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London Bombings: Resilience, Resignation, and Reform

by Rushworth Kidder

In the aftermath of a massive terror attack, there often arises a curious mix of resilience and resignation. In the wake of last week's bombings, Londoners did particularly well at the former.

That's not surprising. Given their experience with Irish Republican Army bombings in London and their famous stoicism during the World War II blitz, they've developed a deep reservoir of physical and moral courage. So last week, rescue services swept into place immediately to clean up the carnage. Prime Minister Tony Blair returned briefly from the G-8 meeting in Scotland to bring words of condolence and determination. Prominent Muslims joined leaders of other religions in quick, unqualified condemnation of the bombings. Even the Queen visited the bedsides of the wounded. By the next day, Londoners were getting back on a (remarkably) still-operating underground system and heading to work.

But Londoners, like the rest of us, had their moments of resignation as well. Shocked by something so stunningly brutal, they found themselves telling one another that, in the end, there's little you can do to stop terrorism. In a physical sense, they're right. You can't pat down every bus rider and detain every border crosser. But does that mean there's no hope? Not at all. What we may be seeing in London is evidence that the terrorist mind-set will, by its very nature, provoke its own demise.

Students of terrorism long have recognized this mind-set as oddly akin to adolescence -- not literally in the age ranges of those who practice it (though suicide bombers can be in their teens and early twenties) but stereotypically in the mentality of those who foment it. This mind-set comes with a devil-may-care bravura and believes fanatically in the invulnerability of its cause. It distrusts the settled convictions of its elders and sees its own ego as the center of the universe. Intolerant of ambiguity, it views reality as nothing but a set of fundamentalist, black-and-white polarities, and manifests an I'm-right-you're-wrong certainty. As such, it is easily preyed upon by those who preach an instant, violent redress of perceived wrongs.

But as is so often the case with revolutionaries, terrorists are better at wrecking than creating. Building a social, cultural, and physical infrastructure is essentially a communal act. Destroying it takes only a few lonely figures. What's more, building takes time. And time (or, more exactly, patience) is what neither stereotypical adolescents nor terrorists have -- the former because they grow up, the latter because they fail unless they take action.

In our moments of resignation, we may imagine that terrorists hold all of the good cards, including patience. But terrorists get no satisfaction from deferred gratification. Unless they can make a difference pretty quickly -- a big, deadly, impressive difference -- they aren't fulfilling their mission. That impatience may account for some of their strategic blunders. Had they strategized more carefully in 2001, they would have understood that the 9/11 attacks on the United States were over the top and would harden, not weaken, the will of their opponents. Had they had similar clarity in 2005, they would have let London alone rather than stimulate what may, in coming weeks, turn out to be a stiffened resolve and an uptick of popularity for both Blair and U.S. President George Bush. Put simply, they may have created a public relations disaster.

In our moments of resignation, however, we also tend to think that terrorists don't need PR -- that they have no interest in what the public thinks of them. That, too, doesn't compute. It's safe to assume that the London terrorists -- unlike American "Unabomber" Theodore John Kaczynski, who was arrested in 1996 after sending a spate of letter bombs to university addresses -- weren't assembling explosives in utter solitude in cabins in the woods. Someone else surely knew the London bombs were being made -- and some community, in or around London, supported that effort. But that community is affected by what people think. Once any community recognizes that terrorists and bomb-builders are bad people to have around, it's only a short step to either their expulsion from the group or a tip to the police.

Terrorism, in other words, depends on secrecy. And that fact may carry the seeds of its own destruction. Why? Because, paradoxically, terrorism also requires publicity. What matters to terrorists is not that the bomb explodes but that the explosion is widely reported -- and properly attributed, in the media, to their cause. Hence, at times, their impatience, their hunger for attention, and their insistence on proper credit -- all of which, as undercover agents know, are temptations that can wreck your cover and blow your career.

That's not to say that eradicating terrorism will be easy. But it does suggest that in proportion as we help strengthen and reform the communities that currently sustain terrorists -- through a practiced ethic of justice, respect, compassion, candid exploration of grievances, and responsible and consistent promise-keeping -- we make communities less willing to offer terrorists the secrecy they need. Slow process? Sure. Building always is. But time and patience are on the side of those who build rather than those who tear down.