The Dangers of the Lone Wolf
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Lone wolf terrorists are among the most dangerous extremists in the world. They have proven time and again that they can initiate attacks that matches and even surpasses the death toll and destruction wrought by larger terrorist organizations. In Norway, Anders Breivik set off a bomb in Oslo and then traveled to an island and massacred scores of young people attending a political summer camp. In the United States, Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan opened fire at Fort Hood, Texas, killing thirteen people and wounding thirty-two others in the worst terrorist attack ever to take place at a US domestic military installation. Meanwhile, shortly after the 9/11 attacks, Bruce Ivins, a disturbed but brilliant microbiologist, sent letters filled with anthrax spores to several members of Congress and the media, creating a crisis atmosphere in America concerning the threat of bioterrorism.

What, then, is it about lone wolf terrorists that make them so dangerous? First, since there is no group decision-making process that might stifle creativity, lone wolves are free to act upon any scenario they might think up. This has resulted in some of the most innovative attacks in terrorism history. For example, lone wolves were responsible for first vehicle bombing (1920), major midair plane bombing (1956), hijackings (1961), product tampering (1982), and anthrax letter attacks (2001) in the United States.

Second, lone have little or no constraints on their level of violence. They are not concerned with alienating supporters (as would be many terrorist groups), nor are they concerned with a potential government crackdown following an attack. This makes them prime candidates to use weapons of mass destruction, including biological agents as Bruce Ivins did. Third, lone wolves are also dangerous since it is difficult to identify and capture them. There are usually no communications to intercept or members of a group to arrest and learn about potential plots. This can be seen in the case of Theodore Kaczynski, the infamous “Unabomber’ who was responsible for sixteen bombings but was able to elude law enforcement for over seventeen years. Some lone wolves, such as Kaczynski, are also mentally unstable, adding yet another element of danger in their attacks.

Lone wolves can also be quite devious in planning a terrorist operation. For example, Eric Rudolph, an antiabortion lone wolf who set off a bomb at the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in
Atlanta and then bombed abortion clinics and a gay nightclub in subsequent years, planted second bombs at the scene of some of his attacks. These bombs were set to go off after police and emergency services personnel had arrived in response to the first explosions. In one case, police discovered the second bomb and defused it, but in another case the second bomb went off, injuring several people, including police officers. Breivik, the Norwegian anti-Islamic lone wolf terrorist, set off the bomb in Oslo to divert the attention of law enforcement so he could then travel to the island to massacre the youths at the summer camp. He wore a policeman’s uniform and told camp officials he was there to protect the campers, who had already heard the news about the Oslo bombing. Breivik then walked to the area where the campers’ tents were located and began shooting whoever he could find.

Following the carnage in Norway, a police official there stated that Breivik “just came out of nowhere.” Another claimed that there were “no warning lights” that he was a terrorist. This view, however, perpetuates the myth that there is little that can be done to prevent lone wolf terrorist attacks. Breivik had actually made his presence known by using the Internet to purchase large quantities of ammonium nitrate fertilizer that was used to construct the car bomb he set off in Oslo. (Norwegian authorities became suspicious of this online purchase, but wrongly concluded that it was intended for a farm that Breivik had rented). Breivik also advocated violence in passages he wrote in a fifteen-hundred-page manifesto that he posted online shortly before his attacks. “Once you decide to strike,” he wrote, “it is better to kill too many than not enough, or you risk reducing the desired ideological impact of the strike.” Breivik, like many lone wolves, did not just come out of nowhere.

Through a mix of creative and innovative strategies, it is possible to reduce the likelihood of a lone wolf succeeding in an attack. Among the strategies that need to be pursued are the following: improved detection devices in post offices and other facilities to identify package bombs or letters containing anthrax spores; expansion of closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras in public settings, including the further development of computer technology that can recognize “suspicious” behavior in public places and then instantly send the information to a control room where CCTV controllers can decide whether to notify nearby police about the situation; and advances in biometrics, including the use of gait analysis (which assesses how somebody is walking) to determine if a person may be carrying a bomb or other weapon and the analysis of facial expressions to predict hostile intent. One of the most important strategies for
identifying lone wolves before they strike is monitoring the Internet (without violating law-abiding individuals’ civil liberties) for those people who are visiting extremist chat rooms, purchasing bomb making materials and other suspicious items online, or posting ominous threats and “manifestos.”

The lone wolf threat is destined to grow in the coming years. The current age of terrorism is one where individuals can become knowledgeable, empowered, and radicalized via the Internet and other means. There is also the prospect for some of the insurgents from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to take their expertise to other regions and launch individual attacks. It is therefore important that governments and societies be as committed to dealing with the lone wolf terrorist threat as they have been to the threat posed by al Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

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