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# Back to the Future with Asymmetric Warfare

VINCENT J. GOULDING, JR.

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The term *du jour* for future military operations is "asymmetric warfare"; ironically, it's a concept as old as warfare itself. For centuries, even millennia, weaker opponents have sought to neutralize their enemy's technological or numerical superiority by fighting in ways or on battlefields that nullify it. It is the human dimension of man's oldest profession, and the latest example of this anything-but-recent phenomenon is the Russian debacle in Chechnya. When the Chechens decided to use military means to achieve their independence, they did not hesitate for an instant to make their very own capital city the battleground. Once forced to abandon Grozny, these hard-nosed "fighters" focused their efforts on other towns and villages in the region, some outside their own borders. Russian failures in Grozny and other less well-known urban battles over the past five years attest to the effectiveness of this particular strategy--effective, but not new. The "take-away" from the fighting in the northern Caucasus is that it is the skill of soldiers of all ranks, not the peculiar nature of the terrain they are operating on, that decides the outcome of military operations. City streets do not win or lose battles.

It might be instructive to step back in time two thousand years to examine another instance where a tribal society refused to be intimidated by a modern army, chose their battlefield wisely, capitalized on some bad operational decisions, and brought a superpower's army to its knees. The similarities between events separated by so much time are extraordinary and boil down to a variation on an age-old theme: God might usually favor the side with the heaviest battalions, but *always* the smartest. The difference between the Roman experience in 1st-century Germania and the Russian experience in the North Caucasus is that the Roman army learned the lesson. The jury is out as to whether the same can be said for Russian, or, for that matter, US military forces. Eschewing the urban or any other complex battlefield is simply not the answer. Learning how to fight smart in it is. It is a matter of strategic necessity because, like it or not, "It doesn't do you any good to make the grand strategy of the Roman Empire if your legions can't fight, and we can't fight." [1] The statement requires further examination.

## Lessons from the Distant Past . . .

In 9 A.D., the Roman legate Publius Quinctilius Varus led his XVII, XVIII, and XIX Legions into modern north Germany between the Rhine and Elbe rivers on what we would today call a peace enforcement mission. His opposite number was Arminius, a Germanic chieftain who had served in the Roman army as commander of auxiliary forces and was, therefore, a Roman citizen. We can surmise that Arminius fully understood the Roman army's operational strengths and weaknesses. He was surely familiar with the weapons and tactics of this "technologically superior" force and must also have known that Varus had at his disposal three legions of infantry, three troops of *equitatus* (cavalry), and six cohorts of auxiliaries. [2] As the underdog must, Arminius sought an innovative means to defeat this impressive force. His success graphically underscores the human dimension of warfare.

Not satisfied with his already well-developed knowledge of the enemy, the Germanic chieftain took the time and effort to further enhance his situational awareness by frequently dining in Varus's officers' mess. He went to great lengths to flatter the corrupt Roman legate and convince him that he and his tribe, the Cherusci, were friends and allies of Rome. [3] All the while, he was adroitly shaping his future battlefield. For his part, Varus was an easy mark. More interested in plundering the region for personal gain than protecting it, he quickly fell into the self-delusional trap that the Cherusci were friendly and that military preparedness to fight in this heavily wooded and hilly terrain was not a requirement. His was a peacetime army, psychologically prepared for police work and occupation, not combat operations. [4]

Only when satisfied that his strategic shaping of the battlefield was complete did Arminius turn toward the operational

level of war. He convinced Varus that the "loyal" Cherusci and, no doubt, the economic potential of the region, were being threatened by anti-Roman tribes in the area and in need of military protection. The legate agreed and dispersed his forces throughout the province.[5] Arminius, sensing that the time was now ripe, stirred up a revolt far to the north of the main Roman base of operations. The rebellion was the bait for an elaborately crafted and deadly trap. Lulled into complacency by the alleged friendship of the Cherusci, whose territory Varus's legionnaires would have to traverse to reach the rebels, the Romans set out on an administrative march. Baggage trains and camp followers were interspersed throughout the column, destroying the tactical integrity that constituted the very bedrock of Roman battlefield success. The result was predictable: three legions destroyed to a man and a boundary change to the Roman Empire reflecting the loss of its possessions in Germany east of the Rhine River. Not a bad day's work for a "barbarian" chieftain.

The lessons of Teutoburger Wald are as clouded in the mist of time as the conduct of the epic fight itself. From a tactical perspective, we don't really know what happened in that dark, rain-soaked forest. It is not important. The battle was decided before swords were crossed. Recent hypotheses that Arminius sought to neutralize Roman technological advancements in the form of cavalry and archers by choosing a boggy and heavily forested battlefield may or may not be valid. What Arminius did know was that the standard Germanic tactic of a spectacular, if clumsy, frontal assault on the well-organized and disciplined legion did not work. It is doubtful that Varus's 360 cavalymen, a traditional Roman deficiency, or archers (auxiliaries, for the most part) worried him. It was the Roman infantry. Arminius knew that if the Cherusci could attack a fragmented Roman tactical formation, they could beat it. The forest might help the tribesmen achieve surprise, but it was the basic organization of the column that needed to be shaped and then ruthlessly exploited. The fact that the numerals XVII, XVIII, and XIX never adorned a legion's standard after 9 A.D. and that Varus's head was sent to Rome in a canvas sack speaks to Arminius's success in both areas.

The Romans, however, had not built their empire based on fear of their enemies. The Second Punic War against the enigmatic Hannibal had more than demonstrated the army's ability to take a punch, learn from it, and counterpunch harder yet. In 14-15 A.D., Germanicus Tiberius Caesar, nephew of Tiberius Caesar, proved himself a worthy disciple of Scipio Africanus. He rightly saw Varus's disaster as a leadership failure and deliberately set out to move his legions through the same terrain his predecessor had died in. A statement needed to be made. The prestige of Rome demanded it.[6]

Germanicus knew his "barbarian" enemies would come to the obvious conclusion that Romans could not fight in complex terrain. He chose to exploit this particular "lesson" rather than be intimidated by Varus's defeat. Germanicus knew it was not Teutoburger Wald that had killed 20,000 Romans five years earlier. His legionnaires marched in full battle array, incorporated an advance guard, and maintained tactical integrity on the move. When the Germans attacked, the combat-ready Roman infantry cut them to pieces with a weapon singularly suited to fighting in close terrain, the Roman *gladius*, or short sword.[7] It was, of course, the same weapon Quinctilius Varus's soldiers had carried five years earlier. Once again, the battle was decided before swords were ever crossed.

### **. . . and the Not So Distant Past**

Fast-forward to 1994. The leaders of the now defunct Soviet Union find themselves faced with a rebellion in Chechnya. It is beyond the scope of this article to dissect Russian civil-military relations or to try to analyze Boris Yeltsin's immediate decision to use military force against the Chechens. Suffice to say, the issue is complex. In addition to the obvious fact that few governments will idly stand by when one of their states decides to declare independence, there was also the issue of oil reserves in the area and the physical security of an economically significant natural gas pipeline. From Moscow's perspective, it is easy to argue that vital national interests were at stake. That said, the Russian "national command authorities" immediately defaulted to the military option, at first covertly under the guise of a Chechen civil war, and ultimately with uniformed Russian military forces. Neither attempt was operationally sound nor militarily successful. Like Quinctilius Varus, the Russians found themselves fighting a tribal society comprised of well defined *teips* on ground of their choosing.[8]

Russian civil and military leaders held the Chechens in about the same esteem that Varus's legionnaires had probably held the Germanic tribesmen, substituting "bandit" and "criminal" for Rome's ubiquitous "barbarian." It was an assessment wholly without basis and one which set the stage for everything that followed. Authors who have written about the war in Chechnya refer to the Chechens as "fighters," a term which far better describes future enemies than

the more enlightened appellation of "soldier":

Though there is much war in the news, there is very little mention of "soldiers," those who belong to the regularly constituted armed forces of established states. Instead, most of the fighting is done by people in the much broader category of "fighters." At a time when most states are reluctant to risk casualties among their well organized and well paid regular forces, there seems to be no shortage of men who are willing to pick up a weapon and defend the cause of their ethnic group, religion, clan, or tribe, usually as an unpaid volunteer.[9]

Military forces like those of the United States and its allies who constitute the bulk of "well organized and well paid regular forces" and generally play by the rules may, in their next battles, wish fervently that it was against soldiers of their own ilk they were fighting. There is little doubt that the panic-stricken legionnaires running for their lives in the Teutoburger Forest or Russian conscripts too petrified to leave their armored vehicles in Grozny would have preferred it. The tendency toward belittling or dehumanizing our adversaries is as dangerous today as it was two thousand years ago. Today's professional military forces would be better advised to contemplate the notion that "the tribe, once banished from the Liberal vocabulary, has returned with a vengeance. It is mankind's basic killing organization." [10] Leaders of that "basic killing organization" are going to continue to do what Arminius did in 9 A.D. and Dzhokhar Dudayev did two thousand years later. They will fight on ground of their choosing, where they think they can either intimidate their technologically advanced adversary into fighting stupidly or, better yet, not at all.

This article attempts no in-depth analysis of Russian military operations at the tactical level, regardless of how poignantly they speak to the disintegration of the Soviet army, or how much better about ourselves they make us feel. The picture that emerges, however, is one of a military establishment incapable of conducting rudimentary tactical maneuvers. That image should sound a clarion call throughout the Defense Department in today's climate of well-publicized *mea culpae* over operational readiness brought on by extended participation in peacekeeping operations. Preoccupation with the tactical level of fighting in Grozny is dangerous if it serves only to convince US military planners that their limited number of very expensive forces should avoid future urban fights at all costs. The best way to surprise future enemies is to fight them well where they least expect it, just as Germanicus did. Not only does such a strategy achieve the immediate objective of imposing physical defeat, more importantly it sends the strongest possible message to future adversaries that resorting to military means ensures only that their political ends will never be accomplished. War is a contest of will. Psychological defeat is much more damaging and long-lasting than battlefield reverse. The best way to achieve it is to thrash your enemy where he feels most comfortable and confident. Sometimes you just have to beat him on his home field. Germanicus understood this very well.

If US strategic and operational leaders come to the conclusion that urban warfare is too costly and destructive, the results at the tactical level will be devastating. Unfortunately, some in the defense intellectual community have already drawn that conclusion. Their prophecies of doom and gloom are invariably based on historical precedent that highlights the carnage of Mogadishu or Grozny.[11] What these analysts overlook is the timeless strategic importance of those ticks on the map that brought together the forces that fought in them. The strategic significance of such places will not go away simply because many in the defense establishment have determined that the urban environment is ill-suited to the emerging American way of war. If anything, it will increase as future enemies justifiably perceive the urban battlefield as a US critical vulnerability.

A common thread in recent urban fights is the hubris demonstrated by attackers who give their adversaries little credit in terms of staying power or just plain ability to fight. The Russian performance in the Grozny debacle is particularly illustrative. The first attack took place in late November 1994. "Loyal Chechens," heavily supported by Russian equipment (including approximately 40 tanks), achieved initial surprise and reached the city center unscathed.[12] Hatches were then popped and the prophecy that resistance would be negligible seemed fulfilled. Not for long. Although the Chechens were initially surprised by the armored incursion into their capital city, it did not take them long to regain the initiative. Chechen fighters reacted quickly and effectively to the sound of the guns. Rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and snipers made short work of the invaders' armored vehicles and crews. Defeat was total. To add insult to injury, a large proportion of the men captured by the "bandits" and featured in various news media turned out to be Russian soldiers. Moscow was humiliated and, like the Romans two thousand years earlier, set out to teach the barbarians a lesson. So far, so good. Unfortunately, however, President Boris Yeltsin gave his Defense

Minister, Pavel Grachev, two weeks to prepare and nine days to execute. Grachev's legions never had a chance.

There are some interesting anecdotes that speak volumes about Russian overconfidence and lack of preparation as the upcoming "punitive mission" drew closer. During the planning for the second attack into Grozny, two colonels from the Russian General Staff visited the state archives in Moscow looking for historical information on armed conflict in the North Caucasus. Despite the librarians' attempt to steer the two officers toward some meaningful information, it soon became clear that their interests were better met by travel brochures. The resulting "intelligence failure of immense proportions"[13] should come as no surprise. Unfortunately, however, it is not generals and colonels who pay the price. During the initial phase of the operation, a Russian tank got separated from its parent unit. The driver stopped to ask a group of civilians where he could buy some cigarettes. They shot him dead.[14] Welcome to Grozny and have a nice day. *National Geographic* had failed to warn Russian planners that the natives might not be friendly.

The follow-on attack commenced on New Year's Eve 1995, Grachev's birthday. He had gone on record that the November attack was unprofessional and, given several hours and a regiment of paratroopers, he could capture the presidential palace.[15] Despite his bluster, it was again Russian armor (this time there was no charade as to who was conducting the operation) that led the attack and quickly penetrated to the heart of the city. Although the factor of surprise had allowed armored units to do so in the November attack, the Chechens had seen the advantage of letting the Russians get well into the urban complex before engaging them. The Russians seemingly had not. The 1st Battalion of the 131st Brigade's experience is illustrative of how the fighting went. Moving in column, the battalion quickly reached its assigned objective, the railway station. As it milled around the station bereft of meaningful "commander's intent," it soon found itself being decimated by the same close-in weapons that had been so effective two weeks earlier. Other units throughout the city fared little better. For 20 days the fighting raged, until finally the presidential palace was captured.[16] Of course, by then it held no strategic significance. It certainly held no Chechens.

The expectation that a lot of armor rumbling around the streets with flags flying would effectively cow the "bandits" into submission was probably a psychological holdover from the occupation of Prague a quarter-century earlier. The Russians seemed little inclined to learn anything from the 26 November fiasco. The times had changed; the Russians had failed to.

It is inevitably easy to critique the actions of the "side with the heaviest battalions" when gathering the inevitable "lessons learned." Certainly, the Russians provide a plethora of examples of how not to fight on the urban battlefield, at all levels of war. US commanders, however, can take little comfort in the fact that they would never send their men into battle without commander's intent, mission statement, or sufficient maps. The fact of the matter is that the Chechens were a worthy opponent and won the fight--perhaps not entirely "fair and square" by our standards, but they won, nonetheless. Their success is a much more bountiful mine to explore than Russian failure, as it likely describes what US forces are apt to encounter in future such environments. Comparing ourselves to the Russians is counterproductive if it serves only to inflate our sense of how much better we are, since although that might well be true, the real question is whether or not we are good enough.

### **What the Chechens Did Right**

Chechen fighters at all levels had an extraordinary understanding of their Russian enemy. The country's president, Dzochar Dudajev, was a retired Soviet air force general-major; and one of the Chechens' most feared tactical leaders, Shamil Basejev, was a former Soviet army battalion commander with combat experience.[17] Most of the individual fighters had done a tour in the Soviet army. They knew more than how to start a T-72 or fire an RPG. Unlike Arminius, these men didn't need to eat in the Russian officers' mess to take measure of their enemy. They were intimately familiar with the quality of the Russian conscript and the tactics his officers were likely to employ. Justifiably, they held their adversaries in disdain:

The Russian soldiers stayed in their armour, so we just stood on the balconies and dropped grenades onto their vehicles as they drove by underneath. The Russians are cowards. They can't bear to come out of shelter and fight us man-to-man. They know they are no match for us. That is why we beat them and will always beat them.[18]

While it is unlikely that the US armed forces will be a primary source of manpower or equipment for our future

enemies, in other ways we have made their situational awareness concerning our forces relatively easy to come by. Live television coverage, open source after-action reports, and self-serving press conferences all paint a fairly comprehensive picture of the American way of war and the forces that prosecute it. One wonders how the Somalis assessed US operational capabilities during the latter stages of our intervention in Mogadishu, and how much that assessment led to the violent counterattack American forces encountered on 3 October 1993. Was Task Force Ranger lured into an elaborately crafted ambush that fateful day?

The Chechens chose their battlefield wisely and ruthlessly. This should come as no surprise to the student of history. Many of these fighters had grown up in the cities and were more than willing to see infrastructure destroyed if it was a necessary ingredient in killing Russians. They took advantage of darkness and moved through the sewers, back alleys, and basements of destroyed buildings, easily outmaneuvering the Russians, who persisted in clinging to the "dubious safety of their armoured vehicles." [19]

In many ways, the Russians exacerbated their inherent disadvantages. Maps were almost nonexistent. Attacks were more akin to road marches, and coordination between ground and air forces was abysmal. Russian soldiers remained wedded to their vehicles, frequently got lost, and fought from a position of psychological terror. But such foibles are useful only if they are exploited. The Chechens exploited them effectively and ruthlessly. They became adept at infiltrating between Russian units at night and firing a few rounds or creating an explosion. The results were invariably the same: instantaneous and deadly Russian intramural fire-fights. Before we smugly make the assumption that our technological edge will preclude such things from happening to US forces, it is worth remembering that even with the global positioning system (GPS) and overhead "spotter" assistance, the first relief column could not find the embattled Rangers during the early hours of the Mogadishu battle on 3 October 1993.

Like Arminius, Chechen leaders sought to neutralize their enemy's source of tactical strength on the battlefield. For the Romans it was the infantry formation; for the Russians, the armored formation. For the Chechens, it was the individual fighter. Of the three, it isn't difficult to figure out which constitutes the most difficult to bring combat power to bear on, especially in the "urban forest":

The battles for Grozny also show the extreme difficulty for organised (or "civilised") armies of operating in the urban terrain, especially without causing enormous damage and civilian casualties. The natural forests of the nineteenth century have been replaced by a modern forest of a different kind, which is spreading all over the world and is likely to make up the chief battleground of the future: the city. [20]

Weapons are not the answer. It was not the *gladius* that won or lost the battles of 9 and 15 A.D. in the German forests. It was the combat efficiency of the men wielding it. The RPG is no longer "high tech," but in the hands of a determined man or woman it is ideally suited for military operations on urban terrain against a variety of modern weapon systems, particularly the helicopter. The warrior possessed of a "good eye and iron nerve" is what turns the RPG into the "longbow of our time, the simple weapon which in the right hands can bring the pride of military aristocracies to dust." [21] The "organised or civilised" armies of the United States and its allies stand to repeat the military failures the world has witnessed in Grozny and Mogadishu if they fail to understand that it is this very genre of fighter they will encounter on future battlefields.

And the world *will* witness such future fights. The streets of Grozny were not the only battlegrounds the Chechens beat the Russians on. Public opinion is now the strategic high ground of the operational art. In the case of Grozny, the Chechens captured it without a fight. Chechen Information Minister Malvadi Udogov was more active himself than the entire Russian propaganda machine. Unique at this point in Russian history was the existence of a relatively free press. Perhaps because it was such a novel concept, the Russians appeared unprepared to compete for "hearts and minds" both within and outside their country. Not so the Chechens. Before the smoke had cleared on any given engagement, Udogov or one of his assistants was giving interviews on radio and television. Conversely, Russian civil and military leaders were spoiled by decades of friendly press coverage and slow to come to the realization that the information war could be lost, or even that such a war existed at all.

Exacerbating their problem was the overwhelming sentiment throughout Russia that there was something inherently wrong with an offensive war inside the country's borders. Bombed-out homes and dead civilians seldom play well,

even thousands of miles from Peoria. Needless to say, the Chechens quickly grasped this theme and exploited it constantly. When Russian propaganda messages were broadcast via leaflet or over the airwaves, Chechen information officers refuted the content immediately through the "free" media. It was at this particular juncture that the Russians reaped the whirlwind of decades of controlled news media, as the party organ status of the government-controlled sources enjoyed far less credibility in and out of Russia than did the unaffiliated press which the Chechens used to promulgate their message. No matter how the issue in Chechnya is ultimately resolved, the world will always view it as a brutally conducted, costly, and slipshod military operation that failed. The information battle is already over, and the former superpower's soldier will never again stand ten feet tall.

## Lessons for the Future

Lessons learned reflect the personality of the observer. Germanicus could have taken the easy path and defaulted to the notion that the lesson of Teutoburger Forest was that the legion was ill-suited to combat in a closed environment and should not fight there. Clearly, his enemies thought that was the case. What Germanicus understood was that his country could not survive if it had an army that had to carefully pick and choose its battles. The military arm of national policy does not have that option. So, who surprised whom in 15 A.D.?

There are those, both friendly and enemy, who would take us down the path of least resistance today. One is no less dangerous than the other to the development of a relevant military force for the 21st century. The lesson of Teutoburger Wald and Grozny is not that we should not fight in the city, but that we must. The lessons of history are there to be mined if we choose to approach the subject in a positive manner. The constant linking of urban warfare and casualties will become a self-fulfilling prophecy only if we allow it to.

We need to ensure that we fight smart. History is replete with examples of defeat brought on by fighting the last war and underestimating the enemy. It does not start with Quinctilius Varus, and it will not end with Pavel Grachev. The Russian experience in the Caucasus should not be viewed entirely as a Russian failure. It should serve as a wake-up call to US military leaders at all levels and drive home the notion that grand strategy is useless if your "legions cannot fight." In the urban environment, at least, the United States has yet to demonstrate that its legions can.

Senior military leaders need to provide the necessary focus and prioritization. In the absence of such emphasis, research and development will languish and US forces will be deprived of the weapons and equipment necessary to fight and win on the asymmetric battlefield of the future. This very same stifling will occur in the related and equally critical areas of doctrine and training area development, neither of which currently reflect the realities of modern urban combat. Categorizing urban operations as too difficult and costly must come to an end, because "unless the money is found, the price will likely be paid in American blood."<sup>[22]</sup>

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