

1982

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Recommended Citation

Etzold, Thomas H. (1982) "Responding to Soviet Intervention in the Third World," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 35 : No. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol35/iss3/4>

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Responding to Soviet Intervention in the Third World

by

Thomas H. Etzold

The prospect of Soviet intervention in Third World countries in coming years symptomizes the one feature of the present world environment that the United States could—and should—have anticipated with considerably more certainty than it has. Today, uneasily, we inhabit the same political, economic, and strategic world as does a Soviet Union vastly more powerful than in the first years following the Second World War. That Soviet power should have increased over the last generation is no surprise; that American policy-makers should so little have considered before the fact how to safeguard American interests in this predictable circumstance is dismaying. It may be, as Roger Fisher of Harvard Law School has often noted, that “To concentrate on matters we can predict is to give less attention to matters we can affect.” But the growth of Soviet power, while predictable, was also something the United States might earlier have been able to affect, and at somewhat lower cost than now.

To say that the consequences of new-found Soviet power are far-reaching sounds inane; yet it is the true starting point for consideration of the policy and strategy concerns arising out of possible Soviet intervention in the Third World: the prospects for such Soviet activity; the significance Soviet activities in the Third World may have for the interests of the United States; factors that bear importantly on the strategic disposition from which the United States must respond; and, finally, elements of possible responses consistent both with American interests and American abilities.

The Prospects

Between now and the end of this century, it is unlikely that the Soviet Union will develop the ability to intervene in Third World nations not located on the periphery of Eurasia. This, I hasten to add, is a judgment, not a provable fact at this moment. It requires both discussion and, in modest degree, qualification.

It would be a mistake, for instance, to suggest that because the Soviet Union until now has intervened directly only in countries on its periphery it has no wider ambition. And it would be equally wrong to insist that the patterns of Soviet military development and political-military manipulation were so immutable that straight-line extrapolations of present factors might be adequate for assessing future strategic challenge. The knowledge drawn from study of Soviet actions, capabilities, and intentions, while substantial, leaves enough to debate to ensure that, on this subject of

Soviet intervention in the Third World, there is no risk of the premature consensus that so often stifles discussion.

Yet, present Soviet force development trends do not, at least in my judgment, add up to a clear effort to acquire power projection capabilities of the sort embodied in American forces, doctrine, and practice. Afghanistan is, to date, the *only* instance of direct Soviet intervention in a Third World country, in itself a fact that ought to cause reflection. The Soviet Naval Infantry—Russia's marine corps—remains small, numbering only about 12,000 men, and shows no signs of preparation for rapid expansion. Its missions, insofar as these can be anticipated, seem to involve keeping important straits and channels open for naval use. Amphibious assault shipping suitable for long-range operations is in very short supply even for this modest force. Whether and when the Soviets may seek or acquire at-sea tactical aviation comparable to that of the big-decked American carriers is a topic that continues to receive vigorous study and equally lively debate. I believe the burden of proof lies on those who assert that the Soviets intend to parallel American maritime development in that way, for if that is indeed their intention their rate of progress is far too modest to cause real concern. Soviet airborne divisions, now six in number, likewise seem ordinary rather than extraordinary in their prospects for future enlargement or special standing.

Of all the aspects of Soviet military development and activity that might indicate the scope and nature of Soviet Third World interventionism in coming years, perhaps the most telling is the liberal distribution of military advisors in some eleven countries in Latin America, Africa, Southwest Asia, and Southeast Asia. Present in substantial numbers in many countries, these military personnel may in fact be the infrastructure on which Soviet interventionary capabilities will be constructed as the end of the century approaches. The pattern of arms transfers also signifies in this regard.

It is one of the larger historical ironies of the last thirty-five years that the United States has consistently defined its most vital interests as lying on and around Russia's rim. This fact alone has conferred enormous advantages upon the Soviets while imposing equally large burdens on the United States—the time and distance factors that, in strategic terms, so often distinguish what is possible from what is not. As the cost of modern conventional warfare has increased, and particularly as the rates at which combat consumables must be brought into the battle have accelerated, this irony has assumed more and more importance both for policy and for strategy.

To some extent, a nation's sense of its interests and objectives is always influenced by intuitive weighing of costs and the possibility of success. The late 1970s gave evidence of a widening reconsideration of the traditional notions of national interest and commitment following the revolution in the Persian Gulf and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. The result has been a certain confusion as to the importance of the national interests touched by Soviet actions and by other forces and actors not clearly under Soviet control.

For the first time since 1950, when Gen. Douglas MacArthur contested the point, Soviet intervention into Afghanistan has inaugurated serious debate as to the validity of the traditional Europe-first priority of American foreign policy and national strategy. Further, the Carter administration's assertion that Soviet intervention in

Afghanistan was the most important development affecting American national security since World War II met substantial—and healthy—skepticism. The Carter Doctrine, which declared the Persian Gulf an area of vital interest to the United States, brought the public and America's allies face to face with the way in which limitations on the ability to act, to project power, may have rendered such ideas of national interests moot.

Therefore, the debate over American national interests in conjunction with recent Soviet interventionary action, and the possibility of more such action in coming years, possesses overriding importance. If Soviet interventions in the Third World have any unifying logic, it is as a form of indirect strategy. Classically, in indirect strategy, states responding to threat or challenge find repeated invitations to dissipate resources in efforts to deal piecemeal with second-order problems. Moreover, because the American military remains a capital-intensive force wedded to high technology, it is possible—and perhaps even likely—that the United States can be forced to abandon small wars simply because of the economic strain. Almost any response to Soviet assaults on American national interests located on the periphery of Eurasia will tax the nation's staying power in conflict.

Although some places along the periphery of Eurasia are of the highest importance to American well-being and security, many others are considerably less than vital. The ability to tell which is which, to distinguish primary from secondary interests in the context of Soviet military activity, will in coming years be one of the most crucial ingredients of an effective American response to Soviet intervention in the Third World.

The Stakes

Considerations of national interest often hover at a level of abstraction that makes it all but impossible to provide or obtain guidance at the working level of government. The theoretical distinction between national interests and national objectives may seem pedantic, for in practice ideas about national interests are dealt with only in the routine, arduous procedure through which policy objectives are defined. Both the procedure and its results are inherently unsatisfactory. It is virtually impossible to deal with external interests, to do so successfully, and to do so in ways that do not violate domestic political values and public morality.

For the past fifteen years, there has been an additional difficulty of considerable import—a lack of domestic consensus on the character and objectives of American foreign policy and, by extension, national security policy. No politically sane individual wants to return to the days of McCarthyism, but it is difficult not to feel a certain nostalgia for most of the rest of the 1950s, for genuine bipartisanship in a working consensus on the great goals of national policy. The policy and political debates of the 1950s, and even the early 1960s, concerned questions of who should govern and of how the nation's purposes should be pursued. Since the middle 1960s, the purposes themselves have been in dispute, along with questions of means and men.

However, the prospect of further Soviet interventionism in the Third World in coming years, like the prospect of being hanged, helpfully simplifies thought about American national interests and objectives. In this context, it is surely beyond

question that it continues to be in the interest of the United States to limit the influence of the Soviet Union beyond its borders. The policy and strategy of containment, articulated in the late 1940s and then for a generation the bedrock of America's foreign policy consensus, has surely become more difficult to execute in the face of growing Soviet power. But it has also become more necessary. In American political culture, it is difficult to make consensus-founding ideas outlast a generational changeover; indeed, Americans do well to discover or invent an idea that, like containment, endures so long as a cornerstone of publicly understood and supported policy.

But the United States has surely paid a high price for its wavering sense of objectives from the middle 1960s until the early 1980s. Henry Kissinger once wrote of Charles de Gaulle's idea that a nation's "sense of purpose enables it to become the master of events instead of their prisoner." The United States seemed to be the prisoner of events in the later 1970s, a condition aptly represented in the drawn-out hostage problem in Iran. The price of becoming the prisoner of events, however, is far from symbolic; for in the 1980s the United States is being judged, even by its friends, on the basis of its ability to deal effectively with the Iranians, the Afghanists, and other relatively modest problems. It is a cruel dilemma: second-order problems justify neither great expenditure of blood and treasure nor great risk. No one should judge America's propensity to defend Europe, for example, on the basis of how it reacts to lesser problems in obscure places. And yet, far-reaching political adjustments may follow from the way in which the United States meets—or fails to meet—the next in a succession of local problems.

In discussing the potential stakes of further Soviet interventions in the Third World, it is essential to remark the way in which the world's major regions diverge both in the nature and in the importance of the issues likely to form the context for Soviet-American contention. The Middle East, for example, was politically and strategically important long before oil became the stuff of politics; the Eastern Mediterranean and the lands adjoining it have been a crossroads of the continents for millennia—almost (to mix the metaphor) the world's navel. The Middle East will continue high in importance even when oil loses its standing as the world's chief strategic commodity.

Resource issues will dominate strategic considerations relating to the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, Latin America, Antarctica, and the Arctic—in which last the Soviet Union is coming to see important potential for self-sufficiency in minerals and fish. Northwest Asia's issues are more likely to revolve around the way in which China and Japan influence the world strategic balance; Japan's economy, both in peace and in war, is certain to be of increasing interest and importance both to the Soviets and to the United States. Although Africa's resources are important, it is possible that superpower interest in African questions will be more a function of ideological struggle and renewed competition for "leadership" in the Third World. There is also the interesting question of how the evolution of technology and of routine military deployments will draw the Southern Hemisphere more extensively into the Soviet-American strategic relationship—a relationship that, at this time, is still contained almost exclusively within the Northern Hemisphere.

For American policy-makers, then, the stakes of Soviet intervention in the Third

World are the product of three factors: the overarching objective of containing Russia's influence; the bearing of small issues and incidents on large political shifts and alignments; and the way in which the location of conflict may determine the national interest in both small and large issues. Soviet intervention in the Third World will continue to raise the fundamental question of how marginal actions of the superpowers might transform the large strategic relationships. In this interaction of global and regional matters the United States will find great need both for foresight and for firm grasp of its strategic circumstances.

Strategic Circumstances

The characteristics of the international environment, of American strategic thought and style, and of American military forces themselves all will shape America's ability to respond to Soviet intervention in the Third World. Under conditions now to be expected, these factors will operate not for the better but for the worse. In this there is a paradox, and several specific aspects of this point seem important enough to single out for brief discussion.

It is essential, for example, to realize well in advance of action that a decision to undertake military operations in any of the world's major regions is tantamount to taking sides in the region's own struggles or quarrels. In most cases and most places, the American military's need for facilities from which to stage forces virtually requires it to alienate some regional states by aligning with or strengthening others. In peace it may be possible to paper over potential differences, as in the current attempt simultaneously to court Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Syria, Jordan, and the Palestine Liberation Organization. But in war, when it comes to military operations that carry risk and have consequences, it is virtually certain that such efforts will fail. It is difficult—no, it is impossible—to imagine circumstances in which the United States could conduct significant military operations in the Middle East, Persian Gulf, or Eastern Mediterranean without having to choose between operating from Arab territory on one hand and operating from Israeli facilities on the other. This problem is not limited to the Middle East. Every region of the world fulminates with local quarrels that the United States may well avoid when just passing through, but that it cannot sidestep if it chooses to employ forces in the area.

Another serious liability affecting American ability to respond to Soviet intervention in the Third World results from the deliberately formulated grand strategy adopted and pursued by the nation for many years. At first reading, this may seem a curious statement. After all, national strategy should tend to reduce security problems, not aggravate them. But a generation of emphasis on Europe as America's region of most vital interest (outside the continental United States and certain adjacent areas) has resulted in what one might call a strategy of "asset concentration." The United States is, in a sense, held hostage by the NATO contingency. There are immense investments in assets either immobile or unsuited for use other than in Europe. Further, the possibility of Soviet action in Europe menaces such vital interests that, even when facing immediate trouble elsewhere, the United States and its European allies feel compelled to hold back substantial forces to deter or, if necessary, to fight a war over Europe.

In a global sense, therefore, American strategy has produced conditions in which

most of the forces owned by the United States and its allies are deployed and/or committed to a region bounded by the east coast of the United States, the border between Eastern and Western Europe, the Arctic Circle, and the Tropic of Cancer. America's forces are comparatively thin over the rest of the world, a fact made more important because inter-theater mobility of major forces is still sadly deficient.

The problems of American strategy and forces alluded to in the foregoing lines lead to a dilemma. Despite the clear disadvantages of conceding the initiative to the Russians whenever they seem bent on intervention or conquest, the risks of moving first are, for the United States, also extremely high. The gravest such risk concerns the possible malpositioning of forces. Because the Soviets enjoy interior lines of communication and advance when operating in the periphery of Eurasia, and because Soviet forces are so numerous, it is possible for the Soviet military now to contemplate opening hostilities in more than one theater at a time. It would not do to send large portions of America's ready forces to the Indian Ocean area, for example, only to find out that the Soviets were going to risk or initiate war in Europe, too. I hasten to acknowledge that the example is extreme, made so for the sake of clarity and simplicity. But the point remains valid. In trying to move quickly, and first, to head off conflict or to fight on favorable terms, the United States may well discover that through strategic deception or the opening of multiple fronts the Soviets have siphoned off substantial American forces into areas of secondary importance to the war's ultimate stakes and outcome.

Because of the technical problems associated with rapid deployment of forces to areas on the periphery of the Soviet Union, there is also a considerable risk of high early losses, both of men and equipment. It is incredibly difficult to get people and equipment deployed to distant places without exposing to attack either people who have not yet married up with their gear, or equipment that for lack of men to use it cannot be moved or employed.

Elements of Response

There is a tendency to assume that any Soviet intervention in the Third World will summon forth an American response of some sort. It is probably no more than realistic to acknowledge that, in one sense, there will always be a response: even when counter-intervention or other actions seem imprudent, Soviet actions will cause reactions in the spheres of politics, economics, and diplomacy and eventually, surely, in strategy as well. In some respects, this is a matter of concern, of unease, especially because of the military dimensions these seemingly inevitable adjustments and responses may imply or include.

Twenty-four hundred years ago, Thucydides the Athenian put wise words into the mouth of one of his orators, who said: "Good policy against an adversary is superior to the senseless attacks of mere force." In retirement, the great Napoleon once expressed his wonderment on a related point: "Do you know what astounds me most about the world?" he asked. "It is the impotence of force to establish anything In the end, the sword is always conquered by the mind." More recently, the 1960s debate that fractured America's policy consensus on containment of the Soviet Union largely turned on the role of military counter-pressure against Russian expansion and interventionary activity.

The foregoing cautions might well encourage the belief that response to Soviet intervention in the Third World ought to begin with the sober question of whether to respond at all, at least in any strenuous or immediate fashion. Yet, I have already adduced two arguments favoring a vigorous, prompt response that is military at least in part. In one, the nation's objectives clearly concern the containment of Soviet expansion and Soviet influence, if necessary by military means. In another, the fact that, for the time being, America's ability to deal with large issues is being gauged by its vigor and success in dealing with the lesser ones argues for distinct, rapid, and perhaps even militant responses to Soviet interventionism.

There is wide recognition that it lies within Soviet power to initiate actions in areas where it is virtually impossible for the United States to bring military forces to bear on favorable terms. Yet current and coming military programming includes large amounts for forces that will enable the United States to get itself into a fair-sized war on the periphery of the Soviet Union within a very short time. This will surely put a premium on the ability of the nation's leaders to make rapid judgments on a series of subtle and complex questions. Despite the strength of the rationales growing both out of America's objectives and America's circumstances, the acceleration of the pace at which wars can be won—and lost—calls uncomfortably to mind Reinhold Niebuhr's observation, set down shortly after the conclusion of the Second World War: "It is the business of military strategists to prepare for eventualities, and it is the fatal error of such strategists to create eventualities for which they must prepare."

If there can be any adequate safeguard against the perverse forces that make men victims of their own foresight, it must be an amalgam of good policy, good instruments, and good judgment.

In responding to Soviet intervention in the Third World in coming years, the leaders of the United States must above all have the wisdom to pursue valid objectives, good policy. One test of policy, discussed earlier, requires the careful differentiation between primary and secondary interests, the distinction between those that are indeed vital and those that may be peripheral. This distinction is the more important because, in the case of the United States, military actions that lack public support are almost always doomed to fail. As an aside, one must note with concern the pronounced tendency now manifest in both military and political circles, to consider the problem of gaining public support as an exercise in manipulating opinion. This is at best shortsighted, and it holds much potential for arousing damaging domestic backlash against a strengthened and more active security policy.

Both to distinguish the vital from the peripheral and to seek public support for response to Soviet interventionism, it is necessary to strive constantly for perspective, for a sense of movement and purpose that is adequate to inform judgment as events unfold case by case. With broader perspective it would have been much more difficult than it proved to be to exaggerate the importance of events in Afghanistan since December 1979. Similarly, it would have been difficult to permit a small, third-rate nation, no matter how troubled, to preoccupy the entire American government for months while other, more important problems went untended. No

amount of good strategic thought or action can make up for flawed senses of purpose and perspective.

In addition to good policy, the response to Soviet intervention in the Third World in coming years will require good instruments. It would be both a conceptual and a political error to conceive of these only or even primarily in military terms. But here I wish to concentrate on military factors, for these are assuming high prominence in the policy profile of the early 1980s.

Despite highly unfavorable cost curves, stretching development and procurement cycles, and serious questions about the relative merits of manned versus unmanned systems, tactical aviation remains the element of in-theater military capability most relevant to the kinds of problems likely to result from Soviet intervention in the Third World. Since World War II, tactical aviation has provided an answer to one of the most classic puzzles in the history of warfare: how to engage decisively when a great land power and a great sea power meet. Around the periphery of Eurasia, and wherever else this classic collision occurs, tactical aviation has assumed a new and still increasing significance. The United States needs to invest heavily in the ground infrastructure for tactical aviation in a number of locations keyed both to American interests and to estimates of Soviet intentions and war plans. It needs to keep aircraft acquisition rates up. And it needs to expend more effort, and probably more money, in modernizing the air forces of allies and friendly nations around the world.

It is also beyond doubt that increased strategic mobility, for at least a portion of America's land forces, is an immediate necessity. Amid all the enthusiasm over the rapid deployment concept, however, it may prove difficult to keep this in perspective. It is not likely to prove advantageous to the United States to deploy more than 2 to 3 divisions into places such as Southwest Asia unless the Army undergoes a vast increase in size. Barring the kind of national catastrophe that would propel the nation into total war, such increases are extremely unlikely. There are many indications that the American military is now about as big as it is likely to get in peacetime; and there are further signs that the American people think the military ought to be able to deal with security problems of modest scale as a matter of routine, without a wrenching national transition to war footing. Strategic mobility, important as it is, must nevertheless be kept in scale as America's military power is renewed.

Increased maritime forces also seem vital to effective response to Soviet intervention in the Third World. I opened this essay by noting that between now and the end of the century the Soviets had little hope of intervening directly beyond Russia's periphery. For this there is a simple reason: despite the extensive press given Soviet naval expansion, the United States retains unparalleled maritime outreach.

By its worldwide deployments and high operating tempo, the United States Navy can deny to the Soviet Union any interventionary opportunity or option that depends on assured transit or sea-based support. In several important theaters, naval assets enable the United States to be first on the scene of trouble, and with the superior force, so that opportunities for Soviet action are foreclosed. But the Navy now is spread so thin that the United States must uncover some vital interests in order to protect others. America simply must augment its Navy enough to make it a globally effective *and* large enough force to contribute tactical aviation at critical times and

places without unduly reducing routine deployments in areas of high or vital interest.

When all is said and done, it would be a strategic error of the first magnitude to forfeit the ability to contain Soviet interventionism by means of maritime supremacy.

Tactical aviation, of course, is not the answer to all ills flowing from possible Soviet intervention. It may be essential for converting maritime advantage into usable military position on land; and it may also be crucial to the ability to inhibit or prevent Soviet meddling in local problems.

The high cost of tactical aviation, not to mention its limited potential in prolonged, low-intensity war, require a complementary effort to develop methods of low-intensity land warfare that are low enough in cost to permit sustained effort where and when American interests seem to call for it.

Along with good policy and good instruments, good judgment constitutes an essential element of American response to future Soviet intervention in the Third World. This quality is so widely necessary for success that it may seem foolish or redundant to speak of it. And yet, special aspects of judgment need to be singled out in the context of the problems posed by Soviet intervention. One aspect concerns the attempt to judge whether or not the results of Soviet action are likely to prove reversible, either in the near term or later on. As an aside, there is room for considerable work within American strategic thought on this point. Much in war is assumed to be iterative or reciprocal, so that what one side does the other undoes as the fortunes of war permit. But in conserving national resources for sustained competition and occasional warfare, it is useful to think in advance about the chances of restoring some kind of *status quo ante* in reacting to Soviet intervention in the Third World, and to avoid expensive efforts to do the impossible. It is equally important to recognize the imperative for prompt action that may arise when what has been done can be undone—but only if dealt with early on. America's interests will not, of course, always be best served merely by restoration of the *status quo ante*. Hence the importance of thinking about how to define and state goals as well as about how to pursue them.

In another essential judgment, America's leaders must weigh the likelihood of success—and here, clearly, there is room for considerable improvement. It is cause for concern that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the chiefs of each individual service advised President Carter in April 1980 that the hostage rescue raid had a “good” chance of success. No matter how necessary and urgent it may seem to respond quickly and strongly to Soviet intervention in the Third World, it will not advance American interests to try and fail.

What Next?

In his book *The Cloud of Danger*, George F. Kennan made a point nearly five years ago that, regrettably, remains all too true: the United States is not well positioned for globally activist foreign and security policies. Although Kennan was speaking of the influence of broad domestic and international dynamics on the nation's situation, his observation is mirrored in the operational military world as well. The simple truth is that the United States at present lacks the infrastructure necessary for the global

activism that growing Soviet power and the possibilities of further, future interventions might require.

Any recognition of shortcomings in America's worldwide military infrastructure necessitates an attempt to balance conflicting impulses—the one toward an aggressive unilateralism, the other toward the burden-sharing of alliance and coalition building. Shortly before leaving the Presidency, Theodore Roosevelt spoke to Congress in terms that embodied the spirit of independence permanently embedded in American political character: "No friendliness with other nations, no good will for them or by them, can take the place of national self-reliance. Fit to hold our own against the strong nations of the earth, our voice for peace will carry to the ends of the earth. Unprepared, and therefore unfit, we must sit dumb and helpless to defend ourselves, protect others, or preserve peace." The politics of burden-sharing have always proven difficult for Americans over any length of time, for reasons that every American almost intuitively recognizes.

Yet, in this decade, it is going to be essential for the United States to talk most earnestly with its allies and with other states about mutual problems. To some proponents of a revival of American power, such phrases have come to be a sort of code for telling allies that they will have to pull their own weight, carry a fair share of costs, stand up to the Russians, and more. Each of those propositions or prescriptions is in some measure worthy of debate. What seems beyond doubt, however, is that it is very difficult to get governments to do things that they have not thought about long and carefully in advance. It is extremely laborious in crisis or war to gain influence in places where you had none earlier, in peace. When adversity has struck, it is too late to ask for facilities to support operating forces, or for intelligence-sharing or for other cooperative courtesies.

Further, there is unmistakably something wrong with the way in which we are presenting our views when our best friends in the world, the NATO nations, believe that American policy is a more likely cause of major war than are Soviet intentions, and when, in Southwest Asia, no nation friendly to the United States will accept even in peace the forward headquarters of the Rapid Deployment Force. The difficult work of thinking through both what we need and what we can offer in collaboration with other nations holds the highest priority in preparing a response to Soviet interventionism in coming years.

In responding to Soviet intervention, there is also a need to distinguish more clearly between war planning and contingency planning on one hand and force structure planning on the other. In efforts to expand American military power in the early 1980s, there is a notable and damaging tendency to blur the distinction between these forms of planning. In part, a more careful separation of these concepts is necessary simply to get good analysis, to restore some faith in governmental process, and to permit legislative-executive relations as well as public discussion on defense to begin with a presumption that good faith, not service or "community" chicanery, underlies the effort.

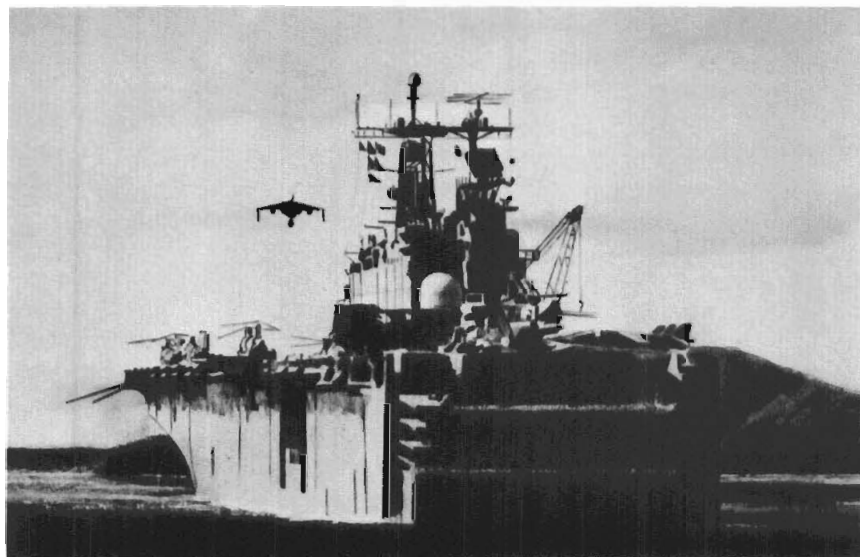
In part, a clearer distinction between war and contingency planning in contrast to program planning is a precondition for identifying and exploring trade-offs between political support for forward positioning and technologies or assets that may increase capabilities. In tactical aviation, for example, enough tankers for air refueling can

help to offset deficiencies in forward basing; the reverse, of course, is equally true. In command, control, and communications, including the intelligence gathering and early warning functions such systems also may perform, aircraft such as the AWACS may reduce reliance on ground stations; or, ground stations (properly sited, to be sure) may diminish requirements for in-theater EW air assets.

Effective response to Soviet interventionism in coming years will require the coordination of technical, economic, and political dimensions of security programs and policies. Much depends on the coherence and closeness of relationships between these elements of response. For, as Kennan wrote in 1948 as he, Dean Acheson, and others "created" the politics of the post-World War II world, "The world situation will be deeply influenced by the measures which we ourselves take. . . . Our policies must therefore be viewed not only as a means of reacting to a given situation, but as a means of influencing a situation as well." Ultimately, America's ability to respond to Soviet intervention will substantially influence the likelihood and frequency of its occurrence. In this way, finally, the response to Soviet intervention can become more than mere reaction, and hence a proper goal for those committed to altering the political and strategic trends of the 1970s.

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Terrorists and Chemical/Biological Weapons

by

Elliott Hurwitz

With all of the interest that has been shown in terrorism in recent months, relatively little attention has been paid to the possibility that terrorists could dramatically escalate the type of weapons they use, and so pose a much greater threat to organized societies and governments than they do at present. What we have in mind is a terrorist group's use, or credible threat to use, mass casualty weapons—those that can cause several hundred to tens of thousands of casualties in a single attack.

Some attention has been paid, in both fictional and nonfiction accounts to the possibility that terrorist groups might acquire nuclear weapons.¹ To be sure, the acquisition of a nuclear device by a terrorist group would indeed be a spectacular event of high political moment and grave public concern. It would mark a new era in terrorist operations and might have an important effect on the political balance in a particular region. However, the seriousness with which we view such a threat is reduced by the extreme difficulty that any terrorist group would face in fabricating or stealing a nuclear device. In effect, the very difficult technical and political problems that a group would have to overcome in order to acquire a weapon have reduced our anxiety that such an event could occur.

However, there exists a second category of mass casualty weapons whose use terrorists could plausibly consider: chemical/biological (C/B) weapons. While these weapons do not quite have the unique destructive power or political force of nuclear weapons, their acquisition and credible deployment by a terrorist group would undoubtedly be considered as a very significant—and ghastly—escalation of the terrorist threat. The use of C/B weapons in a terrorist incident—for example, an attack with a nerve agent on a large auditorium that caused several thousand casualties—would traumatize the government at which the attack was aimed. If the terrorists were well organized and the initial attack were followed up with threats to use C/B weapons again, the possibility exists that widespread social disruption or even panic might result. *Most significantly, and most disturbing, it appears from the available evidence that it is entirely feasible for a terrorist group of even modest resources to acquire and effectively use C/B weapons.* For, as will be shown later, the chemical and laboratory supplies needed to prepare lethal agents are freely available, and the required procedures are discussed in literally dozens of articles in the open literature.

It is the purpose of this article to explore the question of C/B weapons and their possible use by terrorists. We will describe the nature of terrorism, how terrorists

could acquire and plausibly use C/B weapons, and give our view of the outlook for terrorist use of C/B weapons. We should emphasize that by illuminating the possibility that C/B weapons might be used by terrorists, this article is intended to stimulate more effective preparation by governments and security agencies for that possibility. It is not intended to alert any terrorist group to the existence of a terrible new weapon that they have thus far overlooked. In fact, for any terrorist group interested in escalating the weapons in its arsenal, numerous books and articles in the general literature and the publicity surrounding the repeated uses of C/B weapons by the Soviets and their surrogates in Laos, Cambodia, and Afghanistan will already have served as ample notice.²

Looking at the goals of terrorists and the ways in which they operate, it would seem at first glance that terrorism is the type of instrument for which C/B weapons would be ideally suited. Consider the following attributes of terrorism:

- Terrorism is not just what terrorists do, but is the general sense of alarm and fear that they cause by their actions.

- Public perceptions of terrorism in the world appear to be governed not by the actual level of violence, but by the quality of the incidents, the locations, and the media coverage. For example, more people tend to recall the hijacking in the United States of a TWA airliner in September 1976 by Croatian extremists—resulting in one death—than remember the bomb explosion three weeks later that destroyed a Cubana airline with the loss of 93 lives.

- Terrorism, at bottom, is theater. Terrorists will adapt to maintain their “Broadway presence,” endeavor to stay ahead of counter-terrorist preparations, maintain their facade of strength, and increase the audacity, drama, and magnitude of their threat.

Considering these attributes of terrorism, wouldn't terrorists find C/B weapons to be an ideal instrument by which to escalate their threat and maintain their “Broadway presence”? Before attempting to answer this question, it is useful to examine the types of scenarios in which terrorists might use C/B weapons and the objectives that they would probably want to achieve by this dramatic escalation:

- A large or a sophisticated terrorist group might, after considerable debate, decide “rationally” that the use of C/B weapons was to its advantage. A credible threat of a mass casualty C/B attack, perhaps preceded by a “demonstration” with casualties numbering in the hundreds, would be viewed as a highly leveraged instrument of coercion that could crack the resolve even of intransigent governments that had not yielded to less severe threats. The goals of such a threat might include the release of imprisoned comrades, a very large ransom, a demonstration of the government's impotence, and perhaps televised speeches of concession by government leaders.

- In the hands of a group such as the IRA that perceived straightforward military value from the use of C/B weapons, these weapons might be used in an attack on an enemy military or political target of extremely high symbolic or actual importance.

- In a less “rational” mode, C/B weapons might be used by an extremist group that had little concern about alienating an outside constituency, but perceived that it might, through a last desperate act or series of acts, achieve a measure of influence. If it failed to influence events, a group could try to destroy what it could not control,

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avenge its killed or tortured comrades, or simply attack the members of a group that they despised or considered as subhuman. Finally, one could consider the use of C/B weapons as an instrument of punishment by a desperate terrorist group facing imminent defeat and the loss of all that they had fought for. Historically, the model for this would be the final desperate acts of terrorism carried out or planned by the Secret Army Organization in Algeria in 1962. In the future, one could imagine an extremist Palestinian group using C/B weapons in a desperate last-ditch effort to block an Arab-Israeli peace treaty.

If terrorists were to use C/B weapons in a mass casualty attack, there is no doubt that it would be an event of singular visibility and importance. The particular group would receive enormous publicity, and the event would be perceived as not just *another* assassination, kidnapping, bombing, or hijacking. The effect would be even greater if the attack took place in a western city such as London, Paris, or New York. The context of the attack and the terrorists' ability to threaten more such incidents would also influence perceptions.

If it is so plausible and potentially so effective for terrorists to use C/B weapons, then why haven't more groups made use of these weapons? It isn't because C/B agents are too difficult to make or acquire. In fact, as scary as it may seem, making or otherwise acquiring C/B agents is well within the capabilities of a terrorist or other group of even modest resources.

It's relatively easy to make violently toxic nerve agents because the techniques by which they are made are similar to those used for insecticides, and in some cases may simply involve taking as intermediate products insecticides or other chemicals that can be purchased commercially and putting them through one additional chemical reaction. The equipment needed and the chemicals are readily available from chemical supply houses. And the chemical procedures used are described in dozens of articles available in the open literature.

The nerve agent sarin, for instance, discovered by German scientists in the late 1930s, is an order of magnitude more potent than the agents that caused so many casualties during World War I. Yet, although preparing it might be a risky business, sarin can be synthesized in 100 gram quantities by an organic chemist with modest graduate training for an investment of only a few thousand dollars.³ (It should be remembered, however, that a larger quantity would probably be needed for a successful attack.)

It may be even easier for terrorists to acquire biological weapons than it would be for them to acquire chemical weapons. Quantities of clostridium botulinum, the bacillus that produces botulinum toxin, is available from the American Type Culture Collection, in Rockville, Maryland, for a fee of \$34. All that the collection requires is that the request be made on a business letterhead or requisition form from a suitable research facility or laboratory, a procedure that would seem to be well within terrorist capabilities. There is even an 800 number provided for easier service!⁴

Once the bacillus has been acquired, a terrorist need only grow the culture under anaerobic conditions in a pure culture in order to produce the deadly botulinum toxin. (The botulinum toxin is one of the most deadly substances known to man. It has been estimated that seven ounces of botulinum toxin, if efficiently dispersed, would be sufficient to kill *the entire human population of the world*. It should be kept in

mind, however, that the purification process is complex and that a small quantity might not be adequate for an effective attack.)⁵

It would be somewhat more difficult for a terrorist group to disperse C/B agents in an actual attack than it would be to acquire the agents themselves. Efficient dispersal presumes a thorough knowledge of the spaces that are to be attacked and the air flow within them, as well as a precise knowledge of the physical properties of the C/B agent used. However, even if the terrorists only managed to reach 10 percent of the intended victims with a lethal dose of the dispersed agent, the casualties from a single terrorist attack—depending on the scenario and the agent used—might easily amount to several thousand deaths.⁶

How might an actual attack take place? It is frighteningly simple. Terrorists using biological agents could disperse them among bulk food supplies, e.g., at a central market, a large-scale catering operation, or even a single supermarket. Chemical agents could be effective if introduced into the air handling system in a small office building or dispersed, say, from an ice cream cart standing amidst thousands of people in a large auditorium. (Introducing an agent into a municipal water supply would not be a credible threat because of the huge volume of water that would need to be contaminated and the numerous steps in the filtration and purification process.)

So why haven't terrorists made more use of C/B? It is the belief of the author that terrorist groups have not so far (with minor exceptions) used C/B weapons because of a straightforward assessment that the potential gain may not exceed the potential loss. Looked at in this coldly rational way, the "benefits" that a group could expect to achieve from a successful mass casualty C/B attack and the credible threat to repeat the episode would be spectacular visibility and excellent short-term bargaining power against a resistant government. Even such stalwarts as Margaret Thatcher, Menachem Begin, or Ronald Reagan would find it difficult to resist terrorist demands after 1,000 to 2,000 of their citizens had died in an initial incident.

On the other hand, the terrorist organization that used C/B agents in a mass casualty attack would take a tremendous risk of alienating key friendly and neutral constituencies. Years of patiently cultivating the support of certain groups might be sacrificed in a few moments. World opinion might be quite hostile in the aftermath of this "heinous crime." Even the adversary government might harden its policies after the initial threat had faded. It is this risk that a C/B attack might backfire and cause perverse results that has so far limited the use of these weapons by terrorists.

However, the fact that terrorists have not paid much attention to C/B weapons in the past does not assure that they will not do so in the future. The ready availability of C/B agents that can be used in an attack means that, for a major incident to occur, only one terrorist group at any single point in time needs to find that such a weapon meets its requirements. As mentioned earlier, groups that might find C/B weapons to their liking include radical groups opposed to any accommodation with the enemy or mainstream groups that want to kill thousands at a prestigious enemy military or political facility. While the question of whether terrorists will use C/B weapons in a mass casualty attack is unknown—and perhaps unknowable—this author believes that the odds are perhaps even or slightly higher that an attack will eventually occur. Established governments and security agencies would do well to recognize this threat and make plans to deal with it before it actually materializes.

NOTES

1. Dominic Lapierre and Larry Collins, *The Fifth Horseman* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1980); Brian Michael Jenkins, "Nuclear Terrorism and Its Consequences," *Social Science and Modern Society*, July/August 1980, p. 5. Some of the points made below on potential terrorist goals and actions have also been taken from this article.

2. Sources that discuss the potential for C/B terrorism include: Robert K. Mullen, "The Clandestine Use of Chemical or Biological Weapons," International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1978; Mullen covers much of the same ground in his article, "Mass Destruction and Terrorism," *Journal of International Affairs*, Spring/Summer 1978, pp. 63-89; Robert H. Kupperman and Darrell M. Trent, *Terrorism: Threat, Reality, Response* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1979). Pages 62-68 deal with potential use of C/B weapons.

3. Mullen, "The Clandestine Use of Chemical or Biological Weapons," p. 10.

4. American Type Culture Collection, Rockville, Md.: "Ordering Information."

5. Kupperman and Trent, p. 361.

6. Mullen, "The Clandestine Use of Chemical or Biological Weapons," p. 16; Kupperman and Trent, p. 361.

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