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# Exploding Causalities: An Example From Iraq

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**Abstract.** This article provides explanations for a seemingly paradoxical social psychological response to the April 26, 2003 explosions within an ammunition dump in Baghdad.

As reported by Perlez & Gordon (2003), Iraqi civilians were killed “when explosions ripped through an ammunition dump guarded by American troops.” Based on the report, there seemed to be little question among the Iraqi civilians and the United States (US) military that the explosions were the consequence of non-US attackers firing a flare into the weapons cache. Yet Perlez & Gordon report that, as some of the US military—immediately after the explosions—tried to provide medical assistance, they were fired on by “angry residents.” As well, “shouts of ‘Down with America’ rang through the neighborhood.” Given this account, one might seek explanations for the noxious reaction against the US.

The US failed to successfully guard the ammunition dump. There was another failure in not moving the dump farther away from a populated area. Death and other casualties occurred with the US military physically present afterwards while the attackers escaped. Or the attack and the noxious consequences were both part of a plan by adversaries of the US Government (USG) or opponents of the USG presence in Iraq.

Of special note might be the difference between mechanical and ultimate cause. Yes, the attackers were responsible for the actual firing of the flare. However, without the USG presence, there would have been no attack.

In fact, the differential stimulus pulls of mechanical and ultimate causality can often be successfully exploited by terrorists and other practitioners of asymmetrical warfare. The enemies of the USG will quite likely engage in a number of such attacks within Iraq for which they will be mechanically responsible, but for which the USG as ultimate causal agent will be the big loser in the hearts and minds of large segments of the Iraqi and of even the global population.

(See Gorst, U., & Goldenberg, E. (1998). Psychological sequelae of torture and organised violence suffered by refugees from Iraq: Trauma-related factors compared with social factors in exile. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 172, 90-94; Heradstveit, D., & Bonham, G. M. (1996). Attribution theory and Arab images of the Gulf War. *Political Psychology*, 17, 271-292; Perlez, J., & Gordon, M.R. (April 27, 2003). Baghdad blasts at arms dump kill at least 6. *The New York Times*, pp. 1, 11; Zhang, A., Guan, P., Zhou, F., & Lu, Qian. (2003). The models of judgments of behavior responsibility in Chinese culture from an attributional perspective. *Social Behavior & Personality*, 31, 205-214.)