How to Defeat Terrorism

Terrorism is a tactic used by a small set of extremists to fight against an overwhelmingly powerful opponent while surrounded by a large population that mostly just wants peace and quiet.

by Benjamin Kuipers

Terrorism can be defeated. To do this, first we need to understand how terrorists are kept away in the best case, then how terrorists can fight against this mechanism, and finally what works and what doesn't work to foil those aims.

THE THIN BLUE LINE

Although terrorists are not merely criminals, it is helpful to think about what keeps criminals under control in our society. Ask any police officer: it is not the police and the courts who keep criminals at bay. It is the society as a whole. It is the ordinary people who call the police when they hear a problem starting. It is the ordinary people who trust the police and cooper–ate with them to bring criminals to justice. The "thin blue line" only works when it is backed up by the vast majority of ordinary people.

This, by the way, is why police brutality is so damaging to law and order in our society. If ordi–nary people lose trust in the police, they won't call and they won't cooperate. If they fear that calling the police to quiet down a loud party could result in their neighbors' kids being shot dead, they won't call. And they also won't cooperate in more serious cases. Without community backup, the "thin blue line" starts to feel very thin indeed. And criminals become bolder.

Likewise with terrorists. Terrorists are defeated when the large majority of the community feel that they can trust the local authorities to maintain law and order and work for the common good. Then ordinary people will turn the terrorists in to the authorities when, or even before, they strike.

The "thin blue line" only works when it is backed up by the vast majority of ordinary people.

The Unabomber was an insane but highly intelligent man living alone in the woods, writing a manifesto and killing and maiming people with mail bombs. After his manifesto was published, he was turned in to the FBI by his brother, who recognized the writing and made the correct but agonizing decision to be loyal to society over blood. We can only wish that a relative or neighbor of Timothy McVeigh had been in a position to make a similar decision before he struck in Oklahoma City.

In even the best, most civilized, law-abiding society one can imagine, there will be small numbers of extremists tempted by terrorist tactics. Ideally, the vast majority of people will see them as marginal nut-cases, and will report them to trusted authorities if they show signs of turning extreme ideas into dangerous action. Terrorist acts can never be totally eliminated, but a cohesive community that trusts its authorities can defeat a continuing terrorist movement.

ONE MAN'S TERRORIST IS ANOTHER MAN'S FREEDOM-FIGHTER.

But what if the society is not civilized? What if the authorities are hated and feared rather than trusted? Then the true terrorist can always find support and hiding places among sympathizers who are not willing to become terrorists themselves, but are not willing to support the authorities either.

Terrorist acts can never be totally eliminated, but a cohesive community that trusts its authorities can defeat a continuing terrorist movement.

The terrorists' best strategy is to drive a wedge between the people and the authorities. Then the "thin blue line" becomes thinner and weaker. The ordinary people, or at least some of them, protect and support those they see as fighting for freedom, religious faith, patriotism, or some other deep value, against overwhelming odds.

The biggest danger to the terrorist is the trust the people have in the authorities. As that trust is weakened or destroyed, the terrorists gain strength and freedom of action. Their prime goal must be to eliminate the trust between the people and the authorities.

How can they act most effectively to eliminate that trust? Here is where the meaning of terrorist violence is often misunderstood. The classic terrorist act is to blow up some innocent victims. But the actual destruction is not the goal, in a military sense. There is a symbolic

goal of showing that the more-powerful enemy can be touched and deeply harmed, but even that is not the real goal.

The real goal is to provoke massive retaliation. The tiny group of terrorists who actually committed the act may escape entirely, may take casualties, or may even be entirely destroyed, but the larger terrorist movement feeds on the retaliation. The important thing (from the

The biggest danger to the terrorist is the trust the people have in the authorities.

terrorists' perspective) is for the massive retaliation to harm many people in the general population, even among their own supporters.

The point is to incite the authorities to act in a way that erodes the people's trust in them. The people lose trust, the terrorists are seen as freedom-fighters, and they gain support, cover, strength, and freedom of action.

From the terrorists' perspective, the more horrible the original strike the better, since it will provoke a more drastic retaliation. And the more horrible the retaliation the better, since it will destroy the people's trust in the authorities and strengthen the terrorists. From the terrorists' perspective, the actual damage to their own people is a benefit, not a cost, of terrorist action.

THOSE WHO DO NOT LEARN FROM HISTORY ARE CONDEMNED TO REPEAT IT

Sadly, case studies of this strange dynamic are easy to come by, once you realize what to look for.

ISRAEL-PALESTINE

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is a textbook case. There is no military benefit to a suicide bomber killing people at a cafe, a wedding, or on a bus. The benefit to Hamas comes from the massive retaliation, killing the innocent along with the guilty, bulldozing homes and farms, and creating major economic hardship for the large masses of Palestinians who would gladly live in peace with Israel. Israel pegs the price of peace to stopping the terrorists, which ordinary Palestinians have no way of doing. And the immediate impact of the retaliation is to solidify hatred against the Israelis. (We're long past the point of talking about "trust" here.)

So, Hamas has reached the successful point of being able to provoke the Israeli Army to act to build up its strength among the Palestinians. The vicious cycle in that region is that hard-liners in Israel use precisely the same method. When Israeli extremists create new settlements in Palestinian territory, or commit terrorist acts against ordinary Palestinians, they provoke the strongest retaliation the Palestinians are capable of, which is more suicide bombers to slaughter innocents among the ordinary people of Israel. This eliminates any trust in the Palestinian authorities (small "a"), and solidifies hatred against Palestine. This elegant pair of mutually-reinforcing feedback cycles strengthens terrorism on both sides, and makes the chances for peace remote.

IRAQ

Now let's think about Iraq. Terrorists strike US troops, provoking retaliation. The retaliation almost certainly involves collatoral damage, eroding trust in Americans and inflaming hatred. By now this cycle should look familiar.

But the terrorists' goal is the erosion of trust in the US authorities and our attempt to rebuild Iraq, even more than physical destruction. It's hard to imagine Al Qaida coming up with something more effective than the pictures from Abu Ghraib prison for destroying the trust of the ordinary Iraqi people in the civil authority of the US troops.

This elegant pair of mutually-reinforcing feedback cycles strengthens terrorism on both sides, and makes the chances for peace remote.

Because this abuse does such direct strategic damage to our mission in Iraq, the soldiers directly involved must be punished, of course, but so should the entire chain of command. Since our overall mission explicitly requires winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people, it is military professional malpractice to fail to anticipate the pressures on the front–line troops and put discipline in place to prevent such abuse. This abuse is due to more than "a few bad apples," but even if it were only that, a military commander is responsible for know-ing that a few soldiers may be "bad apples," and having controls in place to prevent them from acting out.

The decapitation of Nick Berg was a miscalculation on the terrorists' part. (They aren't all geniuses either, of course!) Ordinary Iraqis were revolted and offended by having this crime done in their name. Furthermore, the decapitation took attention away from the Abu Ghraib pictures, which were doing real damage to the US cause. We could still save their cookies by some sort of massive retaliation, but the responsible authorities seem to be handling this is a more controlled way. Finding and prosecuting the specific individuals involved and their accomplices would strengthen the US position significantly.

This is where the real war is fought. The soldiers are mostly there to keep the bad guys from interfering with the engineers and their work.

There are signs that not all the news from Iraq is bad. First, there is measurable progress in restoring the Iraqi infrastructure, providing water, sewers, electricity, oil pipelines, local government, and eventually jobs. [This is where the real war is fought. The soldiers are mostly there to keep the bad guys from interfering with the engineers and their work.] Second, the ordinary peole of Najf have demonstrated against the religious extremists and in favor of the moderates, and of course in favor of peace and quiet.

9 / 11

This view of terrorists, retaliation, and trust also helps us understand the terrible events of 9/11/01 and who has profited from the aftermath.

The destruction of the World Trade Center and the murder of 3,000 people was a horrifying act that devastated the victims' families and shook the economy for a while. The symbolic impact on the US and its effect on our national confidence was massive. But from a military perspective, the blow was not significant. Compare it with the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, which crippled the Pacific fleet as we entered a war with Japan.

The invasion of Iraq is not only a distraction from more important goals, but a provocation that is making Osama bin Laden's dream come true.

Osama bin Laden's purpose for the 9/11 attack was (and is) to provoke massive retaliation from the US against Islam. He hoped that our retaliation would finally unite Islam against the US as a common enemy, and that his vision for a fundamentalist pan–Islamic state would sweep away all the more moderate governments in the region, as well as movements toward a pluralistic culture.

In the final chapter of his book "Against All Enemies," Richard Clarke gives an excellent de-scription of the conflict we should have pursued after 9/11, and contrasts it with the wars we actually did pursue. The invasion of Iraq is not only a distraction from more important goals, but a provocation that is making Osama bin Laden's dream come true.

The purpose of the original attack was to provoke our retaliation, which would affect primar–ily the ordinary Islamic people, destroying what trust they had for the US, and making them more willing to give aid and comfort to the terrorists among them. To a surprising extent, we have fallen right into Osama bin Laden's trap. The future of the world depends on finding our way out.

HOW TO WIN THE WAR ON TERRORISM

When terrorists are isolated criminals, viewed with suspicion by the vast majority of the gen–eral public, and reported to the authorities when they turn violent, then the war on terrorism has been won.

It's tempting to think that a war against terrorism can be won by killing all the terrorists. In the real world, this naive plan doesn't work.

What weapons will it take to win this war? Just as the Maginot Line in France was impotent against Nazi blitzkrieg at the beginning of World War II, purely military tactics and strategy will fail against the terrorists, and will even be exploited to their advantage. It appears to me that our current professional military leaders generally understand this point, while our hawkish civilian leaders without military experience generally do not.

It's tempting to think that a war against terrorism can be won by killing all the terrorists. In the real world, this naive plan doesn't work. A serious attempt to find and kill all the terrorists also

sweeps up many ordinary people, and some of them and their relatives become new terrorists, creating more terrorists than were destroyed. The harder the authorities pursue this strategy, the more it looks like genocide, and the more effectively they recruit new terrorists.

The "weapon" we need is the trust and cooperation of the general population of the country where the terrorists are based. As we have seen, terrorists understand this, and use fiendishly clever strategies for eroding this trust and fomenting resentment and hatred. (Incidentally, most terrorists are not clever enough to invent this. But they read about strategy and tactics in the writings of Mao Tze Tung and Ho Chi Minh, who were. Fortunately, these same sources are required reading for our professional military leaders.)

THE "SIMPLE" STRATEGY FOR DEFEATING TERRORISM IS:

1.   avoid getting killed by them; make clear that overwhelming power is available, but avoid using it;

....

2.   gain the trust and cooperation of the general population:

   — refute the terrorists' lies; demonstrate truth and openness to criticism;
   — create, publicize, enforce, and obey a simple "Bill of Rights;"
   — demonstrate even-handedness in local disputes;
   — demonstrate justice, even when treated unjustly;
   — avoid massive retaliation, even when taking casualties;
   — visibly work for economic justice for the oppressed;
   — and so on…

....

3.   the people will turn the terrorists in for trial and prosecution.

....

Obviously, implementing this strategy is far from simple. There are trade-offs between the actions required to avoid getting killed and the ones needed to gain trust. But since gaining trust is building the "weapon" that wins the war, it takes priority, and one can't be absolutely safe. Whether you call it nation-building or peace-making, it's a dangerous line of work, actively opposed by unfriendly people.

AVOID GETTING KILLED

Aside from the obvious personal motivation to stay alive, the strategic reason to prevent terrorist attacks is to foil their attempt to provoke massive retaliation. Impotence is the worst-case outcome for a terrorist, not death. We need good enough intelligence to detect and prevent terrorist acts, but this cannot take absolute priority since it trades off against being a free and trustworthy society. Therefore, some attacks will occur, and there will be casualties.

It is important...to understand clearly that terrorist acts cannot possibly defeat our forces militarily

It is important for both the terrorists and the general population to understand clearly that terrorist acts cannot possibly defeat our forces militarily. Failing to attend to this point led to disastrous errors by Reagan in Beirut and Clinton in Somalia. Currently in Iraq, terrorists can reasonably conclude that the US will leave under sufficient pressure. They may or may not be correct, but their ability to draw that conclusion is dangerous to us in itself.

The hardest part about a war on terrorism comes when a terrorist attack succeeds. The whole point of the attack is to do something horrific to provoke massive retaliation. The right response must be measured, deliberate, and appropriate. President Bush's speech on September 20, 2001 was a brilliant example of the correct response to a successful terrorist attack. (Sadly, he did not stay that particular course, as he and his administration demonstrated their obsession with Iraq.)

The whole point of the attack is to do something horrific to provoke massive retaliation.

GAIN TRUST AND COOPERATION

A measured, deliberate, and appropriate response gains the trust and the cooperation of the people.

To do this we must be trustworthy. It also means that the training of our troops for this kind of war must be very different from past wars. Our soldiers must be more than warriors who kill people and destroy things. They must also serve as community police, and even as social workers and political advisors. News reports from Iraq make it clear that our soldiers are vividly aware of this dual role, and they are vividly aware of the fact that they are well trained and equipped as warriors, but not as community police.

Above, I've outlined some of the specific methods for building trust and cooperation from the people.

- refute the terrorists' lies; demonstrate truth and openness to criticism;

....

- create, publicize, enforce, and obey a simple "Bill of Rights;"
  demonstrate even-handedness in local disputes;

....

- demonstrate justice, even when treated unjustly;
  avoid massive retaliation, even when taking casualties;

....

- visibly work for economic justice for the oppressed;

....

- and so on…

....

There are surely many other effective methods to be identified, improved, evaluated, and applied.

THE PEOPLE WILL TURN IN THE TERRORISTS

If the people trust the authorities, and respect the efforts taken to make their lives secure and safe, they will turn in suspected terrorists, knowing that they will receive fair trials. The Unabomber's brother turned him in because he was willing to trust the government's pledge not to seek the death penalty.

Terrorists are not merely criminals. Their extremist ideological motivation makes them far more dangerous than even large organized criminal gangs. Even so, to win against terrorism, in the end they must be treated as ordinary criminals. They must be tried and punished, with full legal rights and protections, not for their extremist beliefs, but for their terrorist actions that disrupt the safe conduct of society for ordinary citizens.

The ordinary people in the middle… are repeatedly savaged to cultivate more recruits for one side or the other.

The Unabomber sits in federal prison for his bombs that killed and maimed. Timothy McVeigh was executed for murder many times over. Their public trials and the public safeguarding of their rights were not out of soft–heartedness or compassion for criminals. They are public ceremonies, reaffirming the value of law and order in our society. They both represent and cultivate the trust that the people have in their government.

That trust is the weapon that defeats terrorism. They cannot stand against it. We must not throw it away.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

If we understand which weapons actually work against terrorists, and if we understand how they try to destroy our weapons, we can see what we need to do and what we need to avoid doing. We can see why the Abu Ghraib prison photos are so damaging to us.

Traditional war is not easy or certain. And the new ways are not easy or certain either. The "simple" strategy above for defeating terrorism requires great knowledge, cleverness, and wisdom to put into action.

War requires discipline. War requires sacrifice. War requires restraint at certain times, and carefully planned action at others. A war against terrorism is unlike the major wars of the past. If we try to fight like we fought wars in the past, we will lose, and we won't understand how or why. We need to learn how to fight with new weapons.

The alternative is a world of perpetual conflict between opposing groups of extremists, locked in a deadly embrace where each side confirms the beliefs of the other and helps them recruit more extremists. The ordinary people in the middle, who just want peace and law and order, are repeatedly savaged to cultivate more recruits for one side or the other.

This is indeed a *clash of civilizations*, but not between Islam and the West. The clash is be–tween extremists of all kinds on the one side, and the forces of pluralism, tolerance, peace, and law and order on the other.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

http://www.cs.utexas.edu/users/kuipers

info

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin Kuipers holds an endowed Professorship in Computer Sciences at the University of Texas at Austin. He investigates the representation of commonsense and expert knowledge, with particular emphasis on the effective use of incomplete knowledge. He received his B.A. from Swarthmore College, and his Ph.D. from MIT. His research accomplishments include developing the TOUR model of spatial knowledge in the cognitive map, the QSIM algorithm for qualitative simulation, the Algernon system for knowledge representation, and the Spatial Semantic Hierarchy model of knowledge for robot exploration and mapping. He has served as Department Chairman and is a Fellow of AAAI and IEEE.

DOWNLOAD THIS

This manifesto is available from http://changethis.com/2.DefeatTerrorism

SEND THIS

To pass along a copy of this manifesto to others, click here:
http://changethis.com/2.DefeatTerrorism/email

SUBSCRIBE

Learn about our latest manifestos as soon as they are available. Sign up for our free newsletter and be notified by email. http://changethis.com/subscribe

info

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the side– walk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.

NAVIGATION & USER TIPS

Move around this manifesto by using your keyboard arrow keys or click on the right arrow (→) for the next page and the left arrow (←). To send this by email, just click on   .

KEYBOARD SHORTCUTS	PC	MAC
Zoom in (Larger view)	[CTL] [+]	[⌘] [+]
Zoom out	[CTL] [–]	[⌘] [–]
Full screen/Normal screen view	[CTL] [L]	[⌘] [L]

BORN ON DATE

This document was created on 23 August 2004 and is based on the best information available at that time. To check for updates, please click here to visit http://changethis.com/2.DefeatTerrorism

info

ABOUT CHANGETHIS

ChangeThis is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.