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The Human Terrain of Urban Operations

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Tasked with urban operations, soldiers think of buildings. The initial mental image is of physical forms--skyscrapers or huts, airports and harbors, size, construction density, streets, sewers, and so on. Planners certainly are interested in the population's attitudes and allegiances, but cities are more likely to be classified by their differences in construction than by the variety of their populations. This focus on "terrain" leads to the assumption that military operations would be more challenging in a Munich than in a Mogadishu. But the latter "primitive" city brutally foiled an international intervention launched with humanitarian intent, while "complex" Munich whimpered into submission at the end of the fiercest war in history. The difference lay not in the level of physical development, but in the human architecture.

While the physical characteristics of the assaulted or occupied city are of great importance, the key variable is the population. At its most obvious, the issue is simply whether the citizenry is hostile, indifferent, or welcoming. Too often, the evaluation of the flesh-and-blood terrain, of the human high-ground, ends there. Yet few populations are ever exclusively hostile, or truly indifferent, or unreservedly welcoming. Man's complexity is richer than any architectural detail. It is, finally, the people, armed and dangerous, watching for exploitable opportunities, or begging to be protected, who will determine the success or failure of the intervention.

Types of Cities

Analyzing the "human architecture" of a city begins with the recognition that there are three broad types of "mass terrain." For military purposes, cities can be classed as hierarchical, multicultural, or tribal. This imperfect system of classification does not offer a basis for command decisions--only a starting point for understanding the operational environment into which the force will be thrust. It can, however, provide early warning of the intractable nature of the problems that may await even an initially welcome peacekeeping force.

Hierarchical Cities

Hierarchical cities are those we Americans know. Chains-of-command operate within a broadly accepted rule of law. The citizens assume at least minimal responsibilities, from the payment of taxes to patterns of public behavior. In return, they expect that they will not be routinely cheated by government or merchants, that the light switch will turn on the light, that water will come from the tap, and that the police will provide a reasonable degree of protection without unreasonable intrusions into personal lives.

Apart from the technological aspects and the unusual degree of freedom enjoyed by Americans, the hierarchical city is a traditional form, stretching back to the dawn of history. Cities of the past were more repressive, of course, but chain-of-command cities, governed by a generalized consent or acquiescence and with popular respect for the rules of interaction, are mankind's great success story (the herding of cats on a mammoth scale). From Athens, Greece, to Athens, Georgia, such cities have provided men and women with the highest degree of well-being available in their ages. Sometimes repressive, elsewhere delightfully liberal--when not libertine--the common denominator of successful cities is a sense of unified popular identity, which is far more important than legal specifics. (A common Western fallacy is to imagine that liberal laws are an end unto themselves; in fact, most populations have preferred restrictive laws impartially administered to exemplary constitutions corruptly applied. A law's consistent observation is generally more important than its inherent quality, and the first purpose of law is certainty.)

Militarily, hierarchical cities, with their united citizenries, can provide bitter, prolonged resistance to an attacker.

Paradoxically, they can be the easiest to govern once occupied--if the population recognizes its interests lie in collaboration. At the close of World War II, the cities of Germany and Japan contained populations recently committed to total war, yet they proved docile and easy to govern by constabulary forces. The citizenry must see the advantage in cooperation; once convinced, its homogeneity eases successful reconstruction, both physical and behavioral. It has always been easier to govern Paris than to take it.

Multicultural Cities

Multicultural cities, which have little to do with the fantasies of Liberal Arts faculties, are those in which contending systems of custom and belief, often aggravated by ethnic divisions, struggle for dominance. They are, by their nature, cockpits of struggle. Chains-of-command in government offices draw willing obedience only from their partisans, while groups that do not identify with those in power must be coerced into desired behaviors and will act subversively until a reaction defines the limits of what is tolerable. To those ignorant of local affairs, the multicultural city may resemble the hierarchical city, with its mayor or other administrator and its formal institutions. But real power is diffused beyond legal agencies into ethnic networks, religious and resistance organizations, and crime syndicates whose leaders usurp much of the authority and some of the functions of the "legitimate" government.

Multicultural cities, even in the best of economic times, squander creative energies and human capital on social struggles aimed at revising the balance of power. True multiculturalism of this sort is centrifugal, intolerant, and ultimately destructive. North American cities, even the most ethnically diverse, remain hierarchical--multi-ethnic, but not multicultural--while those that most closely approach the multicultural "ideal" described here tend to be the least safe and least prosperous. Successful cities require a community of values; multicultural cities may produce successful individual neighborhoods, but the sum is always less than the parts. Where cultural confrontation pits alternative value systems against each other, the city declines--no matter the relative merit of the contending values. Cities are, above all, cooperative ventures (with laws to protect the dull against the anarchic impulses of the creative), and require general agreement as to the social blueprint to be followed. Diversity may thrive within the cooperative, as it does in so much of North America, and may gradually reshape the society from the inside (although the opening of a Chinese restaurant does not presuppose the public's acceptance of Confucian values). But when cultural differences create a sense of assault on group values from the outside, the city is headed for riots at best and, at worst, genocide.

Perhaps the preeminent example of a multicultural city today is Jerusalem, with its irreconcilable differences between Jews and Arabs, whose beliefs, values, and ambitions are profoundly at odds. In this classic model, order is maintained only by the forcefulness of the more powerful faction, buttressing the hatreds of the group excluded from authority (and, by extension, from prosperity and social mobility). When a numerically inferior group holds a larger group or groups in thrall, the situation is especially volatile. The Israelis, with their settlement policies, attacked this problem long ago. Another recent example comes from East Timor, where a minority of Islamic Indonesian occupiers had oppressed and deprived the Catholic Timorese. The values of the two communities were bluntly incompatible (especially when overlaid with Indonesian fantasies of imperial grandeur).

Multicultural cities tend to develop along what Samuel Huntington has called the "fault lines" between civilizations--those marches and frontiers where dominance shifts between groups over centuries (and sometimes more swiftly). South Africa's harsh growing pains center largely on its multicultural cities, where British, Afrikaner, and native African cultural systems collided. When the restraining British hand lifted from the Indian subcontinent, the massacres inflicted on one another by Hindus and Muslims covered their cities with gore and disfigured their nascent states. Now cities such as Lahore and Delhi have returned, limping, to hierarchical status, but continue to suffer under the multicultural legacy of corruption and factionalism, aggravated by value systems ill-suited to modernity. Other urban areas, from Istanbul to its old polar opposite, Vienna, have devolved back into hierarchical cities more successfully, as empires collapsed, civilizational fault lines shifted, and "foreign" elements were expelled or moved on. Even in the best cases, however, the transition periods from multicultural flowering back to monocultural roots are unstable, often bloody, and disquieting to foreign observers.

The continual, generally peaceful cultural evolution in the United States suggests that healthy, prosperous societies can change by elective accretion, but that cultural amalgamation bluntly does not work. Secure in their sense of identity, the populations of hierarchical cities can learn from new arrivals, while multicultural cities barricade themselves--

sometimes literally--against inter-communal exchanges. Even in the United States, the immigrant groups that excited the most resistance and proved slowest to assimilate were those who arrived quickly, in large numbers, creating a perception of threat to the established order and its values. Numbers matter, perhaps even more than do racial differences, as the long struggle of Irish-Americans toward equality compared to the comparatively easy acceptance of Korean-Americans suggests. And overt conformity to societal norms may be even more important than religious conformity in gaining acceptance, except in the most demagogic and primitive cultures. The group established as social hegemon wants, above all, obeisance to its values and cherished behaviors.

Statistically, there are surprisingly few multicultural cities at any given time, since they are inherently unstable. Reversion to monocultural hierarchy--or destruction--is the norm: Turkish Izmir or vanished Troy (a close reading of *The Iliad* suggests that the Trojans drew their support from inherently unstable intercultural alliances, while the Greeks arrived in a state of dynamic cultural coalescence). Unless the city falls to an external power, its less powerful population groups inevitably are massacred, expelled, or forcibly assimilated, whether in the cities of Silesia, Andalusia, or India at the hour of independence from British rule. The ugly fact of the devolution of multicultural cities back into ethnically or confessionally harmonious ones is that the population transfers usually bring stability and peace.

From the military standpoint, multicultural cities can be easy to conquer--with the aid of oppressed minorities as a fifth column--but difficult to administer after peace has been established. If you have made allies of one group, they will expect to dominate after the victory or intervention. Western notions of equitable treatment and the rule of law strike the population as risible, if not as an outright betrayal. Peace can be imposed, but not even a generation of occupation will convince the opposing groups to behave "like us." In cultures where compromise is, literally, unthinkable, the peacekeeping adventure will see a constant jockeying for favor and usually a hardening of physical divisions between groups. The citizens of all factions will be looking beyond the presence of the peacekeepers to the renewed struggle, violent or otherwise, for hegemony. Often, the nominal government imposed by the occupier or peacekeeper will have less real power than ethnic leaders, militia commanders in mufti, religious leaders, or mafiosi. The primary interests of each faction will be to exploit the power of the constabulary force for partisan purposes, to exploit gaps in the force's knowledge of the local situation for advantage, to shield illicit activities from the force's awareness, to consolidate power within the group, and, finally, to corrupt key elements of the force to facilitate prohibited behaviors and to undermine competitors. The primary challenge for a Western military operating in a multicultural city is to get at the facts--and the facts never hold still.

There are also plentiful exceptions to the proposition that multicultural cities are easy to conquer. If the population group with which you are allied is powerless or unwilling to fight, you may face absolutely furious resistance from the enraged majority or urban hegemon. The first battle of Grozny, in Chechnya, was a striking example of this. If the divisions cut so deep that the antagonist is willing to fight a scorched-earth (or leveled-building) war--including the massacre of the minority or weaker group that has bound its fate to you--the intervention force faces extreme combat challenges that will be resolved as much by a question of will as by objective military capabilities. In general, a declared or perceived partisanship on the part of peacemaking or peacekeeping forces prior to deployment creates a window of slaughter, during which the threatened group accelerates ethnic cleansing operations, as in Dili, Pristina, or Freetown. Peace operations resemble other military operations in that, so often, speed saves lives--but swift intervention is one of the rarest acts of the international community. The world reacts to horror, but refuses to anticipate it.

Regarding other multicultural cities of the collapsed Soviet empire, most in Central Asia are losing ethnic European populations, although the situation varies from state to state, but Europeans have not been the objects of violent outbreaks; rather, outside of Tajikistan, the ugliest instances of violence have erupted between indigenous nationalities in Central Asia's Fergana Valley. In Afghanistan, a war of liberation degenerated into an ethnic civil war, and the dominant Taliban movement is willing to lay waste cities in order to "purify" them ethnically and religiously, rendering them monocultural with a vengeance. The number of unresolved issues and artificial states between the Black Sea and China's western provinces make this area the least predictable in the world. No one can foresee whether it will drowse or erupt--but Russia's greatest challenges in the coming decades are likely to arise on its frontiers, not on the financial spreadsheets of Western banks. The Russian Federation is the new "sick man of Europe," and, just as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was triggered by events in Sarajevo, a dusty former city of that empire, so Moscow

may face crises sparked in cities it once occupied, from Kiev through Baku to Tashkent. Indeed, Russia's large, creaking military, its loan-gobbling financial squalor, and its inability to control its remaining territories make it resemble the Ottoman Empire, but with rotting nukes. At a minimum, Russia's future military efforts will offer the West a laboratory in which to study the problems of urban operations, from the festering ulcer of Chechnya to terrorism in Moscow itself.

For the peacekeeping or constabulary force, the most promising environment is a formerly multicultural city that has been, regrettably, ethnically "cleansed." Problems will be directly proportionate to the extent to which *status quo ante bellum* differences remain unresolved: sadly, the more thorough the ethnic cleansing, the better the chances for the city's recuperation. The best hope for recovery in Dili, East Timor--difficult in any case, because of the ravages of violence and long-standing poverty--will be the complete departure of Indonesians who arrived after 1975. Although it remains to be seen, the hideous ethnic cleansing in the Caucasian cities of Baku, Sumgait, and Stepanakert--multicultural for generations, when not centuries--eventually may result in regional pacification. The deprivation of the object of hatred is a powerful force for peace. This is an unattractive concept for Westerners. It is also true.

Tribal Cities

Tribal cities, the most difficult urban environments for peacekeeping operations, are growing in size and number around the world. Based upon differences in blood, but not in race or, necessarily, in religion, ethnic conflicts in this environment can be the most intractable and merciless. One of the many paradoxes of our time is that the greatest expression of human sophistication, the city, increasingly draws in those with primitive, blood-based allegiances. As traditional rural societies grow overpopulated and impoverished, the lure of the city disproportionately draws young males--society's most volatile population slice--seeking opportunity, adventure, and reinvigorated identity.

Whether in Mogadishu, Kigali, Dushanbe, or Karachi, violence between those of the same race and similar or identical religion has ruptured governments even where its remoteness has kept it off the television screen. While Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda might differ in appearance to the tutored eye, they are not civilizationally different. In Mogadishu, peacekeepers could not tell the difference between clans without obvious cues. In Tajikistan, you have to know the *individual* with whom you are dealing. And in Pakistan, where the city of Karachi veers between ungovernable and barely governable phases, the city's explosive growth in the Independence period was based upon the relocation of religiously identical and ethnically indistinguishable "brothers" from the rest of the subcontinent. Now the brothers have turned fratricidal. Around much of the world, the tribe, once banished from the Liberal vocabulary, has returned with a vengeance. It is mankind's basic killing organization.

Perhaps the most startling "tribal" conflict of our time has been the series of wars in the former Yugoslavia. While some might declare this a multicultural conflict based in religious and civilization differences, that is to subscribe to the rhetoric of Milosevic and Tudjman. The region's multicultural phase climaxed a century ago; since then, the local populations have blurred into a gray similarity. The day-to-day cultures of Orthodox Serbs, Croatian Catholics, and Bosnian or Kosovar-Albanian Muslims had converged to the degree that the urban Serb and urban Muslim, in Sarajevo or Pristina, had more in common with one another than either did with his rural counterpart. Religion was discounted, a dusty relic, until revived by demagogues. Ethnicity was an old scar, not a present sore.

Although couched in terms of civilizational conflict, the battles and atrocities in the Balkans have had more in common with those in Somalia or Rwanda than with the epoch-making struggles between Ottomans and Byzantines, or czar and sultan. At the same time, we are seeing a phenomenon the West had assumed to be impossible in our "enlightened" age: these Balkan tribes that had largely lost their primitive identities are recreating them, and doing so with bloody exuberance. We know more about the atmosphere of Mars than we do of the ties for which men kill.

Tribal cities, from Sarajevo to Freetown, pose difficulties for intervention forces or peacekeepers on multiple levels. On the most basic level, it often takes long experience for outsiders to tell members of the contending factions apart when they fail to proclaim--or try to disguise--their identities. It is especially hard to crack tribal and clan cultures for intelligence purposes, and combatants vanish easily into the "sea of the people." But perhaps the greatest difficulty lies in the peculiar depth of hatred clan fighting and tribal traditions bring to bear on a conflict. Interracial pogroms erupt and quickly subside, but tribal hatreds are robust and enduring. There is no will to compromise, no sense of shared

advantage through cooperation--except perhaps briefly against outsiders, such as peacekeeping forces. The pattern appears to be that the more similar contending factions appear to foreign observers, the more savagely they will oppose each other.

We seem to be moving from an age of imperialist genocide--European against African or Native American, Japanese against Chinese or Korean, Arab against African (the oldest enduring genocidal tradition, lingering in Sudan)--to a period of genocide against familiars, shifting from slaughter between civilizations to the slaughter of neighbors. The Germans lit the fire, with their massacre of the Jews who had immeasurably enriched German society over the centuries and who regarded themselves as every bit as German as any *Kanzler*. Now we see the new model of massacre from East Central Africa, to the Caucasus, to the Balkans. Except in the Arab and Persian Islamic world, where the style of hatred lags behind, hatred of the family next door has replaced the fear of the distant, different devil.

Our knowledge of ourselves is too primitive to allow us to understand why this change in humanity's choice of victims is taking place at this time, and we cannot know if it is a psychological response to history or a biological reaction to proximity or something else entirely, but the focal point of ever more contemporary violence--and the likeliest scene of future violence--is the city.

Comprehending Cityscapes

Cities are far more complex organisms than any text can suggest. Suffice to say that the greatest illustration of the human ability to self-organize shows in the daily functioning of cities. The myriad actions required to make Manhattan go are no more subject to complete regulation than they are to thorough quantification. Law is the foundation from which human activity is elaborated, but even the most voluminous codes have failed to foresee the inventiveness of human behavior. The countless individual actions that sum to urban life defy logic in their ability to interact constructively. Anarchy should follow; instead we get Florence, Sydney, and Boston.

Yet, for all the marvels in even a poorly functioning city, there are worrisome trends. Obviously, the increasing size and number of cities pose practical challenges for urban operations. Even in the smoothest operation, cities consume troops; in combat, they devour armies. We look back on a century in which a rural world became an urban one, and the practical and psychological changes are not yet fully apparent. The urbanization of the world's masses will require centuries of adjustment.

Whether or not civilizations are in crisis, they are certainly under pressure to evolve. Some are better-suited to change than are others. The problems for Western militaries will overwhelmingly arise in traditional societies that cannot or will not adapt. In our desire to please all and offend none, we fail to recognize that the civilizational difference between the antagonists in Desert Storm was greater than that between Spaniards and Aztecs, or between the British military and the Mahdi's horde.

The world is not becoming an even, equitable place, but a sphere of deepening fissures, some of which may prove unbridgeable. At a time when even the rich states of Europe are falling two generations behind the United States militarily, and when global economic competition is far fiercer than at the height of the Industrial Revolution, fragile states will not be able to support their unwieldy cities with hope, or jobs, or infrastructure. Look to those cities for conflicts.

This essay offers a crude framework for thinking about the military nature of cities. Doubtless, there are more insightful ways to frame the problem; the model here proposed should spark debate, not pass as a prescription. In an age of urban operations, with many more to come, we must think more deeply and clearly about this environment than we have done. A cold appreciation of the environment and firm resolve often will be of greater help than any technologies or even numbers. Above all, this brief discussion seeks to drive home the point that the center of gravity in urban operations is never a presidential palace or a television studio or a bridge or a barracks. It is always human.

Ralph Peters is a retired US Army lieutenant colonel. He is the author of ten books, including *Fighting for the Future: Will America Triumph?*. His essays and commentaries on military and strategic themes have appeared in a wide range of American and international newspapers and journals, and he is a frequent contributor to *Parameters*.

Reviewed 8 February 2000. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil