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Asymmetries and Consequences®

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Introduction

In the latter years of the 18th Century and spilling into the 19th Century, “-isms” of one kind or another swelled European languages. The suffix “-ism” was meant to connote distinctive theories, doctrines, or practices associated with the root word. The word “terrorism,” first recorded in English in 1795, was constructed to describe the systematic practices used by the governing body in France to frighten, coerce, and eradicate the enemies of the French Revolution in 1793 and 1794. The French “Reign of Terror”—a nine-month period of organized repression and murder—killed over 250,000 enemies unfaithful to the spirit of the Revolution. The word “terrorism” was born. Today, and according to the US Department of State’s definition, terrorism is “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”²

In previous sessions our distinguished speakers have helped us examine global and local scenarios—“glocal” scenarios—on intelligence and terrorism, paying special attention to terror visited on infidels in the name of Islam. This session focuses on tools—human and technological intelligence—we might employ first to understand and then to combat terrorism. Foremost among these tools is our brain.

If terrorism intends to influence an audience, then the targets of terrorism, no matter how terrorism reifies as physical acts of violence, are human minds hosted by human bodies. Others in this session will explore specific tools that our bodies and brains apply to combating terrorism: information operations, network analyses, seizing finances, and so forth. My aim in these remarks is to illuminate more basic ways to use the tool of our brain to deflate terror and defeat terrorism.³

The most basic way to rob terrorism of its potency is to be unafraid of it, even while jointly and methodically employing all the tools at our disposal to eradicate it and to remedy the causes from which terrorism springs. Many things are necessary and must be done.⁴ We must, of course,

¹ The views expressed here are my own. They do not necessarily reflect the views of Alvin or Heidi Toffler, Toffler Associates, or any of Toffler Associates’ customers.

² US Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 2000* (Washington, DC: Department of State Publication, Office of the Secretary of State, Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism, April 30, 2001) The definition used is derived from the language in Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f(d). See <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2000/2419pf.htm>.

³ Richard Szafranski, “Neocortical Warfare? The Acme of Skill,” in John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, eds., *In Athena’s Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age* (Santa Monica CA: RAND, 1997), pp. 395-416. This is the reprint of an article that appeared in *Military Review*, November 1994, pp. 41-55.

⁴ Philip Shenon, “U.S. Agencies Seen as Slow to Move on Terrorism Risk,” *The New York Times*, May 12, 2002. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/12/national/12INSP.html>.

harden our networks, add physical security and access control to our buildings and networks,⁵ have accurate inventories and inventory controls for dangerous materials—tracking and controlling the ingredients of weapons of mass destruction—and become more sophisticated in recognizing the precursor patterns of behavior and the kinds of interactions that may auger attacks. We also must work to eliminate the wide gaps between the rich and the poor. All of these are necessary, and we will cover them in this conference, but they are not sufficient. At the risk of appearing glib, let me assert that terrorism works because we fear it and that we simply must cease fearing it. How?

First, Take Terrorism Personally

For too many years, Americans—and even many here—believed that terrorism was a Mediterranean, or a Middle Eastern, or a Spanish, or an Irish, or a Russian phenomenon. Many took comfort in the belief that “History shows that terrorism more often than not has little political impact, and that when it has an effect it is often the opposite of the one desired.”⁶ Many believed that acts of terrorism were more-or-less random and that the risks of becoming a victim were unknown or incalculable. Many dismissed suicide bombers as suffering from some form of insanity.⁷ This tendency to render terrorism an abstraction or a sickness removes the real awareness of risk from our consciousness and makes it not our worry, but the worry of the government, or the armed forces, or the intelligence services.

Such is not the case. The terrorists succeed if they scare us by creating perceptions of helplessness in you or me, even by killing or maiming others to influence us. Terrorism is not faceless. Terrorists have faces. They are people. And, even if they are people who want to murder you and your family for the sake of calling attention to their “large-group identity,” the probabilities that they can do that are against them and in our favor.⁸ The group we should

⁵ Tom Squitieri, “Cyberspace full of terror targets,” *USA TODAY*, May 5, 2002.

⁶ Walter Laqueur, “Postmodern Terrorism,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/ October 1996 (Volume 75, Number 5).

⁷ Vamik Volkan, M.D., does not agree. See “Suicide Bombers,” presented at the University of Virginia “Psychopolitical Perspectives on September 11” conference, January 22, 2002. Terrorist trainers or “educators” replace “to one extent or another, a person’s individual identity with a ‘team’ or large-group identity associated with ethnicity, nationality, religion, or ideology.” The educators then

...develop a “teaching method” that “forces” the large-group identity, ethnic and/or religious, into the “cracks” of the person’s damaged or subjugated individual identity. Once people become candidates to be suicide bombers, the routine rules and regulations, so to speak, or individual psychology does not fully apply to their patterns of thought and action. The future suicide bomber is now an agent of the large-group identity and will attempt to repair it for himself or herself and for other members of the large group. Killing one’s self (and one’s personal identity) and “others” (enemies) does not matter. What matters is that the act of bombing (terrorism) brings self-esteem and attention to the large-group identity.

See: <http://hsc.virginia.edu/medicine/inter-dis/csmhi/suicide-bomber-psychology.pdf>

⁸ Michael L. Rothschild, “Terrorism and You—The Real Odds,” *Policy Matters 01-31*, November 2001. http://www.aei.brookings.org/publications/policy/policy_01_31.asp. Rothschild writes:

associate them with is a group callously called “murderers.” If we—we personally—are doing nothing to calculate the odds, protect our families, support those pursuing terrorists, or are failing to accept the measures that will thwart terrorist actions, then we make it easier for these murderers to work their will. If together we take terrorism personally, and are angered that there are murderers lurking about looking for victims, then we can summon the survival instincts that make us alert to danger and quick to respond. If we do not take terrorism personally, the abstract can suddenly become concrete and destroy us.

Taking terrorism personally and knowing that terrorists are people who are both outnumbered and outgunned empowers us with the knowledge that they also can be out-thought. We can develop tools to help us look for the patterns of behavior that signal some operation might be afoot, or the ways in which money—the money that supports mayhem—is laundered and may move. We can studiously uncover the vulnerabilities we have and envision how they might be exploited. We can even postulate the specific tactics, techniques, and tools that terrorists might employ and defend ourselves against many of these.⁹ None of this is possible if we treat terrorism as an impersonal abstraction. But if one takes terrorism personally, then the terrorists are disadvantaged by our predisposition to survive and to destroy the attacker in return or even in anticipation. One who takes terrorism personally also knows that terrorists have other disadvantages.

What are the odds of dying on our next flight or next trip to a shopping mall? There are more than 40,000 malls in this country [the USA], and each is open about 75 hours per week. If a person shopped for two hours each week and terrorists were able to destroy one mall per week, the odds of being at the wrong place at the wrong time would be approximately 1.5 million to 1. If terrorists destroyed one mall each month, the odds would climb to one in 6 million. This assumes the total destruction of the entire mall; if that unlikely event didn't occur, the odds would become even more favorable.

In another hypothetical but horrible scenario, let us assume that each week one commercial aircraft were hijacked and crashed. What are the odds that a person who goes on one trip per month would be in that plane? There are currently about 18,000 commercial flights a day, and if that person's trip has four flights associated with it, the odds against that person's being on a crashed plane are about 135,000 to 1. If there were only one hijacked plane per month, the odds would be about 540,000 to 1.

⁹ The newest terrorist tool may be “belt bombs.” See David Von Drehle, “U.S. Fears Use of Belt Bombs: Mideast-Style Suicide Attacks Difficult to Counter,” *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2002; p. A01 and Gordon Thomas, “Hunt For 'Tailor Of Death' -Maker Of Suicide Bomber Suits,” *Globe-Intel Exclusive*, Number 28, April 7, 2002. <http://www.rense.com/general21/su.htm>

Second, Realize That Terrorists Are Weak and Often Unwise

The second way the brain can cope with the threat of terrorism is to realize that the terrorists are weak and that they have a tendency to be unwise. My belief is that the September 11th, 2001, attacks on the United States were unwise, monumentally unwise.

Terrorist operations are activities undertaken by the few, the weak, to offset the strengths and capitalize on the vulnerabilities of the strong. They are “asymmetric operations” in that they aim to offset the attacker’s weakness by striking at a center of mass that intends to shock—often because groups of innocent noncombatants are attacked—and disorient and unbalance the stronger adversary. Asymmetric operations intend to do physical damage while creating the fear and awe associated with rude surprises. The target of terrorism is that which the attacker perceives will so surprise, unbalance, and disorient that the attack leaves the victims susceptible to a cascading collapse of power structures and capacity. Many asymmetric operations do not attack utility—stuff—as much as they attack what the victims value. They aim at provoking fear, undermining confidence, and perverting the victims’ values in response.

However, asymmetric operations are not only the aim of terrorism; they are the aim of *all* military operations and *most* competitive processes. Asymmetric operations can benefit the strong as well as the weak. In a struggle of wills, a strong opponent that enjoys great advantages—global and growing intelligence, overwhelming firepower, great wealth, and mobility—can use these to create mortal asymmetries. When a strong opponent is provoked, a strong opponent can render the inherently weak adversary—the terrorist—weaker still.¹⁰ If terrorists behave in ways that provoke an overwhelming response that shocks, disorients, and unbalances *their own* operations, then they are both weak and unwise. It is unwise to count on the forbearance of victims. In the United States, the massive detentions and arrests following the attack, some apparently quite random and none typical of careful American respect for the finest details of protecting civil liberties, must have been a rude surprise for the attackers and must have had an incalculable effect on plans for follow-up attacks. Now, urged to be alert and suspicious, Americans are.

Thus, I cannot help but conclude that the terrorists behind the attacks on the United States were and are unwise. If the targets were the minds and will of the American people, the attackers provoked sadness and anger, but they failed to create persistent feelings of impotence or defenselessness. If the target of the attacks were physical destruction, the attackers surrendered capacity for strategic surprise without irreparably damaging the infrastructure upon which the United States depends. The US President acknowledged in his January 2002, “State of the Union Address” that, “Time and distance from the events of September the 11th will not make us safer unless we act on its lessons. America is no longer protected by vast oceans. We are protected from attack only by vigorous action abroad and increased vigilance at home.”¹¹ If the

¹⁰ A “strong opponent” is strong in many dimensions. Strength here is not military strength, but “robustness” or “net strength”: the power and resilience of the society in multiple dimensions. We have seen where overwhelming military power alone can be impotent in the face of terrorism.

¹¹ George W. Bush, “President Bush’s State of the Union Address,” *The Washington Post*, (eMediaMillWorks), January 30, 2002; p. A16.

terrorists believed they would cripple the US economy, they could not have foreseen that an additional \$US37 billion would move rapidly to “homeland security.” If the terrorists believed that America would roll over, a consequence of their asymmetric operation was “Let’s roll.”

Third, Appreciate That Even The Unwise Can Be Persistent

For terrorism to achieve the most decisive effects the victims must be surprised and dispirited. The terrorists must cause, to use Liddell Hart’s words, a “dislocation” of our “psychological and physical balance” as “the vital prelude to a successful attempt” to defeat us. Psychological dislocation occurs when terrorism gains a favorable “strategic situation”—as they hoped to have done on September 11th—but failed to do so.

Even after gaining a favorable strategic situation, Hart warned, it would take a “strategic operation” to meet a significant military aim.¹² Terrorists may have been unwise because their attempts to gain a favorable strategic situation failed, but they also are persistent. They may yet be striving for the wherewithal to mount a strategic operation. We in the United States, and you here, should be prepared for that horrific attack and be prepared to mitigate its effects and weather it.

Even as the noose continues to tighten on our common enemies, my unscientific sampling shows that many of us in the United States fully expect another attack since the terrorists must still move if they are to consummate a truly strategic operation. What form might such a strategic operation take? In March 2002, *The Washington Post* reported,

The consensus government view is now that al Qaeda probably has acquired the lower-level radionuclides strontium 90 and cesium 137, many thefts of which have been documented in recent years. These materials cannot produce a nuclear detonation, but they are radioactive contaminants. Conventional explosives could scatter them in what is known as a radiological dispersion device, colloquially called a "dirty bomb."

The number of deaths that might result is hard to predict but probably would be modest. One senior government specialist said "its impact as a weapon of psychological terror" would be far greater.¹³

Moreover it also has been reported that “U.S. businesses and medical facilities have lost track of nearly 1,500 pieces equipment with radioactive parts since 1996, according to a new federal accounting of radiological material that terrorism experts warn could be used in a ‘dirty bomb’ attack against a U.S. city.”¹⁴ In a “private analysis conducted for Washington area government officials,” a report allegedly warned “a truck bomb laced with radioactive materials and detonated in downtown Washington could disable many of the region’s emergency workers

¹² B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d ed., rev. (London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., Signet Books, 1974), pp.x, 325–30.

¹³ Barton Gellman, “Fears Prompt U.S. to Beef Up Nuclear Terror Detection: Sensors Deployed Near D.C., Borders; Delta Force on Standby,” *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2002; p. A01.

¹⁴ Joby Warrick, “NRC Warns of Missing Radioactive Materials,” *The Washington Post*, May 4, 2002; p. A13.

within days and trigger a spontaneous evacuation by fearful residents.”¹⁵ The analysis was based on “the assumption that an attack with a ‘dirty bomb’—a low-grade, relatively easy-to-assemble weapon that would scatter small quantities of radioactive material—it is more likely than the detonation of a stolen nuclear device, the release of smallpox or an attack on a nuclear power plant.”¹⁶ The report also noted that

While a dirty bomb could kill people after prolonged exposure, federal officials have said, the broader impact would be psychological. As a result, planning for such an attack includes managing its after-effects.¹⁷

Our hunters may yet be striving for the wherewithal to mount a strategic operation. We in the United States, and you here, should harden our psyches for that horrific attack, be prepared to mitigate its effects and weather it, and resolve to continue to grind away at our antagonists. The brain helps fear subside when we realize that we could be attacked again, but that vigilance can perhaps deter it. I say “perhaps” because not all of us potential victims are fully engaged in doing our part in a global war on terrorism.

Fourth, Become a Sentient Sensor

The forces of good outnumber the forces of evil, if the good join their eyes, ears, and brains to the network of sensors and processors looking for potential signs of terrorist activity. Terrorists, being people, create observable signatures. They make purchases and telephone calls. They move. In the past they have reconnoitered their targets in advance of attacking them. Their signatures are data that can produce information. “Information,” using Peter Drucker’s definition, “is data endowed with relevance and purpose.”¹⁸ Were there ubiquitous networks of human sensors—augmented and magnified by the tools my colleagues will discuss—and were these all alert and attuned to the data (however non-linear or “fuzzy” the data appear) that precede the possibility of hostile acts, many acts would be deterred and some would be defeated.

As we construct past events, certainly we will see patterns we did not apprehend before. Other patterns we may not yet be equipped to understand, but this meeting will give us greater discernment into what must be done. For example, T. Irene Sanders writes:

Our inability to see and understand the interconnected nonlinear nature of the world made us vulnerable to the malevolent intentions of those who could. The enemy we face is a

¹⁵ Spencer S. Hsu, “Plan Urged For ‘Dirty’ Explosive: Radioactivity Could Spur Panic, Report Cautions,” *Washington Post*, May 4, 2002; p. B01.

¹⁶ Hsu, “Plan Urged For ‘Dirty’ Explosive: Radioactivity Could Spur Panic, Report Cautions.” See also Bill Miller, “Nuclear Plant Threat Called Unreliable: U.S. Does Not Issue New Alert for July 4,” *The Washington Post*, May 14, 2002, p. A02.

¹⁷ Hsu, “Plan Urged For ‘Dirty’ Explosive: Radioactivity Could Spur Panic, Report Cautions.”

¹⁸ Peter F. Drucker, “The Coming of the New Organization,” *Harvard Business Review on Knowledge Management* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 1998), p. 5.

loose coalition of semi-independent terrorist cells, each with a well-defined mission and a high degree of adaptability and flexibility in carrying out that mission. Al Qaeda does not rely on immediate direction from a central authority yet still maintains effective coordination—a model similar to the one used by organized crime syndicates—and hence has been far less susceptible to intrusion or destruction. It adapts its methods to accomplish its goals. This is in direct contrast to the defense and intelligence-gathering organizations in the United States, which are still large and centralized bureaucratic operations, characterized by hierarchical command-and-control structures.¹⁹

Sanders likely would agree with David Ronfeldt’s observation that hierarchical organizational designs have a key limitation: they “cannot process complex exchanges and information flows well.”²⁰ Hence the notion of citizen-sensors could be a powerful countervailing force against the terrorist network, creating what Ronfeldt calls “sensory organizations.” Looking into the future from 1996, Ronfeldt foresaw that:

New approaches will be needed for conflict anticipation, prevention and resolution...Largely because of the information revolution, the advanced societies are on the threshold of developing vast new sensory apparatuses for watching what is happening in their own societies and elsewhere around the world. These apparatuses are not entirely new, for they consist partly of established government intelligence agencies, corporate market-research departments, news media (e.g. CNN), and opinion polling firms. What is new is the looming scope and scale of this sensory apparatus.²¹

What is also new is the motivation for creating and participating in such a network. Since it would be difficult for terrorists to evade a ubiquitous citizen-sensor network, we ought to feel obliged to create it. That done, we must do one more thing to rob terrorists of their ability to blend into their surroundings so that they emerge suddenly to frighten and to hurt: we must be virtuous.

¹⁹ T. Irene Sanders, “To Fight Terror, We Can’t Think Straight,” *The Washington Post*, May 5, 2002, p. B02.

²⁰ David Ronfeldt, *Tribes, Institutions, Markets, Networks: A Framework About Societal Evolution* (Santa Monica: RAND Report P-7967, 1996), p. 35.

²¹ Ronfeldt, *Tribes, Institutions, Markets, Networks*, p. 35.

Fifth, Beware The Temptation To See Ruthlessness As A Virtue

The terrorists who murdered innocents on September 11th violated the canons of their own faith expression.²² As David Little observes

The complication in this case, of course, is that the sacred prohibition against mass destruction was itself apparently violated in the name of religion. As best we can tell, the likely perpetrators invoked what might be called a “sacred exemption” from the solemn Islamic prohibition against the intentional destruction of those “outside combat,” traditionally identified as “women, children, and the elderly.”²³

The “sacred exemption” does not hold. Nor should it. Likewise, for the United States and other democratic nations we would be unwise to quickly turn our backs on the secular democratic values we revere.²⁴ When President Bush referred to the “vigorous action abroad and increased vigilance at home” necessary to defend American citizens, we should worry if the vigorous action begins to take an unsavory cast. In the movie, “The Untouchables,” the character Jim Malone may have anticipated America’s gut response to terrorism when he said, “Here’s how you get him. He pulls a club, you pull a knife. He pulls a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. That’s the Chicago way.”²⁵ The “Chicago way” will doubtless tempt us as America and our allies move to eradicate one terrorist venue after another, in some cases moving serially, in other cases simultaneously, but in all cases moving with mortal consequences for our enemies.

We must strive to maintain a difficult balance: act with dispatch and resoluteness on the one hand and remain aware that any “asymmetric” approaches we take may have irreversible

²² Lew B. Ware, “A Radical Islamist Concept of Conflict,” in Steven C. Pelletiere, *Terrorism: National Security and the Home Front* (Carlisle PA: US Army Strategic Studies Institute, 1995), pp. 31-60.

²³ David Little, “Response to Terrorism,” *Bulletin of the Boston Theological Institute*, Spring 2002: Number 1.2, p. 6.

²⁴ David Little, “Response to Terrorism,” continues:

It appears that the primary objective of the attacks on September 11, and the basis for the special sacred exemption that was believed to authorize them, is the urgent need to unmask what is taken to be the truly diabolical character of the United States, and of its influence around the world.

That can best be done, it is thought, by provoking the US and its allies into a “war against terrorism” that gradually turns into a “war among terrorists.” The very means by which the US and its allies defend themselves—suspending civil liberties, intensifying war fever against terrorism, relaxing prudence and restraint in the use of force abroad, are themselves capable of taking on the image of terrorist techniques.

When and if that comes about, according to terrorist doctrine, the single superpower is then revealed for what it really was all along—the single superterrorist. It is understood as a power that has for generations systematically and pitilessly violated the sacred prohibition against the willful destruction of innocent human beings in ways that dwarf what was done on September 11. Such a conclusion would be the final vindication of the special exemption for the attacks.

²⁵ <http://us.imdb.com/Quotes?0094226> and Robert O. Work.

consequences on the other. We must avoid a temptation to excess even while accepting that “dead or alive” is not now a corny phrase: it is a mandate that men and women are risking and will risk their lives to fulfill on our behalf. If we each do our part, we will have done all we can to join the fight. Our part is to take terrorism personally, to realize the implications of facing unwise murderers who are nonetheless persistent enough to attack us again, to become a part of a contributing and self-defending network of citizen-sensors willingly, and to uphold the values we aim to protect in the global war against terrorism, even when our hearts cry out for vengeance.

One cannot ask ordinary citizens to do more than be brave, resolute, and supportive.

While one cannot ask that we do more, if we do less, we are cowards.

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