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Mueller and Stewart: Hapless, disorganized and irrational

BY JOHN MUELLER AND MARK G. STEWART |

Between Sept. 12, 2001, and last Monday, April 15, 52 cases came to light in which the United States has been, or apparently has been, targeted for terrorism by Islamist extremists, whether based in the United States or abroad.

By far the most striking difference between the Boston Marathon killings and these earlier cases is that, for the first time, terrorists actually were able to assemble and detonate bombs. Many previous plotters harbored visions of carrying out bombings, and in 10 of the cases, they were supplied with fantasy-fulfilling, if bogus, bombs by obliging FBI informants.

But until Boston, no would-be terrorists had been able to make and set one off on their own. And, except for four bombs detonated on the London transport system in 2005, nor has any terrorist in the United Kingdom. This is surprising in part because in the 1970s there were hundreds of terrorist incidents on U.S. soil, most of them bombings, killing 72 people.

In many other respects, however, the Boston Marathon bombing is quite similar to the other 52 cases. For example, the Boston perpetrators were clearly not suicidal, which is the standard in American cases. In only six of the earlier plots were the perpetrators clearly willing to die in their terrorist effort.

And except for their ability to fabricate and detonate bombs, the Boston terrorists do not seem to have been any more competent than most of their predecessors. In assessing what it ominously calls “the nature of the terrorist adversary,” the Department of Homeland Security is fond of stressing their determination, persistence, relentlessness, patience and flexibility.

This may apply to some terrorists somewhere, including at least a few of those involved in 9/11. But it scarcely describes the vast majority of individuals picked up on terrorism charges in the United States since those attacks.

In describing the adversary, the case studies far more commonly use words like incompetent, ineffective, unintelligent, idiotic, ignorant, inadequate, unorganized, misguided, muddled, amateurish, dopey, unrealistic, moronic, irrational, foolish and gullible.

Many of the cases suggest that there is little exaggeration in the 2010 film “Four Lions,” the impressive dark comedy about a band of hapless home-grown British terrorists.

Amazingly, the Boston perpetrators apparently thought they could get away with it, even though they attacked the most-photographed spot on the planet at the time.

Moreover, though they were not prepared to die with their bombs, they do not seem to have had anything that could be considered a coherent plan of escape. This rather bizarre inability to think about the aftermath is typical in the case studies. (Also commonly found: an inability to explain how killing a few random people would advance their cause.)

The Boston perpetrators seem never to have ventured much more than a few miles from the bombing location, and they appear to have had no reliable means of transport and no money. Then, when the police published their photographs, they mindlessly blew whatever cover they had by killing a campus cop, hijacking a car, stealing money, trying to run a police blockade and engaging in a brief Hollywood-style car chase and shootout.

Surveillance imagery played an important role in identifying the terrorists (as it did in London in 2005), but the breakthrough appears to have come when the culprits decided to leave their lair, after which the police applied standard killer-on-the-loose methodology.

And while the scope of the tragedy in Boston should not be minimized, it should also be noted that, if the terrorists’ aim was to kill a large number of people, their bombs failed miserably. As recent cases in Colorado and Connecticut sadly demonstrate, far more fatalities have been inflicted by gunmen.

Boston appears to be a lone-wolf attack — albeit one with two wolves — in the sense that no one besides the bombers seems to have been aware of it. Attacks in which only the perpetrator knows about the plans are obviously more difficult to avert than ones involving a great number of talkative people. (In some cases, would-be terrorists have advertised for support or collaborators on Facebook and in Internet chat rooms.)

Before Boston, 16 people had been killed by Islamist terrorists in the United States since 2001 (13 of them at Fort Hood, Texas), and all were murdered by people who were essentially acting alone.

Concern about lone-wolf attacks has grown in recent years, and a 2011 Homeland Security assessment concluded that “lone offenders currently present the greatest threat.” This is a reasonable observation, but those concerned should keep in mind that, as Max Abrahms — a fellow in the political science department at Johns Hopkins University —

has noted, while lone wolves may be difficult to police, they have carried out only two of the 1,900 most deadly terrorist attacks over the last four decades.

They may be harder to stop, but they are also less lethal. (Keep in mind that an American's chance of being killed by any kind of terrorist, even with 9/11 included, remains about 1 in 3 million or 4 million per year.)

John Mueller is a political scientist at Ohio State University and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington. Mark G. Stewart is a civil engineer at the University of Newcastle in Australia and a visiting fellow at Cato. They are the authors of "Terror, Security and Money: Balancing the Risks, Benefits, and Costs of Homeland Security."