

OUTLOOK

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Diplomacy Doesn't Belong In Bunkers

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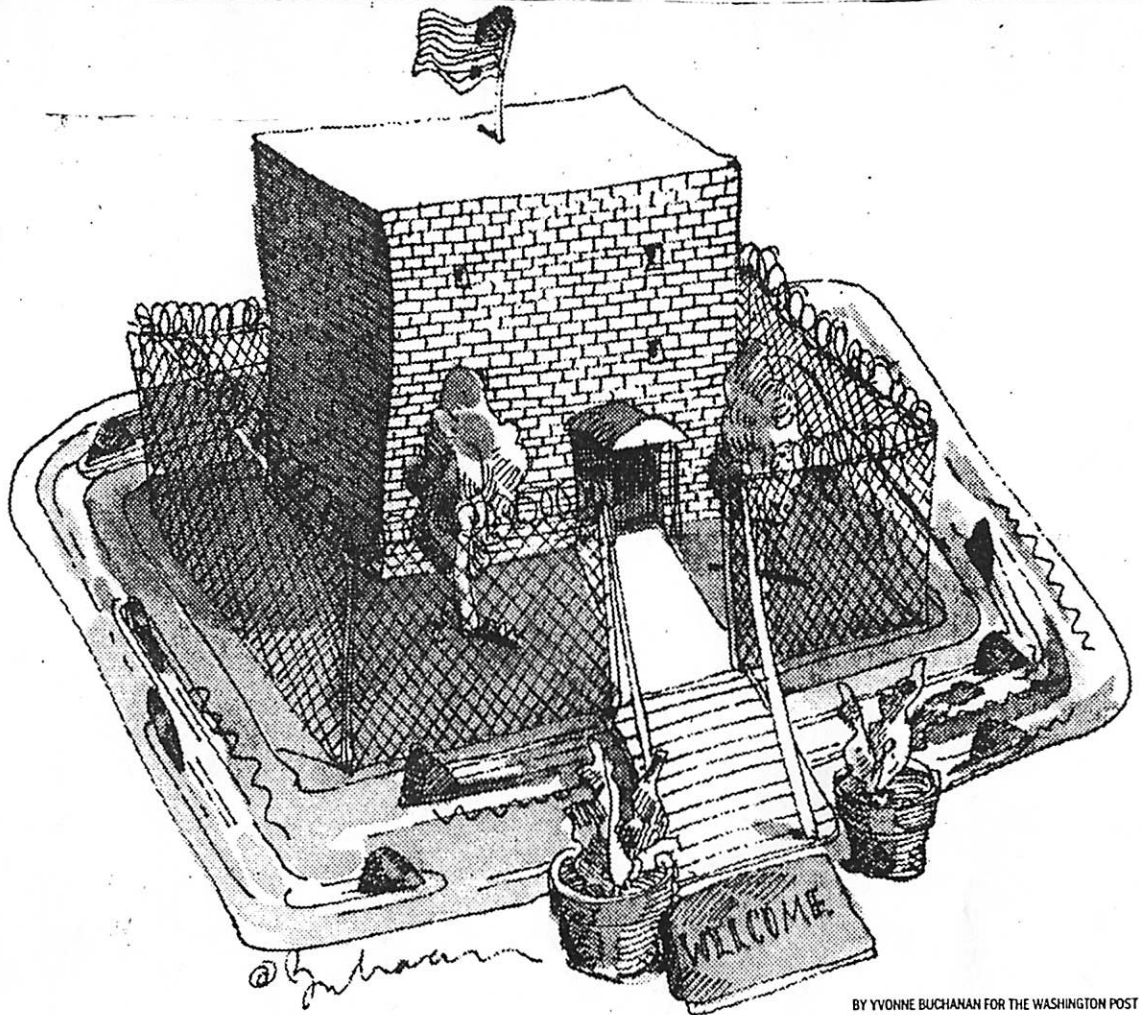
For three years now, ever since a bomb destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City leaving 168 people dead, we have become increasingly aware of the need to balance access to our public buildings with security for the people in them. But nowhere has that dilemma become more acute—and nowhere will it be harder to resolve—than in our embassies overseas. The twin terrorist bombings of the embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam two weeks ago highlight a stark reality—how diplomatic outposts are by their very nature vulnerable to terrorist attack.

In the wake of the explosions, we learned that Ambassador Prudence Bushnell, who was injured in the Nairobi blast, had called for greater security at the embassy there. We have also heard speculation that, if stricter security guidelines had been followed in Kenya and Tanzania, there might not have been such a horrifying loss of more than 260 lives. Sadly, that is probably true.

States deepened its involvement in Vietnam, attacks became more frequent and more dangerous. Mobs stoned the embassy in Moscow, shattering 200 windows; crowds broke all the lower windows and pulled down the Great Seal of the United States at legations in Sofia, Bulgaria, and in Budapest. Violence reached a new level when terrorists killed three embassy employees in an attack on the Saigon embassy in 1965. Such incidents provoked anger and dismay in Congress, leading to calls for better overseas security. The State Department responded by introducing blast-proof construction materials, such as laminated glass, and by

struction, small windows and remote sites, optimally of 15 acres or more. The panel identified more than 100 buildings

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BY YVONNE BUCHANAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

There are no good choices here. Careful construction with reinforcements and shatterproof glass can certainly help prevent injuries and deaths. But we should not let the threat of terrorism drive us into bunkers. My 10 years of research on the history of embassy architecture have led me to question the merit of building fortresses far from the centers of foreign capitals, as some have proposed. While it would be unrealistic to think of returning to the architectural openness that once characterized American embassy design, defensive building styles bring problems of their own, creating an atmosphere of suspicion and divorcing diplomats from the communities they need to know and understand.

As symbols of national power and prestige, representing the people and government of the United States, our embassies have become obvious targets for terror. But just 40 years ago, they were viewed as prominent, accessible public buildings to be visited and admired by American citizens and their foreign hosts. The few random protests and acts of vandalism seemed like isolated events, more of a nuisance than a threat. In the 1950s, the State Department launched a major building program, showcasing modern architecture and intentionally situating new embassies at key downtown locations to provide easy public access and amplify the U.S. presence. The architecture was intended to promote goodwill, symbolize democracy and contribute to the image of the United States as a confident, forward-looking nation. Classic modernist architects such as Gordon Bunshaft, Ralph Rapson and Eero Saarinen designed embassies with wide expanses of glass and multiple entrances. The grand gesture—epitomized by Edward Durell Stone's temple-like New Delhi embassy—won applause, and architects enjoyed great leeway in their designs, sometimes prizing artistic merit over practicality.

But during the 1960s, as the United

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increasing perimeter security with high walls and fences, which distanced the buildings from the ideals of the '50s.

Throughout the 1970s, terrorists targeted American embassies—with murderous assaults in Khartoum, Sudan (1973), Athens (1974) and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (1975). The 1979 hostage crisis at the U.S. embassy in Tehran showed that American diplomats could no longer rely on local authorities for protection. The State Department increased Marine guard detachments and added security checkpoints in embassy lobbies, as well as surveillance equipment and concrete vehicle barriers. Furthermore, the department prohibited the use of some exterior architectural features such as sunscreens, stilts and glass-enclosed lobbies—popular hallmarks of modernist design.

The increased concern with security forced a fundamental change of thinking about U.S. embassies. Up until the '70s, they had generally been considered inviolate. As this assumption became less realistic, embassy architecture gradually became less distinctive, less open and more defensive. The glass box, once symbolically important, was a thing of the past.

The 1983 attack on the embassy in Beirut (along with the bombing of the Marine barracks) marked a shocking escalation in violence. It was one of 243 incidents—including attempted attacks or other threats—on U.S. embassy installations between 1975 and 1985. A National Research Council study concluded that the threat of terror, together with the need to accommodate increasingly sophisticated telecommunications systems and increased numbers of non-State Department agencies, would add significantly to the complexity and size of modern embassies.

At about the same time, Secretary of State George Schultz appointed retired Adm. Bobby R. Inman, a former head of the National Security Agency, to lead an advisory panel on overseas security. Inman's recommendations, widely cited in recent weeks, called for a massive increase in funds for security upgrades and new construction, and specified new and more stringent security standards at all embassies, regardless of location—with 100-foot setbacks, blast-proof con-

struction, perimeter security overhaul or total replacement.

Full implementation of Inman's guidelines would have meant the wholesale replacement of U.S. embassies around the world. It would have meant abandoning prized downtown buildings—including those in London, Paris and Rome—in favor of new structures far from government and business centers. Even if there had been agreement that such a broad shift in U.S. representation made sense (in itself a highly debatable concept), the price tag of well over \$2 billion was impossibly high. And while the new standards provided a strong response to past ground attacks, they provided no protection against missiles, air attack or other unexpected forms of terrorism. Because of pressure to ensure against "another Beirut," though, the new standards guided building design in the early 1990s—a period some architects now refer to as "the dark ages of Inman."

One of the first embassies to meet the new standards was in Sanaa, Yemen. It was completed in 1990 at a cost of \$28 million with nearly windowless 1-foot-thick exterior walls. It combined offices, residences, schools and much-needed recreational facilities within a single walled site. More recently, the State Department built a similar compound in Amman, Jordan, consisting of a gatehouse, office building, annex, ambassador's residence, club, guard quarters, service annex and motor pool. The colossal installation is surrounded by a 9-foot wall and sits on a site that is larger than six football fields.

Such walled facilities are certainly forbidding to foreigners. What's more, they insulate American diplomats from the very people they are supposed to be getting to know. Architects have not abandoned the ideal of fostering goodwill through design, but they are constrained by the need to provide adequate security. Speaking of the new chancery in Bogota, Colombia, architect Gerald Winkler of the firm Integrus said, "The design was driven by the Inman standards, but we still tried to create a friendly piece of architecture." The Bogota building features a trellised outdoor waiting area, with teller windows, like those in banks, where visa applicants transact business without even entering the structure itself.

free buildings around the world. But no building is completely risk-free. Just last week, some operations in Amman's heavily fortified embassy were temporarily suspended and the compound was partially evacuated because of a bomb threat. As former assistant secretary of state for diplomatic security Sheldon J. Krys once noted, "Perfect security means nobody's there at all."

Recognizing that some element of risk is a necessary part of its overseas representation and lacking adequate funds, the State Department could not implement Inman's standards worldwide. Officials privately called the standards "overkill." They granted exemptions to existing properties and to renovated old buildings, such as those hastily acquired in 1991 for embassy use in many of the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. What's more, in an effort to refocus its interest in center cities the department just recently announced its intention to acquire and use "historically significant buildings and properties within established downtown areas" where possible. Who knows, after the bloodshed in Nairobi, whether host cities will continue to welcome U.S. embassies in busy downtown areas? The decision to use those locations represents a renewed commitment to becoming part of the local community, but also complicates the security.

It seems not only impractical but probably undesirable to isolate diplomats within walled enclaves as hostages to the threat of terror. Building bigger and better boxes is not the only solution. Increased investment in intelligence and other less tangible measures are necessary components of any future security plan. It is possible, too, to imagine ways in which embassies might become smaller and less conspicuous through the use of new technology. But as long as *people* make diplomacy work, buildings will matter. As long as goodwill remains a diplomatic objective, the look and location of those buildings will matter, too. Future embassies may be unable to return to the architectural openness of the '50s, but we can hope that they will still strive to represent the democratic ideal in an increasingly dangerous world.