

04/27/98

*Asymmetric Warfare, the Evolution and Devolution of Terrorism;  
The Coming Challenge For Emergency and National Security Forces*

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"Terrorism will remain a major transnational problem, driven by continued ethnic, religious, nationalist, separatist, political, and economic motivations." (1)

The nature of global conflict is changing. It is the considered opinion of the Emergency Response & Research Institute (ERRI) that there is a general paradigm shift underway in regard to how future conflicts will unfold. This transition is one of form rather than substance. Mass violence, injuries and deaths will continue to occur, although we believe they will happen in different places and in differing ways than one might currently imagine.

With Russia's conventional forces on the verge of dissolution, the likelihood of a massive massed tank battle on the plains between Europe and Russia is almost a forgotten possibility. Similar circumstances in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, or near of the DMZ between North and South Korea are also becoming increasingly unlikely. Although circumstances regarding another conflict with Iraq are still possible as this is written, probable prospects there would suggest that the United States (at worst) would undertake a strategic bombing campaign, rather than committing large numbers of ground troops to massed combat.

What is far more possible, however, in the coming decade, are an increasing number of "brush-fire" wars, counter-insurgency campaigns, hostage rescue operations, "drug wars," low intensity conflicts, urban combat, and "peacekeeping operations" that will require a vastly different set of tactics, equipment, training and skills than conventional military engagements of the past. Future conflicts, at least in the near term, may not involve commitments of massive numbers of troops to fixed battle zones, but will likely involve combating small units of fanatical terrorists using Weapons of Mass Destruction and other sophisticated tactics and technologies.(2) As Commandant of the of the Marine Corps General Charles C. Krulak, likes to say, the United States will often be fighting engagements that are more like Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia than they are like Desert Storm. (3)

### **Why Is This Occurring?**

Of great concern is the fact that any number of what were previously considered essentially stable countries are experiencing religious, ethnic and other internal conflicts with increasing numbers of separatist movements trying to carve up larger countries into smaller and more tightly focused ethnic areas. Some of these conflicts are ancient and have been the cause of fighting for hundreds of years. Others are more recent and the result of demographic shifts, changing political regimes, or religious/ideological shifts.

Add to these factors political and ethnic internal disintegration caused by faltering economic circumstances in several parts of SW Asia, the Far-East, Africa, South America and elsewhere and you have a combustible mix that is certain to fuel future conflicts in a number of parts of the globe for the foreseeable future.

Marine Corp Colonel Gary I. Wilson, a long-time observer and analyst of emerging trends in non-conventional warfare, also says that he believes that changes in terrorist tactics, methods and operational activities are a naturally occurring phenomena. He draws similarities between bacteria that naturally mutates in order to become resistant to antibiotics or other adverse conditions. His comparison would suggest that terrorists and their methods also mutate in order to find new ways to survive and better project the strengths of the terrorists against the weaknesses of opposing civilizations.

According to James Denney, ERRI Senior analyst, global societies traditionally contain a myriad of subcultures that are based on strongly held ethnic, religious, cultural and ideological beliefs. In instances where many subcultures interact, new subcultures are generated in much the same way as a living cell generates another and another, until finally a new entity is created. Thus the structural integrity of a given society becomes increasingly complex.

Most incumbent ideologies in the postmodern era are struggling to maintain their dominant identity within their sphere of influence. Because of conflicting ideologies, presumptive religious and ethnic diversity has not materialized in many societies. For this reason, the concept of vertical ethnic and religious integration has given way to horizontal migration and factional polarization within these societies.

This is an engineered dynamic which creates a breeding ground where fanatical ethnic and religious tribalism has emerged as fractal subcultures, vying with each other for inclusion, with mutually exclusive and often conflicting agendas. This situation results in ethnic and religious migration to both geographic and political positioning within the existing society.

Through centuries of serial discrimination, imperious rule and unrelenting subculture manipulation, diversity has successfully been restricted while rulers continue to rise through the incumbent ideology or ruling system. Any perceived threat to the incumbent ideology will always be met with resistance, deflection, threat or illusionary compliance (through process focus) while the status quo is maintained. In some cases, a "preemptive defense" is commonly employed, whereby on one or more pretext, estranged factions are exterminated. Employing this methodology, the incumbent ideology (read government/ruling class) is insured passage from one class of rulers to the next, while those deemed unworthy or contemptible by the "powers that be" are manipulated, bypassed or ignored. This marginalization is often the motivation for violent acts.

### **How Is It Happening/What is Changing?**

Very few countries, today, have the wherewithal to undertake a major attack on any of the major countries of the world...particularly the United States. Thus the reason that terrorism is both evolving and devolving. (4) Most nation-states have recognized the fact that they can no longer engage in open combat nor overtly support terrorism without fear of military retaliation or even openly declared war with the United States or her allies.

Take this evolution theory one step further and you will find that as "terrorist organizations" begin to gain some measure of political legitimization and press attention, that even they will diminish their open support of sabotage and acts of violence against innocent civilians. Obviously, few rational people will vote for or openly support an organization that publicly admits it kills women and children in pursuit of its goals.

Additionally, it would appear that smaller and smaller splinter groups are breaking from the main force body. These ultra-radicals, if you will, have become the enforcers of the extreme ends of an ideology or belief and it is they who will use unconventional tactics to carry out particularly heinous acts. This devolution of terrorist organizations into smaller and more compartmentalized groups makes detection of these small cells increasing more difficult and intelligence gathering and analysis efforts even more valuable.

In addition to the concept of smaller cells of non-attributable, non-state actors, evidence would suggest that there are also cells of what we have called "virtual sapper squads that are put together just for the purpose of committing one act and then disbanded and dispersing back into the population of a friendly nation. (5) One of the first examples of this that was recognized by ERRI was the World Trade Center bombing. It is believed that this is done to further obscure the identities of the perpetrators, enable their escape and evasion and to further complicate the process of ascertaining their motives.

Concurrently such a strategy confuses the issue of tracing ties between the operatives and to nation-states, who sponsor, finance and offer refuge to these killers. International legal and moral justification of military retaliation by the victim state may also become even more difficult, if not impossible.

## **Threats from Multiple Simultaneous Vectors**

By the advent of the 21st Century, not only is it likely that many of the conflicts facing the United States and her allies will be of an asymmetrical and devolving nature, and it is also likely that the threats will come from diverse and differing vectors. Particularly of concern is the possibility that conventional terrorism and low-intensity conflict will be accompanied or compounded by computer/infrastructure attacks that may cause damage to vital commercial, military, and government information and confront communications systems. (6) Unfortunately, it would appear that while the United States gains tremendous advantages from its advanced information and battlefield management systems, we also become increasingly vulnerable to cyber-attacks from our adversaries.

In other words, we would anticipate efforts to cause widespread fear by computer-generated attacks on electrical, water, banking, government information, emergency response systems and other vital infrastructures, while simultaneously suffering terrorist tactics involving multiple conventional explosives and/or chemical/biological/nuclear devices. (7)(8) Even a country as large and sophisticated as the United States could suffer greatly at the hands of an educated, equipped, and committed group of fewer than 50 people. At the present time, such an attack could realistically be expected to cause an effect vastly disproportionate to the resources expended to undertake it.

## **The Battle For Hearts and Minds**

In the Post-Cold-War era, our enemies, including Saddam Hussien of Iraq, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, Fidel Castro in Cuba, Yasar Arafat of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and any number of others have discovered that they can win the "hearts and minds" of the world's people through the selected use of real information, disinformation, manipulation of the press, propaganda, and other psychological (Psy-Ops) warfare methods. In fact, some would even go so far as to suggest that Mr. Hussien actually won the latest stand-off with the United States (early 1998), over Chemical/biological Weapons and inspections of his palaces, as he was able to manipulate public opinion in the United States and elsewhere and split the former allied Persian Gulf coalition. (9)

With assistance of diplomats from a number of Arab countries, Russia, and France, all of whom have a vested economic interest in ending United Nations sanctions against Iraq, Hussien was able to both prevent the bombing of his country and be authorized by the U.S. to sell even more petroleum, ostensibly to buy food and medicine for the Iraqi people. A historical perspective might suggest, however, that such programs and funds have probably enabled Iraq to rebuild presidential palaces and maintain key weapons and military assets.

It is believed by ERRI analysts that such psy-ops and propaganda programs will continue to have an increasingly more influential impact on future conflicts, and that our military and political leadership should seriously consider expanding efforts by U.S. psychological warfare operations and units to counter these developments. (10)

## **Most Serious Concerns**

In recent years, terrorists and insurgent movements have discovered that they can multiply fear in a civilian population by undertaking even more violent and deadly tactics. Federal Bureau of Investigation and the U.S. Department of State reviews of recent terrorist incidents would suggest that they believe that there are a fewer number of incidents, but that those that do occur are more deadly. Additionally, and all too frequently in recent years, terrorist and terrorist groups are no longer taking credit for their acts. It is believed that this anonymity may also be contributing to larger and more reprehensible atrocities.

## **The Impact of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)**

According to Richard K. Betts, some of the most important implications of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) have not yet registered with the public. Betts asserts that the nature of the potential use of Wm.'s is changing. Rather than being weapons of deterrence, as they were during the "Cold War," they are increasingly becoming the weapons of choice of what were formally considered "second-rate" military powers or even non-state groups. (11) It is believed that these formerly impotent players on the world stage may believe that they have found a way to leverage non-

conventional weapons to cause great fear and will use these weapons to attempt to intimidate legitimate governments.

Further and more fearsome, Cmdr. James Campbell, in his recent examination of the terrorist use of Chemical/Biological/Nuclear weapons, offers us a view of a "Post-Modern Terrorist," free of constraints provided by sponsoring nation-states, who have discovered that the use of WMD's affords them the ability to wield disproportionate power to cause massive numbers of casualties, even within the continental United States. (12)

At least some experts find this future use of WMD's in concurrence with recent trends in statistics involving terrorist attacks. A study of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and U.S. State Department (DoS) documents would reveal that they believe that there are a fewer number of terrorist incidents, but that they have produced a greater number of wounded and dead. In other words, non-state actors and post-modern terrorists, with their apocalyptic visions and belief that they are acting on behalf of some higher power, are likely to use WMD to maximize their kill ratios and send a larger and more fearsome message to their perceived enemies.

### **The Effects of Economic Terrorism**

Perpetrated by mercenaries, ideological or religious zealots, it doesn't matter which, businesses and business networks will undoubtedly become future targets of terrorism. More enlightened terrorists have discovered (maybe already in some countries), or will discover soon, that the path to the fear and chaos that they crave most may be more easily achieved by a wide-scale attack on infrastructure/economic targets, thus causing a general breakdown in society and facilitating civil unrest and rioting. Evidence of insurgent attacks on economic targets have been clearly demonstrated in places like Colombia (multiple oil pipeline bombings), India (attack on multiple commercial buildings in Bombay), and Sri Lanka (bank and commercial building attacks). (13)(14)

These concepts, and the inherent threats thereto, will become even more evident and viable in future megatropolises where millions will live in what will be in reality a very fragile and easily combustible (in more than one sense of the word) environment. It is believed that these future societies of largely urbanized populations will be even more vulnerable and susceptible to manipulation by insurgents using terror and low intensity warfare tactics.

There is even a possibility that the terrorist acts could be paid for by legal or extralegal multinational corporations that would benefit from the destruction of existing business competitors in a given city or region, or by less scrupulous business concerns that want to subvert or cause destabilization of an existing (and unfriendly) governmental system. Some evidence of these phenomena is already in evidence in Colombia, Pakistan, Burma and parts of the former Soviet Union.

An excellent example of this emerging situation might involve further study of a recent United Nations report that the GNP of the drug and crime driven "underground economy" in Pakistan is probably greater than that of the official government. Although sufficient studies are currently unavailable, this is also probably true in Colombia, and it is becoming increasingly likely that the same trend is developing in parts of the former Soviet Union, where organized crime "mafia organizations" have infiltrated or subverted legitimate business for their purposes. Needless to say, these patterns do not bode well for the future of the legitimate governments in these and other areas of the world.

### **Solutions and Recommendations**

The prevailing thinking and overall mindset within military, diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement, and emergency service communities may need modification in order to meet and combat these newly evolving patterns involving non-state actors and asymmetric warfare. Conceptually, the preparations, tactics, and strategies for fighting numerous "brush fire" conflicts and larger numbers of small scale but high-impact terrorist incidents, could prove a major challenge for those with an entrenched large force "Cold-War" mentality.

Those that are still mired in fighting another "Desert Storm" or want to continue to live in the comfortable past of a largely bi-polar, superpower-driven global situation may be in for a rude awakening as the nature of asymmetric conflict unfolds in the coming decade. There are few, if any, countries that can militarily challenge the United States in

open combat at the present time. Some seemingly astute assessments would suggest that China may become a future adversary with the industrial and conventional military power to eventually confront America and her allies, but they also point out that this capability is still evolving and that it may take China a minimum of three to five (3-5) years, or more, to become a major threat to the United States and overall world stability.

Instead, our assessment would respectfully suggest that the near term threat to Americans and our country's security may bring a confusing mix of "stateless actors," separatist and fringe "independence movements," insurgency operations, terrorist attacks, the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), Information Warfare (IW), and other unconventional threats. The nature of our defense thinking, training, weapons, equipment, intelligence operations, and national emergency response systems must be redefined and redirected in order to meet these threats that are concurrently both devolving and evolving.

It should not be forgotten that our most important asset in our war with terrorists, and in our defense against other non-conventional threats, rests with the young men and women of our nation's national security and emergency service communities. While useful in more conventional circumstances, "Stand-off" missiles, ICBM's, Nuclear Weapons, and other theatre weapons are practically useless in our response to insurgents, revolutionaries, and terrorist threats. That responsibility will undoubtedly fall on smaller groups of highly trained, better-equipped, and highly motivated anti- and counter-terrorist operatives and agencies, who will monitor, infiltrate, close with and destroy those that would engage in this insidious type of future warfare. Our people will make the difference, if we give them the resources to accomplish the task.

Finally, it is recommended that Congressional and Presidential funding, policies, and other initiatives take all of the issues presented above into consideration in a comprehensive way. This strategy must encompass providing leadership, reallocating necessary funds to the most appropriate efforts, and bringing all of the available public and private assets to work together to study and devise strategies to confront this new and dynamic threat. All of the levels of government, academia and related businesses must find a way to better communicate, cooperate and coordinate in an effective manner. Ultimately, we must ensure that we, as a country, are prepared to confront the asymmetric challenges of the future.

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