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Ridicule as a Weapon

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Introduction

Demonization of the enemy is the general default position of American message-making against international threats. The history of warfare shows, however, that while demonization can build and maintain alliances and coalitions, and is important to maintain national unity in a protracted conflict, it can inadvertently aid the enemy's own war aims.

Incessant, morbid portrayals of an individual, movement, or nation as a mortal enemy might rally support for the American side, but they have a shelf-life that gets tired over time. Constant specters of unrelenting dangers risk sowing defeatism and chipping away at our own morale. Abroad they risk making the U.S. look like a bully in some places and surrender the propaganda advantage to the other side. The questions at this stage of the war are:

- Do we inadvertently aid our enemies and potential enemies by taking them too seriously?
- Does our relentless portrayal of individuals, ideologies, movements and philosophies as mortal dangers to America enhance the enemies' status and prestige?
- Is it an unsound political strategy to hype the image and power of the enemy and the few leaders who personify it?
- Is there something else the United States and its allies should be doing in their attempts to discredit, undermine and defeat the enemy?

This paper argues in the affirmative. It suggests that U.S. strategy includes undermining the political and psychological strengths of adversaries and enemies by employing ridicule as a standard operating tool of national strategy. Ridicule is an underappreciated weapon not only against terrorists, but against weapons proliferators, despots, and international undesirables in general.

Ridicule serves several purposes:

- Ridicule raises morale at home.
- Ridicule strips the enemy/adversary of his mystique and prestige.
- Ridicule erodes the enemy's claim to justice.

- Ridicule eliminates the enemy's image of invincibility.
- Directed properly at an enemy, ridicule can be a fate worse than death.

The power of ridicule

Used as a means of positive persuasion, humor can be an important public diplomacy tool. "If I can get you to laugh with me," said comedian John Cleese, "you like me better, which makes you more open to my ideas. And if I can persuade you to laugh at the particular point I make, by laughing at it you acknowledge the truth."¹ Humor is an excellent means of making policy points and building constructive relations abroad. Everybody wins.

Laughing *at* someone – ridicule - is another matter. It is the use of humor at someone else's expense. It is a zero-sum game destructive to one of the parties involved. Like a gun, it is a dangerous weapon. Even in trained hands, it can misfire. Used carelessly or indiscriminately, ridicule can create enemies where there were none, and deepen hostilities among the very peoples whom the user seeks to win over.

In nearly every aspect of society and across cultures and time, ridicule works. Ridicule leverages the emotions and simplifies the complicated and takes on the powerful, in politics, business, law, entertainment, literature, culture, sports and romance. Ridicule can tear down faster than the other side can rebuild. One might counter an argument, an image, or even a kinetic force, but one can marshal few defenses against the well-aimed barbs that bleed humiliation and drip contempt.

Politicians fear ridicule. Some take ridicule well and emerge stronger for it; others never recover from it. The perpetual circle of democracy absorbs and even breeds ridicule against individuals and ideas, while the system itself remains intact. While ridicule can be a healthy part of democracy, it can weaken the tyrant.

The ancients and ridicule. We get the word "satire" from the ancient Greek *satyr*, the mythical drunk, hedonistic or otherwise naughty man-goat. Satyrs performed the fourth and final part of a tetralogy drama, usually in a burlesque performance that poked fun at the preceding serious or tragic trilogy. The audience would leave the performance satisfied and upbeat.

Prominent Classical literary figures used satire and ridicule against war. Poet-playwright Aristophanes, for example, in 425 B.C., satirized Athenian policy of the Peloponnesian War in *The Acharnians*, and mocked government, society and war in subsequent plays; he filled his plays with invective and *ad hominem* attacks as well as sexual humor. Greek society, irrespective of the type of government, placed boundaries on the types and intensity of ridicule, as did other ancients.

While permitted under certain circumstances, ridicule was seen as such a devastatingly powerful weapon that the ancients proscribed its use except in extreme

¹ Harry Mills, *Artful Persuasion* (American Management Association, 2000), p. 131.

situations. Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar banned jokes about the emperor. In Christianity, ridicule of another person is considered uncharitable and can even be sinful, except, one reasons, in time of war when violence and killing can be morally permissible.

In the Talmud, the basis of Jewish law, the ancient Hebrews proclaimed, “All mockery (*leitzaanut*) is prohibited except for mockery of idol worship (*avoday zarah*),” as mockery is so destructive it can be used only against evil.² Muhammad, the founder of Islam, personally used ridicule as a weapon of war early after he announced his prophethood.³ Islamic poets were not mere literary artists; they were often warriors who wrote satire and ridicule of the enemy as an important weapon of offensive warfare. Muhammad banned the faithful from drawing human images, including his own, in large part to stamp out idolatry. Violent Muslim overreactions in early 2006 to some European cartoons depicting Muhammad appear to be less manifestations of offended sensitivities than of vulnerability to the power of ridicule.⁴

Tyrants, terrorists and ridicule. Dictators, tyrants, and those aspire to seize and keep power by intimidation and force can tolerate no public ridicule. They generally harbor grandiose self-images with little bearing on how people really think of them. They require a controlled political environment, reinforced by sycophants and toadies, to preserve an impenetrable image. Some are more tolerant of reasoned or principled opposition but few of satire or ridicule. The size of their egos may be seen as inversely proportional to the thickness of their skin. However, few are true madmen; most are rational and serious.⁵ Saddam Hussein had a strong sense of humor, and is known to have told mildly self-deprecating stories about himself in public.⁶ That is not to say he accepted others’ stories; Saddam’s storytelling was under his own control.

Hence the vulnerability: Control is the essence of an authoritarian movement or dictatorship. Jokes and contempt know no philosophy and a good laugh, even of the gallows humor variety, spread virally, almost impossible to control.

Russian émigré comedian Yakov Smirnov often referred to the Soviet government’s “Department of Jokes” that censored all spoken and written humor. While we have found no evidence of a Soviet unit with that specific name, we do know that the

² Rabbi Uri Cohen, “Balak – God’s Laughter: Making Fun of Balaam,” *Nishmat*, Jerusalem Center for Advanced Study of Jewish Women, accessed January 18, 2006 at <http://www.nishmat.net/article.php?id=155&heading=0>. Rabbi Cohen, a professor at Princeton University, is also a stand-up comedian.

³ Chronology of Islam, Canadian Society of Muslims (Toronto)<http://muslim-canada.org/chronol.htm>

⁴ Were one to use cartoons against Islamist extremists, one would seek to marginalize the extremists from their support base and from the rest of Islam. The cartoonist would make the extremists’ own appearance and behavior the object of ridicule, and never the Islamic religion or its founder themselves. In addition to betraying the principles of freedom of religion and respect for other religions, making fun of another’s religion is counterproductive to the war effort. For more on this, see White Paper No. 6 in this series, “Splitting the Opposition.”

⁵ See Jerrold M. Post, *Leaders and their Followers in a Dangerous World: The Psychology of Political Behavior* (Cornell University Press, 2004).

⁶ Mark Bowden, “Tales of the Tyrant,” *The Atlantic*, May 2002, pp. 36-37.

Communist Party Central Committee's Propaganda Department and the KGB Fifth Chief Directorate respectively set and enforced ideological discipline in which a "Department of Jokes" or its equivalent would reside.

"No great movement designed to change the world can bear to be laughed at or belittled," Czechoslovakian novelist Milan Kundera wrote in *The Joke*, "because laughter is the rust that corrodes every thing."⁷

Fidel Castro understood the principle when, six months after seizing power in 1959, he had signs placed in all official buildings that read, "Counter-revolutionary jokes forbidden here." One of the first Cuban publications that Castro shut down was *Zig Zag*, a magazine of humor.⁸ While the Russians ultimately did away with a department of jokes, their president, Boris Yeltsin, could laugh at his political opponents' innovative, irreverent and wildly popular political satire TV puppet show, *Kukly*. But the sense of humor of his tough-minded successor, former KGB Lt. Col. Vladimir Putin, has no such ability. Putin shut down *Kukly* and the NTV television channel that produced it. In Putin's Russia, mocking or insulting the president is a crime punishable by imprisonment. Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chavez pushed through a similar law to protect him from open ridicule. In the 1980s, the Islamic Republic of Iran went so far as to assassinate jokesters abroad, even in western Europe, where the regime murdered an exiled humorist in Germany and a London merchant who sold CD recordings that mocked the mullahs.

Repression cannot stamp out humor; in the words of Professor Luis Aguilar of Georgetown University, "it only drives it underground. For repressed people, it is a subtle form of rebellion; a collective means to pay back the oppressor; the last resort; the last laugh."⁹

Empowering the powerless. That collective payback, that last laugh, can empower the powerless. It need not be expressed outwardly, where doing so could mean punishment or even death. In Iran, friends take taxi rides just to share jokes away from informers in their schools and places of work. Even quiet or inward expression remains alive, ready to flame with the first breath of oxygen. Jokes are a release of the fearful, a rewarding act of defiance, a rhetorical rock hurled at the oppressor. The best ones spread because they speak the truth, and the truth leads to freedom. The joke is quietly shared and spread; the people know that they are not alone. "Every joke is a tiny revolution," said George Orwell. "Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny."¹⁰

⁷ Milan Kundera, *The Joke*, trans. Henry Heim (Harper & Row, 1984). The author acknowledges writer Ben MacIntyre for locating the Kundera reference and others in his column, "Saddam Has Only Got One Ball," *The Times*, 26 August 2005, p. 24.

⁸ Luis E. Aguilar, "Chistes" – *Political Humor in Cuba* (Cuban-American National Foundation, 1989), p. i.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ George Orwell, "Funny, but Not Vulgar," *Leader*, 28 July 1945, in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., *Orwell: As I Please, 1943-1945, The Collected Essays, Journals and Letters* (Nonpareil, 2000), pp. 283-288.

Ridicule as an offensive weapon. Like rifles and satellites, submarines and propaganda, ridicule is a neutral piece of technology. It can soften up entrenched and hardened targets, especially when those targets have alienated large parts of the population, or even small but loud elements in society.

French revolutionaries preceded their overthrow and murder of the king and his family through relentless campaigns of ridicule in the politically rather open society of late 18th century Paris. Constant, vicious, often crude parody and mockery of the king as an individual and the monarchy as a system, the aristocracy, and the Church, arguably motivated and radicalized the public more than the high-minded philosophies of the revolutionaries. Combined with positive philosophical, reasoned and inspiring campaigns of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, the abuse stripped away the moral legitimacy the monarchy had from the outwardly respectful French subjects, and made the king the butt of constant sexual and scatological humor that, along with the excesses of the time, reduced the monarchy in many French eyes to a contemptible canker that required and deserved destruction. Popular history falsely remembers the pious Marie Antoinette as her French executioners caricatured her.

Mass murderers can still have a good laugh, but usually at others' expense. Adolf Hitler's sense of humor knew no self-deprecation; his was what the Germans call *schadenfreude*, a word that has no English equivalent but can be understood as taking malicious pleasure at others' misfortune. Hitler loved cruel jokes on his own ministers, especially on Foreign Minister Ribbentrop,¹¹ but always away from public view. He could never laugh at himself. His propagandists in 1933 tried to appeal to the satirical German public by issuing a compendium of tame political cartoons, but the effort went nowhere.

The Nazis and fascists required either adulation or fear; their leaders and their causes were vulnerable to well-aimed ridicule. Hitler with his Charlie Chaplin-style toothbrush mustache (a former aide later said it made him look like he had a cold), his uniform-loving Hermann Goering, and his club-footed propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels made great caricatures of their own, as did the flamboyant Benito Mussolini, who rehearsed his oratorical gesticulations – which could be impressive in person or on film, but made to look silly in still frames – before a mirror. German jokes about the Nazis quickly went underground, but resurfaced when the people saw the regime near collapse toward the end of the war.

Defensive weapon. Little if any American World War II-era ridicule had much effect on continental Europe, but it was still vital to the war effort. Ridicule can be a defensive weapon if it helps calm the fears of the public at home and give hope that they can indeed defeat the enemy. British and American boys sang anti-Hitler songs, mostly mocking the fuehrer's private parts, as one might expect from adolescents, but laughing at the enemy during wartime helps one become less fearful and more optimistic of victory.

¹¹ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (Simon & Schuster, 1970).

Popular culture also mocked the Axis powers – not after a decent interval following a given incident or atrocity, but from the start. The Three Stooges, one of the most popular comic groups in cinema at the time, performed the first parodies of the enemy in 1940, with slapstick episodes of Moe making ridiculous impressions of Hitler; Larry heiling as propaganda minister, and Curly dressed as Goering with his belly and buttocks festooned with medals. Moe also impersonated a laughable Tojo. One episode poked fun at Stalin. Others in Hollywood also helped the war effort through humor and ridicule. Charlie Chaplin’s famous full-length movie, *The Great Dictator*, though developed years before, followed the first Stooges episode in 1940. Chaplin – complaining that Hitler had stolen his trademark mustache - starred as fuehrer lookalike Adenoid Hynkel, accompanied by his sidekick Benzoni Napolini, dictator of Bacteria.

Like many in Hollywood did at the time, the cartoon studios put their talent at the disposal of the war effort. Disney’s Donald Duck, in the 1942 short “Donald Duck In Nutziland” (retitled “Der Fuehrer’s Face”), won an Academy Award after the unhappy duck dreamed he was stuck in Nazi Germany. Disney produced dozens of anti-Axis cartoons, as did Warner Bros. starring Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. Both studios have released some of the cartoon shorts on video but limited the rebroadcast and banned the re-release of some on what critics call political correctness grounds.¹²

Current anti-terrorist ridicule that worries little of political correctness is *Team America: World Police*, a clever animated marionette show about a covert counterterrorism force that patriotically if clumsily fights Islamist terrorists and North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il.¹³ *Team America* is a brilliant work that plays on the obvious faults of an insecure and lonely Kim, the absurdity of United Nations diplomacy in the person of weapons inspector Hans Blix, and on popular stereotypes about Islamist terrorists and Hollywood anti-war personalities. Developed by the creators of the South Park cartoon, *Team America* limits its effectiveness, as well as the size of its audience, with extremely crude adolescent (some might call it “adult”) humor.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is a masterpiece of over-the-top ridicule that could be to the current young generation what the irreverent *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* was to young people thirty years ago. *Team America* puts the bad guys in their place and shows that, as clumsy and arrogant as Americans might be to many people, they are still the good guys.

The United States occasionally used ridicule and satire in film to influence elections abroad. Large-scale American intervention in Italy’s 1948 election, in which the Communist Party was believed able to win a parliamentary plurality, saved the day for the Christian Democrats. Among the many instruments the U.S. used to convince Italians to vote against the Communist Popular Front was the romantic comedy *Ninotchka*, a parody of life in the Soviet Union starring Greta Garbo and Melvyn Douglas. “This film,

¹² *Bugs & Daffy Wartime Cartoons* (Warner Bros., 1942-45; released on VHS video, 1998); *Walt Disney Treasures – On the Front Lines* (Disney DVD, 2004).

¹³ *Team America: World Police* (Paramount DVD, 2005).

¹⁴ One must not discount the value of adolescent humor in winning the war of ideas. While many find it patently offensive, it can appeal to adolescent boys and young men unlike no other form of propaganda, and by its nature is self-replicating. In the global war of ideas, the young male demographic is one of the most important yet, to date, impenetrable markets for counterterrorism strategists.

which hilariously satirized life in Russia, tended to leave an audience with a feeling that if this is Russia please deliver us from such a society,” one observer reported. “Distributors provided double the usual number of copies of the film, and special arrangements were made so that the film would be shown immediately among the low-income-level population.” The film was so effective that the Italian Communists tried to prevent it from being shown; after the Italians voted against the Communists, one party worker complained, “What licked us was *Ninotchka*.”¹⁵

Ridicule and US strategy

Americans have used ridicule as a potent weapon to cut its enemies down to size since the Revolutionary War. Ridicule served two wartime purposes: to raise the people’s morale by helping them to laugh at their enemies, and to dent the morale of enemy forces. Despite their far superior training, discipline, skill and firepower, the British were unprepared for combat with the colonists. The Americans were guerrilla fighters who had the bad form not to stand in formation on a battlefield and to shoot at enemy officers.

The British handily won the first engagement, the Battle of Lexington in April, 1775, but suffered heavy losses during their march from Concord back to Boston with Americans shooting at them from behind trees and rocks. Bostonians jeered. Among the many poems and ditties circulating around Boston after the opening shots of the war at Lexington and Concord was this one:

How brave you went out with muskets all bright,
And thought to befrighten the folks with the sight;
But when you got there how they powder’d your pums,
And all the way home how they pepper’d your bums,
And is it not, honies, a comical farce,
To be proud in the face, and be shot in the arse.¹⁶

Such mockery stung: the British army at the time was the finest, most experienced and most formidable in the world, its officers and men proud of their history, in their view, of gentlemanly warfighting. The practically un-trained, mostly un-uniformed, often un-disciplined, frequently uncouth, and generally low-class American riffraff, in British eyes, were no worthy adversary at all.

With fife and drum as important means of battlefield coordination and communication, British troops ridiculed the Americans with songs like “Yankee Doodle,” whose mocking lyrics the colonists changed and embraced as their own anthem. That counter-ridicule operation unsettled the Redcoats. One British soldier recorded, “After our rapid successes, we held the Yankees in great contempt, but it was not a little mortifying to hear them play this tune.”¹⁷

¹⁵ *Ninotchka* (MGM, 1939; Warner Home Video DVD, 2005).

¹⁶ Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind* (Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 135.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

Local patriots heaped abuse on British civilian and military officials. They directed a poem at General William Howe, whom George III had named royal military governor of Massachusetts in the winter of 1775 and took Mrs. Joshua Loring as his mistress:

Sir William, he, snug as a flea,
Lay all this time a-snoring
Nor dreamed of harm, as he lay warm
In bed with Mrs. -----.¹⁸

Benjamin Franklin was famous in the colonies and Europe as a colorful humorist as well as inventor and scientist. As a colonial agent in London, he used humor to win sympathy for the colonies' grievances, and tried persuasion through gentle satire, such as his 1773 essay on "Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One," a blueprint that showed how, through poor treatment of its colonies, the British government was destroying its imperium. Franklin at the time viewed himself as an Englishman from Pennsylvania, and did not support the idea of American independence. He also used ridicule as a weapon at home as a printer, writer and patriot, and later in France as a diplomat, propagandist and intelligence officer.¹⁹

Ridicule in 21st century conflict

With the proliferation of communications technology, ridicule is a cheap and easy way to wage conflicts short of war, or to undermine an enemy in time of war. Thin-skinned dictators include Castro of Cuba, Kim Jong-il of North Korea, Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, and the regimes of China, Vietnam, and many predominantly Muslim countries. The more extreme the leader, the more vulnerable he is to ridicule.

Being a declared adversary – even enemy - of the United States is a status symbol among the world's terrorists, dictators, and political extremists. By taking that enemy too seriously, by hyping it up as a threat, the United States is unintentionally credentializing a heretofore insignificant individual or group, and giving it the stature it needs to rise above its own society, establish itself, attract recruits, and gain influence. Ridicule can cut the enemy down to size.

Arab, Persian and other predominantly Islamic cultures have long traditions of using ridicule for political and military purposes, presenting the U.S. with ample opportunities. The practice of militaristic ridicule dates from the third- to fifth years of Muhammad's annunciation as prophet, when he employed ridicule aggressively against

¹⁸ A. J. Langguth, *Patriots: The Men Who Started the American Revolution* (Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 313.

¹⁹ J. Michael Waller, "The American Way of Propaganda: Lessons from the Founding Fathers," white paper, Institute of World Politics, November 2005.

enemies, ahead of his invading forces. Poets wrote not so much for entertainment or storytelling as for psychological purposes to help achieve military ends. The popularity of some medieval Arab poets has been undergoing a revival since the 1980s, where the most extreme have provided intellectual and ideological foundations for Wahhabi/Salafi brands of militant Islamism and their terrorist manifestations.

Muslims around the world have ridiculed Islamist extremists and their terroristic interpretations of the Koran as few American writers, comedians and broadcasters would ever dare. Pakistani TV has run shows mocking the extremists. Political satire in literature, music and movies are some of the biggest sellers in the Arabic-speaking markets. Arab, Iranian and Indonesian stand-up comics already perform stinging political satire across the world, but few are well-known and even fewer have outlets, though if they were “discovered” their listenership could be in the hundreds of millions. The previous Iranian government tolerated some forms of political satire, but Iran’s top political impersonator Ali Dean, who did hilarious impressions of various mullahs, was forced to an American exile. Private Farsi-language TV stations in North America lampoon Iranian leaders. The most influential station, NITV, is owned by an exiled Iranian rock star, with Dean as its top humorist, broadcasting into Iran.²⁰

U.S. policymakers must incorporate ridicule into their strategic thinking. Ridicule is a tool that they can use without trying to control. It exists naturally in its native environments in ways beneficial to the interests of the nation and cause of freedom. Its practitioners are natural allies, even if we do not always appreciate what they say or how they say it. The United States need do little more than give them publicity and play on its official and semi-official global radio, TV and Internet media, and help them become “discovered.” And it should be relentless about it.

In his California exile from Iran, Ali Dean studies the mullahs’ sermons and speeches for his material. “They hate me because they don’t like nobody impersonate them,” he says. “To them, they are untouchable. To me, there is no untouchable.”²¹

Conclusion

Ridicule is a powerful weapon of warfare. It can be a strategic weapon. The United States must take advantage of it against terrorists, proliferators, and other threats. Ridicule is vital because:

- It sticks.
- The target can’t refute it.
- It is almost impossible to repress, even if driven underground.
- It spreads on its own and multiplies naturally.
- It gets better with each re-telling.

²⁰ Author’s interview with Zia Atabay, President, NITV.

²¹ Bob Simon, “Lights, Camera, Revolution,” CBS News, 18 June 2003. Accessed at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/10/22/60II/main526501.shtml>.

- It boosts morale at home.
- Our enemy shows far greater intolerance to ridicule than we.
- Ridicule divides the enemy, damages its morale, and makes it less attractive to supporters and prospective recruits.
- The ridicule-armed warrior need not fix a physical sight on the target. Ridicule will find its own way to the targeted individual. To the enemy, being ridiculed means losing respect. It means losing influence. It means losing followers and repelling potential new backers.
- To the enemy, ridicule can be worse than death. At least many enemies find death to be a supernatural martyrdom. Ridicule is much worse: destruction without martyrdom: A fate worse than death. And they have to live with it.