

History of the Car Bomb

New-generation car bombers are graduates of CIA terrorism schools

By [Mike Davis](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

Global Research, July 08, 2007

tomdispatch.com 12 April 2006

In a column on March 23, 2006 (A Vision, Bruised and Dented), David Brooks of the New York Times' wrote about "the rise of what Richard Lowry of the National Review calls the 'To Hell With Them' Hawks." In part, Brooks characterized these hawks as being conservatives who "look at car bombs and cartoon riots and wonder whether Islam is really a religion of peace." One of the advantages of history is that you have to check such thoughts at the door. If Islam can't be considered a "religion of peace," thanks to what Mike Davis calls "the quotidian workhorse of urban terrorism," then at least its jihadists join a roiling crowd of less-than-peaceful car-bombers that has included Jews, Christians, Hindus, anarchists, French colonials, Mafiosos, members of the Irish Republican Army, and CIA operatives among others.

The car bomb seems such a weapon of the moment that who even knew it had an 80 year-long, tortured history. But Mike Davis, whose most recent projects include the only significant book on the Avian flu, The Monster at Our Door, and Planet of Slums, a startling analysis of the way significant parts of our planet have been rapidly urbanizing and de-industrializing all at once, almost invariably produces the unexpected. This week, Tomdispatch offers his two-part history of the car bomb, a series that puts one of the more terrifying phenomena of our moment into a new perspective and shines a dazzling light into any number of dark corners of our recent past. It will, at some future point, be expanded into a small book and so Davis would like to hear from anyone with information on other car bomb campaigns of the last half century. (Tomgram)

Part I The Poor Man's Air Force: History of the Car Bomb

"You have shown no pity to us! We will do likewise. We will dynamite you! — Anarchist warning (1919)

On a warm September day in 1920, a few months after the arrest of his comrades Sacco and Vanzetti, a vengeful Italian anarchist named Mario Buda parked his horse-drawn wagon near the corner of Wall and Broad Streets, directly across from J. P. Morgan Company. He nonchalantly climbed down and disappeared, unnoticed, into the lunchtime crowd. A few blocks away, a startled postal worker found strange leaflets warning: "Free the Political Prisoners or it will be Sure Death for All of You!" They were signed: "American Anarchist Fighters." The bells of nearby Trinity Church began to toll at noon. When they stopped, the wagon — packed with dynamite and iron slugs — exploded in a fireball of shrapnel.

"The horse and wagon were blown to bits," writes Paul Avrich, the celebrated historian of American anarchism who uncovered the true story. "Glass showered down from office windows, and awnings twelve stories above the street burst into flames. People fled in terror

as a great cloud of dust enveloped the area. In Morgan's offices, Thomas Joyce of the securities department fell dead on his desk amid a rubble of plaster and walls. Outside scores of bodies littered the streets."

Buda was undoubtedly disappointed when he learned that J.P. Morgan himself was not among the 40 dead and more than 200 wounded — the great robber baron was away in Scotland at his hunting lodge. Nonetheless, a poor immigrant with some stolen dynamite, a pile of scrap metal, and an old horse had managed to bring unprecedented terror to the inner sanctum of American capitalism.

His Wall Street bomb was the culmination of a half-century of anarchist fantasies about avenging angels made of dynamite; but it was also an invention, like Charles Babbage's Difference Engine, far ahead of the imagination of its time. Only after the barbarism of strategic bombing had become commonplace, and when air forces routinely pursued insurgents into the labyrinths of poor cities, would the truly radical potential of Buda's "infernal machine" be fully realized.

Buda's wagon was, in essence, the prototype car bomb: the first use of an inconspicuous vehicle, anonymous in almost any urban setting, to transport large quantities of high explosive into precise range of a high-value target. It was not replicated, as far as I have been able to determine, until January 12, 1947 when the Stern Gang drove a truckload of explosives into a British police station in Haifa, Palestine, killing 4 and injuring 140. The Stern Gang (a pro-fascist splinter group led by Avraham Stern that broke away from the right-wing Zionist paramilitary Irgun) would soon use truck and car bombs to kill Palestinians as well: a creative atrocity immediately reciprocated by British deserters fighting on the side of Palestinian nationalists.

Vehicle bombs thereafter were used sporadically — producing notable massacres in Saigon (1952), Algiers (1962), and Palermo (1963) — but the gates of hell were only truly opened in 1972, when the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) accidentally, so the legend goes, improvised the first ammonium nitrate-fuel oil (ANFO) car bomb. These new-generation bombs, requiring only ordinary industrial ingredients and synthetic fertilizer, were cheap to fabricate and astonishingly powerful: they elevated urban terrorism from the artisanal to the industrial level, and made possible sustained blitzes against entire city centers as well as the complete destruction of ferro-concrete skyscrapers and residential blocks.

The car bomb, in other words, suddenly became a semi-strategic weapon that, under certain circumstances, was comparable to airpower in its ability to knock out critical urban nodes and headquarters as well as terrorize the populations of entire cities. Indeed, the suicide truck bombs that devastated the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 prevailed — at least in a geopolitical sense — over the combined firepower of the fighter-bombers and battleships of the U.S. Sixth Fleet and forced the Reagan administration to retreat from Lebanon.

Hezbollah's ruthless and brilliant use of car bombs in Lebanon in the 1980s to counter the advanced military technology of the United States, France, and Israel soon emboldened a dozen other groups to bring their insurgencies and jihads home to the metropolis.

Some of the new-generation car bombers were graduates of terrorism schools set up by the CIA and Pakistani intelligence (the ISI), with Saudi financing, in the mid-1980s to train mujahedin to terrorize the Russians then occupying Kabul. Between 1992 and 1998, 16

major vehicle bomb attacks in 13 different cities killed 1,050 people and wounded nearly 12,000. More importantly from a geopolitical standpoint, the IRA and Gama'a al-Islamiyya inflicted billions of dollars of damage on the two leading control-centers of the world economy — the City of London (1992, 1993, and 1996) and lower Manhattan (1993) — and forced a reorganization of the global reinsurance industry.

In the new millennium, 85 years after that first massacre on Wall Street, car bombs have become almost as generically global as iPods and HIV-AIDS, cratering the streets of cities from Bogota to Bali. Suicide truck bombs, once the distinctive signature of Hezbollah, have been franchised to Sri Lanka, Chechnya/Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Kuwait, and Indonesia. On any graph of urban terrorism, the curve representing car bombs is rising steeply, almost exponentially. U.S.-occupied Iraq, of course, is a relentless inferno with more than 9,000 casualties — mainly civilian — attributed to vehicle bombs in the two-year period between July 2003 and June 2005. Since then, the frequency of car-bomb attacks has dramatically increased: 140 per month in the fall of 2005, 13 in Baghdad on New Year's Day 2006 alone. If roadside bombs or IEDs are the most effective device against American armored vehicles, car bombs are the weapon of choice for slaughtering Shiite civilians in front of mosques and markets and instigating an apocalyptic sectarian war.

Under siege from weapons indistinguishable from ordinary traffic, the apparatuses of administration and finance are retreating inside "rings of steel" and "green zones," but the larger challenge of the car bomb seems intractable. Stolen nukes, Sarin gas, and anthrax may be the "sum of our fears," but the car bomb is the quotidian workhorse of urban terrorism. Before considering its genealogy, however, it may be helpful to summarize those characteristics that make Buda's wagon such a formidable and undoubtedly permanent source of urban insecurity.

First, vehicle bombs are stealth weapons of surprising power and destructive efficiency. Trucks, vans, or even SUVs can easily transport the equivalent of several conventional 1,000-pound bombs to the doorstep of a prime target. Moreover, their destructive power is still evolving, thanks to the constant tinkering of ingenious bomb-makers. We have yet to face the full horror of semi-trailer-sized explosions with a lethal blast range of 200 yards or of dirty bombs sheathed in enough nuclear waste to render mid-Manhattan radioactive for generations.

Second, they are extraordinarily cheap: 40 or 50 people can be massacred with a stolen car and maybe \$400 of fertilizer and bootlegged electronics. Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind of the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, bragged that his most expensive outlay was in long-distance phone calls. The explosive itself (one half ton of urea) cost \$3,615 plus the \$59 per day rental for a ten-foot-long Ryder van. In contrast, the cruise missiles that have become the classic American riposte to overseas terrorist attacks cost \$1.1 million each.

Third, car bombings are operationally simple to organize. Although some still refuse to believe that Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols didn't have secret assistance from a government or dark entity, two men in the proverbial phone booth — a security-guard and a farmer — successfully planned and executed the horrendous Oklahoma City bombing with instructional books and information acquired from the gun-show circuit.

Fourth, like even the 'smartest' of aerial bombs, car bombs are inherently indiscriminate: "Collateral damage" is virtually inevitable. If the logic of an attack is to slaughter innocents and sow panic in the widest circle, to operate a "strategy of tension," or just demoralize a

society, car bombs are ideal. But they are equally effective at destroying the moral credibility of a cause and alienating its mass base of support, as both the IRA and the ETA in Spain have independently discovered. The car bomb is an inherently fascist weapon.

Fifth, car bombs are highly anonymous and leave minimal forensic evidence. Buda quietly went home to Italy, leaving William Burns, J. Edgar Hoover, and the Bureau of Investigation (later, to be renamed the FBI) to make fools of themselves as they chased one false lead after another for a decade. Most of Buda's descendants have also escaped identification and arrest. Anonymity, in addition, greatly recommends car bombs to those who like to disguise their handiwork, including the CIA, the Israeli Mossad, the Syrian GSD, the Iranian Pasdaran, and the Pakistani ISI — all of whom have caused unspeakable carnage with such devices.

The members of the Stern Gang were ardent students of violence, self-declared Jewish admirers of Mussolini who steeped themselves in the terrorist traditions of the pre-1917 Russian Socialist-Revolutionary Party, the Macedonian IMRO, and the Italian Blackshirts. As the most extreme wing of the Zionist movement in Palestine — “fascists” to the Haganah and “terrorists” to the British — they were morally and tactically unfettered by considerations of diplomacy or world opinion. They had a fierce and well-deserved reputation for the originality of their operations and the unexpectedness of their attacks. On January 12, 1947, as part of their campaign to prevent any compromise between mainstream Zionism and the British Labor government, they exploded a powerful truck bomb in the central police station in Haifa, resulting in 144 casualties. Three months later, they repeated the tactic in Tel Aviv, blowing up the Sarona police barracks (5 dead) with a stolen postal truck filled with dynamite.

In December 1947, following the UN vote to partition Palestine, full-scale fighting broke out between Jewish and Arab communities from Haifa to Gaza. The Stern Gang, which rejected anything less than the restoration of a biblical Israel, now gave the truck bomb its debut as a weapon of mass terror. On January 4, 1948, two men in Arab dress drove a truck ostensibly loaded with oranges into the center of Jaffa and parked it next to the New Seray Building, which housed the Palestinian municipal government as well as a soup-kitchen for poor children. They coolly lingered for coffee at a nearby café before leaving a few minutes ahead of the detonation.

“A thunderous explosion,” writes Adam LeBor in his history of Jaffa, “then shook the city. Broken glass and shattered masonry blew out across Clock Tower Square. The New Seray’s centre and side walls collapsed in a pile of rubble and twisted beams. Only the neo-classical façade survived. After a moment of silence, the screams began, 26 were killed, hundreds injured. Most were civilians, including many children eating at the charity kitchen.” The bomb missed the local Palestinian leadership who had moved to another building, but the atrocity was highly successful in terrifying residents and setting the stage for their eventual flight.

It also provoked the Palestinians to cruel repayment in kind. The Arab High Committee had its own secret weapon — blond-haired British deserters, fighting on the side of the Palestinians. Nine days after the Jaffa bombing, some of these deserters, led by Eddie Brown, a former police corporal whose brother had been murdered by the Irgun, commandeered a postal delivery truck which they packed with explosives and detonated in the center of Haifa’s Jewish quarter, injuring 50 people. Two weeks later, Brown, driving a stolen car and followed by a five-ton truck driven by a Palestinian in a police uniform, successfully passed through British and Haganah checkpoints and entered Jerusalem’s New

City. The driver parked in front of the Palestine Post, lit the fuse, and then escaped with Brown in his car. The newspaper headquarters was devastated with 1 dead and 20 wounded.

According to a chronicler of the episode, Abdel Kader el-Husseini, the military leader of the Arab Higher Committee, was so impressed by the success of these operations — inadvertently inspired by the Stern Gang — that he authorized an ambitious sequel employing six British deserters. “This time three trucks were used, escorted by a stolen British armored car with a young blond man in police uniform standing in the turret.” Again, the convoy easily passed through checkpoints and drove to the Atlantic Hotel on Ben Yehuda Street. A curious night watchman was murdered when he confronted the gang, who then drove off in the armored car after setting charges in the three trucks. The explosion was huge and the toll accordingly grim: 46 dead and 130 wounded.

The window of opportunity for such attacks — the possibility of passing from one zone to another — was rapidly closing as Palestinians and Jews braced for all-out warfare, but a final attack prefigured the car bomb’s brilliant future as a tool of assassination. On March 11, the official limousine of the American consul-general, flying the stars and stripes and driven by the usual chauffeur, was admitted to the courtyard of the heavily-guarded Jewish Agency compound. The driver, a Christian Palestinian named Abu Yussef, hoped to kill Zionist leader David Ben Gurion, but the limousine was moved just before it exploded; nonetheless, 13 officials of the Jewish Foundation Fund died and 40 were injured.

This brief but furious exchange of car bombs between Arabs and Jews would enter into the collective memory of their conflict, but would not be resumed on a large scale until Israel and its Phalangist allies began to terrorize West Beirut with bombings in 1981: a provocation that would awake a Shiite sleeping dragon. Meanwhile, the real sequel was played out in Saigon: a series of car and motorcycle bomb atrocities in 1952-53 that Graham Greene incorporated into the plot of his novel, *The Quiet American*, and which he portrayed as secretly orchestrated by his CIA operative Alden Pyle, who is conspiring to substitute a pro-American party for both the Viet-Minh (upon whom the actual bombings would be blamed) and the French (who are unable to guarantee public safety).

The real-life *Quiet American* was the counterinsurgency expert Colonel Edward Lansdale (fresh from victories against peasant Communists in the Philippines), and the real leader of the ‘Third Force’ was his protégé, General Trinh Minh The of the Cao Dai religious sect. There is no doubt, writes The’s biographer, that the general “instigated many terrorist outrages in Saigon, using clockwork plastic charges loaded into vehicles, or hidden inside bicycle frames with charges. Notably, the Li An Minh [The’s army] blew up cars in front of the Opera House in Saigon in 1952. These ‘time-bombs’ were reportedly made of 50-kg ordnance, used by the French air force, unexploded and collected by the Li An Minh.”

Lansdale was dispatched to Saigon by Allen Dulles of the CIA some months after the Opera atrocity (hideously immortalized in a Life photographer’s image of the upright corpse of a rickshaw driver with both legs blown off), which was officially blamed on Ho Chi Minh. Although Lansdale was well aware of General The’s authorship of these sophisticated attacks (the explosives were hidden in false compartments next to car gas tanks), he nonetheless championed the Cao Dai warlord as a patriot in the mould of Washington and Jefferson. After either French agents or Vietminh cadre assassinated The, Landsdale eulogized him to a journalist as “a good man. He was moderate, he was a pretty good general, he was on our side, and he cost twenty-five thousand dollars.”

Whether by emulation or reinvention, car bombs showed up next in another war-torn French colony — Algiers during the last days of the *pied noirs* or French colonial settlers. Some of the embittered French officers in Saigon in 1952-53 would also become cadres of the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS), led by General Raoul Salan. In April 1961, after the failure of its uprising against French President Charles de Gaulle, who was prepared to negotiate a settlement with the Algerian rebels, the OAS turned to terrorism — a veritable festival de plastique — with all the formidable experience of its veteran paratroopers and legionnaires. Its declared enemies included De Gaulle himself, French security forces, communists, peace activists (including philosopher and activist Jean-Paul Sartre), and especially Algerian civilians. The most deadly of their car bombs killed 62 Moslem stevedores lining up for work at the docks in Algiers in May 1962, but succeeded only in bolstering the Algerian resolve to drive all the *pied-noirs* into the sea.

The next destination for the car bomb was Palermo, Sicily. Angelo La Barbera, the Mafia capo of Palermo-Center, undoubtedly paid careful attention to the Algerian bombings and may even have borrowed some OAS expertise when he launched his devastating attack on his Mafia rival, “Little Bird” Greco, in February 1963. Greco’s bastion was the town of Ciaculli outside Palermo where he was protected by an army of henchmen. La Barbera surmounted this obstacle with the aid of the Alfa Romeo Giulietta. “This dainty four-door family saloon,” writes John Dickie in his history of the Cosa Nostra, “was one of the symbols of Italy’s economic miracle — ‘svelte, practical, comfortable, safe and convenient,’ as the adverts proclaimed.” The first explosive-packed Giulietta destroyed Greco’s house; the second, a few weeks later, killed one of his key allies. Greco’s gunmen retaliated, wounding La Barbera in Milan in May; in response, La Barbera’s ambitious lieutenants Pietro Torretta and Tommaso Buscetta (later to become the most famous of all Mafia pentiti) unleashed more deadly Giuliettas.

On June 30, 1963, “the umpteenth Giulietta stuffed with TNT” was left in one of the tangerine groves that surround Ciaculli. A tank of butane with a fuse was clearly visible in the back seat. A Giulietta had already exploded that morning in a nearby town, killing two people, so the carabinieri were cautious and summoned army engineers for assistance. “Two hours later two bomb disposal experts arrived, cut the fuse, and pronounced the vehicle safe to approach. But when Lt. Mario Malausa made to inspect the contents of the boot, he detonated the huge quantity of TNT it contained. He and six other men were blown to pieces by an explosion that scorched and stripped the tangerine trees for hundreds of metres around.” (The site is today marked by one of the several monuments to bomb victims in the Palermo region.)

Before this “First Mafia War” ended in 1964, the Sicilian population had learned to tremble at the very sight of a Giulietta and car bombings had become a permanent part of the Mafia repertoire. They were employed again during an even bloodier second Mafia war or Matanza in 1981-83, then turned against the Italian public in the early 1990s after the conviction of Cosa Nostra leaders in a series of sensational “maxi-trials.” The most notorious of these blind-rage car bombings — presumably organized by ‘Tractor’ Provenzano and his notorious Corleonese gang — was the explosion in May 1993 that damaged the world-famous Uffizi Gallery in the heart of Florence and killed 5 pedestrians, injuring 40 others.

The first-generation car bombs — Jaffa-Jerusalem, Saigon, Algiers, and Palermo — were deadly enough (with a maximum yield usually equal to several hundred pounds of TNT), but required access to stolen industrial or military explosives. Journeymen bomb-makers, however, were aware of a homemade alternative — notoriously dangerous to concoct, but

offering almost unlimited vistas of destruction at a low cost. Ammonium nitrate is a universally available synthetic fertilizer and industrial ingredient with extraordinary explosive properties, as witnessed by such accidental cataclysms as an explosion at a chemical plant in Oppau, Germany in 1921 — the shock waves were felt 150 miles away and only a vast crater remained where the plant had been — and a Texas City disaster in 1947 (600 dead and 90% of the town structurally damaged). Ammonium nitrate is sold in half-ton quantities affordable by even the most cash-strapped terrorist, but the process of mixing it with fuel oil to create an ANFO explosive is more than a little tricky as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) found out in late 1971.

“The car bomb was [re]discovered entirely by accident,” explains journalist Ed Maloney in his *The Secret History of the IRA*, “but its deployment by the Belfast IRA was not. The chain of events began in late December 1971 when the IRA’s quartermaster general, Jack McCabe, was fatally injured in an explosion caused when an experimental, fertilizer-based homemade mix known as the ‘black stuff’ exploded as he was blending it with a shovel in his garage on the northern outskirts of Dublin. [Provisionals’] GHQ warned that the mix was too dangerous to handle, but Belfast had already received a consignment, and someone had the idea of disposing of it by dumping it in a car with a fuse and a timer and leaving it somewhere in downtown Belfast.” The resulting explosion made a big impression upon the Belfast leadership.

The “black stuff” — which the IRA soon learned how to handle safely — freed the underground army from supply-side constraints: the car bomb enhanced destructive capacity yet reduced the likelihood of Volunteers being arrested or accidentally blown up. The ANFO-car bomb combination, in other words, was an unexpected military revolution, but one fraught with the potential for political and moral disaster. “The sheer size of the devices,” emphasizes Moloney, “greatly increased the risk of civilian deaths in careless or bungled operations.”

The IRA Army Council led by Sean MacStiofain, however, found the new weapon’s awesome capabilities too seductive to worry about ways in which its grisly consequences might backfire on them. Indeed, car bombs reinforced the illusion, shared by most of the top leadership in 1972, that the IRA was one final military offensive away from victory over the English government. Accordingly, in March 1972, two car bombs were sent into Belfast city center followed by garbled phone warnings that led police to inadvertently evacuate people in the direction of one of the explosions: Five civilians were killed along with two members of the security forces. Despite the public outcry as well as the immediate traffic closure of the Royal Avenue shopping precinct, the Belfast Brigade’s enthusiasm for the new weapon remained undiminished and the leadership plotted a huge attack designed to bring normal commercial life in Northern Ireland to an abrupt halt. MacStiofain boasted of an offensive of “the utmost ferocity and ruthlessness” that would wreck the “colonial infrastructure.”

On Friday, July 21st, IRA Volunteers left 20 car bombs or concealed charges on the periphery of the now-gated city center, with detonations timed to follow one another at approximately five-minute intervals. The first car bomb exploded in front of the Ulster Bank in north Belfast and blew both legs off a Catholic passerby; successive explosions damaged two railroad stations, the Ulster bus depot on Oxford Street, various railway junctions, and a mixed Catholic-Protestant residential area on Cavehill Road. “At the height of the bombing, the center of Belfast resembled a city under artillery fire; clouds of suffocating smoke enveloped buildings as one explosion followed another, almost drowning out the hysterical screams of

panicked shoppers.” A series of telephoned IRA warnings just created more chaos, as civilians fled from one explosion only to be driven back by another. Seven civilians and two soldiers were killed and more than 130 people were seriously wounded.

Although not an economic knockout punch, “Bloody Friday” was the beginning of a “no business as usual” bombing campaign that quickly inflicted significant damage on the Northern Ireland economy, particularly its ability to attract private and foreign investment. The terror of that day also compelled authorities to tighten their anti-car-bomb “ring of steel” around the Belfast city center, making it the prototype for other fortified enclaves and future “green zones.” In the tradition of their ancestors, the Fenians, who had originated dynamite terrorism in the 1870s, Irish Republicans had again added new pages to the textbook of urban guerrilla warfare. Foreign aficionados, particularly in the Middle East, undoubtedly paid close attention to the twin innovations of the ANFO car bomb and its employment in a protracted bombing campaign against an entire urban-regional economy.

What was less well understood outside of Ireland, however, was the enormity of the wound that the IRA’s car bombs inflicted on the Republican movement itself. Bloody Friday destroyed much of the IRA’s heroic-underdog popular image, produced deep revulsion amongst ordinary Catholics, and gave the British government an unexpected reprieve from the worldwide condemnation it had earned for the Blood Sunday massacre in Derry and internment without trial. Moreover, it gave the Army the perfect pretext to launch massive Operation Motorman: 13,000 troops led by Centurion tanks entered the “no-go” areas of Derry and Belfast and reclaimed control of the streets from the Republican movement. The same day, a bloody, bungled car bomb attack on the village of Claudy in County Londonderry killed 8 people. (Protestant Loyalist paramilitary groups — who never bothered with warnings and deliberately targeted civilians on the other side — would claim Bloody Friday and Claudy as sanctions for their triple car bomb attack on Dublin during afternoon rush hour on May 17, 1974 which left 33 dead, the highest one-day toll in the course of the “Troubles.”)

The Belfast debacle led to a major turnover in IRA leadership, but failed to dispel their almost cargo-cult-like belief in the capacity of car bombs to turn the tide of battle. Forced onto the defensive by Motorman and the backlash to Bloody Friday, they decided to strike at the very heart of British power instead. The Belfast Brigade planned to send ten car bombs to London via the Dublin-Liverpool ferry using fresh volunteers with clean records, including two young sisters, Marion and Dolours Price. Snags arose and only four cars arrived in London; one of these was detonated in front of the Old Bailey, another in the center of Whitehall, close to the Prime Minister’s house at Number 10 Downing Street. One hundred and eighty Londoners were injured and one was killed. Although the 8 IRA bombers were quickly caught, they were acclaimed in the West Belfast ghettos and the operation became a template for future Provisional bombing campaigns in London, culminating in the huge explosions that shattered the City of London and unnerved the world insurance industry in 1992 and 1993.

Never in history has a single city been the battlefield for so many contesting ideologies, sectarian allegiances, local vendettas, or foreign conspiracies and interventions as Beirut in the early 1980s. Belfast’s triangular conflicts — three armed camps (Republican, Loyalist, and British) and their splinter groups — seemed straightforward compared to the fractal, Russian-doll-like complexity of Lebanon’s civil wars (Shiite versus Palestinian, for example) within civil wars (Maronite versus Moslem and Druze) within regional conflicts (Israel versus Syria) and surrogate wars (Iran versus the United States) within, ultimately, the Cold War. In

the fall of 1971, for example, there were 58 different armed groups in West Beirut alone. With so many people trying to kill each other for so many different reasons, Beirut became to the technology of urban violence what a tropical rainforest is to the evolution of plants.

Car bombs began to regularly terrorize Moslem West Beirut in the fall of 1981, apparently as part of an Israeli strategy to evict the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon. The Israeli secret service, the Mossad, had previously employed car bombs in Beirut to assassinate Palestinian leaders (novelist Ghassan Kanfani in July 1972, for example), so no one was especially surprised when evidence emerged that Israel was sponsoring the carnage. According to Middle Eastern scholar Rashid Khalidi, "A sequence of public confessions by captured drivers made clear these [car bombings] were being utilized by the Israelis and their Phalangist allies to increase the pressure on the PLO to leave."

Journalist Robert Fisk was in Beirut when an "enormous [car] bomb blew a 45-foot-crater in the road and brought down an entire block of apartments. The building collapsed like a concertina, crushing more than 50 of its occupants to death, most of them Shia refugees from southern Lebanon." Several of the car bombers were captured and confessed that the bombs had been rigged by the Shin Bet, the Israeli equivalent of the FBI or the British Special Branch. But if such atrocities were designed to drive a wedge of terror between the PLO and Lebanese Moslems, they had the inadvertent result (as did the Israeli air force's later cluster-bombing of civilian neighborhoods) of turning the Shias from informal Israeli allies into shrewd and resolute enemies.

The new face of Shiite militancy was Hezbollah, formed in mid-1982 out of an amalgamation of Islamic Amal with other pro-Khomeini groupuscules. Trained and advised by the Iranian Pasdaran in the Bekaa Valley, Hezbollah was both an indigenous resistance movement with deep roots in the Shiite slums of southern Beirut and, at the same time, the long arm of Iran's theocratic revolution. Although some experts espouse alternative theories, Islamic Amal/Hezbollah is usually seen as the author, with Iranian and Syrian assistance, of the devastating attacks on American and French forces in Beirut during 1983. Hezbollah's diabolic innovation was to marry the IRA's ANFO car bombs to the kamikaze — using suicide drivers to crash truckloads of explosives into the lobbies of embassies and barracks in Beirut, and later into Israeli checkpoints and patrols in southern Lebanon.

The United States and France became targets of Hezbollah and its Syrian and Iranian patrons after the Multinational Force in Beirut, which supposedly had landed to allow for the safe evacuation of the PLO from that city, evolved into the informal and then open ally of the Maronite government in its civil war against the Moslem-Druze majority. The first retaliation against President Reagan's policy occurred on April 18, 1983, when a pickup truck carrying 2,000 pounds of ANFO explosives suddenly swerved across traffic into the driveway of the oceanfront U.S. embassy in Beirut. The driver gunned the truck past a startled guard and crashed through the lobby door. "Even by Beirut standards," writes former CIA agent Robert Baer, "it was an enormous blast, shattering windows. The USS Guadalcanal, anchored five miles off the coast, shuddered from the tremors. At ground zero, the center of the seven-story embassy lifted up hundreds of feet into the air, remained suspended for what seemed an eternity, and then collapsed in a cloud of dust, people, splintered furniture, and paper."

Whether as a result of superb intelligence or sheer luck, the bombing coincided with a visit to the embassy of Robert Ames, the CIA's national intelligence officer for the Near East. It killed him ("his hand was found floating a mile offshore, the wedding ring still on his finger")

and all six members of the Beirut CIA station. “Never before had the CIA lost so many officers in a single attack. It was a tragedy from which the agency would never recover.” It also left the Americans blind in Beirut, forcing them to scrounge for intelligence scraps from the French embassy or the British listening station offshore on Cyprus. (A year later, Hezbollah completed their massacre of the CIA in Beirut when they kidnapped and executed the replacement station chief, William Buckley.) As a result, the Agency never foresaw the coming of the mother-of-all-vehicle-bomb attacks.

Over the protests of Colonel Gerahty, the commander of the U.S. Marines onshore in Beirut, Ronald Reagan’s National Security Advisor, Robert McFarlane, ordered the Sixth Fleet in September to open fire on Druze militia who were storming Lebanese Army Forces positions in the hills above Beirut — bringing the United States into the conflict brazenly on the side of the reactionary Amin Gemayel government. A month later, a five-ton Mercedes dump truck hurled past sandbagged Marine sentries and smashed through a guardhouse into the ground floor of the “Beirut Hilton,” the U.S. military barracks in a former PLO headquarters next to the international airport. The truck’s payload was an incredible 12,000 pounds of high explosives. “It is said to have been the largest non-nuclear blast ever [deliberately] detonated on the face of the earth.” “The force of the explosion,” continues Eric Hammel in his history of the Marine landing force, “initially lifted the entire four-story structure, shearing the bases of the concrete support columns, each measuring fifteen feet in circumference and reinforced by numerous one and three quarter inch steel rods. The airborne building then fell in upon itself. A massive shock wave and ball of flaming gas was hurled in all directions.” The Marine (and Navy) death toll of 241 was the Corps’ highest single-day loss since Iwo Jima in 1945.

Meanwhile, another Hezbollah kamikaze had crashed his explosive-laden van into the French barracks in West Beirut, toppling the eight-story structure, killing 58 soldiers. If the airport bomb repaid the Americans for saving Gemayal, this second explosion was probably a response to the French decision to supply Saddam Hussein with Super-Etendard jets and Exocet missiles to attack Iran. The hazy distinction between local Shiite grievances and the interests of Tehran was blurred further when two members of Hezbollah joined with 18 Iraqi Shias to truck-bomb the U.S. embassy in Kuwait in mid-December. The French embassy, the control tower at the airport, the main oil refinery and an expatriate residential compound were also targeted in what was clearly a stern warning to Iran’s enemies.

Following another truck bombing against the French in Beirut as well as deadly attacks on Marine outposts, the Multinational Force began to withdraw from Lebanon in February 1984. It was Reagan’s most stunning geopolitical defeat. In the impolite phrase of Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward, “Essentially we turned tail and ran and left Lebanon.” American power in Lebanon, added Thomas Friedman of the New York Times, was neutralized by “just 12,000 pounds of dynamite and a stolen truck.”

[This article — a preliminary sketch for a book-length study — will appear next year in *Indefensible Space: The Architecture of the National Insecurity State* (Routledge 2007), edited by Michael Sorkin.]

Mike Davis is the author most recently of *The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu* (The New Press) and *Planet of Slums* (Verso). He lives in San Diego.

Part II. Car Bombs with Wings: The CIA’s Car Bomb University (the 1980s)

“The CIA officers that Yousef worked with closely impressed upon him one rule: never use the terms sabotage or assassination when speaking with visiting congressmen.” — Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*

Gunboat diplomacy had been defeated by car bombs in Lebanon, but the Reagan administration and, above all, CIA Director William Casey were left thirsting for revenge against Hezbollah. “Finally in 1985,” according to the *Washington Post*’s Bob Woodward in *Veil*, his book on Casey’s career, “he worked out with the Saudis a plan to use a car bomb to kill [Hezbollah leader] Sheikh Fadlallah who they determined was one of the people behind, not only the Marine barracks, but was involved in the taking of American hostages in Beirut... It was Casey on his own, saying, ‘I’m going to solve the big problem by essentially getting tougher or as tough as the terrorists in using their weapon — the car bomb.’”

The CIA’s own operatives, however, proved incapable of carrying out the bombing, so Casey subcontracted the operation to Lebanese agents led by a former British SAS officer and financed by Saudi Ambassador Prince Bandar. In March 1984, a large car bomb was detonated about 50 yards from Sheikh Fadlallah’s house in Bir El-Abed, a crowded Shiite neighborhood in southern Beirut. The sheikh wasn’t harmed, but 80 innocent neighbors and passersby were killed and 200 wounded. Fadlallah immediately had a huge “MADE IN USA” banner hung across the shattered street, while Hezbollah returned tit for tat in September when a suicide truck driver managed to break through the supposedly impregnable perimeter defenses of the new U.S. embassy in eastern (Christian) Beirut, killing 23 employees and visitors.

Despite the Fadlallah fiasco, Casey remained an enthusiast for using urban terrorism to advance American goals, especially against the Soviets and their allies in Afghanistan. A year after the Bir El-Abed massacre, Casey won President Reagan’s approval for NSDD-166, a secret directive that, according to Steve Coll in *Ghost Wars*, inaugurated a “new era of direct infusions of advanced U.S. military technology into Afghanistan, intensified training of Islamist guerrillas in explosives and sabotage techniques, and targeted attacks on Soviet military officers.”

U.S. Special Forces experts would now provide high-tech explosives and teach state-of-the-art sabotage techniques, including the fabrication of ANFO (ammonium nitrate-fuel oil) car bombs, to Pakistani intelligence service (or ISI) officers under the command of Brigadier Mohammed Yousaf. These officers, in turn, would tutor thousands of Afghan and foreign mujahedin, including the future cadre of al-Qaeda, in scores of training camps financed by the Saudis. “Under ISI direction,” Coll writes, “the mujahedin received training and malleable explosives to mount car-bomb and even camel-bomb attacks in Soviet-occupied cities, usually designed to kill Soviet soldiers and commanders. Casey endorsed these despite the qualms of some CIA career officers.”

Mujahedin car bombers, working with teams of snipers and assassins, not only terrorized uniformed Soviet forces in a series of devastating attacks in Afghanistan but also massacred leftwing intelligentsia in Kabul, the country’s capital. “Yousaf and the Afghan car-bombing squads he trained,” writes Coll, “regarded Kabul University professors as fair game,” as well as movie theaters and cultural events. Although some members of the National Security Council reportedly denounced the bombings and assassinations as “outright terrorism,” Casey was delighted with the results. Meanwhile, “by the late 1980s, the ISI had effectively eliminated all the secular, leftist, and royalist political parties that had first formed when Afghan refugees fled communist rule.” As a result, most of the billions of dollars that the

Saudis and Washington pumped into Afghanistan ended up in the hands of radical Islamist groups sponsored by the ISI. They were also the chief recipients of huge quantities of CIA-supplied plastic explosives as well as thousands of advanced E-cell delay detonators.

It was the greatest technology transfer of terrorist technique in history. There was no need for angry Islamists to take car-bomb extension courses from Hezbollah when they could matriculate in a CIA-supported urban-sabotage graduate program in Pakistan's frontier provinces. "Ten years later," Coll observes, "the vast training infrastructure that Yousaf and his colleagues built with the enormous budgets endorsed by NSDD-166 — the specialized camps, the sabotage training manuals, the electronic bomb detonators, and so on — would be referred to routinely in America as 'terrorist infrastructure.'" Moreover the alumni of the ISI training camps like Ramzi Yousef, who plotted the first 1993 World Trade Center attack, or his uncle Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who allegedly designed the second, would soon be applying their expertise on every continent.

Cities under Siege (the 1990s) "The hour of dynamite, terror without limit, has arrived." — Peruvian Journalist Gustavo Gorriti, 1992

Twenty-first century hindsight makes it clear that the defeat of the U.S. intervention in Lebanon in 1983-84, followed by the CIA's dirty war in Afghanistan, had wider and more potent geopolitical repercussions than the loss of Saigon in 1975. The Vietnam War was, of course, an epic struggle whose imprint upon domestic American politics remains profound, but it belonged to the era of the Cold War's bipolar superpower rivalry. Hezbollah's war in Beirut and south Lebanon, on the other hand, prefigured (and even inspired) the "asymmetric" conflicts that characterize the millennium. Moreover, unlike peoples' war on the scale sustained by the NLF and the North Vietnamese for more than a generation, car-bombing and suicide terrorism are easily franchised and gruesomely applicable in a variety of scenarios. Although rural guerrillas survive in rugged redoubts like Kashmir, the Khyber Pass, and the Andes, the center of gravity of global insurgency has moved from the countryside back to the cities and their slum peripheries. In this post-Cold-War urban context, the Hezbollah bombing of the Marine barracks has become the gold standard of terrorism; the 9/11 attacks, it can be argued, were only an inevitable scaling-up of the suicide truck bomb to airliners.

Washington, however, was loath to recognize the new military leverage that powerful vehicle bombs offered its enemies or even to acknowledge their surprising lethality. After the 1983 Beirut bombings, the Sandia National Laboratory in New Mexico began an intensive investigation into the physics of truck bombs. Researchers were shocked by what they discovered. In addition to the deadly air blast, truck bombs also produced unexpectedly huge ground waves.

"The lateral accelerations propagated through the ground from a truck bomb far exceed those produced during the peak magnitude of an earthquake." Indeed, the scientists of Sandia came to the conclusion that even an offsite detonation near a nuclear power plant might "cause enough damage to lead to a deadly release of radiation or even a meltdown." Yet the Nuclear Regulatory Commission in 1986 refused to authorize the emplacement of vehicle barriers to protect nuclear-power installations and made no move to alter an obsolete security plan designed to thwart a few terrorists infiltrating on foot.

Indeed, Washington seemed unwilling to learn any of the obvious lessons of either its Beirut defeat or its secret successes in Afghanistan. The Reagan and Bush administrations

appeared to regard the Hezbollah bombings as flukes, not as a powerful new threat that would replicate rapidly in the “blowback” of imperial misadventure and anti-Soviet escapades. Although it was inevitable that other insurgent groups would soon try to emulate Hezbollah, American planners — although partially responsible — largely failed to foresee the extraordinary “globalization” of car bombing in the 1990s or the rise of sophisticated new strategies of urban destabilization that went with it. Yet by the mid-1990s, more cities were under siege from bomb attacks than at any time since the end of World War Two, and urban guerrillas were using car and truck bombs to score direct hits on some of the world’s most powerful financial institutions. Each success, moreover, emboldened groups to plan yet more attacks and recruited more groups to launch their own “poor man’s air force.”

Beginning in April 1992, for example, the occult Maoists of Sendero Luminoso came down from Peru’s altiplano to spread terror throughout the cities of Lima and Callao with increasingly more powerful coche-bombas. “Large supplies of explosives,” the magazine *Caretas* pointed out, are “freely available in a mining nation,” and the senderistas were generous in their gifts of dynamite: bombing television stations and various foreign embassies as well as a dozen police stations and military camps. Their campaign eerily recapitulated the car bomb’s phylogeny as it progressed from modest detonations to a more powerful attack on the American embassy, then to Bloody-Friday-type public massacres using 16 vehicles at a time. The climax (and Sendero’s chief contribution to the genre) was an attempt to blow up an entire neighborhood of “class enemies”: a huge ANFO explosion in the elite Miraflores district on the evening of July 16 that killed 22, wounded 120, and destroyed or damaged 183 homes, 400 businesses and 63 parked cars. The local press described Miraflores as looking “as if an aerial bombardment had flattened the area.”

If one of the virtues of an air force is the ability to reach halfway around the world to surprise enemies in their beds, the car bomb truly grew wings during 1993 as Middle Eastern groups struck at targets in the Western Hemisphere for the first time. The World Trade Center attack on February 26 was organized by master al-Qaeda bomb-maker Ramzi Yousef working with a Kuwaiti engineer named Nidal Ayyad and immigrant members of the Egyptian group, Gama’a al-Islamiyya, headed by Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman (whose U.S. visa had reputedly been arranged by the CIA). Their extraordinary ambition was to kill tens of thousands of New Yorkers with a powerful lateral blast that would crack the foundations of one WTC tower and topple it on its twin. Yousef’s weapon was a Ryder van packed with an ingenious upgrade of the classic IRA and Hezbollah ANFO explosive.

“The bomb itself,” writes Peter Lange in his history of the bombing, “consisted of four cardboard boxes filled with a slurry of urea nitrate and fuel oil, with waste paper as a binder. The boxes were surrounded by four-foot tanks of compressed hydrogen. They were connected by four 20-foot-long slow-burning fuses of smokeless powder wrapped in fabric. Yousef balanced on his lap four vials of nitroglycerine.” The conspirators had no difficulty parking the van next to the load-bearing south wall of the North Tower, but the massive explosive proved too small — excavating a four-story deep crater in the basement, killing 6 and injuring 1,000 people, but failing to bring the tower down. “Our calculations were not very accurate this time,” wrote Ayyad in a letter. “However we promise you that next it would will [sic] be very precise and the Trade Center will be one of our targets.”

Two weeks after the WTC attack, a car bomb almost as powerful exploded in the underground parking garage of the Bombay Stock Exchange, severely damaging the 28-story skyscraper and killing 50 office workers. Twelve other car or motorcycle bombs soon detonated at other prestige targets, killing an additional 207 people and injuring 1,400. The

bombings were revenge for sectarian riots a few months earlier in which Indian Hindus had killed hundreds of Indian Moslems. The attacks were reputedly organized from Dubai by exiled Bombay underworld king Dawood Ibrahim at the behest of Pakistani intelligence. According to one account, Dawood sent three boats from Dubai to Karachi where they were loaded with military explosives. Indian customs officials were then bribed to look the other way while the “black soup” was smuggled into Bombay.

Corrupt officials were also rumored to have facilitated the suicide car bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on March 17, 1993 which killed 30 and injured 242. The next year, a second “martyr,” later identified as a 29-year-old Hezbollah militant from southern Lebanon, leveled the seven-story Argentine-Israel Mutual Association, slaughtering 85 and wounding more than 300. Both bombers carefully followed the Beirut template; as did the Islamist militant who drove his car into the central police headquarters in Algiers in January 1995, killing 42 and injuring over 280.

But the supreme acolytes of Hezbollah were the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, the only non-Moslem group that has practiced suicide car bombings on a large scale. Indeed, their leader Prabhaakaran “made a strategic decision to adopt the method of suicide attack after observing its lethal effectiveness in the 1983 suicide bombings of the US and French barracks in Beirut.” Between their first such operation in 1987 and 2000, they were responsible for twice as many suicide attacks of all kinds as Hezbollah and Hamas combined. Although they have integrated car bombs into regular military tactics (for example, using kamikazes in trucks to open attacks on Sri Lankan army camps), their obsession and “most prized theater of operation” in their struggle for Tamil independence has been the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, which they first car-bombed in 1987 in a grisly attack on the main bus terminal, burning scores of passengers to death inside crowded buses.

In January 1996, a Black Tiger — as the suicide elite are called — drove a truck containing 440 pounds of military high explosives into the front of the Central Bank Building, resulting in nearly 1,400 casualties. Twenty months later in October 1997 in a more complex operation, the Tigers attacked the twin towers of the Colombo World Trade Center. They managed to maneuver through barricades and set off a car bomb in front of the Center, then battled the police with automatics and grenades. The following March, a suicide mini-bus with shrapnel-filled bombs affixed to its sideboards was detonated outside the main train station in the midst of a huge traffic jam. The 38 dead included a dozen children in a school bus.

The Tamil Tigers are a mass nationalist movement with “liberated territory,” a full-scale army and even a tiny navy; moreover, 20,000 Tiger cadres received secret paramilitary training in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu from 1983 to 1987, courtesy of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and India’s CIA — the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). But such sponsorship literally blew up in the face of the Indian Congress Party leadership when Indira’s son and successor Rajiv was killed by a female Tiger suicide bomber in 1993. Indeed, the all-too-frequent pattern of surrogate terrorism, whether sponsored by the CIA, RAW, or the KGB, has been “return to sender” — most notoriously in the cases of those former CIA “assets,” blind Sheik Rahman and Osama bin Laden.

The Oklahoma City bombing in April 1995 was a different and startling species of blowback, organized by two angry U.S. veterans of the Gulf War rather than by Iraq or any Islamist group. Although conspiracy theorists have made much of a strange coincidence that put

Terry Nichols and Ramzi Yousef near each other in Cebu City in the Philippines in November 1994, the design of the attack seems to have been inspired by Timothy McVeigh's obsession with that devil's cookbook, *The Turner Diaries*. Written in 1978, after Bloody Friday but before Beirut, neo-Nazi William Pierce's novel describes with pornographic relish how white supremacists destroy the FBI headquarters in Washington D.C. with an ANFO truck bomb, then crash a plane carrying a hijacked nuke into the Pentagon.

McVeigh carefully followed Pierce's simple recipe in the novel (several tons of ammonium nitrate in a parked truck) rather than Yousef's more complicated WTC formula, although he did substitute nitro racing fuel and diesel oil for ordinary heating oil. Nonetheless, the explosion that slaughtered 168 people in the Alfred Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995 was three times more powerful than any of the truck-bomb detonations that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms and other federal agencies had been studying at their test range in New Mexico. Experts were amazed at the radius of destruction: "Equivalent to 4,100 pounds of dynamite, the blast damaged 312 buildings, cracked glass as far as two miles away and inflicted 80 percent of its injuries on people outside the building up to a half-mile away." Distant seismographs recorded it as a 6.0 earthquake on the Richter scale.

But McVeigh's good-ole-boy bomb, with its diabolical demonstration of Heartland DIY ingenuity, was scarcely the last word in destructive power; indeed, it was probably inevitable that the dark Olympics of urban carnage would be won by a home team from the Middle East. Although the casualty list (20 dead, 372 wounded) wasn't as long as Oklahoma City's, the huge truck bomb that, in June 1996, alleged Hezbollah militants left outside Dhahran's Khobar Towers — a high-rise dormitory used by U.S. Air Force personnel in Saudi Arabia — broke all records in explosive yield, being the equivalent perhaps of twenty 1,000-pound bombs. Moreover, the death toll might have been as large as the Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1993 save for alert Air Force sentries who began an evacuation shortly before the explosion. Still, the blast (military-grade plastic explosive) left an incredible crater 85-feet wide and 35-feet deep.

Two years later, on August 7, 1998, al Qaeda claimed the championship in mass murder when it crashed suicide truck bombs into the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, in a replay of the simultaneous 1993 attacks on the Marines and the French in Beirut. Located near two of the busiest streets in the city without adequate setback or protective glacis, the Nairobi embassy was especially vulnerable, as Ambassador Prudence Bushnell had fruitlessly warned the State Department. In the event, ordinary Kenyans — burnt alive in their vehicles, lacerated by flying glass, or buried in smoldering debris — were the principal victims of the huge explosion, which killed several hundred and wounded more than 5,000. Another dozen people died and almost 100 were injured in Dar-es-Salaam.

Sublime indifference to the collateral carnage caused by its devices, including to innocent Moslems, remains a hallmark of operations organized by the Al-Qaeda network. Like his forerunners Hermann Goering and Curtis LeMay, Osama bin Laden seems to exult in the sheer statistics of bomb damage — the competitive race to ever greater explosive yields and killing ranges. One of the most lucrative of his recent franchises (in addition to air travel, skyscrapers, and public transport) has been car-bomb attacks on Western tourists in primarily Moslem countries, although the October 2002 attack on a Bali nightclub (202 dead) and the July 2005 bombing of hotels in Egypt's Sharm el-Sheikh (88 dead) almost certainly killed as many local workers as erstwhile "crusaders."

Form Follows Fear (the 1990s)

“The car bomb is the nuclear weapon of guerrilla warfare.”

— Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer

A “billion-pound explosion”? One meaning, of course, is the TNT yield of three or four Hiroshima-size atomic weapons (which is to say, only a smidgen of the explosive power of a single H-bomb). Alternately, one billion (British) pounds (\$1.45 billion) is what the IRA cost the City of London in April 1993 when a blue dump-truck containing a ton of ANFO exploded on Bishopsgate Road across from the NatWest Tower in the heart of the world’s second major financial center. Although one bystander was killed and more than 30 injured by the immense explosion, which also demolished a medieval church and wrecked the Liverpool Street station, the human toll was incidental to the economic damage that was the true goal of the attack. Whereas the other truck bomb campaigns of the 1990s — Lima, Bombay, Colombo, and so forth — had followed Hezbollah’s playbook almost to the letter, the Bishopsgate bomb, which Moloney describes as “the most successful military tactic since the start of the Troubles,” was part of a novel IRA campaign that waged war on financial centers in order to extract British concessions during the difficult peace negotiations that lasted through most of the 1990s.

Bishopsgate, in fact, was the second and most costly of three blockbuster explosions carried out by the elite (and more or less autonomous) South Armagh IRA under the leadership of the legendary “Slab” Murphy. Almost exactly a year earlier, they had set off a truck bomb at the Baltic Exchange in St. Mary Axe that rained a million pounds of glass and debris on surrounding streets, killing 3 and wounding almost 100 people. The damage, although less than Bishopsgate, was still astonishing: about 800 million pounds or more than the approximately 600 million pounds in total damage inflicted over 22 years of bombing in Northern Ireland. Then, in 1996, with peace talks stalled and the IRA Army Council in revolt against the latest cease-fire, the South Armagh Brigade smuggled into England a third huge car bomb that they set off in the underground garage of one of the postmodern office buildings near Canary Wharf Tower in the gentrified London Docklands, killing two and causing nearly \$150 million dollars in damage. Total damage from the three explosions was at least \$3 billion.

As Jon Coaffee points out in her book on the impact of the bombings, if the IRA like the Tamil Tigers or Al Qaeda had simply wanted to sow terror or bring life in London to a halt, they would have set off the explosions at rush-hour on a business day — instead, they “were detonated at a time when the City was virtually deserted” — and/or attacked the heart of the transport infrastructure, as did the Islamist suicide bombers who blew up London buses and subways in July 2005. Instead, Slab Murphy and his comrades concentrated on what they perceived to be a financial weak link: the faltering British and European insurance industry. To the horror of their enemies, they were spectacularly successful. “The huge payouts by insurance companies,” commented the BBC shortly after Bishopsgate, “contributed to a crisis in the industry, including the near-collapse of the world’s leading [re]insurance market, Lloyds of London.” German and Japanese investors threatened to boycott the City unless physical security was improved and the government agreed to subsidize insurance costs.

Despite a long history of London bombings by the Irish going back to the Fenians and Queen Victoria, neither Downing Street, nor the City of London Police had foreseen this scale of

accurately targeted physical and financial damage. (Indeed, Slab Murphy himself might have been surprised; like the original ANFO bombs, these super-bombs were probably a wee bit of serendipity for the IRA.) The City's response was a more sophisticated version of the "ring of steel" (concrete barriers, high iron fences, and impregnable gates) that had been built around Belfast's city center after Bloody Friday in 1972. Following Bishopsgate, the financial press clamored for similar protection: "The City should be turned into a medieval-style walled enclave to prevent terrorist attacks."

What was actually implemented in the City and later in the Docklands was a technologically more advanced network of traffic restrictions and cordons, CCTV cameras, including "24-hour Automated Number Plate Recording (ANPR) cameras, linked to police databases," and intensified public and private policing. "In the space of a decade," writes Coaffee, "the City of London was transformed into the most surveilled space in the UK and perhaps the world with over 1500 surveillance cameras operating, many of which are linked to the ANPR system."

Since September 11, 2001, this anti-terrorist surveillance system has been extended throughout London's core in the benign guise of Mayor Ken Livingstone's celebrated "congestion pricing" scheme to liberate the city from gridlock. According to one of Britain's major Sunday papers:

"The Observer has discovered that MI5, Special Branch and the Metropolitan Police began secretly developing the system in the wake of the 11 September attacks. In effect, the controversial charging scheme will create one of the most daunting defence systems protecting a major world city when it goes live a week tomorrow. It is understood that the system also utilizes facial recognition software which automatically identifies suspects or known criminals who enter the eight-square-mile zone. Their precise movements will be tracked by camera from the point of entry... However, civil liberty campaigners yesterday claimed that millions had been misled over the dual function of the scheme, promoted primarily as a means of reducing congestion in central London."

The addition in 2003 of this new panopticon traffic scan to London's already extensive system of video surveillance ensures that the average citizen is "caught on CCTV cameras 300 times a day." It may make it easier for the police to apprehend non-suicidal terrorists, but it does little to protect the city from well-planned and competently disguised vehicle bomb attacks. Blair's "Third Way" has been a fast lane for the adoption of Orwellian surveillance and the usurpation of civil liberties, but until some miracle technology emerges (and none is in sight) that allows authorities from a distance to "sniff" a molecule or two of explosive in a stream of rush-hour traffic, the car bombers will continue to commute to work.

The "King" of Iraq (the 2000s)

"Insurgents exploded 13 car bombs across Iraq on Sunday, including eight in Baghdad within a three-hour span."

— Associated Press news report, January 1, 2006

Car bombs — some 1,293 between 2004 and 2005, according to researchers at the Brookings Institution — have devastated Iraq like no other land in history. The most infamous, driven or left by sectarian jihadists, have targeted Iraqi Shiites in front of their

homes, mosques, police stations, and markets: 125 dead in Hilla (February 28, 2005); 98 in Mussayib (July 16); 114 in Baghdad (September 14); 102 in Blad (September 29); 50 in Abu Sayda (November 19); and so on.

Some of the devices have been gigantic, like the stolen fuel-truck bomb that devastated Mussayib, but what is most extraordinary has been their sheer frequency — in one 48-hour-period in July 2005 at least 15 suicide car bombs exploded in or around Baghdad. The sinister figure supposedly behind the worst of these massacres is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian arch-terrorist who reportedly criticized Osama bin Laden for insufficient zeal in attacking domestic enemies like the “infidel Shias.” Al-Zarqawi, it is claimed, is pursuing an essentially eschatological rather than political goal: a cleansing of enemies without end until the Earth is ruled by a single, righteous caliphate.

Toward this end, he – or those invoking his name — seems to have access to an almost limitless supply of bomb vehicles (some of them apparently stolen in California and Texas, then shipped to the Middle East) as well as Saudi and other volunteers eager to martyr themselves in flame and molten metal for the sake of taking a few Shiite school kids, market vendors, or foreign “crusaders” with them. Indeed the supply of suicidal madrasa graduates seems to far exceed what the logic of suicide bombing (as perfected by Hezbollah and the Tamil Tigers) actually demands: Many of the explosions in Iraq could just as easily be detonated by remote control. But the car bomb — at least in Al-Zarqawi’s relentless vision — is evidently a stairway to heaven as well as the chosen weapon of genocide.

But Al Zarqawi did not originate car bomb terrorism along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates; that dark honor belongs to the CIA and its favorite son, Iyad Allawi. As the New York Times revealed in June 2004:

“Iyad Allawi, now the designated prime minister of Iraq, ran an exile organization intent on deposing Saddam Hussein that sent agents into Baghdad in the early 1990s’s to plant bombs and sabotage government facilities under the direction of the CIA, several former intelligence officials say. Dr. Allawi’s group, the Iraqi National Accord, used car bombs and other explosives devices smuggled into Baghdad from northern Iraq... One former Central Intelligence Agency officer who was based in the region, Robert Baer, recalled that a bombing during that period ‘blew up a school bus; schoolchildren were killed.’”

According to one of the Times’ informants, the bombing campaign, dead school kids and all, “was a test more than anything else, to demonstrate capability.” It allowed the CIA to portray the then-exiled Allawi and his suspect group of ex-Baathists as a serious opposition to Saddam Hussein and an alternative to the coterie (so favored by Washington neoconservatives) around Ahmed Chalabi. “No one had any problem with sabotage in Baghdad back then,” another CIA veteran reflected. “I don’t think anyone could have known how things would turn out today.”

Today, of course, car bombs rule Iraq. In a June 2005 article entitled, “Why the car bomb is king in Iraq,” James Dunnigan warned that it was supplanting the roadside bomb (which “are more frequently discovered, or defeated with electronic devices”) as the “most effective weapon” of Sunni insurgents as well as of Al Zarqawi, and thus “the terrorists are building as many as they can.” The recent “explosive growth” in car ownership in Iraq, he added, had made it “easier for the car bombs to just get lost in traffic.”

In this kingdom of the car bomb, the occupiers have withdrawn almost completely into their

own forbidden city, the “Green Zone,” and their well-fortified and protected military bases. This is not the high-tech City of London with sensors taking the place of snipers, but a totally medievalized enclave surrounded by concrete walls and defended by M1 Abrams tanks and helicopter gunships as well as an exotic corps of corporate mercenaries (including Gurkhas, ex-Rhodesian commandos, former British SAS, and amnestied Colombian paramilitaries). Once the Xanadu of the Baathist ruling class, the 10-square-kilometer Green Zone, as described by journalist Scott Johnson, is now a surreal theme park of the American way of life:

“Women in shorts and T-shirts jog down broad avenues and the Pizza Inn does a brisk business from the parking lot of the heavily fortified U.S. Embassy. Near the Green Zone Bazaar, Iraqi kids hawk pornographic DVDs to soldiers. Sheik Fuad Rashid, the U.S.-appointed imam of the local mosque, dresses like a nun, dyes his hair platinum blond and claims that Mary Mother of Jesus appeared to him in a vision (hence the getup). On any given night, residents can listen to karaoke, play badminton or frequent one of several rowdy bars, including an invitation-only speakeasy run by the CIA.”

Outside the Green Zone, of course, is the ‘Red Zone’ where ordinary Iraqis can be randomly and unexpectedly blown to bits by car bombers or strafed by American helicopters. Not surprisingly, wealthy Iraqis and members of the new government are clamoring for admission to the security of the Green Zone, but U.S. officials told Newsweek last year that “plans to move the Americans out are ‘fantasy.’” Billions have been invested in the Green Zone and a dozen other American enclaves officially known for a period as “enduring camps,” and even prominent Iraqis have been left to forage for their own security outside the blast walls of these exclusive bubble Americas. A population that has endured Saddam’s secret police, U.N. sanctions, and American cruise missiles, now steels itself to survive the car bombers who prowl poor Shiite neighborhoods looking for grisly martyrdom. For the most selfish reasons, let us hope that Baghdad is not a metaphor for our collective future.

This article — a preliminary sketch for a book-length study — will appear in Indefensible Space: The Architecture of the National Insecurity State (Routledge 2007), edited by Michael Sorkin.

Mike Davis is the author most recently of The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu (The New Press) and Planet of Slums (Verso). He lives in San Diego.

The original source of this article is tomdispatch.com

Copyright © [Mike Davis, tomdispatch.com](http://tomdispatch.com), 2007

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Mike Davis](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants

permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca