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GLOBAL POLITICS, ECONOMICS, AND IDEAS

STROBE TALBOTT
on Terrorism's Other Evil

EHUD SPRINZAK
on Hyperterrorists

RAY TAKEYH
on Islam's Democratic Hopes

**WILL LAWYERS KILL
THE INTERNET?**
by Lawrence Lessig

**U.S. & EUROPE:
ESTRANGED PARTNERS**
by Jessica T. Mathews

Inside the

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12 >

The Lone Gunmen

The global war on terrorism faces a new brand of enemy.

By Ehud Sprinzak

Shortly following the September 11 terrorist attacks on American soil, U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, offered a now widespread view when he blamed the tragedy on a "massive intelligence failure" by the United States. Indeed, many critics point to a series of institutional or operational failings: inadequate funding for intelligence activities, a dearth of Arabic-speaking agents, and insufficient international intelligence-sharing and

cross-border cooperation. Yet the inability to foresee the latest attacks exposes a problem well beyond poor intelligence gathering. Rather, it reveals an intellectual failure to identify an entirely new category of terrorism. Our post-September 11 comprehension of terrorism must recognize a new enemy: the megalomaniacal hyperterrorist.

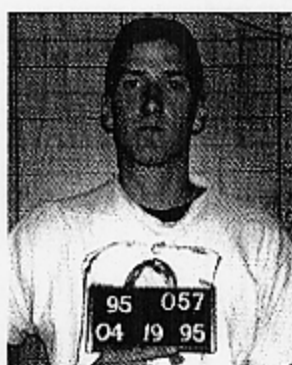
Many of the devastating acts of terror that took place in the 1990s were masterminded by innovative, self-anointed individuals with larger-than-life callings. Ramzi Yousef (the man behind the 1993 World Trade Center bombing), Shoko Asahara (leader of Aum Shinrikyo and architect of the 1995 gas attack in a Tokyo subway station), Timothy McVeigh (the 1995 Oklahoma City bomber), and Osama bin Laden (likely planner of the September 11 carnage) are linked by their insatiable urge to use catastrophic attacks in order to write a new chapter in history. Call it the "Great Man" theory of terrorism. Yigal

Amir, the 1995 assassin of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, also belongs on this list. Amir may not have been involved in mass-casualty terrorism, but the impact of his act on the Israeli people could not have been more catastrophic.

Certainly, the history of terrorism is littered with forceful personalities and charismatic leaders, but specialists never thought the study of individual activists could help them understand what they always considered to be a group-oriented phenomenon. Consequently, experts classified terrorism along organizational or ideological lines, with revolutionary left-wing, conservative right-wing, separatist-nationalist, and religious terrorism as the typical categories. The 1990s rendered this typology obsolete. In fact, our conceptual disregard for the megalomaniacal hyperterrorist is one of the fundamental reasons for the repeated failures to avert the catastrophes of the last 10 years.

Of course, not all modern-day terrorists fall into this new category. The vast majority of terrorists and terror organizations still behave according to the logic portrayed in hundreds of academic studies,

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Megalomaniacal Hyperterrorists: Yousef, McVeigh, Asahara, and bin Laden

scholarly models, and intelligence profiles. They are political, conservative in their use of weapons, and low-casualty perpetrators. Though angry, lethal, and ready to take great personal risks, they are largely rational and realistic. They act in groups or organizations, use the media to get attention, and wish to transform their fights into legitimate military campaigns and political power. They kill, maim, hijack, abduct, bomb, and even blow themselves up in suicide missions, but their leaders, ideologues, gurus, and clerics prefer to avoid catastrophes in order to secure sympathy in the post-terrorism stage. As terrorism expert Brian Jenkins famously remarked, such leaders wish to have "lots of people watching, not lots of people dead."

Megalomaniacal hyperterrorists operate according to an altogether different logic. While often working with the support of large terror groups and organizations, they tend to be loners. They think big, seeking to go beyond "conventional" terrorism and, unlike most terrorists, could be willing to use weapons of mass destruction. They perceive themselves in historical terms and dream of individually devastating the hated system. Ramzi Yousef is a classic example: Talking to the FBI agent who arrested him in 1995, Yousef openly discussed his dream of seeing one of the World Trade Center towers fall into the other, causing 250,000 casualties. While hiding in the Philippines in 1995, he planned to destroy 12 U.S. aircraft in midair. Yousef also entertained ideas about using chemical weapons on a large scale.

Or consider Timothy McVeigh, a Gulf War hero turned murderer of 168 innocent men, women, and children. McVeigh viewed himself as the lone defender of America against a violent and illegitimate federal government; he refused to ask for clemency and went

to his death with a great sense of historical accomplishment. (In his correspondence with writer Gore Vidal, McVeigh compared the justice of his act to the justice behind President Harry Truman's 1945 attack on Hiroshima.) And Yigal Amir, a right-wing resolute loner, believed that he had to "save the people [of Israel] because the people failed to understand the real conditions." Disregarding an entire antigovernment movement, including illustrious settler activists, Amir convinced himself that God wanted him to personally save the nation, and he was ready to die upon the completion of the mission.

Unlike most terrorists, who are technologically conservative, megalomaniacal hyperterrorists are innovators, developers. They incessantly look for original ways to surprise and devastate the enemy. Though not politically blind, they remain apolitical. They know that their actions will foster public outrage, yet they do not care. They believe history alone will judge them, and they are certain of absolution. They know that their terrorism is likely to bring about their death. Death, life in prison, and massive public condemnation are, in fact, risks worth taking, almost part of their self-selected job description.

The rise of the megalomaniacal hyperterrorist does not mean we should toss out the old antiterrorism manuals. Rather than reinvent counterterrorism measures, we should redirect existing efforts toward this new enemy. The best way to deal with megalomaniacal hyperterrorists is through preemptive military strikes on known terrorists and yes, through increased investments in human intelligence aimed at identifying hitherto unknown or potential megalomaniacal foes. Both approaches require great elucidation and development, but both are utterly necessary—now more than ever before. **VP**