

VIEWPOINT

Asymmetric Warfare

Since David fought Goliath, the weak have been able to vanquish the strong

Josef Joffe

HIS COUNTRY BESET BY MURDEROUS ANARCHISTS, A Russian minister to the Czar wrote: Terrorism "may be totally senseless, but it is a poisonous, indeed, horrifying idea that seeks to draw power from impotence." Without knowing so, this exalted servant of the Romanovs was talking about "asymmetric warfare." The idea is to best the strong by refusing to meet them in open battle.

The inventor was probably David. Remember how he felled Goliath. First, he stayed out of range of the Philistine giant's fearsome sword. Second, he used tactical surprise: while Goliath was still taunting him, David pulled out his sling and felled him. Third, it was low tech against high tech. The Philistines had already mastered the art of iron forging; against their hard-edged blades, the bronze weapons of the Israelites had little chance. But David used a string and a rock: the lowest of low tech.

This is essentially what the terrorists did to the U.S. last week. They attacked New York and Washington out of the blue. They used simple weapons: knives and box cutters. And they certainly stayed out of range. At the time of this writing, nobody knows for sure where the masterminds are hiding.

Since David, asymmetric warfare has been employed countless times, all the way to the Palestinians now battling the Israeli army—man for man, probably the best fighting force in the world. As in the Goliath gambit, the idea is to devalue the best weapons of your enemy and stay out of reach of his superior might.

Take the Palestinians of the *intifadeh*. Against their assault rifles, Israeli Merkava tanks and F-16 attack planes can achieve little, for a democratic nation is loath to use 120-mm rounds or laser-guided bombs as its soldiers face killers in the street sheltering behind women and children. Nor can such weapons deal with the lone terrorist armed with a girdle full of explosives and nails—they cannot deter a man determined to die so that he may go straight to Paradise. As for those who send these "walking bombs" on their murderous way, they remain invisible, with neither a face nor an address.

Those who have unleashed the war against America are using the same tactics. The point is to maximize the opportunities offered by the country's vulnerabilities while minimizing its overwhelming military power. What is more vulnerable than a passenger airplane? A handful of terrorists armed with knives and box cutters can hardly do more dam-

age than by going after the crowds who normally inhabit the World Trade Center. And how does the victim fight back?

All the cruise missiles in the world are unable to deal with a foe who simply refuses to show up. The mass murderers who died in the blaze cannot be interrogated. Their masters are hidden in the fog of anonymity. Nor do they brag about their boundless inhumanity. It is hit-and-mum. Indeed, these long-distance killers may well move from country to country, their bank accounts masked by multi-digit numbers and their supply caches concealed in deserts or impenetrable urban agglomerations. Above all, they will never set foot in the arena where their victims can hurl their most sophisticated weapons against them.

Are states truly stumped? Not really. Asymmetric warfare can be executed by both sides. Yet states have to think last about pinpoint precision weapons and concentrate first on

myriad other means at their disposal, tools the terrorists cannot match.

Thousands of FBI agents and U.S. intelligence officials are now hunting the masterminds of the massacre. How about tracking them down before they unleash their next war against America? Governments can sift billions of pieces of digital information in hours, and they can correlate their findings with other governments. They can allocate fewer resources to yesterday's foes and teach the troops to speak Arabic or the

languages of the Afghans. In spy-speak, this is "human intelligence." Short of military power, states have political clout, especially if they act together. They can impose harsh penalties on regimes harboring terrorists. Alas, all too often, the U.S. has turned a blind eye to countries like Syria that give shelter to "rejectionist" Palestinian groups and the Hizballah in South Lebanon. Alas, too many Western governments have lived by the principle, "You deal with your terrorists."

And what can governments do after the fact? Lobbing a few cruise missiles into an empty training camp, as the U.S. did in the aftermath of the Dar es Salaam and Nairobi embassy bombings, is not the answer. For this new war is for keeps. It is inconceivable that it was unleashed by a few well-financed freelancers. It was done with the connivance or active participation of a state. Unlike individuals who seek martyrdom, states want to survive. Hence they can be deterred. And they will be if the punishment fits the crime. "Rogue states" may be crazy, but they are not stupid. ■

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David floored a giant with tactical surprise and a low-tech weapon

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