RUMSFELD’S KNOWN UNKNOWNS

The Graying of Terror(ism) and Dark Terror

On February 12, 2002, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld gave one of his more memorable press briefings

It was during this briefing, while standing beside Gen. Richard Myers, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, that Rumsfeld pronounced the following: 
...there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns - the ones we don’t know we don’t know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones [sic].

(The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek added a fourth category, the unknown known, which is what we intentionally refuse to acknowledge that we know.)

Masked Men

Rumsfeld’s remarks were in response to a reporter’s follow up question about whether there was "any evidence to indicate that Iraq has attempted to or is willing to supply terrorists with weapons of mass destruction." I am not sure what Rumsfeld had in mind when he uttered these remarks, but at the time I found them to be quite amusing - an attempt to clarify a little and obfuscate even more the importance of evidence - and I have never forgotten them. But now they have taken on new significance for me, confirming in my own mind the importance of evidence when it comes to facing terror and terrorism, an importance that has taken on added weight in recent months.

Road Blocks Again?

Bosnians are not without their own experiences with masked men. In the 90s these men came at all times of the day and night to murder, rape, and pillage. Their desire to inflict misery on another human being was insatiable. Neither ethnic identity nor age was a guarantee that a person would not be brutalized; if they were selected, then they went away. Times have changed. The masked men who are seen in Sarajevo and elsewhere in Bosnia are sometimes members of the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) whose mission is to combat organized crime and terrorism, as well as protect people and property.

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Representative Paddy Ashdown has sounded the alarm following Dodik’s meeting with Moscow with Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin, who apparently has proposed offering a loan to the Serbs in lieu of them participating in an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan to Bosnia. Will Putin’s overtures make Dodik even more emboldened toward secession? Will masked men once again set up road blocks throughout Bosnia? Will they have "POLICIJ"A" painted on their body armor? Perhaps the International Community will not allow the unthinkable graying of terror(ism) to return to Bosnia, nonetheless some Bosnians remain apprehensive, particularly in light of what has taken place in Ukraine.

Now let us turn to Malaysia Airlines Flight 370. MH370, a Boeing 777, vanished on March 8 with 239 people on board while it was en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. For whatever reason, MH370 veered off-course and is said to have ended its journey in the Southern Indian Ocean west of Australia. Experts have contended that someone made the mid-course correction. So the question is, "Was the vanishing of MH370 simply an accident, due to negligence, or the result of a terrorist act?"

Many suspect a terrorist act. But if we take terrorism as an act (or threat) of violence against noncombatants, and the act has the objective of exacting revenge, intimidation, or in some way influencing a wider audience, then the fact that MH370 is a known unknown of the most extreme kind may place it in a rather different category from that of terrorism - what I call dark terror, a terror that is intentionally concealed instead of publicized.

It is principally because there is an evidentiary deficit that this known unknown does not fit well with the aforementioned definition of terrorism. It is not clear that it was an act of violence, let alone an act of violence intended to exact revenge, intimate, or influence an audience in some other way. In fact, no one has claimed responsibility for the tragedy. Granted, many suicide bombings are not followed by a "declaration of ownership." But whereas the explosion in a market place is public, including an evidence trail and witnesses galore, dark terror is dark because there is very little, if any, publicity, evidence, or witnesses. In the case of MH370, investigators are struggling to find evidence of the plane, let alone of a crime.

**An Evidentiary Deficit**

This brings us back to the genocide in Bosnia. Thousands of people remain missing and presumed murdered. They are the known unknown Bosnians of that conflict. And when the perpetrators of the genocide thought their work would be uncovered, that the chards of bone and bits of clothing would be discovered and used by forensic anthropologists to build a case against them, they decided to dig up the evidence and dispose of it the best way they could, by placing remains in secondary grave sites. Their intent was to create an evidentiary deficit, for the evidence to "disappear" like MH370. The murderers wanted their victims to remain known unknowns. So much so that not even the survivors had the opportunity to pull a scarf around their nose to reduce the stench as they walked through an identification center in search of family members. And whereas the digging up of remains around Srebrenica and reburying them in secret grave sites is similar to the case of MH370 insofar as the disappearance of evidence is concerned, the two cases are different. The context of Srebrenica was obvious - a case of war time genocide, so we knew what to expect and how to proceed. In the case of MH370, as a case of dark terror, the context has yet to be set, including whether a crime has been committed. That is why it seems more appropriate to speak of dark terror rather than dark terrorism. Srebrenica was never dark terror. Nor was it gray terror(ism). It was terrorism in the guise of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and rape.

Rumsfeld unknowingly provided a conceptual tool in the known unknown, one that has been instructive in highlighting the connection between evidence and terrorism. Combating terrorism of whatever kind requires a whole range of evidence, uncovering the identities of the terrorists is just part of what is required. It has also helped to become aware of the graying of terror(ism). But perhaps its most important contribution is to begin the conversation about dark terror. Some may contend that dark terror is less frightening than terrorism. This may not be far off the mark, given that there is an affective delay of the fear not being fully unleashed without evidence that points to a violent act that has a particular objective. Then, again, it may miss the mark completely. Ask yourself the following questions: How could this form of terror be combated when it rests on the absence of that which is required to combat it? What if the vanishing act was intentional, that the plane was crashed in an area of the Indian Ocean that is far removed from sea lanes, prone to severe weather, and is very deep making it extremely difficult to find the plane let alone retrieve the wreckage? What if there are lone wolves or organizations built around dark terror? (What if states are exemplars of dark terror?) This would be an entirely different problem to contend with, one that would require a rethinking of terrorism. No wonder governments are searching at great cost for the wreckage and the flight recorders. It is easier to wrap our heads around terrorism than it is dark terror.

**Like Russian Roulette**

No doubt we want the known unknowns of the Ukraine crisis and the genocide of Srebrenica to be turned into known knowns. Some progress has been made in both cases: photographic studies of the green men may have identified some individuals as members of Russian military and intelligence units and more remains are being found and identified in the Srebrenica area though identified victims grossly outnumber the identified perpetrators. But dealing with the possibility of dark terror cannot be any less urgent. We surely want an evidence trail that closes the case on MH370 as either an accident or an episode of terrorism. If MH370 is left unsolved, then everyday life may become even more like playing Russian roulette. None of us will know if and when we will be the victim of dark terror.