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Terrorist Acts, So Far Apart, Still Share Much In Common

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Chechen suicide bombers take 800 hostages in a Moscow theatre. Two men with a rifle roam Virginia and Maryland, killing at will. Islamist bombers turn Bali into a paradise lost.

The three distinct massacres have common denominators. The first, of course, is the death of innocents.

Second, the killers did the unpredictable. Third, authorities failed to act on available information before the attacks.

The main lesson to be learned is a harsh one, says Stephen Sloan, co-author of "Terrorism: Assassins to Zealots."

Counterterrorist agencies lack imagination, says Sloan, a political science professor at the University of Oklahoma. "They never learn the lessons."

"Law enforcement and intelligence agencies, not just in the U.S., suffer institutional Alzheimer's," said Sloan. "Terrorists do not lack imagination."

Terrorists learn quickly from their own mistakes, says Sloan. "They probe weaknesses. They know how to do a lot with little."

They also learn from the mistakes of counterterrorism forces. Said Sloan, "The good guys bring huge force to bear to stop them."

That's a mismatch. "Faith and certitude fuel terrorist imagination. They can go wild," he said.

"We won't know how ready we are for what we can't predict until it happens. It's a failure of imagination."

That failure breeds inside counterterrorism bureaucracies, he says.

"Our intelligence communities and law enforcement agencies are hierarchies. They focus on conventional wisdom," Sloan said.

"They see terrorists as larger than life. They're here. They're there. They're everywhere, like the Scarlet Pimpernel."

TV's Impact

"An event is defined by how it is observed," said Sloan. Terrorists want all the media attention they can get. TV coverage becomes a "force-multiplier."

The snipers and the Chechens "shared an ability, conscious or not, to seize the headlines and maximize their impact."

Intelligence agencies become captives of the hype, says Sloan. But the real action is in "the shadow world."

"We must look at terrorism as being multifront and multidimensional," said Sloan. And global.

The world's intelligence agencies could join to overcome their failures of insight, "but we're not having the level of cooperation or imagination we should have," said Sloan.

The problem begins at home, he says. "We still have feuds among the FBI, CIA, NSA and a partridge in a pear tree. How can we expect international unity?"

Meanwhile, the bad guys are watching and learning. Al-Qaida now knows what a roving sniper can do. Moscow taught terrorists about gas counterattack. Bali showed that placing a car bomb where hospitals are inadequate expands terror's impact.

Terror's Learning Curve

How will terrorists apply their knowledge? "They'll let us know

when they're good and ready," said Sloan.

Others say we need to change the way we think. "We need to learn about the chain of unpredictability and the predictability of unpredictability," said Irene Sanders, head of the Washington Center for Complexity and Public Policy.

Old definitions about terrorism limit imagination, says Sanders. A sniper and an Islamist bomber are both committing terrorist acts.

"Terrorism is a mind-set. It has many faces. It plays itself out in behavior," said Sanders.

What's important is not the label, but our response, she says. Tunnel vision became a problem in the sniper case. "We became focused on eyewitness reports of a white van," Sanders said.

That was human nature at work. Said Sanders, "We looked for the clues that made sense and we began to see what was there."

Think Like The Enemy

To fight terror, we must look for gaps in our thinking, she says. We need to think like the enemy.

"That can mean starting with the most outrageous theory and working backward," Sanders said. "It means following hunches and intuition — like a good reporter."

Instead of looking for a pattern, look at how the pattern is shifting, she suggests. "In the sniper example, the profilers were all wrong."

They were focused on what fit previous cases. "No one could discern a pattern except shooting at the face of America."

Terrorists have the edge because

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“the human mind is infinitely creative,” said Sanders. “We need to think in a strategic, nonlinear way from the outset instead of trusting what we’ve known from the past.”

The trick is to work with missing information. “Follow your own questions,” said Sanders.

“You might tell yourself, ‘This doesn’t feel right. What aren’t we hearing? Where would I go with this?’” Sanders said.

Counterterrorism forces don’t work that way, she says. “Their many analytical tools and levels of confirmation squeeze out unconventional thinking.”

Said Sanders, “We don’t live in a straight-line, cause-and-effect world. We’ve been taught to think that way, but that’s not how things work.”

Sanders added, “We need intuitive ways of thinking to associate events, information and people.”

Predictable responses to attacks help terrorists, she warns. “Terror-

ists adapt to the environments in which they operate.”

That’s what makes recent events so ominous, says Paul Bremer, head of Marsh Crisis Consulting and former U.S. counterterrorism ambassador.

Bremer, head of the National Commission on Terrorism in 2000, said, “Our vulnerabilities are infinite.”

Take the sniper case. “We face the risk that terrorist groups will conclude this was a cost-effective way to tie up a lot of law enforcement and terrorize a large metro area.”

He added, “The problem is the basic asymmetry of offense and defense in terrorism. There’s no way to protect all targets, especially with terrorists living among us.”

CIA's Team Training

The CIA now has “red teams” that imagine terrorist scenarios, he says. “Even if they do that very well, it won’t be good enough.”

Said Bremer, “The only way to win this war is with better intelligence.”

Neither the CIA nor FBI is up to the task, he says.

“The CIA and FBI have not got the message about the need to change their cultures,” Bremer said. He calls for a new agency for domestic intelligence, like Britain’s MI5.

That’s funny, says U.K. terrorism expert Richard Bennett, author of the forthcoming book “Elite Forces: An Encyclopedia of the World’s Most Formidable Secret Armies.”

Britain is thinking about changing MI5 to be more like the FBI, Bennett says. Both models are failures.

“We have allowed our intelligence services to be run by gray little men and women,” he said. “They’re utterly incapable of reacting quickly or in a nonorthodox manner to the unexpected.”

Look to the past, says Bennett.

“Intelligence services need a dramatic overhaul akin to that in 1940 when Churchill, fed up with the civil service, created the Special Operations Executive.”

Churchill gave it a bold mandate, says Bennett. “No rules, no inhibitions, just get the job done and tell me afterward.”