Civilization and Its Discontents[1] – Revisited!

The Future of Armed Strife

By Dave Stein

The tragic events of 9/11 are grim reminders of the consequences of not having, or not heeding the advice of, futurists. Although the armed services have long-range planning offices, they have not been the ones driving the proverbial train. Instead, as I observed during my own years in the Pentagon, the tempo was set by day-to-day administrative deadlines or "fire drills." **_Those whose vision extended no further than day-to-day "brushfires" helped leave us tragically unprepared for the real fires of 9/11!_**

But 9/11 tells a second story – a story of discontent and its consequences – especially if taken together with other recent terrorist incidents and the endemic armed struggles throughout the world. Although various approaches to peacemaking and counterterrorism have been implemented and have been the subject of intense debate, they generally leave in place the underlying causes of armed strife, in turn sowing the seeds of new conflict. This begs the question – when will it all end?

As vital as peacemaking and counterterrorism are, the answer lies beyond. In regard to counterterrorism alone, there is ongoing debate regarding the anticipated effectiveness and possible consequences of deterrence, defense, and preemption – and whether technology will favor the "good guys" or the "bad guys." Far less public attention is given to the underlying causes of terrorism and other armed strife.

NOW, HERE'S A LOSER!

With terrorism now a primary mode of armed strife, it is helpful to know what it is. Often described as the recourse of the (otherwise) powerless, terrorism is countervalue warfare by a non-state geostrategic actor. The mindset that attracts the rank-and-file terrorists might be characterized by most or all of the following descriptors:

- Dissatisfaction with the status quo, coupled with a loser mindset (relative to the prevailing political and socioeconomic order),

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[1] From Sigmund Freud's classic treatise of same title.

- A sense of a discounted future – that is, a fatalistic expectation that left alone, circumstances will only get worse,
- Perceived enemies, who in their view are responsible for the status quo and the discounted future or who at least can be so blamed, and
- A sense of powerless and marginalization – that is, a perception that they don't matter to the "powers that be" and that there are no opportunities for them to be listened to in order to effect change.

Sensing that they have nothing to lose and that they have no access to avenues for "constructive dialog" that might lead to win-win outcomes, they turn to extra-civil means to be heard and to strike back at their perceived enemies, all with the hope of making a difference or otherwise conferring on themselves the sense of purpose that heretofore had eluded them – or in extreme cases, finding meaning in martyrdom. While these characteristics are descriptive of many terrorists, the loser mindset is common among other recruits to violence at all levels, even down to the street gang level. Typically "losers" in mainstream society, they are drawn to environments where they can "win" – that is, "self-actualize" on their own terms.

But by what measures are recruits to violence "losers" before they turn to violence? By what measures are they marginalized? To answer these questions, it is helpful to recognize the reasons that terrorist "candidates" and others resent the US and/or "the West." There are at least three. First, some do not really dislike the US *per se* but they resent US policies – for example, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or on regimes that are repressive and/or unresponsive to the needs of their people – policies that help cultivate in them a victim or surrogate victim mindset, and that they feel powerless to change.

A second group, sometimes overlapping with the first, consists of people who want to be like the West but (in their view) lack the means to do so. Aided largely by the information age, they know about and envy the better way of life that characterizes the US, Western Europe, and prosperous countries of the Orient – a way of life shared by their own privileged elites – but one that is seemingly inaccessible to them. To the extent that their struggles are about basic needs or even perceived material inequalities, this is interest-based strife. In addition, there is often an identity-based component of their discontent, in that these people feel left out, marginalized, and powerless to effect change through peaceful means.

Identity- or value-based strife, on the other hand, involves a third group that often overlaps with the first group but is the diametric opposite of the second. These people *don't* want to be like the West, and they view the encroachment of mainstream Western culture as a threat to their own culture, their identity, and their ways of life. For example, some may prefer their traditional ways to contemporary fast-paced Western life, whose cultural values and lifestyles (e.g., consumerism and diversionary entertainment) are alien to them. They may know about other peoples that have experienced deculturation and fear that they are next. In fact, it has been argued that the need to feel anchored in today's sea of rapid change may account, at least in part, for the increased tribalization of identity. Here, too, the people feel powerless to change the course of events – marginalization and victimization once again – and there is the additional apprehension that they will be "losers" after their traditional cultures give way to others, to which they feel unable to adapt. However, there are also other causes of identity-based strife, such as age-old inter-ethnic hatred.

To be sure, there are variations on the theme, a common one being interest-based strife with an identity-based veneer. Even so, as disparate as the third group appears to be from the second, there is an underlying commonality – a discounted future.

WHAT IS NEXT?

For the near term, several trends offer little cause for optimism. On the interest-based side, rising populations will result in additional competition for food, water, energy, other resources, and "lebensraum." Even today, it is apparent that competition for energy by the rising middle class in less-developed countries (LDCs) is driving up petroleum costs. This has a ripple effect even in the developed nations, because in raising the cost of living, it will push some people "over the cliff" financially. The competition for the necessities of life and living space may well be exacerbated by climate shifts – and possibly also by dwindling reserves of petroleum (if the petro-pessimists are right) – unless alternative energy sources are developed and harnessed. An additional cause for concern is the possibility of a major regional or global financial crisis that can start in any of several ways.

However, even under the most conceivably benign circumstances in which a financial, environmental, or energy Armageddon never comes to pass, "prosperity" reaches some before others. This temporary imbalance is often a source of discontent, the long-term benefits of prosperity notwithstanding. An additional dis-equilibrium occurs when cultures that favor large families – and thus large populations – begin giving way to cultures that favor small ones. All the while, the information age continues to heighten discontent, even as it empowers. This is because those who know about a better way of life that they have no hope of attaining are generally more discontented than those who know of nothing other than poverty. Thus in a sense, "relative misery" is paradoxically worse than "absolute misery"!

For its part, the identity-based side, which cannot be disentangled completely from the interest-based side, presents its own challenges. The clash of cultures, itself a result of complex forces, uproots people from their sources of identity and the only ways of life that they have known. As the world becomes more homogeneous, those who are uprooted often find it a struggle to survive under a new "operating system" with its alien values and lifestyles. Indeed, at the very moment they are facing these new daunting survival challenges (an interest-based matter), their sense of identity and stability is also taken from them. As for land, often associated with physical survival, there is also an identity-based component to being driven off of one's ancestral lands by other tribes or civilizations. Losing one's ancestral homes to climatic changes, should they come to pass, is hardly a preferred alternative.

All of these sources of discontent sow the seeds of armed strife and give rise to breeding grounds for terrorism. There is an interest-based and perhaps an identity-based parallel on a smaller scale as well, since those who have a loser mindset and feel like misfits in mainstream society are often the ones who turn to street gangs, other juvenile delinquency, and other crime in general.

SO IS AN END IN SIGHT?

Although the near-term trends are not encouraging and in any event can be overridden by the so-called wild cards, the loser mindset offers a new frontier for fighting terrorism and other violence ranging from the street gang level to the geostrategic level. Therefore, as an alternative future, one might envision a world characterized by cultural plurality, made possible by the peaceful cooperation among cultures and nations. In this world, the various cultures can effectively inter-operate as they choose while maintaining their cultural identities, subject only to basic constraints such as a respect for human rights and for their neighbors. Increased mobility and freedom of movement might then give people a choice of "operating systems" under which they want to live, thereby providing multiple environments if not avenues for self-actualization ("winning"). Even within one's own nation or culture, various institutions might better cultivate the development of one's individual gifts, particularly in schools, again helping more people be – and feel like – winners. To generalize contemporary US political parlance (not necessarily for purposes of endorsement), one might refer to this world as "nobody left behind" – realistically meaning that far fewer are left behind in this future world than presently. The result: fewer losers and correspondingly less overall discontent, thereby shrinking the recruitment pool for gangs and terrorists.

The other alternative future in this simplistic model is a monolithic, worldwide mass culture, toward which the present trajectory sometimes points. This future world only exacerbates discontent. Taken to its extreme, a misfit in this kind of culture has "no place to hide."

Which future world will prevail? TBD (to be determined), one might respond. The fallout from culture clashes (and for that matter, interest-based clashes), and/or the failure of a prevailing culture to meet the formidable challenges of the future, may indeed be the impetus for world leaders to think beyond the either-or zero-sum mindset in a quest for new options. Until then, to deal with violence at any level – street gang to international terrorist network – it's deterrence, defense, and preemption.

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- o *Even the editor-in-chief does not always "get it right." What did he miss?*