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People Power in the War on Terrorism

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Terrorism and political violence are constants for the foreseeable future and few developed states will be immune to these problems. Dealing with these attacks in such a way that they do not tear apart the social fabric of societies is a key element in destroying the key attribute of terrorist attacks: fear.

Centralised bureaucrats and politicians sometimes have a paternalistic view of the societies in which they operate. They tend to believe that they are the only ones who have the skill and knowledge to tackle the various emergencies and catastrophes that arise in society. To date, there is considerable evidence being collected that suggests the contrary. The first and best responders to a crisis will be those on the front line. Citizens, police and other emergency responders will be the first to face the fight. As such, if their response is positive and constructive, the chances that the crisis will play itself out with lessened catastrophic effects are increased. If the initial response on the front line is panic, however, any follow on response from central authorities may not salvage the situation.

It is the social and technical resilience of society that may be the best weapon in fighting terrorist attacks. And this resilience may be much stronger than is generally believed.

The 11 September 2001 Attacks

In conflict, the use of strategic surprise is generally the weapon of the weaker side. Such was the case with the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US. However, far from achieving the total strategic surprise that the hijackers sought, it can be argued that the effective use of tactical intelligence by the citizenry stopped the momentum of the attacks only 108 minutes after the first indications that something had gone terribly wrong. To use terms from the intelligence community, the intelligence cycle of the passengers on United Airlines flight 93 was operating inside the operational cycle of the hijackers. As such, they were able to defeat them. This defeat played a major role in depriving the hijackers of their goal of disrupting US political capabilities and lessened the shock effects of the attack. Partially as a result of the resilience factors, the overall success of Al-Qaeda's 11 September 2001 mission was not attained. The destruction of the US Capitol building would have had a serious symbolic effect, as great as or greater than that of the loss of the World Trade Center in New York.

The First Signs

According to the 9/11 Commission, the first sign of trouble came at 0814. At that time, the hijackers began to force their way into the cockpit and take command of American Airlines flight 11, which was en-route from Boston to Los Angeles. By 0819, however, flight attendant Betty Ong was able to call an American Airlines reservations office and report that

the flight was in trouble. Only five minutes into the crisis, the social resilience factors were starting to play themselves out and valuable information was being transmitted to the world outside. By 0825, the Boston air traffic control centre was also aware of the problem.

Unfortunately, notwithstanding the professionalism of the flight attendants and others, the shock of the strategic surprise of the hijackers overcame them with the loss of three aircraft and thousands of lives.

The Response

United Airlines flight 93 would have a different outcome, however, partly due to the initial responses of the passengers and crews of the three first flights (American Airlines flight 11, American Airlines flight 77, and United Airlines flight 175) and various ground-based individuals.

It is clear from the 9/11 Commission report that the passengers and crew on board United Airlines flight 93 were able to gain critical information by communicating with airphones and mobile phones. Gathered at the back of the aircraft where they had been forced to gather by the hijackers, the passengers analysed the information available to them and took action - all of this without direction from central authorities.

At approximately 0957, the passengers of United Airlines 93 started a sustained and determined counter-attack against the hijackers in the cockpit. This was only 103 minutes after the beginning of one of the most shocking examples of strategic surprise. Al-Qaeda's opposition forces reacted and turned the battle back in the other direction. The passengers of flight United Airlines 93 had put themselves directly into the battle - successfully. At 1002, the flight came to a halt when it crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. This was 108 minutes after the first sign of the crisis.

It should be remembered that the costs of getting into the fight were frighteningly high, with a 100 per cent casualty rate on the flight.

Social Resilience and Gumption

For any hijack to succeed, the hijackers must be able to generate a sense of powerlessness in their victims while also reducing the amount of information available to them in order to ensure this state is maintained. By disempowering their victims, hijackers are better placed to keep them docile and compliant. In the case of the United Airlines flight 93, the hijackers were unable to do either.

Their failure to do so was chiefly due to the resilience and gumption of their intended victims. If resilience is composed of the four factors of knowing, judging, engaging and acting, all four factors were exhibited on that flight.

The successful defence mounted by the passengers of the United Airlines flight exhibited a large degree of both social resilience and technical adaptation permitting them to empower themselves by:

- knowing what was happening
- judging the situation at hand
- formulating a plan together
- acting out the decided action.

The combination of these factors enabled the passengers to take back what the hijackers

intended to remove from them - their autonomy and their access to information.

By using the technology at hand, that is, mobile and airphone telephone networks, the passengers were permitted to obtain the minimal basic information they needed to undertake a course of action. They were able to deduce that this was not a "typical" hijacking in which the aircraft would be landed and they would be involved in some sort of hostage crisis followed by a negotiated settlement. On the contrary, all the evidence suggests that the passengers understood that they were going to die as part of a suicide attack.

With regard to social resilience, although it is a term normally associated with a community's ability to respond positively when a massive trauma is experienced, it may be argued here that the actions of the passengers is an allegory for how most societies should react to acts of terrorism. Instead of waiting for the first responders in an emergency, these passengers understood that there was no foreseeable aid on the way and action had to be taken.

Lessons Learned?

Strategic surprise has been a constant throughout history. Institutionalised intelligence services have not prevented surprise attacks in the past and it is unlikely that they will eliminate them anytime in the future. Newer methodologies such as risk assessment and horizon scanning will alert leaders to the upcoming types of problems and aid them in the response, but discreet events will still cause strategic surprise.

The passengers of United Airlines 93 showed that it is possible for a society to react to surprise, defeat an attacker and regain the initiative in the fight almost immediately, no matter how shocking the event. The immediate and effective response, it should be noted, did not come from formal government decision-making structures such as the military or the police. Nor did the initial response come from informal or impromptu state formations. The response came from the citizens on the scene. This self-emerging group of leaders and followers provided the first line of defence and reaction.

Given the wide range of threats that governments face, such as terrorism, pandemics, natural disasters and man-made calamities, governments take into account the fact that the first responders - and the basis of the survival of their social fabric - might well depend on the immediate actions undertaken by citizens who operate on the front line. The social and technical aspects of resilience have their strength from the ground up - not from the top down. The actual event, as was noted above, is not really the issue. The response and how it unfolds is the issue.

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