

## **Backing a winner: The weak horse, the Long War and the road ahead**

August 2007

Matt A. Mayer

Back in December 2001, Osama bin Laden famously stated, "When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature, they will like the strong horse." Although not exactly Sun Tzu, bin Laden's simplistic point rings somewhat true — people love winners. One of the top movies of the year is the 2,500-year-old story of King Leonidas and his band of 300 Spartan warriors who valiantly fought thousands of Persians to a stalemate for the better part of three days — the very epitome of the strong horse. They intentionally didn't make a movie about all of the leaders who fell to Xerxes on his way to the Battle of Thermopylae.

Six and a half years later, Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards asserts that the war on terrorism is a "bumper sticker slogan" used by President Bush to invade Iraq and scare voters. Edwards and his ilk are exactly the weak horses bin Laden had in mind when he threw down the proverbial gauntlet to Western civilization. Whether we like it or not, we are engaged in a long war that will play out over generations, not a presidency.

To understand the degree of our challenge, one need only look at illiteracy rates in the Arab world. According to the United Nations Literacy Decade, roughly 70 percent of the "world's illiterate adults lived in three regions: Sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, and the Arab states and North Africa." Why do illiteracy rates matter? First, people who cannot read and write can be controlled far more easily than those who can. As the Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky noted, "[t]here are 22 Arab states and not one of them is democratic."

Secondly, in the battle of ideas, it is virtually impossible to persuade audience members when they are unable to read about your ideas or explore the rich history of literature on the subjects of democracy, freedom and individual rights. It is even more difficult to spread those ideas within a closed society without the ability to write. During the Cold War, one of the key factors in winning was the ability of the resistance to spread its ideas via the underground printing presses and literature drops by proponents of democracy.

Finally, an illiterate person, being unable to discover the truth independently, is far more susceptible to religious interpretations that pervert religious text. After all, it was only a few hundred years ago, during the Age of Enlightenment, that Western civilization finally stopped burning people at the stake or jailing them for disagreeing with erroneous religious teachings. Not coincidentally, Johannes Gutenberg's moveable type started in Germany in 1450 and, by 1500, Western Europe had more than 220 printing presses that had produced more than 8 million books.

In environments controlled by despots, where people are taught about a fairy-tale heaven filled with virgins, it is no surprise that a small but significant segment of the masses can be cultivated to hate the West and die trying to destroy it. If you are on the losing side of history, you don't have much more to lose by betting on the virgins. Even in abundant America, you can always find a small group of people who will follow the next nutcase over the cliff like a pack of lemmings.

As Salmon Rushdie stated in 2005, Islam urgently needs to undergo a reformation similar to the Protestant Reformation, which started shortly after the arrival of the printing press and lasted almost 100 years. Unfortunately for politicians practicing sound-bite policy formation, altering the fundamental aspects of the Arab world will take decades. The hardest part for America is deciding when to use soft power and when to use hard power. It is easy to criticize our efforts in Iraq. The hindsight crowd needs to come up with a few more solutions. More diplomacy sounds fine in Iowa, but in Iran or the mountain regions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, it is nothing more than the weasel words of the weak horse.

After all, how do you communicate with the people when they not only don't understand English, but also cannot read their native tongues? If we cannot communicate with the people, then how do we balance out the daily diet of falsehoods and fanaticism they are fed by their political and religious leaders? The 9/11 Commission argued that we should send them lots of aid and perform other acts of good will. That might get some of the people to like America, but with more than 1.5 billion Muslims, there just isn't enough money or means by which to spread the good news of America's generosity.

Diplomacy, to be effective, must be backed by a credible threat of force. Many of our politicians today dilute their credibility on force projection by confusing the specific problems in Iraq with the general use of force in the future. Recent intelligence reports note that suicide bombers have left for the U.S. and Europe, hoping that their dramatic deaths will "invigorate" the Muslim world. One thing is certain: We cannot sit idly by talking about why they hate us and wait for the world to change as they stake out the Mall of America. We must move beyond Iraq and recognize that we might have to use force again in the near future to stop those who seek to harm our citizens.

If the intelligence reports are accurate, al-Qaida may have finally realized what many in the national security space have feared: Namely, the steady drip of suicide bombers in malls, arenas and other large gathering places — or, as many refer to it, the Israeli experience in America — is a powerful weapon. Although the large-scale attack can cause significant carnage, destruction and economic injury, it is also easier to prevent because of the number of people needed to pull it off (one might slip up) and the multiple opportunities throughout the planning, deployment and execution phases to disrupt it (time between planning and execution typically is many months or years). Suicide bombings, on the other hand, require one willing

fanatic and a few weeks of gathering easily available equipment. The results in isolation might be smaller in carnage, destruction and economic injury but when added together can paralyze a nation.

We have been in this situation before. Upon becoming president, Ronald Reagan instinctively knew that a weak horse had little power to effect change with the then-Soviet Union. He launched a strategic military buildup aimed at garnering peace through strength. Several years later, the Soviet Union realized it could not match the strength of the U.S., so it came to the bargaining table willing to secure an unprecedented arms reduction. Like America under Reagan, we again must become the strong horse.

Although our goal is to win this war on terrorism, our aim for the first part of this Long War must be, like King Leonidas, to force our shadowy, stateless enemies who hide themselves in remote places or among innocent civilians into a defensive posture. This strategic move will allow us the chance to roll back the state sponsors of terrorism, either through the carrot or the stick, and buy the world some time for the Islamic Reformation to occur. Without an Islamic Reformation, any hard power activity against nonstate actors will result in a Whac-a-mole world where the terrorists keep popping up in different places. With such a large supply of recruits, we must aim to destabilize their planning elements so that any planned attacks on the West are nipped early and often. This first phase could last a decade or two.

For state sponsors of terrorism such as Syria and Iran, the threat of hard power must remain credible to curb their behavior. In conjunction with this effort, we must engage in aggressive diplomatic efforts to isolate these regimes economically. With new leadership in France and Germany and ever-increasing threats of terrorist attacks in Europe, we just might be able to persuade Europeans to impose tough economic sanctions on Syria and Iran. Without them, our efforts are largely meaningless. Tough sanctions will help reformist elements inside those countries continue to chip away at the façade of power clung to by Bashar Assad and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Our best hope in Syria and Iran is a populist uprising that allows democracy to gain a foothold. If these nations continue to sponsor terrorist activities, then military action might be required to secure our safety.

Finally, at home, we must continue to build capabilities to protect, prevent, respond to and recover from a terrorist attack. In the past five years, Congress has allocated roughly \$20 billion to state and local governments to build those capabilities. The results are uneven and hard to ascertain because of the lack of strategic guidance for much of the time. With the publication of the National Preparedness Goal and Target Capability List, state and local governments now have the blueprint on how to build the right capabilities in the right places at the right levels.

Similarly, initial efforts focused too much on building response capabilities and not enough on building prevention capabilities. Our aim from the start should have been to stop attacks from occurring rather than to be ready to respond to them after they

occur. The focus in the past two years has been to prioritize the building of prevention capabilities such as stronger intelligence and weapon detection. We need to keep the focus on the prevention side of the preparedness spectrum.

Much has been done to eliminate the terrorist threat, but much remains to be done given the sheer scope of the challenge and the zealous dedication of our enemies. Our enemies understand little else except the speed and power of the strong horse. Our conviction to use force when necessary must remain credible and firm so that our diplomatic efforts are viewed realistically and so state sponsors can properly weigh the consequences of their actions. Along with our military and diplomatic efforts, a prepared America where states and localities have built the necessary capabilities to prevent a terrorist attack also will serve as a strong deterrent to our enemies.

Matt A. Mayer is president and CEO of Provisum Strategies and international studies adjunct professor at The Ohio State University. He is the former counselor to the deputy secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. He is a Claremont Institute Lincoln Fellow and a German Marshall Fund American Memorial Marshall Fellow.

Copyright © Armed Forces Journal