

Letter to the Editor

February 2012

THE POWER OF THE FEW

I read with interest Professor Nieto-Gomez's recent article published by *Homeland Security Affairs*. While it may be the case that the "few" are becoming more powerful, the article inaccurately presents this phenomenon and thus misleads the journal's readers.

The article states "on September 11, 2001, 'a few' hijackers were able to bring to a halt the entire nation, cripple the economy, place continuity of government at risk and inflict more than 3,000 casualties." Only the last of the claims in this sentence is true. The economy grew in the quarter that included 9/11 and grew every quarter after that through 2007. The attack thus did not cripple the economy or bring the nation to a halt. Furthermore, at no time did the attack put at risk the continuity of government. (GDP figures available at <http://www.bea.gov/iTable/iTable.cfm?ReqID=9&step=1>)

The article states "current technologies make it possible for small groups of individuals ('the few' or 'the one') to alter the Earth's weather patterns." What Professor Nieto-Gomez means here is unclear. According to the chaos theory he cites, even butterflies may alter the weather, so it is not clear why it is news that Bill Gates can. But if the claim is that Bill Gates or anyone else can now reshape the earth's weather to some purpose, this is clearly false. The news article Professor Nieto-Gomez cites makes clear that weather engineering is merely experimental, at least decades away, if possible at all, and hardly to be accomplished by the efforts of one or even a few.

Professor Nieto-Gomez's article repeats the now familiar contrast between the supposedly nimble few and a "slow-reacting bureaucracy." In considering this claim, the article's readers should reflect on the contest between al Qaeda in Iraq and the US military. The US military proved itself more adaptable than al Qaeda. Moreover, the military adapted not by "networking," but by using the centralized authority of a bureaucracy. This example and many others one could cite belies Professor Nieto-Gomez's claim that "the small and unstructured 'few' are capable of adapting to the pace of change faster than vertical organizations or big governments."

Like most commentators on such issues, Professor Nieto-Gomez does not take into account sufficiently the strengths of "the many" or centralized organizations. This is one reason that the comparisons he draws with Pearl Harbor (in words) and Operation Overlord (in an image) are misleading. Behind both the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the Normandy invasion were powerful organizations (nation-states and their militaries) capable of exercising that power in a sustained manner. Al Qaeda did not have such power and lacked the capacity to follow up on the 9/11 attack. In particular, Professor Nieto-Gomez does not recognize how the new technologies empower governments, already more powerful than "the few," as much and probably more than they empower "the few."

Homeland security, as an academic endeavor and as a national priority, is not enhanced by misleading accounts of the threats we face. More specifically, an accurate assessment of the contest between "the few" and "the many" might call into question the need for the Homeland Security Advanced Research Projects Agency that Professor Nieto-Gomez advocates.

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