



Vladimir Putin officially banned this popular meme of himself with his face painted in drag. That reaction inadvertently made the meme more popular than ever, and it became an international sensation. According to the author of this article, Putin's "thin skin" makes him an easy target for ridicule. (Artist unknown)

# Weaponizing Ridicule

J. Michael Waller, PhD

*The fifth rule: Ridicule is man's most potent weapon. It is almost impossible to counterattack ridicule. Also it infuriates the opposition, who then react to your advantage.*

—Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*

Venezuelan women stripped off their pants and threw them at riot police, taunting the already demoralized young men to “man up” and put them on. Jeering crowds laughed at the confused paramilitary forces, chanting for them to “wear some pants” and side with the people against the tottering Maduro dictatorship. Suddenly, the

truncheon-wielding, helmeted police and their armored vehicles didn't seem quite so menacing. Once the public could make fun of the repressive machine, everyone knew the police state's time was running out.

Improvised street theater across Venezuela in the spring of 2017, with the occasional Molotov cocktails adding drama to provoke overreaction among the security forces, marked the tipping point for a corrupt regime that had brought itself to the breaking point.

The people laughed in the face of their oppressors. Their fear evaporated.

When a police state loses its ability to instill obedience or fear, it cannot long survive. When terrorists lose their ability to terrorize, they lose their most vital psychological weapon. Terrorism being by definition a form of psychological warfare—the name says it all, which is to instill terror among populations and leaders—the perpetrators cannot exist in perpetuity if they fail to cow the people.

Killing terrorists and their supporters is only part of the counterterrorism arsenal. Yet, hunting down and killing them has been the primary means of counterterrorism in a war apparently without end. Sometimes the worst thing to do to an enemy is to mock him or her. Ridicule, mockery, and their related tactics have been weapons against

evil—and evildoers' weapons against all things good—throughout recorded history.

"The devil ... the proud spirit ... cannot endure to be mocked," wrote Sir Thomas More, the closest friend and confidant of King Henry VIII, who would lose his head to the executioner's axe for being what he called "the king's loyal servant, but God's first."<sup>1</sup>

Ridicule can work when philosophy, theology, or reason fails. "The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear Scorn," said Martin Luther, a leader in what would become the Protestant Reformation.<sup>2</sup>

Authors Douglas J. Feith and Abram N. Shulsky echo Luther, writing, "One of the most potent weapons of the Enlightenment in its battle against religious fanaticism and intolerance was ridicule."<sup>3</sup>

The same can be said about most conflicts today. Ridicule has received little attention in modern military thinking. The military is not supposed to be funny. But neither are diplomats nor spies. Ridicule seldom if ever becomes a factor in military or diplomatic strategic planning, and rarely at the tactical or operational levels, even though many of our priority targets, large and small, are ripe for a good laugh.

Al-Qaida leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi lost his aura of invincibility in 2006 when the U.S. military released raw outtakes of a captured video showing the terrorist chief to be a befuddled, pudgy bumbler in a black ninja costume who didn't know how to operate a machine gun.<sup>4</sup> But some in the U.S. military didn't get the value of ripping down al-Zarqawi in this way, arguing that the machine gun, an M249 Squad Automatic Weapon, is "complicated to master" and requires extensive training. Plus, the M249 in question was an "older variant, which makes its malfunctioning unsurprising."<sup>5</sup> Arab journalists, on the other hand, saw the value immediately. Iraqi television broadcast the video over and over for days.

Dictators, terrorists, and totalitarian ideologues, almost by definition, cannot tolerate being laughed at. Nor can anyone with an inflated ego and thin skin. Ridicule is their Achilles' heel. And, humor is a robust underground phenomenon in any society. The Soviet leadership was so fearful of humor that the KGB had what Russian comedian Yakov Smirnov called a "Department of Jokes." That was not the real name of the department, which had a more anodyne designation as a subunit of

**J. Michael Waller, PhD,** is a founding editorial board member of NATO's *Defence Strategic Communications* journal, published by the alliance's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga, Latvia, and is a vice president of the Center for Security Policy in Washington, D.C. He holds an MA in international relations and communication, and a PhD in international security affairs from Boston University. For thirteen years he was the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Professor of International Communication at the Institute of World Politics. He is the author or editor of several books, and he has written for prominent national academic and professional publications, as well as *Reader's Digest*, *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. He has been an occasional commentator on BBC, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, NPR, and the Voice of America.





the KGB's political enforcement section, the Fifth Chief Directorate, but Smirnov's nickname for it made the KGB look all the more weak and bizarre (although all jokes still had to be KGB approved).<sup>6</sup>

The Nazis took a different view. Early after Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933, the Nazis banned comments critical of the regime, but did not ban jokes. Some German historians say that the Nazis considered jokes to be an escape valve for ordinary Germans' tensions and frustrations. During the losing years of World War II, however, the Third Reich took jokes as a form of military defeatism, punishable by imprisonment or death, although historian Rudolph Herzog, author of *Dead Funny: Telling Jokes in Hitler's Germany*, found that the jokes were a pretext for purging undesirables.<sup>7</sup> A persuasive case can be made that excessive denunciation of humorists and jokers, playing up the threats they present, using shows of force, and even physically attacking them, can strengthen the purveyors of ridicule and deepen their appeal.

An antigovernment protester holds a poster with a caricature of Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro 2 March 2014 during a rally against his government in Caracas. The poster reads, "What the hell does SOS mean?," "Peace no, bullets yes." Subsequently, thousands of antigovernment demonstrators marched in the capital trying to keep up the momentum during months of protests demanding Maduro's resignation. (Photo by Jorge Silva, Reuters)

## Cost Effective

Ridicule costs nothing to deploy. It requires no expensive hardware or special procurement budget. As such, it has no pork-barrel political constituency in Congress and no career path in the armed forces. Because ridicule effectively costs nothing, it cannot be accounted for as a tool or weapon. The lawyers and accountants who increasingly dominate military thinking and action cannot "bean count" ridicule the way that they can easily account for spent munitions, wrecked vehicles and gear, dead and mutilated servicemen, and

endless disability benefits. Military promotions tend to be for tangible, accountable time and actions, with occasional intangibles like gallantry and valor, not difficult-to-account-for innovations like ridicule that can weaken and destroy an enemy more effectively than kinetic, bean-countable force. So, we miss endless opportunities to take out our enemies and put our adversaries in their place.

Take an opportunity in early 2017, when Russia sent its creaky *Admiral Kuznetsov* aircraft carrier on its first-ever deployment from the Baltic to the Syrian coast. NATO maritime countries wrung their hands at the development. What if, instead, they simply made fun of the diesel-belching monstrosity? They could have caused an Internet sensation by dogging the *Kuznetsov* in full public view. What if, rather than marvel at Russia's new naval aviation capabilities, the alliance simply made fun of the mechanically plagued *Kuznetsov*? One wag suggested on Twitter that the British send a Royal Navy salvage tug to escort the *Kuznetsov* as it sputtered its way through the English Channel. At the time, Russian aircraft recklessly buzzed NATO warships and even reportedly penetrated NATO airspace. By making fun of Moscow's flagship on its first Mediterranean combat run, the alliance could have slapped Vladimir Putin down a few notches instead of elevating him toward his craved status as a military peer.

Such a stunt is not "information" in the informative or cyber sense of information operations (IO). It's political theater. It isn't "military information support operations," whatever that is, the awkward terminology having stripped the very essence from its former name, psychological operations (PSYOP). But political theater can be PSYOP. Without a proper name, we deprive ourselves from using what we have in hand for the psychological effect on a target. We would

never think of using a tugboat to weaken the intimidating first-ever presence of a Russian aircraft carrier. Instead, policy makers moan and groan about what to do, while bloggers and Twitter activists virtually blew the *Kuznetsov*'s prestige out of the water.<sup>8</sup>



This graffiti, written on a school wall in Daraa, Syria, February 2011 reportedly by then fourteen-year-old Naief Abazid, says "Your turn, Doctor." The graffiti referred to the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and it implied that Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad was next. In response, the government arrested and tortured Abazid and twenty-two other boys, prompting violent protests across Syria and sparking the war against Assad that continues today. (Photographer unknown)

## Vulnerable Leaders

Let's look at some examples of some vulnerable national leaders around the world, and then at some vulnerable adversaries on the tactical and operational levels. First, we must resist the urge to recoil in twenty-first-century horror at forms of ridicule that many in the modern West feel are misogynistic and bigoted, and consider the appropriateness against the relevant targets in their own societies.

**Russia.** Vladimir Putin has a thin skin. He has a crass sense of humor, but he is vulnerable when the laugh is on him. A group of psychologists and policy strategists has



argued that Putin's carefully cultivated tough-guy image is an overcompensation for his own insecurities about his personal sexual identity.<sup>9</sup> Putin is so thin-skinned that he officially banned a popular meme of him with his face painted in drag. That reaction inadvertently made the meme more popular than ever, becoming an international sensation. NATO militaries have now begun to consider memetic warfare, which employs memes as a form of psychopolitical conflict.<sup>10</sup>

**Egypt.** An indicator that a regime is ripe for a ridicule attack is when that regime passes laws and issues decrees to ban public insults against those holding political power. In the case of Egypt after the February 2011 revolution against Hosni Mubarak, the Islamist successors made such a ban part of the new constitution. The democratically elected regime of Mohammed Morsi, which quickly tried to consolidate power into a theocratic Muslim Brotherhood dictatorship, would tolerate no jokes.

That constitutional ban didn't deter Egyptian funnyman Bassem Youssef, who hosted a popular television program modeled after Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*. Youssef had aimed his merciless wit against Mubarak without reprisal, but the Islamists quickly had enough of him after Morsi became the butt of his jokes. Youssef aired a regular gag of poking fun at Morsi's repeated use of the word "love" in political speeches. To the tune of love songs, Youssef caressed a red pillow bearing an image of Morsi's face. These and other offenses were now a crime that earned international headlines. Youssef "made fun of President Mohammed Morsi on television," the London *Telegraph* reported.<sup>11</sup> International public opinion, led by Stewart himself, arguably spared Youssef from prison. The comedian now directs his wit at the Sisi government that ousted Morsi, with no repercussions.

Humor and ridicule can create a battlespace of its own. In Youssef's case, the Islamists fired back with their own acidic comedy. Abu Islam Ahmed Abdullah, whose show *Hezbollah* is aired on the Ummah Channel (these are real names, not jokes), appeared to express physical attraction to Youssef, calling him more beautiful than famous Egyptian actresses, and urging him to cover his face like a woman.

For comedic jihadists, the humor is one-way. Abu Islam said that Islamic sheikhs who have become involved in politics should be held above criticism, "because God gave them the right to enlighten people on what is right and what is wrong and that they can judge

who will go to heaven and who will go to Hell."<sup>12</sup> The Morsi regime and other Islamists called for restrictions on freedom of expression against Egyptian artists in general with high-profile intimidation campaigns.<sup>13</sup>

**Qatar.** The United States considers the dictatorial regime of Qatar a reliable friend and ally in the war against violent extremism, even though the Qatari regime and its ruling family finance the indoctrination, training, and operations of jihadists worldwide. We have conditioned ourselves to think of Qatar as a partner because Qatar "lets" us use the massive Al Udeid military base we built there, much of it at our expense. Why we consider Qatar a friend and ally when it finances the people who kill us is beyond the scope of this article, but let's look at the thin-skinned intolerance of the regime as an Achilles' heel if times get tough. Qatar can dish it out to the rest of us with its Al Jazeera television and Internet channel, but it can't take it.

The Qatari regime sentenced a poet to life in prison for the crime of "insulting" the emir. The offense: deriding the family dictatorship as a bunch of "sheiks playing on their Playstations."<sup>14</sup> The poet, Muhammad Ibn al-Dheeb al-Ajami, supported the regime-backed Arab Spring uprisings in North Africa, and seemed to call for a democratic revolution in Qatar, though he was careful not to say so specifically. Calling for the overthrow of the ruling al-Thani family is a capital crime in Qatar. In one of his poems, al-Ajami said, in Arabic, "If the sheiks cannot carry out justice, we should change the power and give it to the beautiful woman."<sup>15</sup> Such putdowns don't seem like much to people in democratic societies, and the ridicule isn't particularly profound, but it shows the weakness of jihad-exporting petro regimes and the simplicity of taking advantage of their leaders' emotional and psychological insecurities.<sup>16</sup>

**Syria.** The Syrian uprising prior to Islamic State (IS) attempts to control the country began after the Assad regime arrested schoolchildren for painting antigovernment graffiti in what appeared to have been a well-organized, low-budget provocation.<sup>17</sup> The children were not arrested for vandalism but for political crimes. Faced with no real journalism and a weak Internet presence, Syrian artists became increasingly courageous in skewering the Ba'athist Assad regime with the psychologically lethal weapon of satire.

Dictator Bashar al-Assad is said to be extremely sensitive to ridicule, in part for his own political survival

and in part because of a physical feature—an unusually long neck—that makes him an easy target for cartoonists, puppeteers, and other artists.

“From the beginning the regime has known it’s dangerous to use the image, to use art,” Syrian artist Aram Tahhan told CNN. “The camera is the equal of any weapon from the point of view of the regime.”<sup>18</sup>

Many of the authors needed no Internet. They spread their message through songs, cartoons, and poetry. They moved from their traditional skirting of social boundaries to becoming literal iconoclasts, smashing regime personalities and symbolism head-on. Others used the Internet to reach audiences both in Syria and around the world. A group of ten artists, calling themselves Masasit Mati, created cheap, easy-to-smuggle finger puppets of regime leaders to star in a video lampoon called “Top Goon.”<sup>19</sup> The very simple—and very funny—puppet show ripped down the regime’s fragile cult of personality around Bashar “Beeshu” al-Assad, his henchman, and his glamorous wife. The simple performances also heaped ridicule on the regime for its atrocities.

These short, comical puppet shows were popular in Syria and around the world, and reduced the regime to repressing puppets. The puppets themselves were an ideal format for underground video resistance. Easy and inexpensive to make, small enough to hide or discard in an emergency, and mercilessly funny caricatures of various Syrian regime figures, the puppets carried out a brilliant divisive operation to embolden the average Syrian and marginalize what was left of the regime. The short and entertaining shows are worth watching and promoting as examples of cultural resistance to dictatorship, and as ideas for battling other adversaries, such as the regime in Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. Top Goon has its own YouTube channel in Arabic, and videos with English captions and subtitles.<sup>20</sup> The entire campaign was possible by a small grant from the government of the Netherlands.

Before the emergence of IS, some foreign observers urged that satirical artistic expression be supported as a tool in Syria against the well-organized, disciplined, militant, and generally unhumorous Muslim Brotherhood, which sought to take control of Syria.

“A creative and resolutely non-violent form of opposition to Bashar al-Assad’s regime has taken hold in Syria, as the country’s artists respond to the crisis with newfound boldness and purpose, despite the clear dangers in doing so,” wrote CNN’s Tim Hume.<sup>21</sup>

“Since the uprising, the artists have broken through the wall of fear in Syria and are thinking in another way,” said Syrian journalist Aram Tahhan, one of the curators of an exhibition on Syria’s creative dissent—Culture in Defiance—on display in Amsterdam. “The uprising has changed the artists’ thinking about the task of art in society, how they can do something useful for society,” Tahhan said in the CNN report. “They have rewritten everything.”<sup>22</sup>

“With works spanning from painting to song to cartoons, puppet theater to graffiti to plays, the exhibition traces the way that Syrian artists have used a range of creative techniques within traditional and new media to create political, populist art that both brooks ‘the red line’ of dissent and engages the public in unprecedented ways,” according to CNN.<sup>23</sup>

**North Korea.** The totalitarian family dynasty of North Korea may be more absorbent than it seems. The Internet has made Pyongyang acutely sensitive to satire and ridicule. After the 2004 release of the “South Park” puppetry of *Team America: World Police*, rumors circulated in Washington that North Korean leader Kim Jong-il ordered the assassination of producers and directors Trey Parker and Matt Stone.<sup>24</sup> *Team America’s* vulgar humor did no damage to American power and prestige, even though it satirized what was then the Global War on Terrorism. But, it pierced the choreographed imagery of Kim’s propagandistic persona and turned him into a global object of ridicule.

Kim’s son and successor, Kim Jong-un, is even more thin-skinned. When introduced to the world as the successor to his ailing father, South Koreans derided him as a “fat pig” and a “Teletubby.”<sup>25</sup> Apparently facing substantial opposition from the ruling elite, Kim Jong-un consolidated his domestic political power through a regime of fear, executing longtime loyalists through the most humiliating and bizarre methods and assassinating his own half-brother. A decade after the release of *Team America*, James Franco and Seth Rogen starred in the action-comedy *The Interview*, in which the CIA recruited their talk show characters to assassinate Kim under the pretext of having him on their television program.<sup>26</sup> The North Korean foreign ministry warned that release of *The Interview* would be an “act of war” that would trigger a “merciless” response.<sup>27</sup>

Bloody as he is, the chubby North Korean dictator appears intensely conscious about his hard-to-control



weight. In 2016, the Chinese government censored websites that called the 275-pound tyrant “Kim Fatty the Third.”<sup>28</sup> When U.S. Sen. John McCain referred to Kim as a “crazy fat kid,” the North Korean government called the comment “a provocation tantamount to declaration of war.”<sup>29</sup> In the bizarre world of North Korea’s hermit regime, where personal image and psychological intimidation are the only means of keeping power, playing on Kim’s obsession with his personal appearance could become an important psychological factor in bringing the regime to heel and even hastening its collapse.

**Too sensitive to employ?** Many of the real-world examples above raise policy questions for the United States and its NATO allies. Has Western society become too sensitive to find such mockery acceptable? In an absurd way, it has become politically and socially normal for the United States to kill and maim people around the world, but forbidden and even immoral to make fun of them. One of the problems to consider is, have we become too politically correct to use ridicule adroitly against targets in traditional or fundamentalist societies because of our own social prejudices and fears about offending (as opposed to killing) others?

## Terrorists: The Case for Calling Them Nincompoops

What greater prestige can we confer on a sexually confused jihadist loser than to denounce him and his cause, by name, as existential threats to the United

Russia’s only aircraft carrier, *Admiral Kuznetsov*, 2 August 2012. The mechanically plagued ship is a target ripe for public ridicule, according the author of this article. (Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons)

States of America? Why not just call them what they are? Or better yet, why not refrain from calling them anything at all, but let others deliver the message more effectively, without diminishing U.S. prestige?

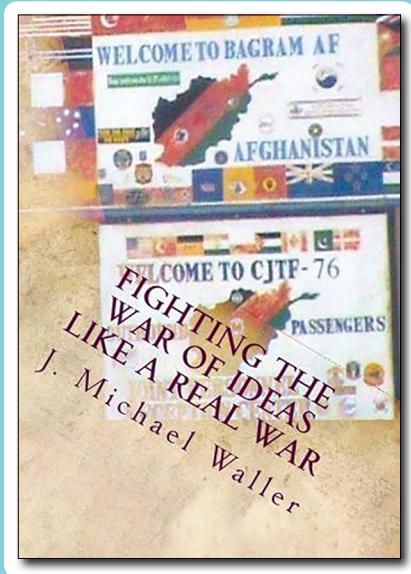
The purpose of waging terror as a strategy or tactic of warfare is to terrorize populations and decision makers. Terror is a psychological phenomenon of electrochemical reactions within the human brain. We inadvertently assist terrorists in accomplishing their missions when we allow them to instill fear and terror in our individual minds and our societies. We confer prestige upon terrorists by building them up as worthy adversaries or existential threats. And, while concepts for tearing down the enemy’s prestige have circulated for more than a decade, there has been little result beyond isolated tactical operations in the field.<sup>30</sup>

What if we just called them out as nincompoops as a matter of national policy? “They blow each other up by mistake. They bungle even simple schemes. They get intimate with cows and donkeys,” Daniel Byman and Christine Fair noted in *The Atlantic*. “Our terrorist enemies trade on the perception that they’re well trained and religiously devout, but in fact, many are fools and perverts who are far less organized and sophisticated than we imagine. Can being more



# Military Review

## WE RECOMMEND



In *Fighting the War of Ideas like a Real War*, J. Michael Waller advances the thesis that employing propaganda and public diplomacy to fight so-called “small wars” is a vital strategic dimension upon which final success actually hinges. He asserts that the war against Islamic terrorists and jihadi insurgents should be seen as first and foremost a war of ideas; however, the author contends this assertion has been frequently overlooked by policy makers, resulting in persistent failure of war efforts. He specifically addresses what he claims are shortfalls in the U.S. strategy for coping with the current operational environment, especially with regard to effectively dealing with Islamic extremism that directly leads to international terrorism. Subsequently, the author discusses the necessity for developing a basic, but uniform and consistent, communications strategy together with a regimen of simple actions that the U.S. government might adopt to wage global ideological conflict on all fronts. He develops recommendations regarding how the United States might mobilize and synchronize its communications resources and policies in a cohesive and comprehensive strategy that aims to simultaneously divide and isolate the enemy while gaining the ideological confidence and support of allies and neutral parties. As part of that strategy, he argues that the U.S. message strategy should be shifted out of the State Department, given to the Department of Defense, and executed primarily through military combatant commands.

realistic about who our foes actually are help us stop the truly dangerous ones?”<sup>31</sup>

How afraid would we be of our enemies, then? How could we better prioritize our targets and how we hunt them down? What can we do better to provoke them into fratricide among themselves? Let’s look at highlights from Byman and Fair’s essay:

- “Even in the aftermath of the botched Times Square bombing ... the perception persists that our enemies are savvy and sophisticated killers.”
- “To be sure, some terrorists are steely and skilled—people like Mohamed Atta ... but the quiet truth is that many of the deluded foot soldiers are foolish and untrained, perhaps even untrainable. Acknowledging this fact could help us tailor our counterterrorism priorities—and publicizing it could help us erode the powerful images of strength and piety that terrorists rely on for recruiting and funding.”
- “Nowhere is the gap between sinister stereotype and ridiculous reality more apparent than in Afghanistan, where it’s fair to say that the Taliban employ the world’s worst suicide bombers: one in two manages to kill only himself. And this success rate hasn’t improved at all in the five years they’ve been using suicide bombers, despite the experience of hundreds of attacks—or attempted attacks.”
- “If our terrorist enemies have been successful at cultivating a false notion of expertise, they’ve done an equally convincing job of casting themselves as pious warriors of God. The Taliban and al-Qaida rely on sympathizers who consider them devoted Muslims fighting immoral Western occupiers. But intelligence picked up by Predator drones and other battlefield cameras challenges that idea—sometimes rather graphically.”
- “One video, captured recently by the thermal-imagery technology housed in a sniper rifle, shows two Talibs in southern Afghanistan engaged in intimate relations with a donkey. Similar images abound, including ground-surveillance footage that records a Talib fighter gratifying himself with a cow.”
- “Tawdry though this predilection for porn may be, it is not necessarily trivial. There is, after all, potential propaganda value in this kind of jihadist behavior. Current U.S. public diplomacy centers on selling America to the Muslim world, but we



should also work to undermine some of the myths built up around our enemies by highlighting their incompetence, their moral failings, and their embarrassing antics. Beyond changing how the Muslim world perceives terrorists, we can help ourselves make smarter counterterrorism choices by being more realistic about the profile and aptitude of would-be attackers.”<sup>32</sup>

Byman and Fair’s approach is exactly opposite the U.S. “narrative” of the past seventeen years. And, it is precisely on target, for it tears apart the pious, self-sacrificial idealism of the enemy—an idealism that the American approach, in many ways, has inadvertently reinforced—and denudes the enemy and their wealthy petrostate sponsors of their moral authority and their sense of invincibility. Furthermore, such exposure plays to social and cultural norms of pride and shame that are far more profound in Muslim states than in Western secular societies.

Some service personnel have collected prurient gun camera and drone videos from Iraq and Afghanistan and posted them online with their own comments. One shows a jihadist who mistakenly sets himself on fire after torching the American flag. Another shows Iraqi insurgents through an infrared scope as they take turns, one holding down a helpless donkey by the neck, while the other pleasures himself in it from behind. Someone created a version of the video set to the Bloodhound Gang’s song “The Bad Touch,” popularly known by its catchy refrain, “Let’s do it like they do on the Discovery Channel.”<sup>33</sup> The posts are generally juvenile, crass, and unsophisticated, and apparently never directed at the necessary audiences but instead to the service member’s friends. However, they give a sampling of what the United States and its allies commonly have at their disposal.

Then there is the Detroit photo of the Nigerian Christmas bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, with his explosive underwear that failed after the detonator was doused by sweat from his scrotum, and the Saudi bomber who failed to murder Saudi Arabia’s counterterrorism chief but blew himself up with a pound of plastic explosives and a cell phone detonator jammed up his bottom.<sup>34</sup> These types of terrorist enemy are not invincible. They are nitwits. They are losers. We should portray them as such. We should make them too radioactive for other radicals to find attractive.

## Afghans Do It Their Way

When such themes are too distasteful or inappropriate for U.S. forces to execute, we may find willing local partners. Locals are almost always better at getting under one another’s skin than foreigners are, and can be the most credible messengers for our purposes.

The Afghan military began heaping public ridicule on the Taliban for global impact around 2011, in ways acceptable to social norms and without diminution of American military prestige. In one instance, on or about 28 March 2011, Afghan troops paraded two captured transvestite Taliban members before international journalists in Mehteriam, east of Kabul. The prisoners apparently had been caught dressed as women. The bearded prisoner stood dressed in a lovely purple traditional dress and green hijab, complete with delicate lace and embroidery. The other, clean-shaven, sported a beautiful tangerine-colored gown with needlepoint floral designs and a locally fashionable jangle belt. Apparently the transvestite Taliban had dressed as women to get close to Americans and kill them. If the U.S. military was involved, there was no public evidence; all credit went to the Afghan military in a story and photo gallery that the Associated Press carried worldwide.<sup>35</sup>

## Islamic State/Daesh

We find little to make fun of regarding IS. However, there are still stories and pieces of evidence that resourceful PSYOPers can use to grind down the invincible image of IS, if not through ridicule, at least through other forms of derision. Following the lead from Arab partners, more nations are referring to IS as “Daesh.” This Arabic acronym translates to Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in English, but the terrorist group finds the use of this moniker offensive. Daesh has threatened to cut out the tongues of people using the word.<sup>36</sup>

## Dangers of Ridicule

Used carelessly or indiscriminately, ridicule can create enemies where there were none and deepen hostilities among the very peoples whom the user seeks to win over. Weaponizing ridicule presents dangers to friendly locals who can do it best. As a testimony to both the vulnerability to ridicule and the courage of individuals who take on murderous opponents with laughter, comedians have paid with their lives.

Syria's Ba'athist regime responded to ridicule with horrific brutality. Agents broke the hands of an opposition political cartoonist, mutilated and murdered a singer, and cut out the vocal chords of a poet who recited verse that offended the government. Instead of backing down, Syrian artists ratcheted up their satirical assault on their tormenters.<sup>37</sup>

Prominent Somali comedian Abdi Jeylani Malaq Marshale, known popularly as Marshale, was one of the fallen. He gleefully skewered Islamist extremists, impersonating al-Shabaab insurgents as part of his comedy routine until jihadists assassinated him in 2012.<sup>38</sup> He knew he was on the terrorists' death list but kept making fun of them anyway. "He had not done anything wrong to anybody, as far as we are concerned, but they shot him in the head and shoulders," a presenter at Kulmiye radio told the BBC. "This is a black day for the entire entertainment industry. He was a leader in Somalia comedy and everybody liked his performance."<sup>39</sup>

The physical dangers to courageous local comedians present opportunities for others to provide them protection—either at home or in exile—as well as studio, broadcasting, and online resources to continue to reach their audiences and targets.

## Conclusion

Satire and ridicule are effective, inexpensive instruments of psychological warfare. They require few resources and little infrastructure. Whether the situation calls for young Venezuelan women taking off their pants to taunt the manhood of riot police, sending a salvage tug to wreck the prestige of a menacing warship, waging memetic warfare with homemade memes, or launching a full-scale campaign to cause terrorists and dictators to self-destruct, ridicule is a powerful



Abdi Jeylani Malaq Marshale was a popular Somali writer, actor, and comedian on radio and television who was known for his parodies of local Islamist militants and the Transitional Federal Government. He had been threatened by the al-Shabaab insurgent group in 2011, forcing him to hide in the northern Somaliland region for several days. On 31 July 2012, Marshale was shot by two unidentified, pistol-wielding men shortly after leaving the Kulmiye radio station and before arriving at his home in the Waberi District of Mogadishu. He later died from head and chest wounds at the Medina Hospital. (Photo courtesy of VOA Somalia)

tool to capture popular imagination and give people courage while tearing down a target.

The U.S. government, though poorly conditioned to use ridicule as a strategic tool, nevertheless has all the capabilities it needs to start experimenting. Under proper leadership, PSYOPers can begin immediately at the battalion level while others explore ridicule more deeply as a strategic weapon. We can then open our eyes to see the weapons at our fingertips all around us that we had never noticed before. ■

---

## Notes

**Epigraph.** Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals, A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971), 128.

1. Thomas More, "Against Tribulation," *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (London: Charles Dolman, 1847), para. 159, accessed 13 July 2017, [https://archive.org/stream/dialogueofcomfor00moreoft/dialogueofcomfor00moreoft\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/dialogueofcomfor00moreoft/dialogueofcomfor00moreoft_djvu.txt).

2. Martin Luther, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. and ed. William Hazlitt (London: H. G. Bohn, 1862), lxxxvi.

3. Douglas J. Feith and Abram N. Shulsky, *Organizing the U.S. Government to Counter Hostile Ideologies* (Washington, DC: Hudson Institute, May 2010), 23.

4. "US Video Shows Fumbling Zarqawi," *The Guardian* website, 5 May 2006, accessed 17 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/may/05/iraq.alqaida>.

5. C. J. Chivers, "Not All See Video Mockery of Zarqawi as Good Strategy," *New York Times* website, 6 May 2006, accessed 17 July 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/06/world/06zarqawi.html>.

6. For more on the KGB's political enforcement mechanisms and functions, see J. Michael Waller, *Secret Empire: The KGB in Russia Today* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).
7. David Crossland, "Did You Hear the One About Hitler?," *Der Spiegel*, 30 August 2006, accessed 22 May 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/new-book-on-nazi-era-humor-did-you-hear-the-one-about-hitler-a-434399.html>; Rudolph Herzog, "War Jokes: Humor in Hitler's Germany," *Huffington Post* online, 20 October 2012, accessed 13 July 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rudolph-herzog/war-jokes-hitler\\_b\\_1798599.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rudolph-herzog/war-jokes-hitler_b_1798599.html).
8. This writer was part of the online effort to ridicule the Kuznetsov on its maiden combat deployment to the Mediterranean.
9. "Follow-up on Putin's Psychosexual Profile," Memorandum to President-Elect Donald Trump, authors' names redacted, 20 December 2016.
10. Jeff Giese, "It's Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare," *Defence Strategic Communications* 1, no. 1 (Riga, Latvia: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Winter 2015): 68–76, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.stratcomcoe.org/academic-journal-defence-strategic-communications-vol1>.
11. "Egyptian Satirist Accused of Undermining Mohammed Morsi," *The Telegraph*, 1 January 2013, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/9774456/Egyptian-satirist-accused-of-undermining-Mohammed-Morsi.html>. Bassem Youssef "made fun of President Mohammed Morsi on television," which Islamists allied with Morsi say "undermines" the Egyptian president and is therefore a crime.
12. Ayman Hafez and Ahram Online, "Video: Salafist TV Host Says Bassem Youssef Should Wear Niqab," *Al Ahram* website, 26 December 2012, accessed 22 May 2017, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/35/61262/Arts--Culture/Stage--Street/VIDEO-Salafist-TV-host-says-Bassem-Youssef-should.aspx>.
13. Rowan El Shimi, "Artists and Islamists Going Head-to-Head," *Al Ahram* website, 25 December 2012, accessed 22 May 2017, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/0/61193/Arts--Culture/0/Artists-and-Islamists-going-headtohead.aspx>.
14. Regan Doherty, "Qatar, Arab Spring Sponsor, Jails Poet for Life," *Reuters*, 29 November 2012, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-poet-court-idUSBRE8AS11320121129>. "This is wrong," Muhammad Ibn al-Dheeb al-Ajami said. "You can't have Al Jazeera in this country and put me in jail for being a poet."
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. Joe Sterling, "Daraa: The Spark that Lit the Syrian Flame," *CNN*, 1 March 2012, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/01/world/meast/syria-crisis-beginnings/>.
18. Tim Hume, "Syrian Artists Fight Assad Regime with Satire," *CNN*, 27 August 2012, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/27/world/meast/syria-uprising-art-defiance/>.
19. "Top Goon Episode 1: Beeshu's Nightmares," YouTube video, posted by "Massasit Matti," 23 November 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5RifYxWr-4&index=2&list=PLFC068715C22D002C>.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Tim Hume, "Syrian Artists Fight Assad Regime."
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. Scott Rudin, Trey Parker, and Matt Stone, *Team America: World Police*, (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 14 October 2004), movie. The author heard of the assassination rumors through conversations with author and journalist Bill Gertz (*The Washington Free Beacon* and *The Washington Times*) and others who helped produce the movie.
25. "South Koreans Ridicule 'Fat' Kim Jong-un," *The Telegraph*, 1 October 2010, accessed 22 May 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/8036407/South-Koreans-ridicule-fat-Kim-Jong-un.html>.
26. Evan Goldberg, Seth Rogan, and James Weaver, *The Interview* (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 11 December 2014), movie.
27. "North Korea Threatens War on US over Kim Jong-un Movie," *BBC*, 26 June 2014, accessed 17 July 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-28014069>.
28. Associated Press, "Kim Jong Un Doesn't Like Being Called 'Kim Fatty the Third,'" *New York Post*, 16 November 2016, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://nypost.com/2016/11/16/kim-jong-un-doesnt-like-being-called-kim-fatty-the-third/>.
29. "McCain, North Korea in War of Words over 'Crazy Fat Kid' Crack," *Fox News*, 30 March 2017, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/03/30/mccain-north-korea-in-war-words-over-crazy-fat-kid-crack.html>.
30. J. Michael Waller, "Ridicule: An Instrument in the War on Terror," *Institute of World Politics Public Diplomacy White Paper No. 7*, Political Warfare blog, 9 February 2006, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://acmeofskill.com/2006/02/ridicule-an-instrument-in-the-war-on-terrorism/>; J. Michael Waller, *Fighting the War of Ideas like a Real War* (Washington, DC: Institute of World Politics Press, 2007), 93–109; J. Michael Waller, "Larry, Curly, and Musab," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 May 2006, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/may/21/opinion/oe-waller21>.
31. Daniel Byman and Christine Fair, "The Case for Calling Them Nitwits," *The Atlantic* (July/August 2010), accessed 13 July 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/07/the-case-for-calling-them-nitwits/308130/>.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Bloodhouse Gang, "The Bad Touch," released 31 May 1999 by Jimmy Franks Recording Company; lyrics available on AZ Lyrics website, accessed 22 May 2017, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bloodhoundgang/thebadtouch.html>.
34. Scott Lewis, "FBI Agents Reveal Underwear Bomber Abdulmutallab Wore Explosive Underwear for Three Weeks," *WXYZ Detroit*, 28 September 2012, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.wxyz.com/news/local-news/investigations/fbi-agents-underwear-bomber-abdulmutallab-wore-underwear-for-3-weeks>; Sudarsan Raghavan, "In Failed Strike on Saudi Prince, A New Fear of Al-Qaeda's Tactics," *Washington Post*, 7 October 2009, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/06/AR2009100603711.html>.
35. Graham Smith, "Meet the Taliban Transvestites: Rebels Are Captured Dressed in Drag," *Daily Mail* online, 30 March 2012, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2122130/Chief-army-officer-Afghanistan-orders-guardian-angels-protect-U-S-troops-insider-attacks.html>.
36. Lizzie Dearden, "ISIS vs Islamic State vs ISIL vs Daesh: What Do the Different Names Mean—and Why Does It Matter?," *The Independent* website, 23 September 2014, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-vs-islamic-state-vs-isil-vs-daesh-what-do-the-different-names-mean-9750629.html>.
37. Tim Hume, "Syrian Artists Fight Assad Regime."
38. "Somali Comedian Who Dared to Mock Islamist Militants Is Gunned Down," *Fox News*, 2 August 2012, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2012/08/02/somali-comedian-who-mocked-islamist-militants-is-killed.html>.
39. "Marshale: Famous Somali Comedian Shot Dead in Mogadishu," *BBC News*, 1 August 2012, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-19075678>.