

Book Review

Dies Irae: Day of Wrath¹

Reviewed by Lieutenant Commander Aaron J. Casavant*

*Be Prepared.*²

I. Introduction

Over the past year, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has carved great swaths of territory out of those countries, shocking the world with its military sophistication, brutality, and callous disregard for human life.³ In that same time period, hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants, including many unaccompanied minors, have crossed the southwest border into the United States.⁴ Politicians from both parties debate these problems, but no solutions have been forthcoming.

William R. Forstchen's most recent book, a novella, *Dies Irae: Day of Wrath*, weaves these familiar issues into a compelling narrative about our country's vulnerability to a determined enemy. Told from the perspectives of a middle school teacher and several ISIS operatives over the course of a single harrowing day, the *New York Times* best-selling author describes a nightmarish terror attack against the United States executed by a well-organized, suicidal force.

No stranger to cautionary tales,⁵ the author explicitly intended *Day of Wrath* to be a wake-up call to the country and our leaders.⁶ The effectiveness of that, as in any such novel, depends on how realistic the plot is crafted. Although the scenarios in *Day of Wrath* are entirely possible, at times the author glosses over certain important details that would affect the likelihood of their occurrence. Regardless, the book contains important warnings that we disregard at our peril.

II. A Gripping, Horrific Story

The story's protagonist, Bob Petersen, is a seemingly average teacher at the fictional Joshua Chamberlain Middle School in Portland, Maine. Bob's day starts out normally enough as he hurriedly grabs a cup of coffee from his wife,

Kathy, on the way out the door. His oldest daughter, Wendy, a student at the school, rushes him through the couple's goodbye kiss in her haste to meet friends, and the author closes the chapter with the ominous portent that this is the last time they would see each other alive.⁷ This introduction to Bob and his family is effective because it provides the reader with a personal reason to care about what happens to the country during the terror attack.

Unknown to his colleagues at school, Bob brings with him a Ruger .380 handgun, in defiance of state and federal law.⁸ Though illegal, Bob's decision is based on what he believes is a moral obligation to protect his students above all other considerations.⁹ The concealed carry plot element is clearly a reflection of the author's belief that ordinary Americans are responsible for their own safety,¹⁰ a fact highlighted by the impotence of first responders and law enforcement later in the novella.

The author next introduces the villains: members of one of the thirty ISIS death squads preparing to attack the middle school. Forstchen describes in detail the terrorists' voyage on a cargo ship from the Middle East to Mexico to bypass the heightened scrutiny of airplane passengers put in place after September 11, 2001 (9/11). The terrorists then use drug cartel mules to smuggle them across the U.S. border. The ISIS teams also maintain strict electronic silence to avoid detection. Once inside the United States, the teams link up with sleeper agents who have obtained assault weapons, ammunition, and combat gear through private sales in order to escape background checks. Only on the day of the attack do they finally activate their cell phones to receive the single tweet from their leader: "#diesirae631: Four hours, Sword One. Four Hours and a Half Hours, Sword Two. Allahu Akbar."¹¹

While the description of their journey is certainly

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¹ WILLIAM R. FORSTCHEN, *DIES IRAE: DAY OF WRATH* (2014).

² "Be Prepared" is the Boy Scout Motto. See BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA HANDBOOK 25 (13th ed. 2015).

³ *ISIS Militants Target Random Cars and Run Them Off the Road*, THE DAILY MAIL, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/news/video-1099735/ISIS-militants-target-random-cars-run-road.html> (last visited June 10, 2016).

⁴ *CBP Border Security Report*, CUSTOMS & BORDER PROTECTION 3 (2014), https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/FINAL%20Draft%20CBP%20FY14%20Report_20141218.pdf.

⁵ The author's bestselling novel, *One Second After*, chronicles the effects of a catastrophic electromagnetic pulse (EMP) attack against the United States.

See WILLIAM FORSTCHEN, *ONE SECOND AFTER* (2009).

⁶ See Forstchen, *supra* note 1, at iv ("I hope that [the book] will make enough of us think things through to ensure not only the safety of our children, but of our Republic as well.").

⁷ *Id.* at 9.

⁸ See, e.g., 18 U.S.C. § 922(q)(2)(A) (2011).

⁹ Forstchen, *supra* note 1, at 15 ("If ever the children in his charge were threatened, he believed that the first responsibility of a teacher, transcending all other responsibilities, was to protect.").

¹⁰ *Id.* at 14.

¹¹ *Id.* at 25.

thought-provoking, the author also implies that the highest levels of the U.S. Government were aware of at least the possibility of the Day of Wrath attack,¹² but, for political reasons, decide to exploit the situation to increase the government's powers.¹³ Given the author's stated intention to effectively communicate a warning,¹⁴ this statement was not helpful because it suggests that the U.S. Government was complicit in the slaughter. Perhaps the author figured that being provocative was a small price to pay for being heard, but the suggestion that the White House was in on the plot could be offensive to some readers.

After leaving the hotel, the five-man death squad piles into two vehicles, one bound for Joshua Chamberlain and one headed for the highway. The three Sword One terrorists then assault the school, slaying the security officer and killing the administrative staff. They take position at the front and back entrances, scattering fake improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the other exits to keep the students and teachers penned inside and first responders out. Guided by architectural plans obtained on the Internet,¹⁵ the third gunman moves down the hallways, killing students and teachers in their classrooms.

In the staff lounge, Bob notes with horror that this is not the lone wolf-style attack like Columbine and Newtown that they had been trained for, but rather an assault similar to the Beslan school massacre of 2004.¹⁶ He manages to find his daughter and shoves her through a classroom window, allowing her to run to safety. When the gunman enters his classroom, Bob shoots him, forcing him to withdraw. He then helps the remaining students escape.

With attacks on four other schools underway, the media erroneously reports that schools across America are under siege, and frantic parents flood the highways trying to retrieve their children. As they crowd onto the interstate, the Sword Two teams move along the stretches of road, massacring drivers, passengers, and bystanders.¹⁷ Some of the terrorists exit their vehicles and proceed to walk through the resulting traffic jams, executing hundreds and videotaping the slaughter for uploading to ISIS servers and further broadcasting to the world.

¹² *Id.* at 112.

¹³ *Id.* at iii. "There is a subtext within these pages that transcends ISIS; I'll leave that for you to find. Recall the words of a politician who declared that any crisis presents political opportunity as well." *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.* at iv.

¹⁵ This is easy to do on the Internet. See, e.g., *Floor Plans for The New Elementary School*, DOUGLAS PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT, <http://www.douglas.k12.ma.us/Admin.cfm?subpage=1502632> (last visited June 10, 2015).

¹⁶ The attack occurred in Beslan in North Ossetia on Sept. 1, 2004. Kelley McEvers, *Beslan Timeline: How the School Siege Unfolded*, NPR (Aug. 31, 2006), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5740009>. In the attack, thirty-two Chechen militants stormed the town's School No. 1 and took 1,200 children, parents, grandparents, and teachers hostage. *Id.* Most of these individuals were herded into the school's gymnasium, which was rigged with explosives, where they were held for three days without

In the chaos, Bob's wife, Kathy, leaves their youngest daughter with a neighbor and tries to get to the school, only to be shunted into a nearby church to wait. Meanwhile, Bob re-engages one of the gunman outside the classroom and is shot several times. Though partially paralyzed, he kills the gunman and retrieves his assault rifle. What follows is one of the most horrifying moments of the book: a terrorist grabs a twelve-year old girl and brings her up to the roof of the school where, in full view of the news cameras, he rapes her and slits her throat. This act provokes the police and parents into storming the school, where many of them, including Kathy, are killed by the terrorists as they charge across the school yard. The rapist then sets out to kill Bob, only to be killed when Bob shoots him with the gunman's recovered rifle.

The remaining ISIS teams are stopped through the combined actions of ordinary citizens, police officers, and the National Guard. Bob is rescued and reunited with his daughter but sees Kathy's body as he is loaded into the ambulance. The book ends with the U.S. President declaring martial law and the ISIS leader proclaiming, "Allah be praised, we have won!"¹⁸

III. A Closer Look at Key Plot Elements

The story keeps the reader engaged, but the author makes some assumptions that require further analysis. The most important of these are the terrorists' journey to the United States; the selection of so-called *soft targets* to attack; and the use of mass media to induce panic.

A. The Terrorists' Journey to the United States

Because the terrorists' departure point is described only as a "middle Eastern port,"¹⁹ it is impossible to say what maritime security counter-measures were in place that country when the crew was embarking. Mexico, however, is a state party to the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) Convention and the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS)

food and water. *Id.* On the third day, two explosions rocked the gymnasium, leading Russian Special Forces to try to take back the school. *Id.* Over the three-day siege, over 330 hostages and soldiers were killed, along with 31 militants. *Id.*

¹⁷ Forstchen, *supra* note 1, at 65.

Simply get on the highway, swing alongside cars, preferably those with a number of passengers, and shoot the driver. Tractor trailers were sweet targets: drive up, send several shots through the door, then speed on, hoping the truck jackknifes. Even better if it is carrying petrol or some hazardous material.

Id.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 168.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 17.

Code.²⁰ The ISPS Code, a 2004 amendment to SOLAS enacted in response to 9/11, provides a framework for governments to cooperate to detect and deter acts of maritime terrorism.²¹ Notably, the ISPS Code requires that vessels control the embarkation of “persons and their effects,”²² and one of its conditions of port entry is the provision of a crew list to the port state.²³ As a party to both SOLAS and the ISPS Code, Mexico would require a vessel calling at one of its ports, especially one from the Middle East, to provide the crew list for security screening. Unless the terrorists were hiding in a cargo container, a fact not mentioned by the author, their names would have been screened against the Mexican equivalent of a known or suspected terrorist (KST) list, increasing the likelihood of detection. Also, the author states that the chances of the container ship being checked were “less than five percent,”²⁴ but it is unclear to what this statistic refers. Is it the chance of law enforcement checking each cargo container? Is it the probability of screening the crew list against the KST list? In order to analyze the likelihood of the maritime portion of the voyage, additional details are required.

The second stage of the terrorists’ journey through Mexico is also controversial. Within the last year, several conservative websites have reported active collaboration between drug cartels and ISIS.²⁵ Predictably, these stories were criticized by left-leaning journalists.²⁶ While U.S. officials are more circumspect,²⁷ their assessments are based on the assumption that their agencies will be able to detect coordination between ISIS and the cartels, a factor the author tries to minimize by the terrorists’ radio silence. However, there are other forms of intelligence that could assist U.S. law enforcement agencies determine whether terrorists are infiltrating the country.²⁸ As such, while it is at least possible for ISIS to enter through the southern border, the likelihood of its doing so is very much open to debate.

²⁰ IMO Documentation, INT’L MARITIME ORG., <https://imo.amsa.gov.au/public/parties/solas74.html> (last visited June 10, 2016).

²¹ ISPS Code: International Ship and Port Facility Security Code and SOLAS Amendments iii, INTERNATIONAL MARITIME ORGANIZATION http://www.imo.org/blast/mainframe.asp?topic_id=897 (last visited June 10, 2016).

²² *Id.* at 11.

²³ *Id.* at 53.

²⁴ Forstchen, *supra* note 1, at 17-18.

²⁵ Edwin Mora, *Report: Border Patrol Agent Says Classified Intel Proves Terrorists Infiltrate U.S.*, BREITBART (Sept. 30, 2014), <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2014/09/30/report-border-patrol-agent-says-classified-intel-proves-terrorists-infiltrate-u-s/>.

²⁶ See Greg Sargent, *Tom Cotton: Terrorists Collaborating with Mexican Drug Cartels to Infiltrate Arkansas*, WASH. POST (Oct. 7, 2014), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2014/10/07/tom-cotton-terrorists-collaborating-with-mexican-drug-cartels-to-infiltrate-arkansas/>.

²⁷ See Zeke Miller & Alex Rogers, *GOP Ad Claims ISIS Plot to Attack U.S. Via ‘Arizona’s Backyard’*, TIME (Oct. 7, 2014),

B. Selecting Soft Targets

The author’s next assumption is that the terrorists will attack so-called soft targets rather than a large-scale attack like 9/11. These types of targets, which include schools, malls, and restaurants, are an increasing cause for concern among national security experts.²⁹ The disturbing fact is that people are vulnerable when they go to the coffee shop, mall, or grocery store; most are simply not on the alert for a terror attack. As ISIS calls for sympathizers to kill civilians in the West,³⁰ terrorists unfortunately have an excellent chance of success against a soft target.

Moreover, this type of attack inevitably produces mass confusion as bystanders evacuate the area, emergency medical personnel attend to casualties, and law enforcement officers attempt to stop the threat.³¹ This is perhaps the most disturbing prediction in *Day of Wrath*. As the parents and law enforcement attempt to reach the school children, attention focused on arriving at school, they are even more likely to be caught unawares on the highways.

Additional strain is placed on law enforcement and emergency medical services as more people become victims, further reducing their effectiveness. A coordinated attack on multiple targets in a single geographic with hundreds of victims could easily overwhelm the emergency response systems of most cities and towns in the United States.

III. Exploiting the Media to Cause Panic

In the fourteen years since 9/11, personal computing and social media have expanded exponentially. Smartphones, tablets, and cameras are ubiquitous, giving us the ability to upload videos to the Internet within seconds of an event. Some of these go viral, garnering millions of page views and

<http://time.com/3478254/isis-nrcc-border-plot-gop-2014/>.

²⁸ Other types of intelligence, including human intelligence (HUMINT), were not addressed by the author and could potentially provide law enforcement agencies with additional means of tracking ISIS collaboration with drug cartels.

²⁹ Steven Edwards, *Terrorists’ ‘Soft Target’ Strategy Puts Anyone—and Everyone—in Danger*, FOX NEWS (Feb. 2, 2015), <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/02/02/terrorists-soft-target-strategy-puts-anyone-and-everyone-in-danger/>.

³⁰ Josh Yevs & Holly Yan, *Western Leaders Reject ISIS Leader’s Threats Against Their Civilians*, CNN (Sept. 22, 2014), <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/22/world/meast/isis-threatens-west/>.

³¹ Forstchen, *supra* note 1, at 64.

The brilliance of the caliph’s plan was understanding the pattern of the infidels’ reaction, how they would respond collectively to a threat to their precious children . . . Though only a few out of the nearly one hundred thousand schools were now threatened, millions of parents would rush out of their homes and offices and flood onto the interstates.

Id.

Facebook likes. Against this technological backdrop, the author perceptively observes that information is a new battlefield in the fight against terror.³² This was on disturbing display in the professionally-produced ISIS propaganda videos recording the chaos it caused in the Middle East. Unfortunately, these images are profoundly compelling to tens of thousands of disaffected young men in countries around the world, young men who are even now streaming into ISIS-controlled territory to take part in the fight against the West. The footage of ISIS bringing the most powerful country on the planet to its knees in a two-pronged terror attack would be a powerful lure for those who want to kill Americans and deal the West a crippling blow in the information war.

IV. Conclusion

As a work of fiction, *Day of Wrath* contains no footnotes or citations, which hampers any objective evaluation of the likelihood of this type of attack occurring. However, by fleshing out a lurid hypothetical scenario with highly sympathetic characters, the author effectively seizes the reader's attention while also communicating his concerns about the country's vulnerabilities.

Despite this shortcoming, *Day of Wrath* is terrifying, and I now understand why the author said that it was a book he did not want to write.³³ What makes the novella effective is that none of the scenarios he creates in the plot are impossible. Some are, perhaps, less likely than others, but they are still plausible. These scenarios are certainly no more unlikely than hijackers commandeering four passenger aircraft and flying them into major U.S. landmarks. The good news is that the vulnerabilities the author identifies have not yet been exploited in the manner he describes.

Day of Wrath is the *cri d'coeur* of an intelligent, perceptive author intent on warning us that despite the billions of dollars spent on homeland security and the Global War on Terror, we remain vulnerable to a low-tech, suicidal attack. It is also a reminder to those of us who have dedicated our professional lives to the national security of the United States to think about how we can be even more prepared, both personally and professionally. For now, let us be thankful that *Day of Wrath* is a work of fiction.

³² *Id.* at 154.

³³ *Id.* at i.