

Book Review: Buda's Wagon - A Brief History of the Car Bomb

by CNS - Peter Rowe

"Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb" by Mike Davis; Verso; 228 pages; \$23.

Mike Davis doesn't waste any time. If you want to glimpse the many virtues and occasional vices of his grimly fascinating book, just read the first chapter.

AUTO FOCUS - Mike Davis' history of car bombs starts well, but eventually bombs out. CNS Photo. It's fast: A scant three pages outline of Italian anarchist Mario Buda's Sept. 16, 1920 attack on New York City's Wall Street.

It's vivid: Buda hopped off his horse-drawn cart, then detonated its cargo. "Windows exploded in the faces of office workers," Davis writes, "pedestrians were mowed down by metal shrapnel or scythed by shards of glass, building awnings and parked cars caught fire, and a suffocating cloud of smoke and debris enshrouded Wall Street."

It's chock-full o' data: Davis reports that the blast killed 40, wounded more than 200 and littered Wall Street with \$80,000 in greenbacks.

But it's silent on a key question: So what?

Buda, Davis tells us, "managed to bring unprecedented terror to the inner sanctum of American capitalism." So what? Almost 87 years later, Wall Street is robust, which is more than can be said for this Italian anarchist - Buda died in Italy in 1963 - or Italian anarchism.

That's not to say that we don't need a history of car bombs. We do, and author provocateur Davis - a MacArthur Fellow whose previous books have probed the dark sides of San Diego, Los Angeles, Western imperialism, urbanization, agribusiness, *The Man in all his overbearing guises* - seems ideally suited to the task. In fact, "Buda" deserves high marks for its global perspective and restless energy. After opening in 1920 Manhattan, this slim volume dashes from 1948 Palestine to 2006 Baghdad, with stops in Sicily and Sri Lanka, Belfast and Beirut, and many points between.

"In the new millennium, 85 years after that first massacre on Wall Street, car bombs have become almost as generically global as iPods and HIV/AIDS, cratering the streets of cities from Bogota to Mumbai and frightening tourists away from many of the world's most famous islands and resorts," David notes. "Car bombers are currently or recently active in at least 23 countries, while another 35 nations have suffered at least one fatal car-bombing during the last quarter-century."

But history must be more than a recitation of facts. What, beyond torn flesh and charred buildings, do these outrages accomplish? Davis doesn't spend much time answering this question.

If you wonder why car bombs are so popular, though, Davis is your guide, charting the weapon's increasing destructiveness. In 1983, the U.S. embassy in Beirut was destroyed by a truck carrying the equivalent of 1 ton of TNT. By 1996, a car bomb five times as powerful destroyed a U.S. military housing compound near the Saudi city of Dhahran, actually lifting the building into the air.

That's plenty of bang for astonishingly few bucks. A simple car bomb, capable of killing 50 passersby, can be built from "\$500 of fertilizer and bootlegged electronics," Davis writes.

Potent and cheap, car bombs are employed by cash-strapped revolutionaries and reactionaries, by the IRA, the Mafia and Timothy McVeigh. They've also been used by government agencies - including, Davis notes, U.S. agencies. In the 1980s, the CIA funneled money to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, which taught the latest car bomb techniques to anti-Soviet Islamists. In a sobering example of blowback, these lessons now are being used against Americans in Iraq.

As Davis demonstrates, this weapon has spread from nation to nation, cause to cause. But he pushes his argument too far.

"The result has been the irreversible globalization of car bombing know-how," he writes. "Like an implacable virus, once vehicle bombs have entered the DNA of a host society and its contradictions, their use tends to reproduce indefinitely."

Well, no. Davis himself notes that car bombing is virtually unknown in East Asia. Moreover, he ignores examples that contradict his thesis of an endless downward spiral of detonations and destruction.

Northern Ireland, for instance, eventually abandoned this tactic, even as its internal struggles continued.

And how effective is the car bomb, anyway? Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, was first car bombed in 1987. Combat between the army and the separatist Tamil Tigers continued until 2002. Davis doesn't cite any evidence to show that the ensuing and oft-violated cease-fire was forged by car bombs.

Davis describes car bombs as a "poor man's air force," but overlooks that term's implications. Historians still debate the value of air power. Did, say, the Allies' bombing of Germany and Japan hasten the end of World War II? Or did it harden the public's resistance and strengthen the hands of hard-line politicians and generals?

Do car bombs destroy the will of civilians? Do they provoke, as Davis argues about Iraq, "an endless cycle of sectarian warfare"? Or are these loud, bloody distractions having little influence on a conflict's final outcome?

"Buda" argues on behalf of the car bomb's primacy. Davis points to the success of Hezbollah's suicide car and truck bombings in 1983 Lebanon. They "prevailed over the combined firepower of the fighter-bombers and battleships of the U.S. Sixth Fleet and forced the Reagan administration to undertake a humiliating retreat from Lebanon. Other suicide car bombings played a crucial role in dislodging the supposedly all-powerful Israeli Defense Forces from the Shiite-majority region of southern Lebanon."

Worse, Davis sees Buda's offspring as an unstoppable "hot rod of the apocalypse." The book ends with a pessimistic discussion of potential tactics to stop this plague, from high-tech "fantasies" to a dreary vision of lands without civil liberties.

Again, though, Davis' own text undermines his hopelessness. Stating that "no country is immune to the contagion," the author cites the summer 2006 arrest of Canadians who had been buying tons of ammonium-nitrate for "a doomsday truck bomb."

Of course, they were arrested. It's been more than a decade since a fertilizer bomb shattered the Oklahoma City federal building. Stockpile tons of chemicals, and you can expect a visit from well-armed government agents.

People learn and adapt. That's why weapons change, but so what? That's also why civilizations survive.

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