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Terrorists' Delight: The Soft Psychological Underbelly of a Superpower in the Post-Cold War Era

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Abstract. This article describes psychological vulnerabilities of the one remaining superpower that are being exploited by terrorist organizations--those that are state-sponsored and abetted and those sponsored and abetted by other political actors.

Unclassified findings have been released from two panels that were led by United States (U.S.) Admiral William Crowe (U.S. Navy-Retired), the former Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and were charged by the U.S. Secretary of State with investigating U.S. embassy security in the aftermath of terrorist bombings against U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. These findings should give comfort to states and other political actors seeking to employ terrorism against the security interests of the US.

First, as noted by Admiral Crowe and a host of journalists, analysts, and commentators, the findings are eerily similar to those released over 14 years earlier by experts led by U.S. Admiral Bobby Inman (U.S. Navy-Retired), the former Deputy Director, Central Intelligence Agency. This is especially the case with recommendations for more security consciousness, more money for security, and physical specifications for chanceries. Yet other domestic and foreign political, policy, and budget priorities impeded implementation of the Inman recommendations and will, in all likelihood, do so in the present case.

Second, the transmission of information by national and international mass media about the Crowe panels and about international terrorism threats and operations effect psychopolitical gains for terrorists. The very transmission of these terrorists' names, visual likenesses, and accounts of their exploits inflates their attractiveness in the eyes of many of the wretched and not so wretched of the earth. Attractiveness, in turn, facilitates the recruitment of still other operational and support cadre for terrorist activities. All this is furthered by the social construction of an image of the US as a superpower that can do all things but still loses to terrorism, that is responsible for all evil and deserves to lose to terrorism.

Third, in the approximation of representative democracy that is the US, the U.S. Congress and the populace that the Congress represents must ultimately support counterterrorism initiatives. However, at least many members of Congress and of special interest groups that distort a sense of the populace at large seem to be remarkably risk-averse--a state that affects White House decision-making and bears on its initiatives. It seems as if counterterrorist operations are planned to avoid loss of life or even injury to the virtual exclusion of other operational necessities and the achievement of vital political objectives--viz., significantly decreasing the terrorist threat. Ambiguous counterterrorist notions of degrading terrorist capabilities are bandied about as opposed to neutralization of terrorist leaders and high-level supporters. All this suggests that counterterrorist will is lacking and understanding is distorted.

Fourth, U.S. policymakers charged with confronting terrorism seem too often to be careerist in the most noxious sense of the term. Such priority concern for professional and personal (usually psychological) gain of policymakers minimizes a clear focus on counterterrorism that suffers in contrast with the hyper-obsessional and compulsive concentration of some terrorist types--e.g., the religious and ideological fanatic. Again, the counterterrorist will is lacking and understanding distorted. (However, note that the

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concentration of the fanatic has its own vulnerabilities that can be exploited by counterterrorist personnel.)

Fifth, the Crowe recommendation of pulling back State Department and other assets from at least some high-threat countries to form "super embassies" elsewhere has two built-in flaws. The terrorist wins and will take credit for winning as the US ceases to show the flag in support of its own global interests. Also, the super embassies would furnish terrorists with very lucrative targets. (In fact, the U.S. embassy in Kenya was a type of super embassy in that U.S. personnel who otherwise would be working in Sudan worked out of Kenya because of the terrorist threat in Sudan.)

Sixth, it may be the case that the whole notion of superpower is changing. The traditional superpower with its global reach and concomitant global exposure in all significant fields presents huge targets of opportunity for the terrorist. Moreover, technological change not only facilitates the traditionally weak drawing blood from the strong, but also presents vulnerabilities of the strong for exploitation by the weak. The 21st century or postmodern superpower may end up constituting the terrorist entity that can strike anywhere but presents little exposure--especially in a spatial and temporal sense--that is vulnerable to counterterrorist response.

Although terrorism cannot be eradicated, its noxious consequences for its targets can only increase without a political psychological makeover by counterterrorist authorities. (See Frey, R. G., & Morris, C.W. (1991). *Violence, terrorism, and justice*. Cambridge University Press; Reich, W. (1998). *Origins of terrorism: Psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind*. Cambridge University Press; Report of the Accountability Review Boards on the Embassy Bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam on August 7, 1998. (January 1999) [Online]. Available: http://www.state.gov/regions/africa/accountability_report.html; Risen, J., & Weiser, B. (January 9, 1999). *Before bombings, omens and fears*. The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Wilkinson, P. (1977). *Terrorism and the liberal state*. Halsted.) (Keywords: Counterterrorism, Superpower, Terrorism.)