

The Car Bomb

Poor Man's F-16

Don LaCoss

2008

reviewed in this article

Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb, by Mike Davis, 2007, Verso, 228 pp., \$22.95

Mike Davis argues forcibly that the “vehicle-borne improvised explosive device” (in Pentagon parlance) is a weapon of mass destruction. Keying in on the terrible effectiveness of this weapon (“an inconspicuous vehicle, anonymous in almost any urban setting, to transport large quantities of high explosive into precise range of a high-value target”), Davis underscores the inevitability of its proliferation as globalized capitalism industrially overdevelops every corner of the world, “like a kudzu vine of destruction taking root in the thousand fissures of ethnic and religious enmity that globalization has paradoxically revealed.”

In short, the car bomb is the hot rod to Hell in the age of asymmetrical, open-source warfare. In 1983, a couple of well-placed vehicle bombs in Lebanon defeated Ronald Reagan and the combined might of the US Sixth Fleet. “The average family SUV with 10 cubic feet of cargo space can transport a 1000-pound bomb,” Davis says. “Every laser-guided missile falling on an apartment house in southern Beirut or a mud-walled compound in Kandahar is a future suicide truck bomb headed for the center of Tel Aviv or perhaps downtown Los Angeles.”

Historically speaking, the “radical potential” of car bombs “would be fully realized only after the barbarism of strategic bombing had become commonplace, and after air forces routinely pursued insurgents into the labyrinths of poor cities.” In fact, the car bomb is the “poor man’s air force par excellence”: compared to the \$1 million price tag on every single US cruise missile that is hurled at a target, Davis writes, “40 or 50 people can be massacred with a stolen car and approximately \$500 of fertilizer and bootlegged electronics.”

The car bomb is “an inherently fascist weapon”

In this aspect, *Buda's Wagon* can be read as a complement (or even a sequel) to Sven Lindqvist’s excellent study, *A History of Bombing* (1999; English translation 2001). Lindqvist makes the provocative point that the technologies of bombardment from the air were not an integrated development in this general sweep of the history of warfare, but actually a completely unique approach with drastically different norms and forms. Davis makes a very similar argument about the car bomb’s semi-strategic ability to rethink what constitutes a “high-value target.”

Like an air force bombing raid, “collateral damage” is guaranteed with the vehicle bomb. “If the logic of an attack is to slaughter civilians and sow panic in the widest circle, to operate a ‘strategy of tension’ or just demoralize a society, car bombs are ideal.” Davis concludes that, when all is said and done, the car bomb is “an inherently fascist weapon guaranteed to leave its perpetrators awash in the blood of innocents,” adding that “this categorical censure, of course, applies even more forcibly to the mass terror against civilian populations routinely inflicted by the air forces and armies of so-called ‘democracies’ like the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Israel.”

As demonstrated in his previous books like *City of Quartz*, *Planet of Slums*, and *The Ecology of Fear*, Davis is entirely capable of laying out keen explanations that analyze the sophisticated political, social, and economic environments under scrutiny. For *Buda's Wagon*, he deliberately avoids any deep discussion of the political grievances that motivate the car bombers, preferring instead to keep the focus on the technical changes over time that have gone into the development of the car bomb as an ideologically-neutral technology.

Davis chooses to ignore those instances when booby-trapped cars are used to try to kill specifically-targeted individuals (like the 1976 CIA and Chilean secret police conspiracy to blow up Orlando Letelier in Washington DC and the attempt by the FBI and/or the Oakland police department to murder Earth First!er Judi Bari in 1990) in order to stay centered on his central "poor man's air force" thesis.

Car-bomb universities

But to his credit, Davis's discussion goes beyond non-State agents of terrorism to include the use of car bombs by State defense and espionage agencies, police apparatuses, and government-sanctioned death squads. His insights into the British Army's Special Air Services close collaboration with Northern Ireland's Loyalist paramilitaries in bombing a busy shopping district in Dublin and a pub in Monaghan Town in May 1974, are chilling reminders of State terrorism, as is Davis's look at the CIA's gruesome failure to kill the Hezbollah leader Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah at the Imam Riad Mosque in Beirut in 1985.

His chapter on the "car-bomb universities" run by the US, Pakistani, and Saudi spy agencies in Peshawar refugee camps in the 1980s will come as a shock to anyone who has swallowed the sugar-coated spin of recent historical revisions (like that loathsome recent Hollywood movie *Charlie Wilson's War*) of the CIA's secret war in Afghanistan between 1985 and 1988.

The black-budget car-bomb colleges run by CIA director William Casey schooled an estimated 35,000 violent Sunni mujahideen in techniques (including the camel bomb) used by jihadists against Soviet soldiers and Afghan royalists, secularists, leftists, college professors, and women's rights groups. The graduates of this State-supported terrorist infrastructure later authored explosions in Kashmir, Chechnya, the parking garage of the World Trade Center in 1993, in front of US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in 1998, and throughout Occupied Iraq right now.

Davis's history starts with a horse-drawn wagon stuffed with scrap metal and dynamite before being detonated at noon on Wall Street in front of the offices of plutocrat J.P. Morgan in September 1920, killing at least 40, wounding more than 200, and littering the streets with \$80,000 in cash that was blown out of nearby financial offices. (Mario Buda, an Italian immigrant connected with the Galleianist anarchist group, had planned the blast to intimidate the government into releasing Sacco and Vanzetti from jail.)

The book concludes with the cars and trucks driven by Sunni Muslim suicide bombers through the checkpoints into Baghdad's Green Zone more than eighty years later. Along the way, Davis dips into other vehicle bombings in British-occupied Palestine, French-occupied Algiers, downtown Saigon in the early 1960s, the University of Wisconsin's Army Mathematics Research Center in 1970, Belfast, Beirut, Soviet-occupied Kabul, Sri Lanka, Barcelona, Bogota, Lima, Oklahoma City, Riyadh, Grozny and elsewhere.

Perpetrators include Maoist rebels, violent religious extremists, all manner of ethnic separatists and anti-colonial nationalists, soldiers of the Sicilian mafia, and cocaine cartel hit men. And, just as traffic will only get worse, the odds for seeing more car bombs on the streets in the future will only get better.

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