

Guy Fawkes Redux: Led Urban Mayhem and 21st Century Security

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I opened the Strife blog to the tune of the annual chant to ‘Remember, remember...’ Returning to the subject of Guy Fawkes and the modern relevance of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, this piece is interested in the issue of led urban mayhem in the landscape of 21st century security. The insurgent or terrorist who can leverage the mob in tumult and hurl it at targets within a city in coordination with other action has mastered a primitive but highly effective weapon of mass effect. Whereas the first piece considered the motivations of the 17th century plotters and the implications of these upon the modern landscape of conflict, here the context and structure within which the plot was imagined define the focus. Specifically, we are concerned with the trinity of city, insurgent, and mob and what might be possible from their admixture.

Developments in the last two decades suggest the need for such a review. Small groups of motivated individuals have demonstrated their ability to achieve strategic effect. The power of the mob has proved itself in the modern era, to mass, coordinate and strike with near impunity across the urban landscape, as well as to provide cover for more nefarious activities. And as every report of future security concerns agrees, the city is *the* place of the future for humanity. So, we could expect 5th of November to become a norm of conflict.

From the perspective of my own interests, the inspiration for this veer in focus is research I’ve been doing on the 2011 London riots. For obvious reasons, prior to my arrival to London that autumn I had no interest in paying too much attention to the

events. I was happy to be moving here, and wanted nothing to interfere with that; as well, I had already committed, so there was nothing good that was going to come of getting too worked up by the chaos. However, as I became more comfortable with the city – and learned that chaos was in its history and on its streets – I became more curious about what had happened.¹ And so, as the time arrived to return to Guy Fawkes for this piece, it was with the subject of urban mayhem heavily upon my mind.

To develop this scenario and examine the security implications it portends, we will review the salient factors of each point in the trinity. What are the characteristics of each that matter in this form of conflict? Further still, for each we will include consideration of how these factors came into play in four headline events of the last decade. Significant illustrative events are not in short supply. I have chosen September 11th Manhattan, Mumbai 2008, London 2011, and Benghazi 2012 simply because they are widely known, which eliminates the need to provide their narratives here. Also, each of them presents iconic and obvious evidence which directly supports the scenario.

The Trinity – The Insurgent, the City and the Mob

The first element in the trinity is its core, the insurgent. Dedicated, faithful, and trained, this is the “professional” cadre of non-conventional conflict.² For the sake of clarity – as well as my sanity – to avoid having to skip around the thesaurus entries for non-conventional combatant, I use insurgent to cover a multitude of actors, and define it as one willing to fight against an established order using non-conventional or asymmetrical means. Whether the behaviour is noble (freedom fighter), criminal (terrorist), necessary (partisan), or a reflection of relative weakness (insurgent in the current

parlance) is case dependent, subjective, and most importantly, irrelevant to this discussion.

When it comes to the modern insurgent fighting force, size proves nothing. Even with limited numbers, given thoughtfully chosen targets, realistic aims, and a sensible application of their skills, training and preparation, the insurgent can achieve much. This is particularly true within the urban environment, where the geographic and demographic contours of the city aid and magnify their efforts. Using a relatively simple skill set, in the city a small group of insurgents is at a clear operational and tactical advantage. Buildings become firing perches at their heights and visual cover on the ground, and side streets and thoroughfares can be easily blocked, thwarting the efforts of authorities to move about. Transportation and route nodes that feed the city with goods and people can be choked preventing movement in and out of the city. Mass, public gathering points become high value targets and the resultant public fear creates chaos which further cripples the city's functioning. And within this maelstrom, maintaining communications throughout the city and an awareness of events is nearly impossible for those who must respond, whereas the insurgent has few of such requirements.

There were only 10 terrorists unleashed upon Mumbai. 19 others were able to wreak massive destruction on 9/11. Who knows what small few there were in Benghazi whose primary mission was to storm the American consulate, but it was certainly a minute fraction of the crowds demonstrating their wrath at the insult of the film. London 2011 might point to a further problem. As reviews of those events and the police response demonstrate, too much information dumped into the police networks caused much confusion and uncertainty as to what was happening and where. One cannot

help but wonder whether such information blitzes will become a regular tactic of the urban insurgent.

Nor are there any shortage of causes to inspire recruitment, indoctrination and adherence to radical, violent groups. Fault lines of religion, culture, politics and economics cut across the globe. The rising tide of environmental worry and the terms of justice and humanity are as well now adding their causes to the rolls. So, in addition to the usual suspects we have come to expect, one must wonder what others will come down the pike. Will the Occupy movement develop an armed wing if the economic crisis deepens? Will China or India's choking pollution crises spawn eco-terrorist forces? What happens when women in traditional countries and around the globe (because the west is weak here too) finally lose patience and band together for effect? Finally, one must consider to whom the gang and criminal syndicates loyalty would go. (Such thoughts give one a certain fondness for the Mafia and its assistance to the Allies in WWII.) Less drastically, it is not inconceivable that in return for significant payment these groups would be happy to hire out personnel, some of whom might just enjoy being part of the mayhem, or might want to fight the authorities for their own reasons. There is certainly no shortage of anger towards the authorities in certain quarters.

Complicating things, the groupings will increasingly defy the neat Westphalian ordering of the world. These organizations represent every level of human collection, from pan-identism to sub-state minorities, and every stop in between. Add to that, common enemies or objectives can lead to unexpected but often transient alliances. Insofar as the technological and material needs of the insurgent are concerned, there are very few hurdles. Off the shelves communications and other technological needs satisfy just about every need.

Vehicles and small weapons are easy as well. What few other requirements remain should never exceed moderate bespoke capabilities. The age of the Strategic Insurgent is upon us.

Turning to the next piece of the threat, the urban context is *the* strategic target, and it's soft. The material destruction and act of mass political assassination (really, governmental decapitation) envisaged by Guy Fawkes et al. could only have been achieved in London, the capital city and the necessary hub of a united England. And so the city today remains ideal for mayhem. The centre of society, economy and culture, the city is an ideal location for conflict. Whether the city favoured the defence or the attack under the terms of recent conventional warfare is debatable; however, in a world of insurgent and asymmetrical warfare everything about the city favours the attackers.

As ripe as ever, and promising to ripen ever more into the future, the modern city is thus a target of delightful opportunity for those who wish to unleash mayhem for effect. There are hard targets to turn to rubble and population to harm and inspire to chaos. The caverns, labyrinths, and heights of the urban context comprise a wealth of potential energy to fuel a bleak future security landscape. The raid on Mumbai in 2008 was a clear demonstration of the weakness and vulnerability of the modern city to even a small band of dedicated fighters. 9/11 NYC proved the power of rubble as our greatest accomplishments can be rendered to blinding and toxic dust and lethal debris in the short term. (It also demonstrated the potential of debilitating rubble in the long term if cleanup efforts are hampered.) London 2011 showed just how easy it is, given the size and sprawl of most cities, to tax to the point of overstretch the local authorities.

While the complexities of the city tend to

aid the attackers (forces of disorder), for those meant to defend or maintain order (law enforcement or the armed forces) it is a burden. Before the rise of the COIN'dinistas the Marine Corps had begun grappling with the perils of this piece of modern (or, rather, neo-primitive) urban warfare. Their experience in Mogadishu – the 'good old days' of that intervention, before the UN mission morphed into an effort to affect the internal dynamics of the Somali conflict (best exemplified by the efforts to capture Mohamed Farah Aidid) – and other similar missions of the 1990s led to the creation of the '3 Block War' concept.³ As described by then Commandant of the Marine Corps General Victor Krulak, the demands of the modern urban battlefield were such that an armed force might simultaneously be conducting full scale military operations, peacekeeping or stability operations, and humanitarian operations, on three separate but near blocks.

The '3 Block War' concept not only conveys the complications of the conflict faced, it also speaks to the demands placed upon the security forces (military or law enforcement). Each mission is different and requires divergent skills and material assets, and this will require difficult choices. For example, which objective should have priority where resources are thin? Furthermore, to manage or lead the commitments to each mission adds to the burden by increasing the complexity of command and control.

I have no doubt that the police officers who deployed to London 2011 could understand this model as they struggled to confront rioters, stop looters and assist fire-fighters, all in close geographic proximity. Given the tough choices, if only one block could be managed, it was the rioters that the police chose as their focus. That there is not a consensus on that answer is clear from the post-disorder criticisms that the police allowed

Tottenham to burn or looters to run rampant without any seeming response. In an ideal world, the Met, the UK police, and authorities globally would prefer to be able to handle all three simultaneously. In the necessary world where led urban mayhem is a fixed feature of conflict they are going to have to figure how to do more or how to mitigate the damage of not doing everything. As it sprawls and spreads outwards and teems with increasing human and structural density at its centre, the siren song of the city will continue to tickle the ears if the forces of mayhem.

Finally, the last piece in the trinity is the mob. It is within the city that the mob is born. First, to be clear about this term, this does not refer to the masses, such as “the people” in certain counter-insurgency doctrines. The mob represents only a small (if not tiny) fraction of the whole of the population, but its disproportionate power derives from being in motion – usually dangerous and destructive motion. Certainly the plotters of 1605 imagined that the human and material devastation wrought by the planned explosion would ignite some useful degree of panic on the streets of London. In addition to such hopes, they had actively intended that the destruction of Westminster would create a political vacuum into which their “army” would assert and support the claims of Princess Elizabeth to the throne. Unfortunately, the force they would have been able to assemble on short notice would not have amounted to more than a mob.⁴

As noted in every UK law enforcement report or manual on the subject from the last decade, the face of future public disorder is fraught. Although dealing with public order generally – that is, to include lawful assembly and protest – the sense that the chaos is always lurking around the corner is palpable. From a review prior to London 2011 conducted by Her Majesty’s

Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), there is this description of the public order landscape: “After a few relatively quiet years, this is a new period of public order...faster moving and more unpredictable.” As expected, the description in the Metropolitan Police Service’s initial report on their response to the riots expresses fully their awareness of a dramatically altered landscape in public order: “The events...were unprecedented in the capital’s history. The initial peaceful protest in response to the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan escalated to violent local protest and on to London and countrywide. The speed, geographical distribution and scale of this escalation set these events apart from anything experienced before.”⁵ Emerging after more than a decade of increasing public order challenges in the UK, the riots of August 2011 demonstrated the resilience of the mob in urban terrain. Empowered and/or emboldened, crowds are thus a threat that could emerge at any moment.

Reliance upon less well-trained, less dedicated personnel as filler for missions is not new for insurgents in this era. In Iraq it was certainly the case that single or small group cadres of specialist fighters would operate with local filler. For example, in sniper ambushes, one highly skilled marksman would be supported by locals who need only ‘pray and spray’ in the general direction of the attack. It is no great leap to move from this to the even more basic use of angry crowds to tactical or strategic effect.

The mob, then, is on the march, and its effect is being felt at the tactical and strategic levels of public order and security. Whether it will maintain its ascendance is unknown, but if it continues to prove itself a worthy vehicle of action then we can be sure to see more of it. Benghazi 2012, coming on the heels of an angry Muslim Summer that was itself following the politically angry long Arab

Spring, brought the trinity together to terrible effect. The success of the attack on the American consulate, the casualties, and the near shocked surprise at what had been accomplished, amply demonstrated the risk presented by the combination of the insurgent, the city and the mob.

Separately, each piece of the trinity is an area of future security concern. Together they could combine to create a prospective nightmare of mayhem, destruction and carnage. Taken from this perspective, I can still maintain that we remain English henceforth and should certainly “Remember, remember...”

References

- 1 As I’ve read the reports and reviews, several issues have struck me. In addition to those related to urban mayhem, my curiosity is particularly encouraged by the fact that law enforcement has no scholarly historical function. As time goes by I’d like to be able to assess the events from the perspective of military history and as a historian. It will be interesting to see what can be made of those events in that context.
- 2 I am using ‘cadre’ here in the way that military historians or planners will speak of a trained cadre of officers, NCOs and enlisted personnel around which a larger force can be developed in times of war.
- 3 Of course, being a 90s concept, the 3BW is outré these days. It has also recently received a kick in the validity shins as the Canadian Army has found it to be unsuitable as a strategic model. The authors review the effort by the Canadian Army to adopt the concept and adapt it to strategic purpose in Afghanistan and beyond. (“The Rise and Demise of the Three Block War,” Dr. A. Walter Dorn and Michael Varey, *Canadian Military Journal*.) However, they agreed that it functioned quite well as a description of modern urban conflict, and for the purposes of this piece, that is sufficient.
- 4 Of course, it’s paradoxical that celebration of the 5th would lead to disorder. At points in the 19th century London left the streets of the city on that day to the revellers. That is, until the chaos grew to such a level that public sentiment and security demanded that the police reassert control.
- 5 Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, “Policing Public Order: An overview and review of progress against the recommendations of Adapting to Protest and Nurturing the British Model of Policing,” February 2011, p. 3; Metropolitan Police Service, ‘Operation Kirkin: Strategic Review – Interim Report,’ 21 October 2011, p. 4.