Preparing for Terror Attacks: The Case for the Case Method

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Acts of terror disrupt routines. In particular, they disrupt the routines of those who are charged with responding to such attacks. Whether they are police officers or members of the armed forces, aviators or merchant mariners, such people spend most of their professional lives engaging problems other than terrorism. Thus, when acts of terror take place, they have to act in ways that are strange to them.

Acts of terror are so disruptive of routines because they are rare. Between 1 January 2001 and 31 December 2010, only one terrorist attack took place in Norway. In the same decade, Denmark experienced three acts of terror. However, only one of these incidents, an attempt to set fire to the home of a cabinet minister, posed any danger to life or limb.¹

Sweden had a somewhat different experience of terrorism. In the first full decade of the twenty-first century, six acts of terror took place on Swedish soil. Thus, on average, Swedish authorities had to deal with one terrorist attack every twenty months. However, three of these attacks were the work of the same group of people («Global Intifada») over the course of a short period of time (21 December 2004 to 23 March 2005), thereby forming part of a single terror operation. Thus, rather than responding to six discrete incidents, Swedish national authorities dealt with four distinct operations. This, in turn, increased the average interval between significant events from twenty months to thirty months.

Of course, not all countries are as fortunate as the three Scandinavian kingdoms. Between 1 January 2001 and 31 December 2010, the United Kingdom suffered thirty-three terrorist attacks. As eight of these were single acts of terror and six consisted of several separate attacks, British national authorities found

¹ All of the data on terror incidents used in this article comes from the RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents, which can be found at the following website: http://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/terrorism-incidents.html.
themselves dealing with a total of fourteen distinct operations. Thus, on average, British national authorities were faced with one terror operation every eight or nine months.

As the vast majority of terror attacks that occurred within the United Kingdom took place in London, the experience of that great city was comparable to that of the United Kingdom as a whole. To be more specific, the municipal authorities of London dealt with four terror campaigns and five separate attacks, and thus, on average, one terror operation every thirteen months. Conversely, the concentration of terror attacks in a single metropolis meant that, for the fifty police departments responsible for public safety in those parts of the United Kingdom other than London, the situation with regard to terror attacks was more ‘Scandinavian’ than ‘British.’

Outside of London, the vast majority of British police departments (forty-four out of fifty) had no direct experience of terrorism whatsoever. Of the six police departments that had to respond to acts of terror, one dealt with four such attacks, two dealt with two attacks apiece, and four each dealt with single acts. Thus, on average, each of the British police departments outside of London with direct experience of acts of terror dealt with one such incident every five years.

Formal Doctrine

When dealing with the problems that they face on a regular basis, organizations are able to learn from their own experience. They are able to customize conventions, adjust attitudes, refine rules, and tailor techniques. When, however, organizations prepare for problems that happen infrequently, they are unable to do this. Instead, they must resort to conventions that have not been customized, attitudes that have not been adjusted, rules that have not been refined, and techniques that have not been tailored. In other words, they must make use of some kind of formal doctrine.

Embodied in handbooks and training materials, formal doctrine provides an organization with an approved set of conventions, attitudes, rules, and techniques for dealing with particular situations. It may have much in common with the working doctrine of an organization: the conventions, attitudes, rules, and techniques that are transmitted through the «folk culture» of the organization. Indeed, in cases where an organization is preparing itself to deal with an unfamiliar problem, formal doctrine serves as a substitute for working doctrine.

The easiest way for an organization to acquire formal doctrine is to import it. That is, it may copy the formal doctrine created by (or for) another organization
of a similar type. It may be provided with formal doctrine by a central authority. It may even purchase handbooks and training materials from a private firm. Whatever the source of the formal doctrine, importation allows an organization to quickly acquire an approved set of conventions, attitudes, rules, and techniques for responding to terror attacks. Importation offers the further advantage of promoting the use of common terminology. (This is particularly true when the doctrine is provided by a central authority.)

Unfortunately, formal doctrine created for one organization may not meet the needs of another. Indeed, given the fact that the terror operations carried out in one place are often very different from those perpetrated in another, handbooks and training materials based on one kind of terror operation may do a poor job of preparing people to deal with another. Indeed, the differences between different terrorist groups are such that imported doctrine may even be counter-productive.

Just how different terror groups, operations, and techniques can be from one another can be seen in the experience of two British police departments during the ten years that started on 1 January 2001. In this decade, all six the terror attacks that took place in the area served by the Thames Valley Police were the work of an organization that called itself the ‘Animal Liberation Front’. While as willing as any other terrorists to cause death and injury to others, terrorists claiming membership in that organization have demonstrated no desire whatsoever to take part in suicide missions. In the same period, both of the terror attacks that took place in the city of Glasgow were car bombings were the work of Islamists who expected to die in the explosions that they set off.

An organization that imported doctrine based on the experience of the Thames Valley Police would be well prepared for a certain kind of terrorism. That is, they would expect to deal with letter bombs and arson attacks, but neither car bombs nor shootings. They would expect attacks to be preceded by threatening letters and telephone calls. They would look for attacks aimed at particular individuals and institutions rather than the public at large. And they would expect that terror attacks would be part of a larger campaign of intimidation that also included legal activities (such as peaceful demonstrations) and

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2 Well known to fans of the fictional detectives Inspector Morse and Sergeant Lewis, the Thames Valley Police serves the populations of three English counties: Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, and Berkshire.

3 It is important to note here that I have no knowledge of the conventions, attitudes, rules, or techniques adopted by any of the British police departments discussed in this article. Thus, my description of doctrine that might be derived from the experience of either the Thames Valley Police or the Strathclyde Police should not be confused with the actual doctrine of those organizations at any point in time.
crimes of other sorts (which ranged from vandalism to the theft of human re-
 mains from a cemetery.)

By way of contrast, an organization that imported doctrine based upon the ex-
perience of the Strathclyde Police in the same period would develop a very
different set of conventions, attitudes, rules, and techniques. Rather than pre-
paring for a campaign of intimidation aimed at particular institutions, it would look
for isolated attacks aimed at society in general. Rather than associating acts of
terror with the lunatic fringe of the animal rights movement, it would link them
to the most extreme elements of political Islam. Rather than dealing with relatively small firebombs of the sort that were left in buildings or under cars, it
would look for larger explosive devices that were built into automobiles.

A General Theory of Terrorism

One alternative to the importation of formal doctrine would be the use of a gen-
eral theory of terrorism. Such a general theory would provide a general descrip-
tion of the phenomena of terrorism, a thorough understanding of the inner work-
ings of terrorist groups, and an overarching explanation of the relationship be-
tween terrorism and other phenomena. This general theory would also make it
possible to deduce measures for preventing acts of terror, responding to acts of
terror, and dealing with terrorist groups. Indeed, when combined with excellent
local intelligence, a general theory of terrorism would provide an organization
with everything that it needed to develop its own set of conventions, attitudes,
rules, and techniques.

Unfortunately, the social sciences are not nearly as well developed as the
natural sciences. Thus, a general theory of terrorism is not likely to make its ap-
pearance at any time in the near future. There may be things that purport to be
general theories of terrorism. These, however, will inevitably be based on such a
small sample of events that they might better be described as «theories of terror-
ism in a given place and time» or even «theories that explain a given terror oper-
ation or terrorist group». Because of this, there is a good chance that a limited
theory of terrorism will, like imported doctrine, will do a poor job of preparing a
given organization for the particular terror operations it will have to deal with.

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4 For more on the terror attacks and other activities of the Animal Liberation Front in the first decade of the
twenty-first century, see, among others, Rosie Murray-West, «Animal Rights Activists in New Wave of At-

5 Familiar to viewers of the long-running television program Taggart, the Strathclyde Police was the police
department that had jurisdiction over the city of Glasgow during the years between 1975 and 2013.
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To further complicate matters, terrorism is a dynamic phenomenon. Old terrorists go away, new terrorists appear, and existing terrorists adopt new methods, change locations, and react to counter-measures. Thus, even if a set of conventions, attitudes, rules, and techniques adopted by an organization proves well suited to a given place and time, it is likely to have a relatively short shelf life. The same is true for a general theory. Even if such a theory manages to make sense of the terror operations of the past, there is no guarantee that it will provide the same service in the future.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, a substantial number of the terror attacks that took place in the United Kingdom (fifteen out of thirty seven) were the work of groups that claimed descent from the Irish Republican Army. In the decade that followed, a much smaller proportion of the terror attacks that took place in Great Britain and Northern Ireland (five out of thirty-four) were the work of such groups. All five of those attacks, moreover, took place in 2001, the first year of that decade. Thus, the most prolific source of terror attacks in the eleven years leading up to 31 December 2001 conducted no terror attacks whatsoever in the nine years that followed.

The two most active types of terrorists of the first decade of the twenty-first century played a much more modest role in the preceding decade. Between 1 January 1991 and 31 December 2000, only of the thirty-seven terror attacks carried out in the United Kingdom were perpetrated in the name of animal rights. In the ten years that followed, the champions of animal rights were responsible for nearly a quarter (nine out of thirty-four) of the acts of terror that took place on British soil. Similarly, while Islamists were clearly tied to only two of the terror attacks executed in the United Kingdom in the last decade of the twentieth century, they were the authors of nearly a third (eleven out of thirty-four) of the acts of terror that took place in Great Britain in the following decade.

Case Studies

A third approach to the problem of preparing for terrorist attacks involves the use of case studies. That is, an organization preparing to deal with the possibility of terrorism would study the histories of specific terror operations in much the same way as the general staffs of the late nineteenth century studied the great campaigns of the past. In particular, organizations using this approach to prepare for terrorist attacks would use two types of case studies: retrospective case studies and decision-forcing case studies.
A retrospective case study is a complete account of a given event. Indeed, the ideal retrospective case study so complete that it allows the reader to see the event in question from a number of different perspectives. (An excellent example of a comprehensive case study is provided by Graham Allison’s *Essence of Decision*, a book that looks at the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 from three very different points of view.)\(^6\) A retrospective case study is also complete where the course of the narrative is concerned. That is, it provides a great deal of information about the aftermath of the events in question and, in particular, the consequences, both short term and long term, of the many decisions that were taken.

While a retrospective case study provides a comprehensive narrative, a decision-forcing case is necessarily a partial account. That is, it is a story told from the perspective of a single person («the protagonist») that ends at the point in time where that person is faced with an important decision. A decision-forcing case, moreover, is necessarily a classroom exercise. That is, while the reading of a retrospective case study can be an end in itself, the reading of a decision-forcing case serves chiefly as preparation for a Socratic conversation. This is a discussion in which a facilitator asks participants to describe, explain, and, in the end, solve the problem faced by the protagonist.

When a reader reads a retrospective case, he does so from the point of view of an objective observer who enjoys the benefit of hindsight. (It is this hindsight that gives the retrospective case its name.) In other words, he is an outsider who is looking back at a completed event. When, however, a person works through a decision-forcing case, he takes on the role of the protagonist and, in doing so, makes himself part of an event that has yet to run its course. Because of this, a decision-forcing case often begins with such expressions as «you are … », «your name is …» and «the year is …». Moreover, in sharp contrast to other sorts of histories, decision-forcing cases are invariably written in the present tense.

As an outsider who knows the end of the story, the reader of a retrospective case devotes much of his attention to analysis. That is, the retrospective case study tells the reader what happened, thereby leaving him with the question of why things turned out the way that they did. Because of this, a retrospective case is also called an «analytic case».

By way of contrast, the participant in a decision-forcing case is primarily engaged in an act of synthesis. That is, he must first make use of what little information he has to make sense of what is going on. That done, he uses his evaluation to take a decision, offer a solution, sketch out a plan, or provide the broad

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\(^6\) Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1971)
outlines of a design. To put things another way, a «decision-forcing case» might just as easily be called «evaluation-forcing case» or a «synthesis-forcing case».

One of the great case teachers of the early twentieth century, the future French field marshal Ferdinand Foch, was in the habit of asking his students «de quoi s'agit-il».7 Variousy translated as «what is going on here», «what is the heart of the problem» and «what is this all about». This question was, in effect, a demand for a rapid evaluation of the situation that, in turn, would lead to an equally rapid decision. In fact, the evaluation of the situation is so closely coupled to a decision that many case teachers skip the question made famous by Foch and go straight to such questions as «what is your plan», «what is your solution», «what are your orders» and «what are you going to do».

A Way to Use Case Studies

If it is sufficiently comprehensive, a retrospective case study can serve as the basis of a series of decision-forcing cases, each of which asks participants to solve a particular problem from the perspective of a particular protagonist. In other words, a retrospective case study can be compared a Lego™ set that is big enough to create either one large model or a wide variety of smaller ones. Indeed, some authors of retrospective case studies write them in a way that facilitates the use of sections as decision-forcing cases. These are like the Lego™ boxed sets that contains a number of plastic bags, each of which holds the pieces needed to build one of the many buildings, vehicles, or creatures that make up the model as a whole.

In 1931, a German military officer published a book called The Army and the Navy in the Conquest of the Baltic Islands in October 1917: Lessons and Observations.8 At first glance, this book appears to be an ordinary monograph on the subject of Operation Albion, the first successful amphibious operation of the First World War. Upon closer inspection, however, it is clear that each chapter of the book is, in fact, a decision forcing case study. That is, each chapter describes the problem faced by a given decision-maker and ends at the point at which that person made a significant decision. In doing this, each chapter also describes the results of the decisions made in previous chapters, thus turning a series of decision-forcing cases into a single retrospective case study. Thus, while it was possible to use The Army and the Navy in the Conquest of the Baltic

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Islands as the basis for a well-ordered series of classroom exercises, it was also possible to use the book as a comprehensive account of the operation as a whole.

In the 1930s, officers of the United States Army, Navy, and Marine Corps used The Army and the Navy in the Conquest of the Baltic Islands as a means of exploring the problems of amphibious warfare. It is not known if any of these officers employed the chapters as decision-forcing cases. There is much evidence, however, of the book being translated, circulated, read, and discussed. Indeed, such was the interest in the book that, soon after it was published in Germany, two American officers, neither of whom seems to have known about the other, made translations of the work.⁹

The American officers studying Operation Albion also had access to many of the records created by the German forces involved in the landings on the Baltic Islands. These, which were located and (in some cases) translated by American officers working in the German military archives, provided many technical details that were missing from The Army and the Navy in the Conquest of the Baltic Islands. (These included detailed load plans for ships and landing craft, detailed orders of battle, and many of the actual orders issued before, during, and after the operation.)¹⁰

The U.S. armed forces adopted a number of conventions, attitudes, rules, and techniques used in Operation Albion. Nonetheless, the officers who studied The Army and the Navy in the Conquest of the Baltic Islands were not slavish imitators. For them, Operational Albion was neither an ideal to be replicated nor the illustration of any particular theory, but a rich source of concrete examples. That is, Operation Albion provided the American students of amphibious warfare with the means of moving their exploration from the realm of theory and speculation into the realm of concrete discussion, planning, and experimentation. Thus, rather than discussing disembodied ideas and abstract concepts, they were able to refer to specific people, problems, places, and procedures.

The study of Operation Albion was greatly enhanced by the concurrent study of the Gallipoli campaign. Like Operation Albion, the British landing at Gallipoli was an attempt to use landing forces to overcome a maritime fortress by attacking it from the landward side. Thus, there were lots of opportunities to compare the different approaches used to solve similar problems. At the same time, there were substantial differences between the two operations, the most im-

⁹ One of these translations, by Colonel Henry Hossfeld of the US Army War College in Washington, was published. The other, by Major Samuel Cumming of the US Marine Corps, was not. Copies of both translations can be found at the Library of the Marine Corps in Quantico, Virginia.

¹⁰ These copies can be found in the US National Archives (Archives II) at College Park, Maryland. RG 165, Historical Section, US Army War College, German World War I Military Records.
important of which was the quality of the opposing forces. While the Russian forces stationed on the Baltic Islands were burdened with low morale and ineffective leadership, the Ottoman troops defending the Gallipoli peninsula were both highly motivated and extremely well led.

The materials on the Gallipoli campaign available to American officers were different from those that dealt with Operation Albion. There was no work comparable to *The Army and the Navy in the Conquest of the Baltic Islands*. Neither were there any archival documents. Nonetheless, the literature on the British landings at Gallipoli was considerable. Therefore, American students of amphibious warfare were able to obtain an understanding of that campaign that was sufficiently sophisticated to permit the making of useful comparisons between many different aspects of the Gallipoli campaign and comparable features of Operation Albion.

The German landings of the Baltic Islands and the British landings at Gallipoli were not the only amphibious operations studied by American officers during the 1930s. Nonetheless, they were the only two operations that were studied both intensively and extensively. As such, they provided the framework for a discussion of amphibious warfare that was simultaneously forward looking and rooted in recent experience, both visionary and concrete. This discussion, in turn, prepared the US Army, Navy, and Marine Corps to conduct a wide variety of amphibious operations, few of which had much in common with either the Gallipoli landings or Operation Albion.

**A Program**

The use of case studies to prepare the US Armed Forces for the challenge of amphibious warfare suggests a program for preparing a present-day organization for the challenge of terror attacks. As with the American experience, the starting point for such a program is the intensive study of two terror operations. Ideally, each of these «reference operations» would be the subject of a book written in the same manner as *The Army and the Navy in the Conquest of the Baltic Islands*. However, as such works do not yet exist, a reasonable substitute can be found in a collection of materials on each operation.

Once the materials on the subject of the reference operation have been collected, the next step is the creation of a series of decision-forcing cases. Some of these will look at particular events from the point of view of the terrorists. Others will look at the same events from the point of view of those who are trying to prevent a terror attack, capture the terrorists, or mitigate damage. Indeed, the key
to the developing a sophisticated understanding of each terror operation is the experience of looking at its component parts from a number of different points of view.

In addition to this, decision-forcing cases will provide an engaging and effective way to teach a wide variety of skills. Indeed, with a little bit of planning, the decision-forcing cases can substitute for classes of other sorts. Thus, the benefits of a common understanding of the reference operations can be gained without increasing the amount of time that people spend on training.

Once a sufficient number of people in an organization have become familiar with the two reference cases, they will be able to use them as a means of making sense of the challenges that they face. They can say «this possibility is like our first reference operation» or «that danger has much in common with such-and-such part of our second reference operation». In other words, rather than dealing in abstractions or dogma, they will be able to discuss concrete measures for dealing with specific problems.

The case method is not a panacea. It will not cure the disease of terrorism. Neither will it allow us to avoid the hard work of preparing our organizations for the challenge of dealing with terror attacks. Nonetheless, the thoughtful combination of retrospective cases and decision-forcing cases will allow an organization to prepare for terrorist operations in a way that is practical, flexible, and inherently interesting.

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