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Great Marianas Turkey Shoot

 Posted by Mike under [Military History](#), [Military Science](#)

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Attrition does not just kill men. It destroys skills. Military organizations can regenerate losses in terms of manpower but they have far greater difficulty in regenerating skill.

Managing and using skills poses a series of tradeoffs that have long-term effects. In World War II, the Japanese believed the best way to use aces was to kill American pilots. Americans believed the best way to use aces was to train more American pilots. The result was the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot.

To get straight to the point, attrition has an impact in the current war. Bluntly, moron terrorists replace elite terrorists.

At the start of WWII, Japanese pilots outclassed the Americans in the air battles over Port Moresby near New Guinea. The Japanese were veteran pilots from China, and the Zero was a superior fighter than the American planes, like the old P-40E Warhawk. The Americans eventually produced excellent fighters to match the zero while increasing their pilot skill level.

By 1944 the situation was reversed. The average American pilot was vastly more skilled than the average Japanese pilot. At the Battle of the Philippines, the Japanese attempted to launch an air attack against the US Fleet. This became known as the "[Great Marianas Turkey Shoot](#)." The American pilots kill ratio was about 25-1.

This is a story that has been told a hundred times, so I'll do it once more. The US military managed its pilot skill better than its enemies. American Aces were promoted to squadron commanders and eventually pulled out of combat to train new pilots. They transferred their combat and aviation knowledge to green pilots and raised the average skill level.

Other states, like Japan and German, put their top pilots directly in combat until they died. As a result, there were a handful of extraordinary top-aces and a large number of green low-skilled pilots. [Germany](#) produced the highest scoring aces in history – ie Erich Hartmann with over 352 kills. American aces barely made 25 kills before their commanders yanked them out of combat.

At the end of the war, the Japanese gave up trying to contest the skies and switched to Kamikaze suicide attacks. This signaled the end of Japanese air dominance.

Skill management and attrition remains important for the current wars. The American military is developing better technology and doctrines as we go. Our knowledge base is rapidly increasing. For instance, American intelligence agencies are [learning Arabic](#). Language skills play a major role in disrupting terrorist attacks and implementing good counterinsurgency plans. The lack of skill early on showed.

Al-Qaeda and the Taliban face severe attrition of skill. They lost training bases in Afghanistan and many of their best commanders and operatives. Simply replacing losses with novices

regenerates raw numbers, not skill.

The decline of the Taliban is a case in point. The new Taliban commanders are unskilled in logistics and waging asymmetrical warfare. This year they could not even launch a serious offensive.

Suicide bombers are currently on the decline world-wide after being used as a major terrorist tactic since the 1980s. In Palestine, Afghanistan, Algeria, Sri Lanka, and Iraq, terrorists are having difficulty attracting recruits. It appears that each attack is growing less effective as well. The Taliban's difficulties in Afghanistan are most obvious, but the problems are similar everywhere. They have to attract highly educated, middle class volunteers willing to die for a political cause.

Efraim Benmelech and Claude Berrebi studied the economics of suicide bombing operations. They discovered that **education raises the productivity**.
From the abstract:

“We argue that human capital is an important factor in the production of terrorism, and that if terrorists behave rationally we should observe that more able suicide bombers are assigned to more important targets... Our empirical analysis suggests that older and more educated suicide bombers are being assigned by their terror organization to more important targets. We find that more educated and older suicide bombers are less likely to fail in their mission, and are more likely to cause increased casualties when they attack.”

There is some good data here. Every extra year of age reduces the chances of being caught. Because of the high costs of failure, only mentally stable and reliable volunteers are selected.

College educated are the best bombers. Given the costs of the bombs, terrorist organizations are less likely to accept uneducated or poor volunteers unless they are desperate for recruits. The mean education of a Palestinian suicide bomber is higher than the nation-wide mean. It turns out, educated middle-class recruits commit terrorist attacks more so than uneducated religious fundamentalists.

We should reevaluate the cost of suicide bombing. Traditionally, we only look at the cost of the bomb and the operation. We should include the costs of educating and training a man to produce just one volunteer – this means suicide bombing is much more expensive than we realized.

It seems like the Suicide Bomber strategy works out the same way as the Kamikazes: a waste of human capital.



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