

THURSDAY KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The Changing Nature and Tactics of Terrorism

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I am very thankful for the opportunity to be back in Oklahoma. Thank you, Bill Gorden, for the invitation. I am surprised Bill would ask me to speak again because of the debacle that happened 15 years ago. I missed my flight and frantically tried to figure out how to make it to the meeting in time. I made it, but was late. I am glad he has forgiven me, or at least forgotten, and extended the invitation.

Fifteen years ago, I was a young 31-year old at the RAND Corporation, working on a Congressional Commission report dealing with WMD Terrorism. Coming to Oklahoma in 1999 led me to meet individuals from the Oklahoma City National Memorial – Brad Robison and Jane Thomas – who came to listen to and record my speech. That association led me to come back in 2000 to assist in the organization's National Conference on Terrorism, coinciding on the opening of the memorial itself, and later to join the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism. Ten months later, I become its first Director of Research. I cherished my five and a half years here in Oklahoma, working at that counter terrorism institute with truly outstanding

individuals. This was all a result from that initial invite from Bill Gorden. Thank you.

So, Bill contacted me to come back fifteen years later, both to look back and forward on the state of terrorism. I first wish to speak briefly about what the world was like – in terms of the nature of terrorism – fifteen years ago, then discuss what it is like today, then look to the future and speculate on what we might see, and end with my thoughts of what we need to do at this stage.

TERRORISM IN 1999

Fifteen years ago, when I last spoke here at Redlands Community College, I entitled my speech “Response to Chemical & Biological Terrorism: Pragmatism or Paranoia?” What made us so worried about weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or high explosives) in 1999?

- Aum Shinrikyo, March 1995: 12 dead, 5,000 injured. Only ineptness of Aum limited the number of fatalities.
- Oklahoma City, April 1995: We are very aware of this bombing that resulted in the deaths of 168 people in the heart of Oklahoma City. It was the largest act of terrorism on U.S. soil at the time, and the perpetrator was a fellow American.
- Anthrax hoaxes 1996-1997: Nation-wide hoaxes leading to over-reactions on the part of public safety—for example hosing down a 70 year old outside in the bitter chill of winter to decontaminate him—he said, “Just kill me now!”

These incidents had a profound effect on how we viewed terrorism in 1999. We saw with Aum Shinryko that terrorists were willing to break the taboo of using “non-conventional weapons” (chemical & biological agents instead of bombs, firearms, arson, hostage taking, etc.). With the Oklahoma City bombing just a month later, we saw large casualties (168 dead, approximately 700 injured), more fatalities than what we saw in Japan, this time in our country’s heartland. This led us

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to question our safety and ask, “Could we see the same type of attack here?” The Anthrax hoaxes a year later seemed to answer that question, and we wondered, “If these had been real, what would we have done?” In 1999 we were at a level of almost paranoia about the whole WMD concept. I was employed at the time at RAND to work as a staff member of the U.S. Congressional Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction, more commonly known as the “Gilmore Commission.” Over a five-year period we made 164 recommendations to Congress and Presidents Clinton & George W. Bush on how to prepare for and more effectively respond to acts of WMD terrorism. I’m pleased that the federal government adopted, in whole or in part, 146 of those recommendations. This shows what our concerns were back then.

What was the status of Al Qaeda in 1999? They had already set off a car bomb in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, killing 5 Americans and 2 Indians in November of 1995. Three years later, in 1998, Al Qaeda shocked the U.S. by conducting a simultaneous attack on our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing more than 200 people and injuring thousands. This was a huge wake up call for our country, and it brought the name “Bin Laden” first to our minds; at this point, however, it was not yet a household name. The attack on the U.S.S. Cole had not yet happened, and the September 11th attacks were still two years away. In other words, al Qaeda had made a splash on the scene, but their main event was still to come.

What about suicide bombings? Yes, we were concerned about the phenomenon of terrorism and keeping an eye on it; however, in the years prior to 1999 we had only seen 145 acts of suicide terrorist events. Incidentally, the first of those 145 attacks took place in 1981, in Lebanon with the bombing of the Iraqi embassy.

Leading up to 1999, we still followed the belief of Brian Jenkins, the American “godfather” of counterterrorism analysis: the belief that “terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead.” (Jenkins 1975, 4). This means that although terrorists kill individuals, their ultimate goal was not to just kill people, but to create an environment of fear in order to lead to change. Thus, Brian Jenkins also said, “Terrorism is theater” (Jenkins 1974, 4). The idea of

terrorists wanting more people watching was to be put to the test in the next fifteen years.

TERRORISM: 1999-2014

So what has happened in the last 15 years? On a personal note, I lost more hair, had three more children (probably the cause of my baldness), lived and worked here in Oklahoma, and then moved out to Hawaii. In the realm of terrorism, things took a turn for the worse, meaning it got a lot bloodier.

We cannot talk about the past 15 years without bringing up September 11th, 2001. However, 9/11 was not the only major attack that we have witnessed since the last time I spoke. Here are some other noteworthy attacks:

- In 2002, Bali bombings killed 202 people, many of them Australian tourists.
- In 2004, Madrid bombings not only killed 191 in Spain but led to a new government and the pull-out of Spanish troops in Iraq. The attacks were committed by Moroccan jihadists.
- Also in 2004, we witnessed the Beslan, Russia school massacre, with 334 killed, mainly young children and women, by Chechen separatists.
- A year later, in 2005, we saw what the British call their 7/7 attack on the London subway system. 51 people were killed, and the attackers were “homegrown.”
- How about the 2007 Yazidi community attack (4 coordinated suicide vehicle bombings) on a religious minority, which killed almost 800 people and injured 1,500 more? To date, and next to 9/11, this is the second largest attack in terms of fatalities. Interestingly I would guess none of you remember it. Do you? We’ll talk more about why in a moment.
- Another terrorist highlight was the 2008 Mumbai attack, where a handful of Pakistani terrorists used grenades and AK-47s to kill 175 people at multiple locations.

- There are more attacks we could discuss, but we don't have the time to discuss all of the 55,000 terrorist attacks since 1999, do we?

Now, I'm not going to say much about the September 11th attacks themselves, except to say that they were a pivotal moment in terrorism, not just because of the sheer magnitude and audacity of the attack itself, but also because of the ramifications that resulted from it. Perceptions were changed. Legislation was created. Two wars were started. Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden became household names. September 11th also birthed a new host of pundits, talking heads, and what my counter terrorism analyst friends and I call "September 12th" terrorism experts.

Remember Brian Jenkins—"terrorism is theater", "more people watching than dying"? After 9/11, pundits decried this thought and said it was antiquated. Even Brian Jenkins expressed doubt. After September 11th, policy makers wanted to know if the future of terrorism was going to resemble multiple 9/11-like attacks, or if the 9/11 attack was an anomaly. Thirteen years ago, we didn't know, but what I felt for sure was that terrorism was and would continue to be a theater, just the theater of the extreme.

- We have become desensitized.
- We need something with greater "excitement" to draw our attention.
- The massive use of suicide terrorism was born out of this desensitization.

Let's look back at the Yazidi community attack in Iraq in 2007. There were 796 fatalities and over 1,500 injuries. This is the second largest terrorist attack in modern history – since we started collecting statistics in 1968. Why on earth would we completely forget such a horrendous attack? The Yazidi are a religious minority people in Iraq, and often persecuted, but that should not be the reason we ignored it. Why? We have become desensitized. After 9/11 we reacted to any attack anywhere across the world. But the second intifada in Israel was under way and we had bombing after bombing in the news. Terrorist campaigns in Chechnya and Kashmir soon started, and the fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq led to opponents using terrorism to target

civilians. By 2004 terrorist incidents that might have been on page one or two in the paper were moving their way back as we created a new norm in acceptable violence. Suicide bombings against civilian populations in Iraq became commonplace. By the time of the 2007 Yazidi attack, we had become numb to this level of attacks and did not give it the attention it deserved.

The question is whether terrorism had changed, or had we changed instead?

So let's look at a few things that made us change, or that changed terrorism.

Fifteen years ago, if I had said the word terrorism, students would have said, "Oklahoma City." Ten years ago, if I would have said the word terrorism, students (or people) would have said, "September 11th". Today it is different. I said "terrorism" to a group of underclassmen a few weeks ago and asked them to tell me what first came to their mind. The majority of them said "suicide bomber." In fact, only one student out of the 25 said "9/11". When I mentioned that the 9/11 attackers used suicide as well, they nodded, but said, "We don't remember that event, we just know terrorists strap on suicide vests and blow themselves up."

What changed? Well, we have gotten older for one. Our 18-year-old freshmen were just five years old at the time and were not affected in the same way as their older peers. For these young people, they grew up with a seemingly constant barrage of suicide bombing after bombing in the news. What is interesting to me is that this is more of a perceived observation. In fact, if we look at terrorist attacks going back to 1999, we see that suicide terrorism only amounts to less than four percent of all terrorist events. So why do these young people have the stereotype of all terrorists as suicide bombers? Mainly because these four percent of all attacks have caused 33 percent of all the fatalities!

So why is there a fascination with suicide terrorism? Remember, I said leading up to 1999 that we had witnessed 145 suicide terrorist attacks. Suicide terrorism was a concern back then, but we didn't realize the explosion (sorry for the pun) in numbers that we would soon see. From 1981 till the end of 1999 we had 145 suicide attacks, but from the beginning of 2000 till today we have had over 3,000! This does not

include suicide attacks made against military personnel, which is categorized as an act of war or insurgency rather than a terrorist event. With 3,000 attacks, of course the public would be more aware of suicide attacks today compared to what we saw 15 years ago.

But why have terrorists turned to using this tactic? Certainly even with this “explosion” in suicide operations it still only represents a small number of the total terrorist attacks worldwide. Still, many more groups have joined the ranks of using suicide operations as part of their terrorist arsenal. There are several reasons we see for why terrorists are using this tactic.

Suicide operations are cheap. Yes, yes, they know that they are strapping on a bomb to a human being, and human life is precious. But the ends they are fighting for clearly justify, in their minds, the means. So, taking away the cost of a human life, the cost of the operation is still inexpensive. Matthew Levitt, an analyst of terrorism, actually went and asked terrorist groups how much they spent on a suicide bombing operation (Levitt 2007). Hamas said it cost them about \$3,500. Palestinian Islamic Jihad said it cost them around \$2,100. Hezbollah said it only cost them \$665! The point is, these operations are cheap. Bin Laden spent \$500,000 to fund the September 11th attacks, and they were spectacular. However, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah can terrorize a community and make world headlines for a whole lot less.

Suicide operations are much less complicated! The hardest element of the terrorist attack cycle – target selection, planning, deployment, the attack itself, escape, media exploitation, lessons learned, and new target selection – is escape. This is similar to most crime. Committing the crime isn’t as hard as getting away with it and not getting caught. The beauty of a suicide bombing is that the bomber doesn’t have to worry about “getting away.” Certainly, the handler, the recruiter, the bomb-maker, and terrorist leadership want to “get away” to carry out more attacks, but the link connecting them to the incident dies in the attack. Dead men tell no tales, right?

Suicide bombings get more media attention than just “regular” terrorist events. This is for a few reasons. No matter what, at least one person will die in the attack. The idea that someone is willing to give up their

life for this action is captivating to the public, and they see the adversary as more dedicated than others. We respect life and often do anything we can to preserve our own lives and so we question why someone would give up their life for the cause. It's intriguing to us. We also see these “fully committed” terrorists as unstoppable, and feel even weaker in our ability to stop them. Add a higher body count and this is just what the media needs to draw attention to the attack and get more advertising. Ted Koppel, the famous newscaster once said the following:

Let me put forward the proposition that the media, particularly television, and terrorists need one another, that they have what is fundamentally a symbiotic relationship. Without television, terrorism becomes rather like the philosopher's hypothetical tree falling in the forest: no one hears it fall and therefore it has no reason for being. And television without terrorism, while not deprived of all interesting things in the world, is nonetheless deprived of one of the most interesting. (Danner et al. 1984)

Suicide attacks tear at the very fabric of our societal trust. The very fact that you came here to this event tonight indicates that you felt that you would survive the experience. However, if Steve Housel, in his Fall Newsletter, would have said, “Come listen to our Thursday night speaker. One lucky individual will be randomly selected to demonstrate the devastating power of a suicide vest in the parking lot. A memorial service for the volunteer will be held Friday morning.” How many of you would have still showed up? Consider the communities where suicide-bombing campaigns have taken place, where day after day, week after week, buses, market places, restaurants, schools and government buildings have been targeted. What does that do to a society? People stop going to social events. Just shopping for groceries becomes a harrowing experience. You see a pregnant woman come onto a bus and instead of instinctively giving up your seat for her, you ask yourself, “Is she pregnant, or is that a bomb?” For me this is one of the worst consequences of suicide bombings and one that terrorists pursue.

Suicide attacks are the ultimate “smart bomb”. Tomahawk cruise missiles cost approximately \$1.4 million dollars apiece. These are amazing devices, but they cannot change their minds half-way to their

targets. A suicide bomber can. The bomber can walk to a target, see something to change his or her mind, and then start looking for a new target, all for the cost of \$600-\$3,000: cheap and effective. A classic example of this is Hasib Hussain, the youngest of the four 7/7 bombers in London. Remember, they each put homemade bombs in their backpacks, and each targeted a separate train of the London subway system. At the time agreed to detonate, Hasib was still waiting on the subway platform at King's Cross - the station famous from the Harry Potter series – for his train to arrive. It was delayed. The intercom told people to evacuate the subway and he frantically called the other three bombers over and over again. I have two theories of why they did not answer his calls. Either they were too busy with their 70 virgins to respond, or their cell phone carrier didn't quite reach paradise. Regardless, Hasib was not able to go after his first target. He went to a store, bought a new 9-volt battery (which indicates he might have tried to explode at the station), then went (and I'm telling the truth) into McDonalds. He got a Big Mac, and then worked his way outside to board a bus that was packed because of the closed subway station, and detonated, killing 13 people.

So, suicide operations are easy, effective and cheap, and have, over the past 15 years, become mainstream in the arsenal of many, but not all, terrorist organizations.

WHAT ELSE HAS EVOLVED?

Up till the September 11th attacks, al Qaeda had trained thousands of individuals in terrorist tactics. They had training camps in Sudan and then later in Afghanistan. The vast majority of those trained were sent back home to fight for common causes, and the best were recruited into al Qaeda itself. After the 9/11 attacks, these members of al Qaeda continued their attacks throughout the world in places such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Turkey, Indonesia, and Jordan. In fact, al Qaeda had more attacks after 9/11 than before 9/11. However, the pursuit of the United States and the killing and capture of many of its operatives put a strain on the organization. The results led al Qaeda to decentralize, and start to franchise.

We call the old al Qaeda, AQ 1.0, and the evolved from AQ 2.0. This evolution had two parts. First, were the major 2.0 franchises, such as AQ-AP (al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula) and AQ-IM (Islamic Maghreb). Many of the leaders of these franchises were former members of AQ 1.0, were trained in the AQ 1.0 camps, and had personal association with other AQ 1.0 members. However, by decentralizing, these franchises were able to make operational decisions on their own.

More interesting to me is the second element of the decentralization of al Qaeda. AQ 1.0 started to push “small AQ 2.0 business” franchises. These were smaller groups without formal AQ 1.0 training camp experience or leaders without connections with AQ 1.0 who conducted attacks in the name of bin Laden and al Qaeda. This was the grassroots component of AQ 2.0. We saw this starting with attacks on the trains in Madrid, in London on their subways, or the attack on Fort Hood. This element of change for al Qaeda created a hydra affect for the organization—for every leader killed or captured, others around the world were willing to rise up and take their place. This rise of homegrown terrorists, so named, since they are citizens or long-term immigrants in their communities, is something of concern for government officials and a boon for terrorist leaders.

In fact leaders of the AQ-AP franchise saw the rise of the unconnected/homegrown affiliates, and created a tool for them. Inspire Magazine is a slick, well-put-together publication to do exactly what its title states: Inspire others to conduct the fight on their own. AQ leadership realizes that it is becoming more difficult for individuals to seek out and find fellow terrorists and get the training they need to be effective. So why not take advantage of the web and provide the training and motivation directly to these willing individuals? Inspire Magazine is full of doctrinal discourses justifying violent jihad, praise of martyrs (the issue after Bin Laden was “great”), and instructions on how to carry out attacks. In fact, the Summer 2010 issue was popular, since it had a great article on how to create a bomb in your very own kitchen. The pictured instructions are thorough and clear. The author walks you through how to create your explosives using a simple Christmas-tree light – yes, the author said, Christmas, even though he starts the article stating that you are doing this for Allah. So use the light, from which you will remove the plastic top, to ignite your explosives, and use a simple alarm clock as your timer. All of this can

go into a capped pipe, or even a pressure cooker. Sound familiar? It should, since this is the exact recipe the Tsarnaev brothers used at the Boston Marathon. Those brothers are exactly the type who Inspire Magazine is targeted for. Just as we learned from the Oklahoma City bombing, it is extremely difficult to detect and stop an individual or small group.

These changes are what lead counter terrorism analysts to talk about a concept of “new terrorism.” Terrorists just need more blood to get us to notice them. They are bloodier, less organized, and using asymmetrical methods. I’m personally not a big fan of the term “new terrorism,” since I wonder what we will call the changes in terrorism 20 years from now? Perhaps then we will call it the “New and improved terrorism”? But how has it really changed?

Yes, terrorism is indeed bloodier, but part of that is a reflection of our own desensitization, and not because of exotic weapons. Suicide terrorism is better at obtaining a bigger body count, but that is just because the terrorist can use his or her brain to locate the best target. Remember, Brian Jenkins said, “terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead.” But how many dead are we talking about? There still are a lot more people watching the actions of terrorists than there are victims. Perhaps Brian Jenkins is still correct. Terrorists might need a few more dead bodies to capture our attention now, but they still want to use dead bodies to send a message, rather than create the apocalypse.

TODAY AND 15 YEARS FROM NOW

So, where are we today and where are we going to be 15 years from now? I am no prophet or fortuneteller, but I can safely say two things: 1) terrorism is not going away, and 2) terrorism will continue to evolve. That is just nature.

Currently the concern is with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or as our military calls it—Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This is one of the natural shifts that we see in terrorism as time goes by. Al Qaeda in the past has been more cautious, looking at bigger and more symbolic attacks. AQ 1.0 was more interested in big issues and

did not consider taking territory. ISIS on the other hand is bold, quick acting, and wanting to take and hold territory for its own. These changes in tactics and strategy led to conflict between AQ 1.0 and ISIS, one of its former franchises. In February of this year, ISIS cut ties with al Qaeda and is moving on its own, no longer a franchise, but a separate and wholly unique organization.

What is compelling about ISIS, is not just its ability to have taken over so much territory so quickly, but in its unabashed way of turning its back on AQ, it has stepped out of bin Laden's shadow and stepped into its own lime-light. Yes, government leaders, the public, and the media are watching ISIS, but so too are other terrorist organizations. Now these smaller organizations have two examples that they might follow: AQ or ISIS. Already, other organizations are voicing their support to ISIS. The question for the future is whether terrorists will follow a calculating AQ model or a bold ISIS model.

Fifteen years ago when I spoke here, I advocated a common-sense/pragmatic approach to the threat of WMD terrorism in order to avoid the hype and over-reaction. I was pleased that some of the things I recommended, which were integrated in the Gilmore Commission's reports, were being integrated across the country in 1999. Then, two years later, we had the September 11th attacks, and our perspective radically changed. We are a reactive people, and we tend to overreact and fixate on our last threat. Currently, we are more concerned with Ebola than other threats, although Ebola is something I don't lose too much sleep over.

So often we over-react and we desire to "quarantine everyone." Remember after 9/11 when we were told to buy plastic sheeting and duct-tape? Yep, classic over-reaction. Yet we can also go in the opposite direction and become jaded and overly skeptical. Last year, while in Washington DC, I attended a conference on future threats by the CATO Institute. I had attended a similar conference by CATO in 1996. I might have saved my time in 2013 if I had only re-read my notes from 17 years before. The same individual from 1996 spoke again in 2013 and said the same thing he said previously, "Why are we so worried about terrorism, when more people die each year in the bathtub?" He had a point. We do overreact to a threat where less Americans die than in bathtubs. But I'm not ready to drink his grape-flavored Kool-Aid just yet.

Do bathtubs intentionally try to kill us? If I knew that my bathtub wanted to kill me, would I step in it each day? If bathtubs were trying to send a message of fear by killing innocent bathers in order to change hygiene policy, then I just might be willing to support efforts to eradicate bathtubs around the world. Okay, so a little too melodramatic, but hype works in both directions. Yes, more people die from other causes, but terrorism is something that is also of concern because of its psychological and political impact, in addition to al Qaeda and ISIS, drawing us into foreign conflicts. Bathtubs tend not to do the same.

CONCLUSION

So what do we do? We need to be pragmatic. We need to avoid the hype, step back, and see terrorism for what it is. Yes, it involves intentional violence to create fear, so what can we do to reduce both the violence and the fear? Only using military means to counter terrorism is like hiring a carpenter to remodel your kitchen armed only with a hammer. We need all the tools possible to assist in this effort: intelligence, diplomacy, humanitarian efforts, international development, public diplomacy, criminal investigation, cooperation in financial institutions, and so on.

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We need to stop talking about a “war on terrorism,” since it is the wrong metaphor. We have declared wars on disease, crime, and poverty. I hate to say this, but we still have disease, crime and poverty, and probably always will. Instead, we need to go back to combating terrorism, or reducing the impact of terrorism. We need to ask ourselves the fundamental questions of what is an acceptable level of terrorist violence that we are willing to live with? Just like crime, we will not eradicate it, but we can reduce it to a level we can accept.

I would plead for pragmatism within our universities in regard to terrorism. Good research should be concrete, push theoretical

boundaries, be original, but also pragmatic! We often forget this in academia. How useful will our research be to the practitioners?

In 2001, prior to the 9/11 bombings, Andrew Silke wrote this:

Research is ultimately aimed at arriving at a level of knowledge and understanding where one can explain why certain events have happened and be able to accurately predict the emergence and outcome of similar events in the future. Terrorism research, however, has failed to arrive at that level of knowledge. (Silke 2001, 1)

Now thirteen years after the September 11th attacks we have mixed results on terrorism research, where prizes for terrorism dissertations are given to those with original ideas, but not necessarily pragmatism. Marc Sageman, one of the leading scholars on terrorism has described a “stagnation of research” (Sageman 2014). I will not go as far as that, since I think we are doing much better in our research that is both innovative and pragmatic. However, I would ask you to question your students if they write or do research about terrorism. “How might the results of your research assist in reducing the threat of terrorism?” If they cannot answer that to your satisfaction, have them think it over again.

I do not see the world falling apart because of terrorism, but I do see us making mistakes that could be avoided with pragmatic thinking and better research. Terrorism is here to stay, but it is up to us to decide how we will approach it. I hope that we avoid the hype and overreaction.

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