Groundhog Day

James K. Galbraith

Let’s see... It’s August. Bush is in Crawford on a “working vacation.” His polls are in the tank. Congress is in revolt. The economy is going soft. The next elections don’t look good. Cheney is off in Wyoming, or wherever he goes. It’s 2001. No, it’s 2006.

In *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx reports that “Hegel writes somewhere” that the great events of history tend to occur twice, first as tragedy and then as farce.

On September 11, nineteen hijackers commandeered four airplanes and succeeded in killing some 3,000 people. On August 10, we are told, British authorities upended a suicide-murder plot aimed at destroying twelve airplanes, killing everyone on board including the bombers, possibly with more fatalities than on 9/11. As a senior British police official put it, “This was intended to be mass murder on an unimaginable scale.”

From all official statements so far, we are led to believe that August 10 was a highly developed, far-advanced conspiracy, under surveillance for some time, which could have been put into action within just a few days. And perhaps 8/10 really was the biggest thing since 9/11. But then again, perhaps it wasn’t. We don’t know yet. And it’s not too early to ask the questions on which final judgment must depend.

Well, then. Here is a checklist of some things we should shortly be hearing about. Bombs. Chemicals. Detonators. Labs. A testing ground. Airline tickets. Passports. Witnesses. Suspicious neighbors. Suspicious parents. Suspicious friends. Threats. Confessions. Let me spell this out: By definition, you cannot bomb an aircraft unless you have a bomb. In this case, we are told that there were no bombs; rather, the conspirators planned to bring on board the makings of a bomb: chemicals and a detonator. These would be mixed on board.

Exactly what the chemicals were remains unclear. Nitroglycerin has been suggested, but it’s too likely to go off on the way to the airport. TATP, made of acetone and peroxide, has been suggested, but there are two problems. One is that the peroxide required is highly concentrated - it’s not the 3 percent solution from the drugstore. The other is that acetone is highly volatile. As anyone who flies knows, you can’t open a bottle of nail polish remover on an airplane without everyone within twenty feet knowing at once. It’s possible to imagine one truly dedicated and competent bomber pulling this off. But it is impossible to imagine twenty-four untrained people between the ages of 17 and 35 all getting away with the same trick at once.

So, there must have been training. That means there must be a lab, or labs. There must have been trial bombs. There must be various bits and pieces of equipment used to mix the chemicals and set them off. There must be a manual. There must be a testing ground. And each one of the young men under arrest must have been to these places. Interestingly, it must have all happened, too, without a serious accident, injury or death among the conspirators. If so, they are a lot more competent than the Weather Underground ever was, in my day.

Arrests were made at night, catching the culprits at home. Houses have been raided, and are being searched. So far as we know at this point, no bombs have been found. No chemicals. No equipment. No labs. No testing ground. Maybe this will come out later, but it hasn’t so far, even though the authorities seem anxious to tell just about everything they know.
Now, in order to get on an airplane, even the most devout suicide terrorist needs a ticket, and these generally must be purchased with money. Apparently, not one ticket had been purchased by the detainees. One little-known feature of airline security (in the United States, anyway) is that people traveling on one-way tickets bought at the last minute get special scrutiny at the gate. Those tickets are also (a lot) more expensive. If you want to pass unnoticed, you will buy your ticket round-trip, in advance, and also save money like everyone else. Actually, if you didn’t know this already, you’re not fit to be let out of the house.

Further, to get on an international flight from Britain to the United States, in these days of the modern nation-state, you need something else. It’s a document called a passport. Apparently, some of the detainees don’t have them. Someone lacking a passport can, I think, safely be excluded from the ranks of potential suicide bombers of UK-to-US flights. They could, of course, have a counterfeit or be operating in a support role - but so far we are not being told of any counterfeit documents or any support operation. And to pass security you would use a different person to carry each chemical you needed. For twelve flights, that’s twenty-four people.

As for the suspicious parents, friends and neighbors - it’s technically possible that the bombers’ security was so excellent that none existed. It’s just that, in dealing with young people swept up in a fervor of religious hatred, the odds are extremely low. Of all the Islamic groups, Hezbollah in Lebanon is the only one that maintains effective military security, which it does by isolating its fighters as completely as possible from the civilian population. But these young men were picked up at home; they were well-known and yet apparently suspected by no one at all.

As to threats: A joke going around the Manchester Airport on August 10 was that at least the IRA would remember to call. What’s the point of a suicide bombing if no one knows what it’s for? The downing of twelve airplanes would be horrific to those on them (including me, as it happened), but as it happened, but it wouldn’t put a dent in Western capitalism. It would have to be part of a much larger, ongoing, unstoppable campaign. Otherwise, why bother? A once-off attack shows the weakness, not the capacity, of the plotters, and in the end it strengthens not them but the governments they attack. After 9/11, terrorists should know this.

Finally, confessions. Twenty-four suspects have been arrested, according to some reports. Nineteen have been named. Happily, the detainees were taken alive. Unlike the man arrested in Pakistan, we may presume (I trust) that they are not being tortured. Therefore, they will have a chance to make an uncoerced statement of their intentions in open court. By then the authorities will have found the labs, testing grounds, airline tickets and passports. Credible witnesses too will have emerged. By then the young zealots will have no expectation of acquittal or mercy, and nothing to lose. We may therefore confidently expect them to face the judges and declare exactly what their motives and intentions were. If they do that, I’ll eat my hat.

In short: Could this case blow up? Could it turn out to have been an overreaction, a mistake - or even a hoax? Yes, it could, and it wouldn’t be the first one, either. I’m not saying it will, necessarily. I’m not accusing the British authorities of bad faith. I’m not suggesting the plot was faked - at least, not by them. But dodgy informants and jumpy politicians are an explosive mixture, easily detonated under pressure. Everyone knows that.

EPS Board Chair James K. Galbraith flew from Manchester to Boston on August 10th, 2006, enduring eleven hours without a book. Expect to see him soon in an aisle seat near you.

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