



**THE FOUR HORSEMAN OF THE MODERN WORLD:  
FSR INTERVIEWS DR. HARLAN ULLMAN**

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Dr. Harlan Ullman, a distinguished Fletcher School alumnus, sat down with the Fletcher Security Review recently to discuss the past, present, and future of U.S. and global security, as well as his most recent book, *A Handful of Bullets: How the Murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand Still Menaces the Peace*. He is Chairman of the Killowen Group, which advises leaders in business and government; Chairman of CNIGuard Ltd and CNIGuard Inc. which are infrastructure protection firms; Senior Advisor at the Atlantic Council and Business Executives for National Security, both in Washington, D.C.; on the Advisory Board for the Supreme Allied Commander Europe; and Director Emeritus of the Wall Street Fund, one of the nation's first mutual funds. A former naval officer with 150 combat operations and missions in Vietnam in patrol boats and other commands at sea, he was principal author of the 'Shock and Awe' doctrine, which was released in 1996. With seven books and thousands of articles and columns to his credit, he was made UPI's Arnaud de Borchgrave distinguished columnist earlier this year.

**FSR:** *Thanks so much for sitting down with us. Could you tell us a bit about rapid dominance strategy (Shock and Awe Doctrine) and what challenges it was designed to address?*

**Ullman:** In the mid-1990s a group of us were very concerned with the direction that America's defenses were headed. We were shifting away from the Soviet Union as the major threat, and were focused on the most recent conflict we had then experienced namely Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990 and 1991. Because of these concerns, I helped establish a group of Vietnam and Desert Storm veterans, all of whom had held very high rank in those particular wars, to see how war was really changing, how technologies were changing and what would be an appropriate strategy for the United States. The theory was that we would define various outcomes first and then work backwards to see how these might be achieved and what role the military would play or not.

It became clear that in plain terms, the aim was to get people to do things that we wanted them to do, or to stop doing things to which we objected. These aims can be easily defined as "affecting, influencing, and controlling rule and perception." How do you get the other person to do what you want? Do you do that through trickery, do you do it through the threat of force, or do you do it through other means?

One conclusion was defining 11 or 12 levels of Shock and Awe, all the way from the most positive Shock and Awe such as winning \$100 million in the lottery, or were awarded a lot of money to do something; to the most negative, which how during World War II, Japanese psychology was transformed from suicidal behavior before August 6, 1945 to relative passivity after August 9, 1945. The notion was that the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was so shocking and awesome that the Japanese could not comprehend what one airplane and one bomb could destroy. That shock and awe forced a complete reversal and tectonic psychological shift in attitudes turning suicidal intent into a passivity to accept surrender, even though at the time the Japanese people were enduring B-29 raids that numbered thousands of bombers killing more people in cities such as Kyoto and Tokyo than perished in Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

Different levels of shock and awe applied to the battlefield, where if the enemy knew it could not win; possibly not survive; and were certain of defeat, would that prevent fighting in the first place?

Shock and Awe was also defined by four components. One was achieving "total" knowledge of the battlefield and its surrounds superior to your enemy? This of course was first argued by Sun Tzu: "Know your enemy."

Second, was the ability to control the environment. That meant controlling not only the

electronic environment, but the physical environment so you could deprive or deceive the enemy and thus force it to accept your will.

Third was brilliance in operations. You had to train to be brilliant. Being good was not good enough.

Fourth was rapidity meaning you could respond, react, move and think far faster than the adversary.

This combined capacity would overwhelm an enemy before you even went to war. If force were needed, it would mean that you could defeat this enemy by changing his mindset as quickly as possible, normally with minimum casualties on both sides – although war can often be bloody and destructive, because often in war there is no way that you can limit the violence.

Clearly, you're never going to have total knowledge. But you must anticipate how an enemy is going to think and how an enemy is going to react, which requires the intellectual capacity to understand the adversary in all dimensions.

The U.S. military in the 1991 Gulf War was a brilliant operational example because we had stunning technology and were fighting a rather poor army in Iraq. With precision guided munitions and the F-117 stealth bomber, which the enemy couldn't see, the first Gulf War was akin to shooting fish in a barrel. So brilliance in those operations was driven by overwhelmingly powerful, dominant technology.

Hence what we needed was what Sun Tzu and the great military strategists called the intellectual understanding of war. Understanding yourself and your adversary led back to the pursuit of total knowledge and the basis for Shock and Awe...

**FSR:** *Clearly what you referred to in 2003 as "Shock and Awe Lite" that was implemented in Iraq didn't work. What would a successful Shock and Awe campaign have looked like and how might it have changed the long-term outcome of the conflict?*

**Ullman:** The most successful shock and awe campaign would have meant that we would not have had to invade in the first place. We would have been able to force the Iraqi Army to overthrow Saddam. That is how the campaign should have been designed, by working from within Iraq and its army. I would have had far more messaging to the Iraqi Army. I would have had replays of 1991 and what happened to the Iraqi Army broadcast on Iraqi television by controlling their television stations or beaming in such programs and propaganda. If that would have been successful, then when we actually started the attack, perhaps dissident Iraqi officers would overthrow Saddam or surrender in such large numbers that a military attack would not have been necessitated. There would have been far less destruction.

Then, when a new government was installed, I certainly would not have imposed a representative democracy. That was not going to work. What was needed was a prime ministerial form of government that would have brought together the three main components of Iraqi society — the Sunnis, Shia and Kurds — on an interim basis deferring elections until Iraq had been stabilized. Part of the problem was that the only politicians the George W. Bush administration knew were émigrés from the Iraqi National Congress who were as partisan and vindictive in many ways as the leadership that they replaced. That is what happened when Nouri Al Maliki became Prime Minister who oversaw reprisals of Sunnis retaliating against Shia excesses under Saddam Hussein.

Quite frankly, the rise of the Islamic State arose from conditions in Iraq that had been going on for years: torture, repression and murder by Shia against Sunni. And today, former

Prime Minister al Maliki, still holds a large amount of power through a shadow government he controls. And in the last election, Maliki won the largest number of votes.

So that's how such a campaign could have been conducted. And I would have listened to the Saudis and the Russians who counseled not to invade. Why invade? We had contained Saddam. I was one of the very few analysts who said that I did not believe that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction... I think the second Iraq War was the biggest geostrategic blunder American history since the Civil War.

**FSR:** *Do you see a way for us to apply the principles of Shock and Awe to the situation in Syria?*

**Ullman:** No. The problem is that from a strictly humanitarian basis to minimize loss of life, you would have supported Assad – from as I noted a strictly loss of life basis. Fewer people would have died if Assad had won. Now I understand, one can call Assad a monster. I'm not denying that. But if he had won outright, there would have been far less loss of life and the situation would not be as chaotic as it is now. As the civil war raged in Lebanon for more than a decade, that's what is happening now in Syria. The notion that we are going to raise a Syrian army of 50,000 is nonsensical. I just don't see where it is going to come from. And then Al Qaeda, Al Nusra, and the Islamic State have obtained powerful positions. And, quite frankly, Assad has the same interest as we do in defeating the Islamic State, as does Iran and as does most everyone else.

This of course makes for very strange bedfellows, which complicates the situation. On one hand, in Syria, Iran and the U.S. have the same intent of defeating the Islamic State. But Iran is clearly supporting Assad and President Obama has demanded that Assad must go. As Lenin said, "There are contradictions, comrade."

We have contradictions here and unless we fix them, there is no way that any strategy is going to work because the country is in civil war. Either the war in Syria will burn itself out and the factions are forced to stop through some sort of political agreement, or ultimately Assad wins and kills off the enemy. But there is no way of applying a useful military strategy that is going to work, because the only option to succeed is to put in a half a million people to occupy Syria. That is the only way to end the violence and no one is going to do that. Besides, that might not work as it did not in Iraq.

**FSR:** *Can shock and awe succeed when adversaries have even military strengths, or is it only possible when there is a strategic imbalance in military capabilities?*

**Ullman:** Well, there is always an imbalance in military capabilities. Everybody has certain weaknesses. What you have to do is understand the weaknesses. [Shock and Awe] would work particularly well if you are weaker. The inverted point: take improvised explosive devices and what is called asymmetric warfare. The enemy takes advantage of one of your strengths and turns it into a weakness. What's interesting is that the United States spent over \$70 billion on counter-IEDs. What did the other side spend in Afghanistan and Iraq on IED's? Pennies. So the cost exchange ratio is easily a million to one in their favor...

What's interesting is that at the start of WWII, and Hitler's blitzkrieg, the British and French were far more superior in terms of technology and weapons systems. And yet Hitler routed them. In Vietnam, the enemy had Kalashnikovs. But they had the will, patience and were willing to die. I'm not saying that the enemy used Shock and Awe. But you have to learn to exploit the strengths as well as the weaknesses of your enemy. That becomes the issue irrespective of whether you are stronger or weaker.

**FSR:** *After 9/11, what mistakes do you think the U.S. made in framing the "War on Terror"?*

*and how are these mistakes still affecting us today?*

**Ullman:** The biggest mistake we made was declaring the War on Terror, which is absurd. Terror is a tactic. It is like saying we are going to declare war on blitzkrieg, or on drugs, or crime. You don't declare a war that you cannot define. And if you declare a war, you are supposed to be able to win a war. So how do you win it?

Our fundamental mistake was in seeing this as a war against terror, and not a struggle of a revolutionary movement. Just as Nazism, fascism and Communism were revolutionary movements, so too was Al Qaeda. After all, what was Bin Laden's objective? It wasn't just to destroy the United States or hurt the United States. It was also to get back and throw the Saudis out of Riyadh. When Lenin got aboard the sealed train and headed back to Russia in 1917 and caused the revolution, he did it with the Bolsheviks who were a tiny percentage of the population. If you go re-read Lawrence of Arabia, Lawrence wrote that you could win with 1% of the population.

We should have realized that this was a revolution using a cover of religion as a way of legitimizing itself. Intellectually, we failed to recognize the dangers and the threats. We dealt with a symptom — terror — not the cause. And then we went overboard.

We passed the PATRIOT Act. We shifted when we went into Afghanistan from eliminating Bin Laden and Al Qaeda to going after the Taliban and then rebuilding the country. How did that happen? That wasn't the role. So we catalyzed this global War on Terror... and the question is, has it really made a difference? Now people will argue that we haven't been attacked, but we have. We've been attacked in different ways... terrorism has been going on all around the world. So I think that we enormously overreacted and of course 9/11 gave the Bush Administration the patina of a reason to go into Iraq, which was catastrophic.

**FSR:** *You've called for a new Nixon Doctrine. What would this doctrine look like and why do we need one?*

**Ullman:** Well, we don't have a real strategy. Our strategy is a composite of slogans... What we need is [a strategy in which] America provides stabilization in terms of the global strategic balance as well as key enablers for regional states: intelligence, logistics and training. But if you remember, the Nixon Doctrine argued that the United States would maintain the key stabilizing role strategically vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, and to a lesser degree China. Regional states would have to act more to ensure their regional security. That is what we must do today.

How is that done? Well, we have a pretty interesting and successful organization in NATO. Why are we not rejuvenating NATO? Here is Mr. Putin in Ukraine, with the NATO countries in eastern Europe rightly concerned. We can say that we will be there in case of Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, which says that an attack against one is an attack against all. But we need a stronger narrative. We have 28 countries who spend God knows how many trillions of dollars on defense, the strongest military alliance ever. We ought to be using that contribution more positively.

NATO is establishing a very high readiness reaction force. The U.S. deployed a brigade combat team of 5,000, with 250 tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles. We needed to talk more about that. We needed to say what NATO was doing: NATO is not going to engage into Ukraine. Unfortunately, NATO failed to do this initially. When it finally decided to be more vocal, this gave Putin the ammunition to use this against NATO in the war of narratives that Russia is so far winning.

Further, while NATO countries are supposed to commit a minimum of 2% of GDP to defense,

that is the wrong metric. NATO states need to spend enough, and as long as NATO maintains a strong declaratory policy, spending should be a lesser consideration but only to a point. I think NATO has been too late in adopting a narrative and now that narrative is seen as too provocative by Moscow.

In the Middle East, I would mobilize the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Now, those six countries are often at each other's throats and you can't expect them to agree on everything, but here is a common thread. That common thread is [opposition to] the Islamic State. I'm not suggesting that the GCC can be a NATO alliance. But the notion that the Arab states want to form an army of some 50,000 is a good start. Focus that on the Islamic State. We have to realize that we cannot defeat the Islamic State: They have to. We have to act more forcefully to get that done. And quite frankly I don't think we've done a very good job in that regard.

Our presidential envoy to the coalition of 62 [the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State], General John Allen, has been waging a one-man fight. He has not been very well supported by the U.S. government. While there is a strategy, execution has been poor. For example, Central Command is fighting the air battle. But that battle has not terribly well coordinated in the coalition. So, by doing those kinds of things, this would be an extension of the Nixon Doctrine. . .

In the Pacific we have very powerful allies. I would work much more to secure a better rapprochement between South Korea and Japan. I would bring in Thailand. We are working more closely with Vietnam now (even though they beat us in that war). So there are ways that we can bring those Pacific countries together through partnerships.

The argument I make in my book,<sup>1</sup> is that we want peace, prosperity and stability through new partnerships. I sketch out how you would go about putting those partnerships in place. In some cases, we would lead from the front, but in others we want to lead from behind when our presence is too visible and has disruptive effects, which we see particularly in Arab and Muslim countries.

**FSR:** *So in that East Asia system of partnerships, where does China fit in?*

**Ullman:** China is central. Hank Paulson, the former CEO of Goldman Sachs and Treasury Secretary, has written a book and has a couple of good articles in the Wall Street Journal about dealing with China. What he basically says is that you have to treat China as an adult. In the United States, because we have had this "pivot to Asia," understandably the Defense Department now is talking about China's growth and its military forces. Yes, China has increased its defense spending a great deal, in large part because it is moving to a professional army and you have to pay them something. But it is developing modern systems.

I think we have overreacted. We worry about their aircraft carrier. But that aircraft carrier was built in 1972 and was for a while was used as a passenger ship — a cruise ship! Now we're worried because they might build a second one? Ok, so they have this old ship, which in combat would last about a millisecond. And they are building a second carrier. But we have ten. So I don't really see the crisis.

We need to be lower key. China is heavily invested in the United States and not just in the bond market to the tune of over a trillion dollars in equity or stock markets. China must grow its economy 7 or 8 or 9% annually because it has an underclass of 300-400 million, and

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<sup>1</sup>Ullman, Harlan. *A Handful of Bullets: How the Murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand Still Menaces the Peace*. Naval Institute Press (2014).

if it hiccups, it has a problem. Every single Chinese ruler going back 5000 years has been afraid of one thing: a peasant revolution...

China has a lot of internal problems. Yes, it is expanding, and yes it has neighbors that it has clashed with in the past. It has to deal with North Korea and the unhappy experience with Japan. Having said that, I think we need to look at China as a partner. I think we have to be very cognizant of its military. But I don't think we have to fear it.

My view is that we can have a counter-containment strategy to keep the Chinese locked in to the first island chain militarily. If it came to the point where China became an adversary, we could probably contain it. I think it unlikely that China will have the capacity to invade Taiwan successfully. Now, China could obliterate Taiwan. But crossing the Taiwan Straits to invade Taiwan is something that will exceed China's capacity for a very long time. And they are certainly not going to cross the Japanese Straits...

Back to what Hank Paulson said: we have to treat the Chinese as adults. They are just as smart or even smarter than we are. They are extremely industrious... The dynamism of the Chinese is really quite something. The fact of the matter is that a Jeffersonian democracy in China will not be achieved for a very long time to come if ever. I think that would be antithetical to Chinese culture, Chinese history and I don't think it would work. For better or for worse, you need a strong authoritarian center to manage it...

**FSR:** *In some of your recent articles, you draw lessons from the past, and particularly WWI and the Vietnam War. In what ways has the world changed over the past 100 years and what ways has it stayed the same? What are the effects of the changes and the continuities on the future of U.S. strategy?*

**Ullman:** I argue that there have been three profound changes. What really has happened since the Archduke [Franz Ferdinand's] death is that globalization and the diffusion of power have had major effects. First, we have created any number of potential archdukes, and a large number of bullets. Now, no longer do you have to shoot at an archduke. A Tunisian fruit vendor can set himself on fire and light off the Arab Awakening.

Second, we've seen a weakening and displacement of the Westphalian System. In 1648, after the Thirty Years' War, states became the sovereign measure of the international political system. States were the way that international politics were conducted. This is no longer true. Individuals—Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning—have had a huge impact. Now, obviously so did Gavrilo Princip, the assassin of the Archduke. But individuals now—because of globalization and the diffusion of power—have tremendous influence and have eroded the basic power of states. Then you have new actors—including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Then you have other organizations. For example, the EU has imposed tremendous restrictions on state sovereignty. Therefore, the Westphalian System is changing into something else, but we haven't defined that something else.

Last, and most importantly, the assassination has created four new Horsemen of the Apocalypse. [One of these Horsemen] is failed and failing governments, all the way from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, with Washington and Brussels in between. This is the number one threat, I think, to mankind: governments that are unable to deliver. We're seeing that dramatically, certain in the region from the Mediterranean in Libya all the way east to the Bay of Bengal.

[The second Horseman] is economic disparity: You cannot live on \$2 a day, and many people have to. In the United States, we have greater disparity of wealth between rich and poor, a middle class that is shrinking, but an economy that is sputtering. So you need to deal with these economic issues much more centrally than we've been able to do. I'm not talking about just the United States: this is fundamental.

Thirdly, there are radical ideologies, in this case the perversion of Islam by the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, but, you know, [Yitzhak] Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing, radical Jew. So you have. . . radicals who are using — as Lenin used Marxism as a legitimizer — religion, in my judgment, as an excuse or rationale for what in essence is a revolutionary movement.

Finally, there is environmental calamity. You see what is happening in California with the drought, you see these huge storms. Here in Boston, you have a thousand feet of snow! You have Ebola, you had Hurricane Sandy and tsunamis, and now you have climate change. So, the environment is producing all sorts of challenges. Whether they are getting worse or not, they seem to be increasing. Whether this is a cycle and they are going to decline or change, who knows, but increasingly government's are worried about environmental calamities.

We are going to have to deal with these Four Horsemen. In that regard, for much of the 20th century and throughout the Westphalian System the dangers and threats were expressed as state against state. Certainly for the last 50 years of the 20th century, it was state against state. First Axis versus Allied powers, then the West versus the East. Now that is profoundly changed and it is the Four Horsemen, in my mind, who have eclipsed states versus states as the most dangerous threats we have to deal with. But we have to realize that we cannot dismiss the possibility of state versus state warfare. . . but the larger challenges come in the form of the Four Horsemen, which confront all of mankind. . .

*\*Interview has been lightly edited for clarity. Brackets indicate editorial additions.*