible assault on Gaza in retaliation for a Hamas attack on a military base on the Israeli side of the border. Tank battalions rolling over an international border, guns blazing – that’s an image of a ground war, even if no one shoots back. Likewise, Rommel’s forces thundering across North Africa in World War II, Americans slaughtering each other at Gettysburg during the Civil War, the British burning Buffalo in 1812, Hitler’s forces overrunning Poland in 1939, Roman chariots tearing across Europe – these are ground wars.

Now picture a lone, disheveled Moses wannabe, who, according to Knight Ridder newspapers, wandered Miami’s impoverished Liberty City neighborhood wearing bathrobes and capes, sometimes carrying a worn walking stick. Does this also constitute a ground war? The answer, if you count on Fox News or CNN for your interpretation of reality, is yes.

Broadcasters scrolled a newsflash along the bottom of America’s TV sets last Friday, alerting us not to recent allegations that the Bush administration had just been busted for monitoring our banking transactions, but to tell us instead that Homeland Security agents just had saved us from “home-grown” terrorists planning to blow up Chicago’s Sears Tower. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales later appeared on our screens, not to tell us he would be prosecuting his bosses in the Bush administration for spying on Americans but to let us know that the Miami Cell, as this new supposed al Qaeda franchise came to be

called, planned a “full ground war against the United States.”

By Friday afternoon, Dick Cheney was hitting the Republican fundraising circuit in Illinois, praising government agents for thwarting this would-be, Miami-based invasion of the American homeland. By evening, all the news chatter about Bush administration spying scandals had given way to a Code Red regimen of fear and disdain for our own civil liberties. Without Big Brother’s watchful eye, Al Qaeda would have just taken out the Sears Tower along with five, we came to learn, FBI buildings across the US. Go stick that to your naïve, Constitution-loving social studies teacher. Bush uber alles! Save the Sears Tower.

Brothers Rot and Naudy

Upon closer examination of the indictment, however, it seems the supposed warriors had no weapons, no plans to obtain explosives, had never been to Chicago and didn’t even have maps of Chicago. Their only al Qaeda connection was with a member of the FBI’s South Florida Terrorist Task Force. The Miami Cell, it turns out, is a group of seven Haitian immigrants and Haitian-Americans, most with backgrounds in petty crime and street names such as Brother Rot and Brother Naudy. Their supposed leader, Narseal Batiste, also known as Prince Manna, is the aforementioned Moses figure who wandered the neighborhood in robes and capes, sometimes wearing odd headgear, preaching a homemade Judeo-Christian hybrid religion.

If you think this doesn’t jibe well with al Qaeda mythology, read on. When the FBI raided the homes of the supposed terrorists, they found no weapons, which, quite frankly, is rather odd in South Florida. And they had no explosives. Not even, it appears, any books on how to make explosives. Not even an Internet post on how to make a Diet Pepsi-Mentos rocket.

What they did have, however, was a wish list, which Prince Manna presented to the FBI’s al Qaeda poser. According to the indictment, the Prince promised that he, Brothers Rot and Naudy and company, would “build an Islamic Army” to “wage jihad” against the United States – but they’d first need supplies from al Qaeda. Over the course of a few meetings, Prince Manna allegedly requested things such as automatic weapons, cars, radios, video cameras, military boots, clothes and, most importantly, according to subsequent reports issued after the indictment, \$50,000 in cash.

Interestingly enough, the supposed bombers never asked for bomb-making material. The items they did request were all things that are easily convertible into cash on the streets of Miami. For all the trash talk out there about Liberty City, in real life explosives aren’t easy to peddle.

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Can you give a jihadist a lift?

Before the whole investigation was over, the FBI bought cameras and rented cars for Prince Manna, Brothers Rot and Naudy and company. As it turned out, the people about to “wage full ground war” didn’t have the means to leave Liberty City and go downtown without the FBI’s help. When the cars and cameras were provided, they drove around Miami with the FBI informant, taking pictures of potential targets, which means buildings. Beyond supplying cameras so that Prince Manna, Brothers Rot and Naudy and the rest of the crew could manufacture supposed evidence to be used against themselves, “al Qaeda,” wasn’t very forthcoming with the requested goods, pretty much only supplying some nifty boots.

Clearly, this seems like a con job – with an out-of-work messiah and a few Liberty City street toughs trying to shake down a supposed representative of a cash-rich but clearly clueless terrorist organization. To do so, they allegedly trash-talked America, giving an almost comic rap lampooning all stereotypes of jihad, swearing their allegiance to al Qaeda while promising to “kill all the devils we can.”

At the very least, we have con men attempting to, in the reverse of the usual terror indictment, embezzle materials from a terrorist organization. Or, if we are to accept the charges at face value, we have a bona fide group of intellectually challenged, wannabe terrorists shopping for a cause and a sponsor. You can find this scenario in any junior high school cafeteria.

The Real Miami cells

Does this all mean that there are no real terrorists? Absolutely not. Miami, ironically, is actually crawling with them.

There’s Orlando Bosch, who despite alleged links to the 1976 midair bombing of an Air Cubana jet, killing 73 people, and a later bombing of Havana’s Copacabana nightclub, is still free in Miami. And there’s Luis Posada, the alleged mastermind of the Air Cubana bombing, who is in jail on immigration charges but never has been charged with terrorism.

Miami is also home to the Cuban American National Foundation, which funded the purchase of weapons to be used in attacks against Cuba, and Alpha 66, which also allegedly orchestrates attacks against Cuba and Cuban targets. These are real groups that, unlike Price Manna and Brother Rot and Naudy’s crew, have a real life history of violence and aiding and abetting violence. The problem is, the Bush administration needs a tactical win in its “war on terror.” It needs images of al Qaeda-loving terrorists who would bomb the Sears Tower. It doesn’t need or want embarrassing images of Republican-allied groups that actually engage in or support terrorism. Hence, we have this

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timely chasing of shadows, which, like most every other aspect of the "war on terror," is a misappropriation of resources.

After SWAT teams descended upon Liberty City, the only physical evidence against Prince Manna and company are boots and photos of buildings. Most of us have those in our closets. Then there are the allegations that the Prince's posse was trash-talking. Here, ultimately, lies the case against them. Seven guys in Miami trash-talked America. Now there's some timely news. Be careful what you say. Loose lips lock limbs.