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## **Duck and Cover**

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The nation has been so focused on the Bush administration's plans for war with Iraq that the war against Al Qaeda seemed to slip into the background. But the fear of terrorism was front and center again yesterday, as the F.B.I. director warned Congress about Qaeda cells inside this country and a new audio tape surfaced purporting to be a recording of Osama bin Laden urging Iraqis to undertake suicide missions against the United States. All this occurred at a time when the national terrorism alert level was at the nervous-making Code Orange level and the government was issuing guidelines on how to gird the family home against chemical or biological warfare.

The White House argued that the tape, if it really was Osama bin Laden, simply demonstrated that Iraq and terrorism were indeed somehow linked. But we couldn't help wondering if the expression of solidarity with Iraq might have been a canny way of luring the United States into an attack on Baghdad that would rally the Muslim world against the West, producing new converts to Al Qaeda.

The fact that a gulf war may make Osama bin Laden happy is not a reason, in itself, to oppose an invasion of Iraq. But the American people want their government to concentrate on fighting domestic terrorism above all else, and there have been a number of moments recently when Washington seemed to be missing the main point. The Department of Homeland Security's new home preparedness guidelines were another. There is certainly nothing wrong with dispensing tips on how to put together a household disaster supply kit. But the timing seemed ironic, given the fact that states and local governments have yet to get the federal aid they were promised to buy needed antiterrorism equipment. Washington is urging people to prepare for chemical attack by purchasing duct tape, while it fails to provide fire departments with funds for protective suits or bioterror detectors.

The preparedness guidelines sounded a bit like those TV weathermen who mark every cold snap by earnestly instructing their viewers to wear more layers of clothing. Anyone who has been hit with chemical weapons probably does not need to be told to "decontaminate hands using soap and water," and in the event of biological warfare, people who "notice symptoms of the disease caused by an agent exposure" will probably consult a doctor even if they fail to visit the Federal Emergency Management Agency Web site. Still, the preparedness tips are something people can actually do for themselves, and every family can respond to the guidelines as its own level of risk tolerance dictates. If a disaster supply kit increases one's sense of security, there's no reason not to get a copy of the FEMA list and go shopping.

But given a choice between a well-equipped basement and a well-equipped fire department, we know which way we'd go.