Diversion and Misdirection

The Oslo, Norway, attacks were two-pronged and designed to confuse first responders.

The July bombing and shooting attacks in Oslo, Norway — where a citizen terrorist struck the prosperous, peace-loving nation with a devastating act of political violence — claimed at least 80 lives, injured nearly 100 people and captured the world's attention.

The shock was amplified by the fact that Norway had previously been largely spared from the kind of political violence that has chronically afflicted its European neighbors and the United States. These acts reflected a deadly combination of elaborate planning, deception and diabolical creativity.

Borrowing from military science, terrorism experts often use the term "operational art" to describe the evolving modi operandi and tactics of terror groups. The term is doubly apt in describing acts of "performance violence" — attempts to orchestrate public spectacles of destruction to broadcast a message to the world. Like other forms of art, operational art is cumulative and referential in an important sense. A given operation draws inspiration (and differentiates itself) from those that have gone before. The script from the July 22 massacre in Oslo contains familiar elements.

The use of a fertilizer bomb by an extremist to target government buildings, for example, appears to be taken straight from the Oklahoma City bombing template, with Norwegian right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik (a.k.a. Andrew Berwick) cast in the role played by Timothy McVeigh. Breivik's so-called manifesto — itself following in the footsteps and drawing upon that of Ted Kaczynski, the so-called Unabomber — indicate that he identified with McVeigh. The use of tightly sequenced attacks is reminiscent of several recent cases in Mumbai, India.

Targeting youth, in this case, participants in a political party youth retreat, is reminiscent not only of Chechen terrorist acts, but also school shootings in the United States, such as those at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech. The use of deception and manipulation in the form of a false police uniform to gather and herd intended victims evokes associations with Nazi extermination methodology — and it also enabled the alleged perpetrator's access to the site of the youth movement retreat.

It's important to note that Breivik's plan included significant manipulative aspects aimed at first responders. The first attack was intended to strike at the symbolic heart of the Norwegian government, but also included an element of diversion and misdirection — leading first responders and the security services to concentrate attention and resources on downtown Oslo and possible additional threats to government leaders and buildings when the real threat was elsewhere. Other terrorists have used manipulative tactics targeted at first responders. A classic case of this is the 2004 Madrid bombings, in which secondary charges are thought to have been timed to detonate after a deliberate delay designed to allow the Spanish first responders to arrive on the scene.

Breivik's dance of death on July 22 was choreographed in minute detail — it was the result of meticulous planning and preparation spanning several years. By purchasing a farm, he was able to order large quantities of chemical fertilizers without attracting attention. A substantial part of this preparation focused both on the operational side of his mission and on how to communicate his message for maximum impact. Enormous effort was devoted to documenting the narrative of his journey and developing propaganda materials clearly designed to go viral and capitalize on the instant celebrity that comes with the commission of these kinds of atrocities. Breivik groomed himself for this role by taking steroids, and preparing glamour shots of himself decked out in medieval costume, and futuristic military apparel and equipment. Reportedly he even underwent cosmetic surgery to prepare himself as the intended poster boy for his crusade against multiculturalism in Norway and Europe.

Breivik took full advantage of the fact that he did not fit the profile of a "typical" terrorist as
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perceived by the Norwegian authorities. As a citizen terrorist of traditional Norwegian ancestry and Nordic appearance, he was able to blend in and evade scrutiny.

Several recent United States cases serve as vivid reminders that so-called insiders, including those employed by the government, can pose a serious threat and are easily overlooked. The perpetrator of the Fort Hood Massacre of 2009, in which 13 people were killed and 29 wounded, was a U.S. Army psychiatrist, Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan.

September 2011 will not only mark the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, but also of the Anthrax attacks when deadly anthrax spores were mailed to members of Congress and prominent media figures.

The FBI and U.S. Department of Justice concluded that the perpetrator was a leading anthrax specialist employed at a U.S. Army research lab. An exhaustive study by an Expert Behavioral Analysis Panel found that the expert had motive, opportunity and a behavioral disposition consistent with the attacks. The anthrax expert was psychologically unstable, according to the findings, and shouldn’t have been allowed continued access to deadly biological agents.

As a result of this incident, the panel prepared reform proposals designed to enhance the rigor of personnel reliability programs to prevent psychologically unstable or otherwise inappropriate individuals from accessing dangerous or other forms of sensitive materials and information.

Sadly the events of July 22 will add a new montage to the discourse of political violence and will inspire other fanatics to new acts of monumental and devious cruelty. Hasan’s attack on Fort Hood has apparently already spawned at least one (fortunately rather inept) copycat in the form of Pfc. Naser Jason Abdo. This raises some very troubling questions: Who will follow Breivik, and how and where will he or she choose to strike?