Can We Win the War on Terror?

Daniel Modell, Lieutenant (ret.), New York City Police Department

Terrorism and Rapid Mass Murder seem to be permanent, lurking shadows darkening the stage of modern politics. Experts weave a nest of causes, from untempered religious orthodoxy and the moral queasiness of the West to historical grievance and the internet as a mechanism for radicalization, among others. All, perhaps, carry their measure of truth. I would like to suggest that whatever volatile mix of causes accounts for the menace of terrorism, as a practical matter, the problem is intractable. The prevailing structure of our institutions offers no response to it.

The issue is best framed by contrasting the organizational dynamics of terrorist groups and the government agencies purporting to foil them.

Terrorist groups have adapted to ensure their survival as conditions have demanded. As governments identify and freeze assets, terrorist groups have retreated from layered operations involving dense logistics and significant training requiring substantial expense (as in, say, the 1972 Munich Olympics) and instead recruit untrained, aimless, youths with few prospects (in some cases, indeed, *purchasing* the youths from their parents—as in Mumbai) and giving guns or strapping bombs to them and then depositing them in populated areas at little expense to the organization. More vexing still, terrorist groups have honed the skill of recruiting such prospects remotely via the internet, exploiting angst and anger, playing on the desire to belong and inspiring with fiery rhetoric. With minimal guidance, encouraging makeshift, independent action, the group excites the recruit to grab a knife or rent a vehicle and attack a crowd of innocents—at no cost to the terrorist organization. It lives beyond the frozen assets.

The terrorist group also lavishes praise on those who commit acts of terror in its name even if, in some conventional sense, the act is a relative failure. The terrorist lives on as a hero in the institutional memory of the organization. Family of the terrorist is lauded, even supported financially in some cases. This excites a potent sense of loyalty and belonging among adherents.

Likewise, established bases of operation are prone to discovery and destruction by the superior military power of state-actors. Terrorist groups adapt. They have become more fluid in their operational structure; more remote in their communications; more nimble in their movement. As a related point, strictly centralized hierarchies can be identified and eliminated. So, terrorist groups have become more de-centralized, more loosely networked and more ghostlike. Terrorist groups have evolved to skirt destruction.

Now compare the organizational structure of government agencies purporting to answer the menace of terrorism. There are no external conditions compelling an agency to adapt and evolve as terrorist groups must. The *survival* of the agency is not subject to "market" forces in this sense. The FBI (ATF, DEA, ICE, NYPD) is not going out of business,

whether or not it succeeds in its mandates. It may find itself subject to greater or lesser criticism, it may invite more or less scrutiny but its survival is not at stake in any meaningful sense. This fundamental fact about bureaucracy means that it tends to perpetuate its own status quo (cosmetic alteration around its periphery notwithstanding). The difference between the two types of organization is urgent and telling. If a terrorist group fails to evolve, it perishes. If an agency fails to perform, it gets scolded.

Let's dig a little deeper into the weeds. Bureaucracy bathes in process, protocol and procedure. To take an example, between its Department Manual and Administrative Guide, the NYPD carries some two thousand pages of mind-numbing rules from detailing the kind of facial hair personnel can sport to specifying the color of ink approved for activity log entries (my point is not to single out the NYPD—differences across agencies are a matter of degree, not of kind). Under the stranglehold of protocol, discretion starves and independence fades, lip service from executives pandering to the public notwithstanding. As I wrote in *The Warrior's Manifesto: Ideals for Those Who Protect and Defend*:

"As organizations evolve, so, too, does the weight of administration, and if the weight reaches critical mass, propagating itself in a furnace of officialism, the cumulative gravity powered by that weight, by the red tape and the number crunching and the procedural minutiae and the data hoarding, explodes into a black hole of bureaucracy, that bloated monstrosity that consumes identity, humanity, responsibility and decisiveness alike; mashes them through its reeking digestive tract; and excretes through its bowels process, protocol and paper in their stead."

Bureaucracy requires compliance, not discretion; obedience, not independence; rule-following, not innovation. To operate within a rigid and circumscribed system of rules requires a strict kind of subordination and stratification. In a brilliant thesis, "State Bureaucracy: Entropic Organization in the Age of 4th Generation Warfare," Sergeant Russell Jung details the dysfunction wrought by this form of organization under a range of circumstances across generations. Around the rigid system of rule and subordination, a dense architecture swells to administer it: units and sub-units; sections and sub-sections; bureaus and sub-bureaus; departments and sub-departments with correlative unit and sub-unit managers, section and sub-section managers, bureau and sub-bureau managers in a stratified hierarchy crowned with a politically appointed overlord at its apex.

The result may be order of a kind but it is not very meaningful order. It is the order of the entrenched, the slow, the bloated and the inflexible. To a greater or lesser degree, everyone has experienced the net result of it all. Have you ever been staggered by the stunning swiftness and efficacy of an experience at the Department of Motor Vehicles or the Post Office (or some other agency, if you prefer)? The issue here is manifestly *not* the inherent competence of individual employees; it is, rather, a function of the rigid system within which they must operate. There is no meaningful *structural* difference between these agencies and those that focus on a particular kind of enforcement (differences in nomenclature—in how you refer to the layer upon layer of managerial dross—are unimportant). A difference in mission does not entail a difference in mechanism, in fact or in theory.

Returning to the primary theme: under the bureaucratic system of organization, what happens to information about a possible terrorist attack (or other terrible event) when it is presented? First, the information is recorded and categorized according to prescribed rules. Second, *if* the information goes any further, it ends up on the desk of an investigator who has a stack of other cases to dispose of in accordance with prescribed protocols and paper and coding to track and justify the disposition. As in all bureaucracies, the performance of the investigator is judged by how many cases he clears and how quickly, that is, in accordance with quantitative metrics, so the pressure is to dispose in quantity not in the quality of the investigation. The investigator knows that much of this sort of information amounts to nothing and, in any case, that his supervisor (or the supervisor of his supervisor) does not want to be burdened with it. So, perhaps the information dies. Even if the investigator believes that the information is actionable and pushes it up the dense hierarchy, each successive manager, to a greater or lesser extent, will subject the recommendation for further action to a visceral, political calculus (What happens if we're wrong? What effect will it have on my status within the organization? What if the subject of the information is connected to a group, class or ethnicity that might breed accusations of racism, xenophobia or profiling? After all, isn't the most important thing to protect the organization?). Given the rigid hierarchy, the miracle is that anything ever gets done.

People are understandably outraged when they discover that the FBI or a municipal police agency had access to information about a possible terrorist attack (as in 9/11) or a Rapid Mass Murder event (as in Parkland, Florida) and failed to develop or act upon it. They demand investigations, often from the same bureaucracy that failed or, what is just as bad, from *another* bureaucracy of the same type. Committees are convened—another standard bureaucratic distraction. An individual, or a few, from within the organization are marginalized and culpability is assigned—as if an individual or two could *possibly* account for the failure. But the placebo of the disgraced individual satisfies the public, nourishes the bureaucracy, and things remain more or less as they were. I would ask why anyone expects anything other than what in fact happens in these cases.

A bloated, centralized, rigid, process-obsessed organization that hobbles when it should sprint will never defeat a lean, de-centralized, nimble and fluid adversary, fitted to adapt as circumstances demand.

These differences portend dark days. And I would caution anyone against finding hope in the perennial, boasting reassurances of politically appointed functionaries who promise change. Bureaucracies don't change. Neither do bureaucrats. Cosmetic alterations around the periphery, new departments, new committees, merely attach themselves like barnacles to the obese status quo. The solution is not to *change* the entrenched organizational structure but to *raze* it. The price for continuing to *talk* change while fundamentally preserving our existing architecture is the red pool of gore that terrorists exact in every corner of this world.