

Nonlethal weapons to protect troops?

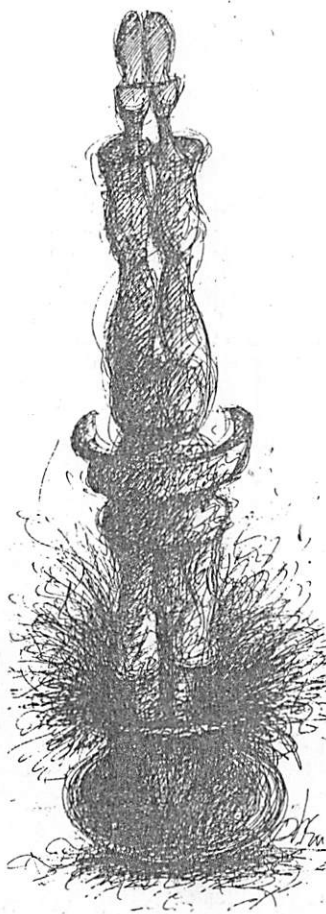
Recently, a platoon of U.S. soldiers in Bosnia was confronted by an angry mob of 400 Serbian civilians while on a mission to verify Bosnian-Serb compliance with the Dayton accords. The Serbs heckled, threw rocks at and spat on the Americans while their commander ordered them to stand fast. One soldier received kicks to the head and chest, and another was so unnerved that he said all he could think of were images of that American Ranger being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu by a similar mob. The platoon commander refused to be intimidated, and called in reinforcements in the form of allied warplanes and more soldiers to 'prove' his point. The Americans didn't budge and the crowd eventually dispersed. Left alone, they remounted their now dented and spittle-covered humvees, and continued their patrol.

This time the situation ended favorably, with the only casualties being a soldier's sore head and a platoon's bruised ego. But with 20,000 U.S. troops in Bosnia, and two battalions of lightly armed military police on the way, such incidents are bound to occur again. As we learned in Lebanon, harassment does not stop at rock-throwing. If tensions in the previous incident had escalated — and soldiers did believe members of the crowd had guns — their only options would have been to stand fast and be targets, withdrawal, or respond with lethal force.

Assault rifles and machine guns may be perfect for taking out opposing infantry, but for neutralizing snipers in a crowd, they are practically useless unless one wishes to mow down hundreds of unarmed civilians in the process. In addition to the unacceptable political costs, using lethal force is an invitation for the enemy to escalate by bringing in more people, and the next crowd might not be armed with rocks. An incident that results in dead Serbs might also prompt a Saudi Arabian-style bombing, or guerrilla attacks such as those the Israelis face in southern Lebanon.

The U.S. Army could give its commanders a greater range of options if it only invested in some proven, innovative technologies known as nonlethal weapons. The NLWs are not meant to replace a soldier's rifle and grenades, but to supplement them, and give his commander the ability to defend against massed civilians who may hurl rocks one moment but grenades the next. If a gunman in the crowd of Serbs had opened fire on the soldier's patrol, the GIs could have either held their fire and probably suffered casualties, or opened up with their machine guns, taking innocent lives, taking casualties themselves and creating an international incident (Somalia comes to mind).

Such a situation is possible in the future, but not if soldiers on patrol were equipped, for example, with an American-built foam gun tested at engineering labs and briefly deployed (but never used) in Somalia. Future patrols could neutralize snipers by dousing the threat with the nontoxic sticky foam and immobilizing them. Bystanders may get a little sticky, but no innocent lives would be lost, and no incident would



occur that would result in the loss of American prestige or Serbian retribution. Other NLWs could be deployed as well, giving units even more flexibility in dealing with troublemakers within crowds. Rocket-propelled nets with a sticky coating could be used to apprehend criminals, or stop a would-be assailant. Nonlethal grenades that explode in a burst of dazzling light could also cover a planned withdrawal or disorient a threat while causing no lasting harm to innocents. Finally, with more development, and big 'battery, infrasonic speakers could send out inaudible sound waves that would wreak havoc with rioters' internal organs. This device is called an infrasonic visceral resonator, and its low-frequency sound waves would give an assailant an unpleasant stomach ache, but only as long as he or she stayed within harassing distance.

These technologies have already been developed, use no chemicals or toxins, and are 100 percent compliant with all international laws. Troops equipped with these NLWs would still have the option to respond to a massive threat with machine guns and assault rifles, but would not be forced to do so if confronted by a teen-ager trying to kick in the windows of their humvees. The U.S. Army already goes to great lengths to defend its troops. Tanks sport top-secret armor, and designers use bullet-proof kevlar in everything from humvee armor to flak jackets and helmets, which soldiers in Bosnia must wear even if they go outside to breath some fresh air. Investing a few million dollars in refining and procuring NLWs for the troops should be the next logical step for an Army that increasingly finds itself walking the fine lines between peace-keeping, peace enforcement and war. With America's future in Bosnia uncertain, and its future deployments even more so, Congress should fund NLWs so they can be given to the troops, before GIs or innocent civilians die of the consequences.

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