

TERRORISM AND COUNTERTERRORISM SINCE 9/11¹

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ABSTRACT: It seems increasingly likely that the reaction to the terrorism attacks of September 11, 2001, has been massively disproportionate to the real threat al-Qaeda has ever actually presented either as an international menace or as an inspiration or model to homegrown amateurs. In result, we have been living a decade of delusion as, driven by bottom-up fear, trillions of dollars have been expended and tens of thousands of lives have been snuffed out in a frantic, ill-conceived effort to react to an event that, however tragic and dramatic in the first instance, should have been seen, at least in the fullness of time, to be of only limited significance. Included is an assessment of all the 50 cases that have come to light of Islamist extremist terrorism since 9/11, whether based in the United States or abroad, in which the United States itself has been, or apparently has been, targeted. Overall, terrorists are not really all that capable a bunch, terrorism tends to be a counterproductive exercise, and 9/11 is increasingly standing out as an aberration, not a harbinger. A warning: the paper includes reference to the Wizard of Oz and to The Emperor's New Clothes and may not be suitable for all audiences.

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In November 1963, a little deluded man with grandiose visions of his own importance, managed, heavily because of luck, to murder the president of the United States. Stunned, many have maintained that such a monumental event could not have been accomplished by such a trivial man—the proportions seemed all out of whack, out of balance—and elaborate efforts have been made over the decades since to uncover a bigger conspiracy behind the deed.

In September 2001, a tiny group of deluded men—members of a fringe group of a fringe group with grandiose visions of its own importance—managed, heavily because of luck, to pull off a clever and carefully-planned terrorist act that became by far the most destructive in history. As with the assassination case, there has been a general reluctance to maintain that such a monumental event could have been carried out by a fundamentally trivial group, and there has consequently been a great tendency to inflate the group's importance and effectiveness. At the extreme, the remnants of the tiny group have even been held to present a threat to the very survival of the United States, one that is “existential.”²

Ten years after 9/11, the most costly and determined manhunt in history finally culminated in Pakistan when a high-tech hit squad killed Osama bin Laden, one of the chief authors of 9/11 and one of history's most storied and cartooned demons. Taken away with bin Laden's bullet-shattered body, which was soon to be ceremoniously dumped at sea, were written documents and masses of information stored on five computers, 10 hard drives, and 100 or more thumb drives, DVDs, and CD-ROMs. This, it was promised, was a “treasure trove” of information about al-Qaeda—“the mother lode,” said one official eagerly—and it might contain plans for pending attacks.³ Poring through the material with great dispatch, however, a task force soon discovered that the members of the group were primarily occupied in dodging drone missile attacks, complaining about the lack of funds, and watching a lot of pornography.⁴

Except for the pornography, it proved to be a Wizard of Oz moment. But, although the mysterious and much quested-after bin Laden has been exposed mostly as a thing of smoke and mirrors and is now as dead as the wicked witch, the terrorism/counterterrorism saga trudges determinedly, doggedly, and anti-climactically onward: people profess fear of another attack, funds continue to be expended irresponsibly, and killing continues, all in the name of the fabled tragedy of 9/11.

In the wake of 9/11, recalls Rudy Guiliani, who was mayor of New York in September of 2001, “Anybody, any one of these security experts, including myself, would have told you on September 11, 2001, we're looking at dozens and dozens and multiyears of attacks like this.” And Jane Mayer observes that “the only certainty shared by virtually the entire American intelligence community” in the months

² Thus, Obama administration adviser Bruce Riedel proclaimed the al-Qaeda threat to the country to be “existential” in 2009. Lehrer NewsHour, PBS, October 16, 2009. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff had pushed the discussion to a special level in the previous year when he called the threat from terrorism “a significant existential” one. Shane Harris and Stuart Taylor Jr., “Homeland Security Chief Looks Back, and Forward,” *GovernmentExecutive.com*, March 17, 2008. For the “survival” concern, see, in particular, Michael Scheuer, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 2004), pp. 160, 177, 226, 241, 242, 250, 252, 263. On this issue, see also Glenn L. Carle, *The Interrogator: An Education* (New York: Nation Books, 2011), p. 293; John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, “Hardly Existential: Thinking Rationally About Terrorism,” *foreignaffairs.com*, April 2, 2010.

³ Alison Gendar and Helen Kennedy, “U.S. commandos find 'mother lode' of material on Al Qaeda inside Osama Bin Laden's compound,” *New York Daily News*, May 4, 2011.

⁴ Greg Miller, “Bin Laden Documents Reveal Strain, Struggle in al-Qaida,” *Washington Post*, July 1, 2011. Scott Shane, “Pornography Is Found in Bin Laden Compound Files, U.S. Officials Say,” *New York Times*, May 13, 2011. See also David Ignatius, “The bin Laden plot to kill President Obama,” *Washington Post*, March 16, 2012.

after 9/11 “was that a second wave of even more devastating terrorist attacks on America was imminent.”⁵ Under the circumstances of the time, this sort of alarm is understandable, but it scarcely excuses the experts from completely dismissing an alternative hypothesis—that the attack was an aberration.⁶ However, over time the alarmist perspective has become substantially internalized, perpetuated. In 2006, for example, 79 percent of experts polled declared it certain or likely that an “a terrorist attack on the scale of 9/11” would occur in the United States by the end of 2011.⁷

The result, suggests Glenn Carle, a 23-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency where he was deputy national intelligence officer for transnational threats, is that during the 9/11 decade we have been “victims of delusion,” a quality defined as “a persistent false belief in the face of strong contradictory evidence.”⁸ That condition shows every sign of continuing as trillions of dollars have been expended and tens of thousands of lives have been snuffed out in distant wars in a frantic, ill-conceived effort to react to an event that, however tragic and dramatic in the first instance, should have been seen, at least in the fullness of time, to be of only limited significance.

This paper is a set of ruminations on our ten years, and counting, of delusion.

Delusions about the Terrorist “Adversary”

As it happens, 9/11 has proven to be an aberration, not a harbinger, and this is largely because people like Giuliani and others, including a whole raft of “security experts,” have massively exaggerated the capacities of what they have often called “the universal adversary.”

The domestic adversary

To assess the danger presented by domestic terrorists, we have at hand a systematic examination of the few dozen cases that have come to light of Islamist extremist terrorism since 9/11, whether based in the United States or abroad, in which the United States itself has been, or apparently has been, targeted.⁹ These cases, of course, comprise (or generate) the chief terrorism fear for Americans. Table 1 supplies a capsule summary of each case, and the case numbers given throughout this paper refer to this table and to the web book from which it derives.

None of these plots were (intentionally) comedic, of course. But when an examination of the array of cases is conducted, there is often uncanny resonance with “The Four Lions,” a British fiction film that appeared finally in 2010 after considerable difficulty obtaining funding. It is a dark comedy—if ultimately a desperately sad one—that looks at a set of Muslim would-be terrorists in the United Kingdom.

For example, when the terrorists in “The Four Lions” accidentally kill a sheep, they justify it as an attack on the food infrastructure. But when their counterparts in the actual JIS plot in Los Angeles (Case 15) robbed gas stations in order to obtain funds to buy a gun, they envisioned the venture as a sort of mini-jihad against big oil as a political symbol of U.S. oppression. That they accidentally left a cell phone behind in their last robbery, allowing them to be found, and that their target list included a military base that didn’t exist, is also the stuff of comedy.

⁵ Giuliani: CNN, July 22, 2005. Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p. 3

⁶ On this issue, see John Mueller, “Harbinger or Aberration?” *National Interest*, Fall 2002, pp. 45-50.

⁷ John Mueller, “New Year Brings Good News on Terrorism: Experts Wrong Again,” The Skeptics blog, nationalinterest.org, January 3, 2012.

⁸ Carle, *The Interrogator*, pp. 269, 293, 298-99

⁹ John Mueller (ed.), *Terrorism Since 9/11: The American Cases* (Columbus, Ohio: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2012). This free web book can be accessed through polisci.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/since.html

And the extravagant plans of one of the fictional British terrorists to trigger a Muslim uprising with a few explosions (they rise up “and it all kicks off,” he says excitedly) are surely no more ludicrously fanciful than those of the real-life one who believed that setting off a grenade in a trash can in Rockford, Illinois, would be the “first domino,” triggering a set of further attacks from Muslims that would ultimately lead to the fall of the government (Case 29). Or than those earnestly hatched by a man in jail as he orchestrated a plot by three men on the outside, one of them a confirmed schizophrenic, to lead a revolution to establish a caliphate by shooting up a few army recruitment centers (Case 15).

And there is the preposterous anticipation of the real-life plotter that, if dressed “like a Jew,” he planted a small bomb in the Herald Square subway station, it would destroy a major office and shopping building over it even while killing few (except for the homeless sleeping in the station) if it was set off in the morning (Case 12). Or even more so, there is the wild fantasy of the leader of the Sears Tower plot (Case 19) that toppling the structure into Lake Michigan (for which he had absolutely no capacity whatever) would create a tsunami allowing him to liberate prisoners from a Chicago jail who he would then form into a vanguard for the establishment of a new Moorish nation.

We also have the adventure of the extremist who 1) tried to kill a Rabbi with a Molotov cocktail only to go to the wrong house and, regardless, have the explosive bounce off the house’s window and fail to explode; 2) tried to shoot up a military recruitment center only to find that the office was closed; and 3) after actually firing at another recruiting center, made a wrong turn in his getaway car and was captured by police within 12 minutes (Case 26).

Or there is the clever plotter who thought that if his men carried pornographic magazines and condoms in their luggage they would be less suspicious (Case 20).

Or the several plotters who divulged their violent plans (or fantasies) and tried to pick up co-conspirators in FBI-haunted internet chat rooms or on Facebook (Cases 16, 30, 39, 40, 48).

And there is a resonance with the common finding in the cases that few terrorists could scarcely be said to have figured out a credible goal to be serviced by their plot. Beyond expressing outrage, the actions very often seemed to have no purpose—that is, goal—whatever. In a few cases, the conspirators muttered something about how their act might somehow be a catalyst or trigger that would unleash an Islamic revolution or “wake the Muslims up” (Cases 29 and 44), but the process by which this would come about characteristically went unexamined. This phenomenon is neatly reflected in “The Four Lions” by the dumbfounded response of one of the terrorists to a police query that he detail his demands: “I don’t have any,” he says in utter bewilderment.

In 2009, the Department of Homeland Security issued a lengthy report on protecting the homeland. Key to such a consideration, it would seem, would be a careful assessment of the character, capacities, and desires of potential terrorists within that homeland.

The report does have a section dealing with what it calls “The Nature of the Terrorist Adversary,” but it spends only two paragraphs on the concern, and both are decidedly one-dimensional and fully preoccupied with the dire end of the spectrum of the terrorist threat. It devotes a total of two sentences to an assessment of the adversary’s nature:

The number and high profile of international and domestic terrorist attacks and disrupted plots during the last two decades underscore the determination and persistence of terrorist organizations. Terrorists have proven to be relentless, patient, opportunistic, and flexible, learning

from experience and modifying tactics and targets to exploit perceived vulnerabilities and avoid observed strengths.¹⁰

Some of this may describe the qualities of some terrorists somewhere, including at least a few of those involved in the 9/11 attacks. However, it scarcely describes the vast majority of those picked up on terrorism charges in the United States. The inability of the DHS to consider this even parenthetically in its fleeting discussion is really quite amazing—and perhaps delusional.

In sharp contrast, the authors of the case studies, with remarkably few exceptions, describe their subjects with words like incompetent, ineffective, unintelligent, idiotic, ignorant, inadequate, unorganized, misguided, muddled, amateurish, dopey, unrealistic, moronic, irrational, and foolish.¹¹ And in just about all of the many cases where an FBI operative was plying his talent (nearly half of the total), the most appropriate descriptor would be “gullible.”

In ten years no terrorist in the United States has been able successfully to detonate even a primitive bomb and, except for the four explosions on the London transportation system in 2005, neither as any in the United Kingdom. In result, the only method by which Islamist terrorists have managed to kill anyone at all in the United States since 9/11 has been through the firing of guns—inflicting a total of perhaps 16 deaths over the decade (Cases 4, 26, 32).¹²

This incapacity is impressive because small-scale terrorists in the past in the United States have been able to set off quite a few bombs. Noting that the scale of the September 11, 2001, attacks has “tended to obliterate America’s memory of pre-9/11 terrorism,” Brian Jenkins reminds us (and we clearly do need reminding) that in the 1970s there were 60 to 70 terrorist incidents, mostly bombings, on U.S. soil every year.¹³

In all, as Shikha Dalmia has put it, would-be terrorists need to be “radicalized enough to die for their cause; Westernized enough to move around without raising red flags; ingenious enough to exploit loopholes in the security apparatus; meticulous enough to attend to the myriad logistical details that could torpedo the operation; self-sufficient enough to make all the preparations without enlisting outsiders who might give them away; disciplined enough to maintain complete secrecy; and—above all—psychologically tough enough to keep functioning at a high level without cracking in the face of their own impending death.”¹⁴ The case studies certainly do not abound with people with such characteristics.

The situation seems scarcely different in Europe and other Western locations. Michael Kenney has interviewed dozens of officials and intelligence agents and analyzed court documents. He finds that, in sharp contrast with the boilerplate characterizations favored by the Department of Homeland Security and with the imperatives listed by Dalmia, Islamist militants there are operationally unsophisticated, short on know-how, prone to make mistakes, poor at planning, and limited in their capacity to learn.¹⁵ Another

¹⁰ Department of Homeland Security, *National Infrastructure Protection Plan: Partnering to enhance protection and resiliency* (Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2009), p. 11.

¹¹ See also Bruce Schneier, “Portrait of the Modern Terrorist as an Idiot,” schneier.com, June 14, 2007; Daniel Byman and Christine Fair, “The Case for Calling Them Nitwits,” *Atlantic*, July/August 2010.

¹² See also Risa A. Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism in the United States: How Serious is the Threat?” *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Fall 2011), p. 39.

¹³ Brian Michael Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadist Terrorist Radicalization in the United States since September 11, 2001* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), pp. 8-9.

¹⁴ Shikha Dalmia, “What Islamist Terrorist Threat?” reason.com, February 15, 2011.

¹⁵ Michael Kenney, “‘Dumb’ Yet Deadly: Local Knowledge and Poor Tradecraft Among Islamist Militants in Britain and Spain,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 33, No. 10 (October 2010), pp. 911-932. See also Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism.”

study documents the difficulties of network coordination that continually threaten operational unity, trust, cohesion, and the ability to act collectively.¹⁶

In addition, although some of the plotters in America did harbor visions of toppling large buildings, destroying airports, setting off dirty bombs, or bringing down the Brooklyn Bridge (Cases 2, 12, 19, 23, 30, 42), these were all wild fantasies, far beyond their capacities however much they may have been encouraged in some instances by FBI operatives. Indeed, in many cases, target-selection is effectively a random process, not one worked out with guile and careful planning. Often, it seems, targets are selected almost capriciously and simply for their convenience. Thus, a would-be bomber targeted a mall in Rockford, Illinois because it was nearby (Case 21). Terrorist plotters in Los Angeles in 2005 drew up a list of targets that were all within a 20 mile radius of their shared apartment, some of which didn't exist (Case 15). Equally impressive is a neo-Nazi terrorist in Norway who, on his way to bomb a synagogue, took a tram going the wrong way and ended up dynamiting a mosque instead.¹⁷

Although the post-9/11 terrorism efforts in the United States often demonstrate the would-be perpetrators to be pathetic, even comical or absurd, the comedy remains a dark one of course. Left to their own devices at least a few of the often inept and almost always self-deluded people under consideration might have been able to do some serious, if decidedly less than cosmic, damage.¹⁸

The foreign adversary

As noted, the 9/11 terrorist attacks were by far the most destructive in history—no terrorist act before or since has killed more than a few hundred people—but the tragic event seems increasing to stand as an aberration, not as a harbinger. Accordingly, it may be about time to consider that, as Russell Seitz put it in 2004, “9/11 could join the Trojan Horse and Pearl Harbor among stratagems so uniquely surprising that their very success precludes their repetition,” and accordingly that “al-Qaeda’s best shot may have been exactly that.”¹⁹

Indeed, it is not all that clear that al-Qaeda central, now holed up in Pakistan, has done much of anything since 9/11 except issue videos filled with unfulfilled, self-infatuated, and essentially delusional threats—an array of these can be found in Table 2. The tiny group of perhaps 100 or so does appear to have served as something of an inspiration to some Muslim extremists, may have done some training, has contributed a bit to the Taliban’s far larger insurgency in Afghanistan, and may have participated in a few terrorist acts in Pakistan.²⁰ In his examination of the major terrorist plots against the West since 9/11, Mitchell Silber finds only two (Cases 1 and 20) that could be said to be under the “command and control” of al-Qaeda central (as opposed to ones suggested, endorsed, or inspired by the organization), and there are questions about how full its control was even in these two instances.²¹

The Wizard of Oz conclusion of the 10-year quest for bin Laden suggests that Glenn Carle got it right in 2008 when he warned: “We must not take fright at the specter our leaders have exaggerated. In

¹⁶ Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Calvert Jones, “Assessing the Dangers of Illicit Networks: Why al-Qaida May Be Less Dangerous Than Many Think,” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Fall 2008), pp. 7-44.

¹⁷ John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (London and New York: Routledge), p. 44.

¹⁸ John J. Miller, “FBI Response to Rolling Stone Magazine Article,” *Rolling Stone*, February 22, 2008.

¹⁹ Russell Seitz, “Weaker Than We Think,” *American Conservative*, December 6, 2004. See also Mueller, “Harbinger or Aberration?”

²⁰ See Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); David Ignatius, “The Fading Jihadists,” *Washington Post*, February 28, 2008.

²¹ Mitchell Silber, *The Al Qaeda Factor: Plots Against the West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

fact, we must see jihadists for the small, lethal, disjointed and miserable opponents that they are.” Al-Qaeda “has only a handful of individuals capable of planning, organizing and leading a terrorist organization,” and although they have threatened attacks, “its capabilities are far inferior to its desires.”²² Impressively, unlike the Wizard, bin Laden appears to have remained himself in full delusion even to his brutal and abrupt end. He continued to cling to the belief that another attack like 9/11 might force the United States out of the Middle East, remaining unfazed that the first such effort had proven to be spectacularly counterproductive in this respect, triggering a deadly invasion of his base in Afghanistan and an equally deadly decade-long pursuit of his operatives.²³

Other terrorist groups around the world, affiliated or aligned or “connected” to al-Qaeda may be able to do intermittent mischief, but nothing that is very sustained or focused. In all, extremist Islamist terrorism—whether associated with al-Qaeda or not—has claimed some 200-400 lives yearly worldwide outside of war zones, about the same as bathtub drownings in the United States.²⁴

One of the affiliated groups, the one in Yemen, has actually tried to do direct (or at least semi-direct) damage to the United States. It was apparently responsible for the underwear bomber’s inept effort to blow up a US-bound airliner in 2009 (Case 33). It is not clear how this effort was much of an advance on the shoe bomb attempt of 2001 (Case 1), and it failed for the same central reason that that one did: the chosen explosive, PETN, is fairly stable and difficult to detonate, particularly because the most reliable detonators, like blasting caps, are metallic and cannot be used because they are likely to be picked up even by screening methods in place before 9/11.²⁵ Consequently, more complicated methods of detonation need to be employed, and these are likely to strain the capacities of an amateur bomber especially when he is surrounded by people who are likely to notice strange behavior and who have an overwhelmingly strong incentive in the post-9/11, or post-shoe bomb, era to do something about it. A test by the BBC of this same explosion on a decommissioned airplane of the same type suggests the plane would have been able to land safely even if the bomb had gone off.²⁶

It is generally assumed that the bomb was designed by someone in Yemen who is continually called a “master bomb maker.” A true master, one might think, would be one whose product not only works when it is supposed to, but accomplishes and is capable of accomplishing its destructive goal. Neither condition, it seems likely, held in this case. The maimed bomber claims that many other bombers are being groomed in Yemen to attack aircraft bound for the United States.²⁷ None have yet shown up,

²² Glenn L. Carle, “Overstating Our Fears,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 2008.

²³ Michael Hirsh, “Bin Laden Journal Reveals Future Planning, Possible Targets,” *National Journal*, May 11, 2011. On this belief in 2001, see Gerges, *Rise and Fall*, pp. 90-91. For other evidence of bin Laden’s delusional ramblings, see Ignatius, “The bin Laden plot,” and David Ignatius, “A lion in winter,” *Washington Post*, March 18, 2012.

²⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Challenge of Biological Weapons* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2005), pp. 29–31, tallies “major attacks by Islamists” outside of Iraq: 830 fatalities for April 2002 through July 2005. Brian Michael Jenkins, *Unconquerable Nation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006), pp. 179–184, tallies “major terrorist attacks worldwide” by “jihadist extremists” outside Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Algeria, Russia, and Kashmir: 1,129 fatalities for October 2001 through April 2006. “Jihadi Attack Kill Statistics,” IntelCenter, August 17, 2007, p. 11 (www.intelcenter.com), tallies “most significant attacks executed by core al-Qaeda, regional arms and affiliate groups excluding operations in insurgency theaters”: 1,632 fatalities for January 2002 through July 2007. See also John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money: Balancing the Risks, Costs, and Benefits of Homeland Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 2.

²⁵ Bryan Walsh, “Why It’s Not Easy to Detonate a Bomb on Board,” *Time*, December 28, 2009.

²⁶ “Boeing 747 survives simulation bomb blast,” BBC, March 4, 2010.

²⁷ Anna Schecter and Brian Ross, “Obama Orders Air Marshal Surge by Feb. 1: ‘Race Against Time,’”

but if the claim is correct, it would seem the vaunted “master bomb maker” has his work cut out for him.

The Yemen group also carried out an aborted effort to set off parcel bombs contained within laser printers on cargo planes bound for the United States in October 2010 (Case 36). It promised to continue to strike such blows, and explained that one of the packages contained a copy of Charles Dickens’ novel *Great Expectations* because the organization was “very optimistic” about the operation’s success.²⁸ Although this may give evidence that even some terrorists may have something that resembles a sense of humor, their optimism, and thus far the promise, have gone unfulfilled.

In addition to its penchant for delusion, al-Qaeda has, as Patrick Porter notes, a “talent at self-destruction.”²⁹ Overall, with 9/11 and subsequent activity, bin Laden and gang seem mainly to have succeeded in uniting the world, including its huge Muslim portion, against their violent global jihad.³⁰ Its activities have also turned many radical Islamists against them, including some of the most prominent and respected.³¹

No matter how much they might disagree on other issues (most notably on America’s war on Iraq), there is a compelling incentive for states—including Arab and Muslim ones—to cooperate to deal with any international terrorist problem emanating from groups and individuals connected to, or sympathetic with, al-Qaeda. Although these multilateral efforts, particularly by such Muslim states as Sudan, Syria, Libya, Pakistan, and even Iran, may not have received sufficient publicity, these countries have had a vital interest because they felt directly threatened by the militant network, and their diligent and aggressive efforts have led to important breakthroughs against al-Qaeda.³²

This post-9/11 willingness of governments around the world to take on terrorists has been much reinforced and amplified as they reacted to subsequent, if sporadic, terrorist activity within their own countries. Thus a terrorist bombing in Bali in 2002 galvanized the Indonesian government into action and into extensive arrests and convictions. When terrorists attacked Saudis in Saudi Arabia in 2003, that country seems, very much for self-interested reasons, to have become considerably more serious about dealing with internal terrorism, including a clampdown on radical clerics and preachers. The main result of al-Qaeda-linked suicide terrorism in Jordan in 2005 was to outrage Jordanians and other Arabs against the perpetrators. Massive protests were held, and polls found that those expressing a lot of confidence in Osama bin Laden to “do the right thing” plunged from 25 percent to less than 1 percent. In polls conducted in 35 predominantly Muslim countries, more than 90 percent condemned bin Laden’s terrorism on religious grounds.³³

abcnews.com, January 6, 2010.

²⁸ “Cargo planes bomb plot,” Wikipedia, accessed May 3, 2011.

²⁹ Patrick Porter, “Long Wars and Long Telegrams: Containing Al-Qaeda,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (March 2009), p. 300.

³⁰ Joby Warrick, “U.S. Cites Big Gains against Al-Qaeda,” *Washington Post*, May 30, 2008. See also Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chap. 5.

³¹ Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, “The Unraveling: The Jihadist Revolt against bin Laden,” *New Republic*, June 11, 2008. Lawrence Wright, “The Rebellion Within,” *New Yorker*, June 2, 2008. Fawaz Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³² Gerges, *Far Enemy*, p. 232, and, for a tally of policing activity, pp. 318–319; see also Paul R. Pillar, *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), pp. xxviii–xxix; Marc Lynch, “Al-Qaeda’s Media Strategies,” *National Interest*, Spring 2006, pp. 54–55; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, p. 149; Juan Cole, *Engaging the Muslim World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 163; Max Abrahms, “Does Terrorism Really Work? Evolution in the Conventional Wisdom Since 9/11,” *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 22, No. 6 (2011), pp. 583–594.

³³ Indonesia: Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,

In addition, the mindless brutalities of al-Qaeda types in Iraq—staging beheadings at mosques, bombing playgrounds, taking over hospitals, executing ordinary citizens, performing forced marriages—eventually turned the Iraqis against them, including many of those who had previously been fighting the American occupation either on their own or in connection with the group.³⁴ In fact, they seem to have managed to alienate the *entire* population: data from polls in Iraq in 2007 indicate that 97 percent of those surveyed opposed efforts to recruit foreigners to fight in Iraq, 98 percent opposed the militants' efforts to gain control of territory, and 100 percent considered attacks against Iraqi civilians "unacceptable."³⁵ In Iraq as in other places, "al-Qaeda is its own worst enemy," notes Robert Grenier, a former top CIA counterterrorism official. "Where they have succeeded initially, they very quickly discredit themselves."³⁶ Grenier's improbable company in this observation is Osama bin Laden who was so concerned about al-Qaeda's alienation of most Muslims that he argued that the organization should get a new name.³⁷

Al-Qaeda has also had great difficulty recruiting American agents. In the early days, even before 9/11, there was some effort specifically to send recruiters to the United States to sign people up. The most important, and perhaps the only, instance of this is the Lackawanna experience (Case 5) when a smooth-talking operative returned to the upstate New York town in early 2000 and tried to convert young Yemeni-American men to join the cause. In the summer of 2001, seven agreed to go to an al-Qaeda training camp with him and several more were apparently planning to go later. However, appalled at what they found there, six of the seven returned home and helped to waylay the plans of the next contingent. The total gain to al-Qaeda from this enterprise, then, was one man—who is apparently now in a Yemeni jail as his captors squabble over the reward money they will receive if they turn him over to the United States.

The CIA apparently has never been able to infiltrate an operative into the ranks of al-Qaeda, a rather impressive non-achievement, given the amount of effort the agency presumably has devoted to it. But maybe it isn't necessary. In two instances (Cases 24 and 28), Americans acting on their own, duly "radicalized" and genuinely dedicated to the Muslim extremist cause, have been able to do what the CIA has apparently been unable to do: join up with, and be accepted by, the organization. From al-Qaeda's perspective, however, the experience has been disastrous. Both were eventually captured and once in captivity they almost immediately abandoned their former comrades and talked a blue streak—just as if they had been CIA plants from the beginning. "Radicalization," one would think, should be made of firmer stuff.

2004), pp. 53, 142, 173. Saudi Arabia: Gerges, *Far Enemy*, p. 249; Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, pp. 53, 144. Jordan polls: Pew Global Attitudes Project, "The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other," June 22, 2006, pewglobal.org; see also Lynch, "Al-Qaeda's," pp. 54–55. Religious grounds: Fawaz Gerges, "Word on the Street," *Democracyjournal.org*, Summer 2008, p. 75. See also Pillar, *Terrorism*, p. xxiv; Fareed Zakaria, "Post-9/11, We're Safer Than We Think," *Washington Post*, September 13, 2010.

³⁴ Bob Woodward, "Why Did Violence Plummet? It Wasn't Just the Surge," *Washington Post*, September 8, 2008; Frederic Wehrey, "The Iraq War: Strategic Overreach by America—and also by al Qaeda," in Brian Michael Jenkins and John Paul Godges, *The Long Shadow of 9/11* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011), pp. 47–55.

³⁵ Andrew Mack, "Dying to Lose: Explaining the Decline in Global Terrorism," in *Human Security Brief 2007* (Vancouver, BC: Human Security Report Project, School for International Studies, Simon Fraser University, 2008), pp. 15–17.

³⁶ Warrick, "U.S. Cites Big Gains." See also Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," *Mother Jones*, November–December, 2007; Brian Michael Jenkins, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2008), p. 191; Gerges, *Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*.

³⁷ Ignatius, "The bin Laden plot." See also Ignatius, "Lion in winter."

The undisclosed adversary

The discussion thus far has dealt with an assessment of terrorism as disclosed on the public record. In general, it seems, any threat presented by Islamist extremist terrorism, whether domestic or foreign, is quite limited. However, there have been claims from intelligence people from time to time that they have thwarted many additional terrorist plots but can't disclose information about them. In working on an extensive report about how American intelligence efforts (and budgets) were massively increased after 9/11, the *Washington Post's* Dana Priest says she frequently came up against this claim. When she heard it, she "asked them to share with us anything they could, plots that were foiled that we could put in the paper because we didn't have many examples. We said give us things, just in generalities." But, "we didn't receive anything back."³⁸

That perhaps there isn't all that much out there is further suggested by the fact that when a terrorist plot has been rolled up, policing agencies have generally been anything but tight-lipped about their accomplishment. Indeed, they have routinely been quite quick to trumpet and parade their deed—and often to exaggerate the direness of the threat presented by the detained.³⁹ Relatedly, the huge dump of classified information released by WikiLeaks in 2010 contained no really significant new disclosures—just about all the information was already essentially public, though in many cases less textured and nuanced.⁴⁰

Arrests are made, of course, only where prosecutors think they have enough evidence to obtain a conviction. In addition, however, authorities may have come across any number of loud-mouthed aspirational terrorists and, lacking enough evidence to convict on terrorism charges, have found lesser ones, such as immigration violations, to put the aspiring away.⁴¹ But these untrumpeted and unparaded plots probably are even less likely than the disclosed ones to lead to notable violence.

Also, if undisclosed plotters have been so able and so determined to commit violence and if there are so many of them, why have they committed so little of it in the period before they were waylaid? Or why were there so few plots in the months and years following 9/11 before "enhanced" security measures could be effectively deployed? Given the massive policing efforts put in place after 9/11, any sensible terrorist will want to act as quickly as possible before he can be detected. (The same conclusion holds for the argument that there are a lot more out there that we haven't found yet.)

It may also be useful to point out that we have heard this story before. For decades, officials clearly exaggerated the degree to which domestic Communists—"masters of deceit" and the "enemies from within"—presented a threat to the republic. Thus FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover insisted in a 1958 book that the American Communist Party was working "day and night to further the communist plot in America" with "deadly seriousness," that a "Bolshevik transmission" was in progress that was "virtually invisible to the non-communist eye, unhampered by time, distance, and legality," that it was "creating communist puppets throughout the country," and that it had for "its objective the ultimate seizure of

³⁸ NPR, "Talk of the Nation," July 19, 2010, transcript.

³⁹ "Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 senior government officials have announced dozens of terrorism cases that on close examination seemed to diminish as legitimate threats." David Johnston and Scott Shane, "Terror Case Is Called One of the Most Serious in Years," *New York Times*, September 25, 2009.

⁴⁰ Editor Bill Keller of the *New York Times*, conversation with John Mueller, Berkeley, California, April 9, 2011.

⁴¹ One FBI estimate is that only one in four terrorism cases leads to terrorism charges. Simpler criminal charges are used to remove, disrupt, or dismantle the rest. Garrett M. Graff, *The Threat Matrix: The FBI at War in the Age of Terror* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011), p. 557.

power in America.”⁴² Thus impelled, his agency spent a prodigious amount of time and public money pursuing the harmless and the nearly so.⁴³

Finally, even the most crafty of terrorist conspirators fail to carry out the vast majority of their aspirations and therefore any policing effort that takes them out is far more likely to waylay impotent scheming than consummated violence. Thus, in a book, *Mastermind*, about a central 9/11 plotter, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, Richard Minter lists his subject’s admitted (or claimed) involvement with terrorist efforts in addition to 9/11. These include the 1993 World Trade Center and 2002 Bali bombings; plots on Heathrow airport, Big Ben, the Empire State Building, the Panama Canal, and buildings in Los Angeles, Seattle, and Chicago; plans to assassinate Bill Clinton, the Pope, and several prime ministers of Pakistan; and two efforts to infiltrate agents into the United States. Whatever the validity of these claims, many of which may be inflated, all of the ventures, except for the Bali bombings, failed or never even began to approach fruition. And the role of the “mastermind” in the Bali case, according to Minter, was simply to supply some money.⁴⁴

The Delusions of Counterterrorism

It seems increasingly likely that the reaction to the terrorism attacks of September 11, 2001, was massively disproportionate to the real threat al-Qaeda has ever actually presented either as an international menace or as an inspiration or model to homegrown amateurs. But rare indeed have been such observations as those from the CIA’s Carle noted earlier.

Applying standard techniques and using the extensive data sets about terrorism that have been generated over the last decades, it can be determined that the chances an American will perish at the hands of a terrorist at present rates is 1 in 3.5 million per year—well within the range of what risk analysts hold to be “acceptable risk.”⁴⁵ Yet, despite the importance of responsibly communicating risk and despite the costs of irresponsible fearmongering, just about the only official who has ever openly put the threat presented by terrorism in some sort of context is New York’s Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who in 2007 pointed out that people should “get a life” and that they have a greater chance of being hit by lightning than of being struck by terrorism—an observation that may be a bit off the mark but is roughly sound.⁴⁶ It might be noted that, despite this outburst, Bloomberg still managed to be re-elected two years

⁴² J. Edgar Hoover, “*Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It*,” (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), p. 81. See also Joseph McCarthy, “Enemies from Within,” speech at Wheeling, West Virginia, February 9, 1950. On the parallels between domestic terrorism and domestic Communism, see also Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*, pp. 185-188.

⁴³ On this issue, see, in particular, Alexander Stephan, “*Communazis*”: *FBI Surveillance of German Émigré Writers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ Richard Minter, *Mastermind: The Many Faces of the 9/11 Architect, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), pp. 2, 157.

⁴⁵ Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*, chap. 2.

⁴⁶ Sewell Chan, “Buzz over Mayor’s ‘Get a Life’ Remark,” *nytimes.com*, June 6, 2007. It is possible that any effective outrage against Bloomberg’s glancing brush with reality was undercut by the fact that his city expends huge resources chasing after terrorists while routinely engaging in some of the most pointless security theater on the planet. For example, New York often extracts police officers from their duties to have them idle around at a sampling of the city’s thousands of subway entrances, blandly watching as millions of people wearing backpacks or carrying parcels descend into the system throughout the city—perhaps the ultimate Maginot exercise. And, as discussed below, it is also fond of trumpeting the fact that thousands of people each year call the city’s police counterterrorism hotline while managing to neglect to mention that not one of these calls has yet led to a terrorism arrest. It is also possible that Bloomberg’s pronouncement was motivated by an effort to undercut potential harm to tourism to New York than to responsibly communicate threat. On this issue, see also John Mueller, *Overblown*

later.

Indeed, if the demise of bin Laden recalls the end of the Wizard of Oz, much of the public and official reaction to 9/11 calls to mind Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes." The con artists in this fable of delusion convince his court that they can weave stuffs of the most beautiful colors and elaborate patterns from the delicate silk and purest gold thread they are given (and promptly squirrel away). These stuffs, they further convincingly explain, have the wonderful property that they will remain invisible to anyone who is a) unusually stupid, or b) unfit for profitable office. The Emperor finds this all quite appealing because not only will it furnish him with impressive new clothes, but it will allow him to "discover which men in my empire are unfit for their posts"—or in today's terms, "have lost their effectiveness." Since all in the court, including the Emperor, know quite well that they are not unusually stupid, they have great professional incentive to insist that the stuffs on the loom are excellent, very beautiful, absolutely magnificent: "What a splendid design! What glorious colors!"

None of our guardians in the post-9/11 decade seems to be stupid. What, then, can we conclude when, echoing Andersen's courtiers, they forcefully insist that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence"?

Consider, for example, the alarming and profoundly imaginary estimates of intelligence agencies in the year after 9/11 that the number of trained al-Qaeda operatives in the United States was between 2,000 and 5,000.⁴⁷ Cells, they confidently told rapt and uncritical reporters, were "embedded in most U.S. cities with sizable Islamic communities," usually in the "run-down sections," and were "up and active" since electronic intercepts had found some to be "talking to each other."⁴⁸ Another account relayed the view of "experts" that Osama bin Laden was ready to unleash an "11,000 strong terrorist army" operating in more than 60 countries "controlled by a Mr. Big who is based in Europe," but that intelligence had "no idea where thousands of these men are."⁴⁹

Similar imagination was on display on February 11, 2003 when FBI Director Robert Mueller assured a Senate committee that, although his agency had yet actually to identify even one of the al-Qaeda cells the US, "I remain very concerned about what we are not seeing," a sentence that is rendered in bold lettering in his prepared text. Moreover, he claimed that such unidentified entities presented "the greatest threat," had "developed a support infrastructure" in the country, and had achieved both the "ability" and the "intent" to inflict "significant casualties in the US with little warning."⁵⁰

Over the course of the 9/11 decade such essentially delusionary thinking was internalized and institutionalized. In Carle's view, the CIA was "spinning in self-referential circles" in which "our premises were flawed, our facts used to fit our premises, our premises determined, and our fears justified our operational actions, in a self-contained process that arrived at a conclusion dramatically at odds with

(New York: Free Press, 2006), pp. 151-152.

⁴⁷ Bill Gertz, "5,000 in U.S. Suspected of Ties to al Qaeda; Groups Nationwide Under Surveillance," *Washington Times*, July 11, 2002. Richard Sale, "US al Qaida Cells Attacked," UPI, October 31, 2002.

⁴⁸ Sale, "US al Qaida Cells."

⁴⁹ Andy Lines, "War on Terror: Bin Laden Army: 11,000 Terror Agents Set to Strike," London *Mirror*, September 24, 2001.

⁵⁰ Testimony by Director Mueller can be found through www.fbi.gov/congress/congress.htm. In 2005, an FBI report found that, despite years of well-funded sleuthing, the Bureau had yet to uncover a single true al-Qaeda sleeper cell in the United States. The report was secret, but managed to be leaked. Brian Ross, "Secret FBI Report Questions Al Qaeda Capabilities: No 'True' Al Qaeda Sleeper Agents Have Been Found in U.S.," ABC News, March 9, 2005. The FBI, however, was reported to have observed that "just because there's no concrete evidence of sleeper cells now, doesn't mean they don't exist." "FBI Can't Find Sleeper Cells," Fox News, March 10, 2005.

the facts.” The process “projected evil actions where there was, more often, muddled indirect and unavoidable complicity, or not much at all.” These “delusional ratiocinations,” he further observes, “were all sincerely, ardently held to have constituted a rigorous, rational process to identify terrorist threats” in which “the avalanche of reporting confirms its validity by its quantity,” in which there is a tendency to “reject incongruous or contradictory facts as erroneous, because they do not conform to accepted reality,” and in which potential dissenters are not-so-subtly reminded of career dangers: “Say what you want at meetings. It’s your decision. But you are doing yourself no favors.”⁵¹

The process can also be glimpsed in an episode in New York. In a 2008 book Michael Sheehan, the city’s former deputy director for counterterrorism, recalls a 2003 conversation in which he told his bosses, Raymond Kelly and David Cohen, “that I thought al-Qaeda was simply not very good Under the withering heat of the post-9/11 environment, they were simply not getting it done. I said what nobody else was saying: we underestimated al-Qaeda’s capabilities before 9/11 and we overestimated them after.” Journalist Christopher Dickey describes what happened next:

He could see that they were taken aback. It was not so much that they disagreed. . . . They all understood only too well the way the public and politicians would react if headlines started to read “Commissioner disses Qaeda.” Support for counterterrorism would start to crumble And then, if the bad guys got lucky . . . Kelly, Cohen, and Sheehan agreed it would be better if Sheehan kept his estimate to himself for a while.⁵²

And so, it seems, Sheehan kept his views rather quiet for several years, and all three officials continued to pretend in public that terrorists were everywhere. Thus, delusion was perpetuated, support for counterterrorism did not “crumble,” the newspapers were kept from revealing an unconventional truth all three men agreed upon, and, had there actually been an attack in New York in the meantime, various bureaucratic backsides would have been strategically covered.

But these instances only begin to sketch of the counterterrorism delusions of the 9/11 decade. There are many others.

Misidentification of terrorist motivations

Judging from the American cases, the common notion that terrorists target the United States because they oppose its values is utterly delusional. Almost none of the terrorist characters in the cases had any problem with American society—indeed, a number of them show a deep and quite nuanced appreciation for American girls. In contrast, they do display plenty of outrage at foreign policy in the Middle East.

There were a few cases in which it could probably be said there was no notable motivation at all (Cases 5, 10, 19). However, in almost all the other cases, the overwhelming driving force was simmering, and more commonly boiling, outrage at American foreign policy—the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular and also the country’s support for Israel in the Palestinian conflict. Religion was a key part of the consideration for most. However, it was not that they had a burning urge to spread Sharia law or to establish caliphates—indeed, few would likely even be able to spell either word. Rather it was the desire to protect their religion against what was commonly seen to be a concentrated war upon it in the Middle

⁵¹ Carle, *The Interrogator*, pp. 249, 274, 275, 288. See also Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 23-24, 49, 51-52, 191-192.

⁵² Michael A. Sheehan, *Crush the Cell: How to Defeat Terrorism without Terrorizing Ourselves* (New York: Crown, 2008), p. 14. Christopher Dickey, *Securing the City: Inside American’s Best Counterterror Force—the NYPD* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), pp. 118–119.

East by the United States government and military.⁵³ None seems to remember (or perhaps in many cases ever knew) that the United States strongly favored the Muslim side in Bosnia and in Kosovo in the 1990s—as well as, of course, in the Afghan war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

That they display remarkably little hostility to American culture or society or to its values or to democracy is particularly impressive because many (though certainly not all) were misfits, suffered from personal identity crises, were friendless, came from broken homes, were often desperate for money, had difficulty holding jobs, were on drugs, were petty criminals, experienced various forms of discrimination, and were, to use a word that pops up in quite a few of the case studies and fits even more of them, “losers.” Indeed, in all the cases, there may be only one person who was substantially motivated by hostility toward, or at least discomfort with, American society (Case 31). However, he, too, was deeply concerned about the country’s Middle East policy and, insofar as he disliked America, it was because he was uncomfortable being surrounded by unbelievers and was thinking of moving to an Islamic country.

As a result, military installations within the country were fairly common targets even though they are not very good ones if one is seeking to do maximum damage and inflict maximum shock. The easiest military targets to find are recruitment centers and it is at these, that 14 of the 16 deaths caused by Islamist extremists since 9/11 have been inflicted—and only one of those killed was a civilian (Cases 26, 32).⁵⁴

In addition to those would-be terrorists focusing on targets within the country as arrayed in Table 1, there are also quite a few who have sought to go abroad to fight against American interests there—to join the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan or to defend Somalia against Ethiopian invaders. Hostility to American foreign is obviously the primarily motivator for those.

It is common in the literature to assess the process by which potential terrorists become “radicalized.” But this may not be a particularly good way to look at the phenomenon.⁵⁵ The concept tends to imply that there is an ideological motivation to the violence, but what chiefly sets these guys off is not anything particularly theoretical but rather intense outrage at American and Israeli actions in the Middle East and a burning desire to seek revenge, to get back, to defend, and/or to make a violent statement expressing their hostility to what they see as a war on Islam.

WMD: massive extrapolation

Concerns about terrorists with atomic bombs or other “weapons of mass destruction” escalated greatly after the September 11 attacks. However, to observe that terrorists were able, mostly by thuggish means, to crash airplanes into buildings, and then to conclude from that observation that they might

⁵³ See also Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 76-79; Stephen M. Walt, “Why they hate us (II): How many Muslims has the U.S. killed in the past 30 years?” *foreignpolicy.com*, November 30, 2009; Peter Bergen, “Five myths about Osama bin Laden,” *washingtonpost.com*, May 6, 2011; James Fallows, *Blind Into Baghdad: America’s War in Iraq* (New York: Vintage, 2006), p. 142; John J. Mearsheimer, “Imperial by Design,” *National Interest*, January/February 2011, 24. Although the tiny number of people plotting terrorism in the United States display passionate hostility to American foreign policy, there is, of course, a far greater number of people who share much of the same hostility, but are in no sense inspired to commit terrorism to express their deeply-held views. On this issue, see also Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism,” p. 14. Marc Sageman has provided an arresting comparison with Jewish youths who felt called upon to go abroad to fight for besieged Israel in wars in 1948, 1967, and 1973. *Leaderless Jihad*, pp. 74-75.

⁵⁴ See also Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism,” p. 38.

⁵⁵ See also Mark Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2010, pp. 479-494; Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism,” pp. 12-14.

therefore be able to construct an atomic bomb is an extrapolation of delusionary proportions. But it happened. Brian Jenkins has run an internet search to discover how often variants of the term *al-Qaeda* appeared within ten words of *nuclear*. There were only seven hits in 1999 and eleven in 2000, but this soared to 1,742 in 2001 and to 2,931 in 2002.⁵⁶ By 2008, Defense Secretary Robert Gates was assuring a Congressional committee that what keeps every senior government leader awake at night is “the thought of a terrorist ending up with a weapon of mass destruction, especially nuclear.”⁵⁷

Few of the sleepless, it seems, found much solace in the fact that an al-Qaeda computer seized in Afghanistan in 2001 indicated that the group's budget for research on weapons of mass destruction (almost all of it focused on primitive chemical weapons work) was some \$2,000 to \$4,000.⁵⁸ In the wake of the killing of Osama bin Laden, officials now had many more al-Qaeda computers, and it appears that nothing in their content suggests that the miserable little group had the time or inclination, let alone the money, to set up and staff a uranium-seizing operation, as well as a fancy, super-high-tech facility to fabricate a bomb. It is a process that requires trusting corrupted foreign collaborators and other criminals, obtaining and transporting highly guarded material, setting up a machine shop staffed with top scientists and technicians, and rolling the heavy, cumbersome, and untested finished product into position to be detonated by a skilled crew, all the while attracting no attention from outsiders.⁵⁹

If the miscreants in the American cases were unable to create and set off even the most simple forms of conventional bombs, it stands to reason that none of them were very close to creating, or having anything to do with, nuclear, biological, radiological, or chemical weapons. In fact, with perhaps one exception, none ever even seems to have dreamed of the prospect. And the exception is Jose Padilla (Case 2) who apparently mused at one point about creating a dirty bomb—a device that would disperse radiation—or even possibly an atomic one. His idea about isotope separation was to put uranium into a pail and then to make himself into a human centrifuge by swinging the pail around in great arcs.⁶⁰

Even if the weapons were made abroad and then imported, their detonation would require that there be people in-country with the capacity to receive and handle the complicated weapons and then to set them off. Thus far, the talent pool appears to be, to put mildly, very thin.

WMD: definitional delusion

“Weapons of mass destruction” had once been taken to be simply a dramatic synonym for nuclear weapons or meant to include nuclear weapons as well as weapons yet to be developed that might have similar destructive capacity. The phrase came increasingly into vogue after the Cold War, at which point it was expanded to embrace chemical, biological, and radiological weapons even though those weapons for the most part are simply incapable of committing destruction that could reasonably be considered to be “massive,” particularly in comparison with nuclear ones.⁶¹

In 1992 the phrase was explicitly rendered into American law to include those weapons.

⁵⁶ Jenkins, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* pp. 250-251.

⁵⁷ Bob Graham, *World at Risk: The Report of the Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism* (New York: Vintage, 2008), p. 43.

⁵⁸ Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida's Quest for Weapons of Mass Destruction: The History behind the Hype* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008), pp. 35-36.

⁵⁹ For the extended argument that the likelihood of atomic terrorism is vanishingly small, see John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), chaps. 12-15. See also John Mueller, “The Truth About al Qaeda: Bin Laden’s Files Revealed the Terrorists in Dramatic Decline,” *foreignaffairs.com*, August 2, 2011; Jenkins, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?*

⁶⁰ Graff, *Threat Matrix*, p. 366.

⁶¹ On this issue, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, pp. 11-13.

However, in the process of codification the definition was extended far further to include any bomb, grenade, or mine; any rocket having a propellant charge of more than four ounces; any missile having an explosive or incendiary charge of more than one-quarter ounce; and any projectile-spewing weapon that has a barrel with a bore more than a half inch in diameter.⁶²

It turns out then, that Francis Scott Key was exultantly, if innocently, witnessing a WMD attack in 1814, that the “shot heard round the world” by revolutionary war muskets was the firing of a WMD, and that Iraq was chock full of WMD when the U.S. invaded—and still is, just like virtually every other country in the world.

In the post-9/11 decade, the delusional—or at least preposterous—expanded designation has been routinely applied in the United States. Many of those arrested for terrorism have been charged with planning to use “weapons of mass destruction” even though they were working, at most, on small explosives or contemplating planting a hand grenade in a trash bin.

The creation of terrorists

As noted, in the early days and years after 9/11, it was supposed that thousands upon thousands of al-Qaeda operatives were on the loose and flourishing in the United States. To help with the quest, the public was asked to send in tips, and, by the end of the 9/11 decade, the New York Police Department had received tens of thousands of these on its trademarked “If You See Something, Say Something” hotline.⁶³ None, however, had led to a terrorism arrest. This experience could possibly be taken to suggest that the tipster campaign has been something of a failure. Or perhaps it might suggest that there isn’t all that much out there to be found.

By definition, however, delusion cannot be undermined by repeated inadequacy. Although the government receives over 5000 “threats” a day, the admonition from FBI Director Robert Mueller remains, “No counterterrorism lead goes uncovered,” and, under that strict order, huge amounts of money are being expending on what some in the FBI call “ghost chasing.”⁶⁴ Meanwhile, New York continues to spend \$2 million to \$3 million each year (much of it coming from grants from the federal government) to promote and publicize its hotline.⁶⁵ And, in one of her early public announcements after becoming Secretary of Homeland Security in 2009, Janet Napolitano indicated that she wanted to inspire even more participation by the public in the quest to ferret out terrorists.⁶⁶

Another approach to the problem of the near-dearth of domestic terrorists is to create them—to make, in a sense, the invisible visible—and the police seem increasingly to be getting better at this enterprise.⁶⁷ Indeed, in the last years the number of police operatives embedded in terrorist plots in the

⁶² On the history of “WMD” and for data on the use of the term, see W. Seth Carus, *Defining “Weapons of Mass Destruction,”* Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction Occasional Paper 42006, 2006. See also John Mueller and Karl Mueller, “The Rockets’ Red Glare: Just what are ‘weapons of mass destruction, anyway?’” www.foreignpolicy.com, July 7, 2009; David C. Rapoport, “Terrorists and Weapons of the Apocalypse,” *National Security Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 49–67; Peter Bergen, “WMD terrorism fears are overblown,” cnn.com, December 5, 2008; Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, pp. 11-15.

⁶³ William Neuman, “In Response to M.T.A.’s ‘Say Something’ Ads, a Glimpse of Modern Fears,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2008.

⁶⁴ Graff, *Threat Matrix*, 398-399, 579.

⁶⁵ Manny Fernandez, “A Phrase for Safety After 9/11 Goes Global,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2010. See also John Mueller, “Terror Tipsters,” The Skeptics blog, nationalinterest.org, January 24, 2012.

⁶⁶ Spencer S. Hsu, “Security Chief Urges ‘Collective Fight’ Against Terrorism,” *Washington Post*, July 29, 2009.

⁶⁷ See also Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism,” pp. 18-20; Schneier, “Portrait of the Modern Terrorist;”

United States have considerably outnumbered actual would-be terrorists. At least in some cases, there seems to be a condition of dueling delusions: a Muslim hothead has delusions about changing the world by blowing something up, and the authorities have delusions that he might actually be able to overcome his patent inadequacies to do so.

The process involves linking the hothead up with a police operative who stokes delusions and eventually supplies the hothead with bogus weapons. When the hothead takes possession of weaponry he would never have been able to fabricate on his own, or, more commonly of late, plants it near his target and then presses a phony detonator button, he is arrested (see, in particular, Cases 21, 22, 25, 29, 30, 38, 40, 42, 44, 46, 49, 50).

The self-interested efforts of the police operatives clearly have had a seductive effect in some cases. Most of these men were trained and experienced in such matters, and often the process seems to be one in which an able con man is set among the gullible—not unlike the situation in the Emperor’s court.⁶⁸ Interestingly, the operative often seems to have been considerably older than the informed-upon, and there is frequently a pattern in which the informant becomes something of a father-like figure to young, insecure men, many of whom grew up mostly without one.⁶⁹ Operatives and informants have been crucial to the development of 23 of the 50 plots—those identified in Table 1 as case type 3.

Left to their own devices, some of the gulled would-be terrorists—often hate-filled, but generally pretty lost and incompetent—might eventually have done something violent on their own. But it seems likely that most (as in Cases 3, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23, 25, 29, 30, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 46, 48, 49, 50) would never have gotten around to much of anything without the creative, elaborate, and costly sting efforts of the police. And, given their natural incapacities, even those who did attempt to carry out some violence on their own were likely to fail in their efforts or to commit destruction of quite limited scope.

With the vagueness of such central concerns as “material support for terrorism” and with the huge sentences that can be imposed for plotting, or envisioning, terrorism, the police are in a good position to exact confessions and guilty pleas.⁷⁰ Also on their side are judges who, in fear of terrorism, are anxious to set deterring examples. Moreover, as Jenkins puts it, “juries comprised of frightened citizens do not always reach unbiased verdicts.”⁷¹

Calculating the Costs of the Counterterrorism Delusion

Delusion is a quality that is difficult to quantify. But there may be a way to get something of a handle on it—or at least on its cost consequences.

It has been argued that terrorism is a limited problem with limited consequences and that the reaction to it has been excessive, even delusional. But unlike the Emperor’s new clothes, terrorism does exist, and therefore some degree of effort to deal with the terrorism hazard is certainly appropriate—and is decidedly *not* delusional. The issue then is a quantitative one: at what point does a reaction to a threat

Trevor Aaronson, “The Informants,” *Mother Jones*, October 2011, pp. 30-43.

⁶⁸ On the easing of restrictions on domestic intelligence-gathering that occurred in late 2008 and that made such operations easier and more frequent, see Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism,” p. 17; Charlie Savage, “F.B.I. Casts Wide New Under Relaxed Rules for Terror Inquiries, Data Show,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2011.

⁶⁹ On this process in different context, see also Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, p. 79.

⁷⁰ Laws concerning “weapons of mass destruction” have heavy penalties. Since they can be applied even in cases in which defendants have imagined the use of hand grenades, they have greatly added to the prosecution’s plea bargaining arsenal in many cases.

⁷¹ Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors*, p. 10.

that is real become excessive, delusional?

At present rates, as noted earlier, an American's chance of being killed by terrorism is one in 3.5 million per year. This calculation is based on history (but one that includes 9/11 in the count), and things could, of course, become worse in the future. However, the analysis here suggests that terrorists are not really all that capable a bunch, that terrorism tends to be a counterproductive exercise, and that 9/11 is increasing standing out as an aberration, not a harbinger. And this perspective has essentially become the official line as we have been told that the likelihood of a large-scale organized attack like 9/11 has gone down and that most to fear are terrorist attacks that are small-scale and disorganized.⁷² Small attacks can inflict painful losses, of course, but these are going to be quite limited and are unlikely, even if they do occur, to change the fatality risk for the American population very much.

The key question, then, is: "are the gains in security worth the funds expended?" Or as this absolutely central issue was posed shortly after 9/11 by risk analyst Howard Kunreuther, "How much should we be willing to pay for a small reduction in probabilities that are already extremely low?"⁷³ That such questions are not asked, and that standard considerations of acceptable risk are never broached, suggests denial at best, delusion at worst.

Since 9/11, expenditures in the United States on domestic homeland security alone—that is, excluding overseas expenditures like those on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—have expanded by a total of over \$1 trillion.⁷⁴ These expenditures may have helped make us safer. However, in line with Kunreuther's query, the question is: How much terrorist destruction must these expenditures have waylaid in order to justify the outlays?

According to a careful assessment by a committee of the National Academy of Sciences in a 2010 report, these massive funds have been expended without any serious analysis like the ones routinely carried out by DHS for natural hazards such as floods and hurricanes. The committee could not find "any DHS risk analysis capabilities and methods" adequate for supporting the decisions made, noted that "little effective attention" was paid to issues that are "fundamental," was (with one exception) never shown "any document" that could explain "exactly how the risk analyses are conducted," and looked over reports in which it was not clear "what problem is being addressed."⁷⁵

Similar conclusions emerge from a study focusing on intelligence spending by Dana Priest and William Arkin. They calculate that it has increased by 250 percent since 9/11 "without anyone in government seriously trying to figure out where the overlaps and waste were"—an apt description of a delusory process. After receiving a "steady diet of vague but terrifying information from national security officials," they continue, American taxpayers

have shelled out hundreds billions of dollars to turn the machine of government over to defeating terrorism without ever really questioning what they were getting for their money. And even if they did want an answer to that question, they would not be given one, both because those same

⁷² Richard A. Serrano, "U.S. faces 'heightened' threat level," *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 2011.

⁷³ Howard Kunreuther, "Risk Analysis and Risk Management in an Uncertain World," *Risk Analysis*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (August 2002), pp. 662-663. See also John Mueller, "Some Reflections on What, if Anything, 'Are We Safer?' Might Mean," *cato-unbound.com*, September 11, 2006; Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism," p. 43.

⁷⁴ Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*, pp. 1-3.

⁷⁵ National Research Council of the National Academies, *Review of the Department of Homeland Security's Approach to Risk Analysis* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2010). The report also notes that DHS risk assessment for natural hazards is "near state of the art," is "based on extensive data," has been "validated empirically," and appears "well suited to near-term decision needs." See also Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*, Introduction.

officials have decided it would gravely harm national security to share such classified information—and because the officials themselves don't actually know.⁷⁶

In all this, then, no one ever answers the perennial query, “Are we safer?” with the essential consideration: “At present rates, your yearly chance of being killed by a terrorist is one in 3.5 million; how much safer do you want to be and how much money do you want to spend to achieve that level of safety?”

The extent of the over-spending on domestic homeland security can be assessed, and the cost consequences of the counterterrorism delusion can be measured, by applying standard cost-benefit and risk-analytic procedures of the sort called for by NAS, procedures that have been codified in international conventions.⁷⁷

Under this approach, the *benefit of a security measure* tallies the gains—the improvement in the security situation—generated by a security measure. It is a function of three elements:

$$(\text{probability of a successful attack}) \times (\text{losses sustained in the successful attack}) \times (\text{reduction in risk generated by the security measure})$$

The *probability of a successful attack* is the likelihood a successful terrorist attack will take place if the security measure were not in place. The *losses sustained in the successful attack* include the fatalities and other damage—both direct and indirect—that will accrue as a result of a successful terrorist attack, taking into account the value and vulnerability of people and infrastructure, as well as any psychological and political effects. The *reduction in risk generated by the security measure* is the degree to which the security measure foils, deters, disrupts, or protects against a terrorist attack.

This *benefit*, a multiplicative composite of three considerations, is then compared to the *costs* of providing the risk-reducing security necessary to attain the benefit. If the benefit of a security measure outweighs its costs, it is deemed to be cost-effective.

The interaction of these variables can perhaps be seen in an example. Suppose there is a dangerous curve on a road that results in an accident once every five years, as cars occasionally overshoot the curve and plummet down a hill. The *probability* of an accident each year under present conditions would be 20 percent, or .20. Suppose further that the accident results in one death, several injuries, and the totaling of a car, as well as some property damage. If the value of the life is taken to be, say, \$4.5 million, the total *losses* from the accident might sum to \$5 million.

Measures are then taken to reduce this risk. These could be ones that lower the probability of an accident by, for example, erecting warning signs, or they could be ones that reduce the losses sustained in the accident by, for example, erecting a barrier so that cars that overshoot the curve are prevented from toppling down the hill. Or they could do both: a lowered speed limit might reduce not only the likelihood of an accident but also its consequences. Suppose further that such measures result in a yearly *reduction of risk* of 50 percent or .50. The *benefit* of the safety measures, applying the previous equation to this example, would then be .20 x \$5 million x .50, or \$500,000.

One would then need to compare this with the *cost* of the risk reduction measures. If their cost, all things considered, is less than \$500,000 per year, the benefits would outweigh the costs, and the measures would be deemed cost-effective.

⁷⁶ Dana Priest and William M. Arkin, *Top Secret America: The Rise of the New American Security State* (New York: Little Brown, 2011), pp. xviii-xix, 103.

⁷⁷ For a much more extensive application and discussion of this approach, see Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*.

This same approach can be used in a “break-even analysis” to calculate how many otherwise successful attacks would have to take place to justify the increase since 9/11 in domestic expenditures on risk-reducing security measures. To do this we think of the “benefit” as the cost of the security measure. The equation then becomes

$$(\text{cost of the security measure}) = (\text{probability of a successful attack}) \times (\text{losses sustained in the successful attack}) \times (\text{reduction in risk generated by the security measures})$$

which is then manipulated for break-even purposes to be

$$(\text{probability of a successful attack}) = (\text{cost of the security measure}) / [(\text{losses sustained in the successful attack}) \times (\text{reduction in risk generated by the security measures})]$$

We apply these estimates and assumptions:

1. We include in our cost measure only enhanced local, state, and federal security expenditures and enhanced intelligence costs since 9/11 (totaling \$75 billion per year), leaving out many other expenditures including those incurred by the private sector, opportunity costs, and costs abroad such as those attending the terror-related wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.
2. We deal with the consequences of a rather large attack something like, or probably somewhat larger than, the car bomb attempt at Times Square in 2010, one exacting \$500 million in damage (the vast majority of terrorist attacks inflict far less damage).
3. We assume those security measures in place before 9/11 continue and that these, combined with the extra public vigilance induced by 9/11, reduce the likelihood of a successful terrorist attack or reduce the losses sustained in such an attack by 50 percent.⁷⁸
4. We assume the enhanced security expenditures since 9/11 have successfully reduced the likelihood of a successful terrorist attack or have reduced the losses sustained in such an attack by a further 45 percent, leading to an overall risk reduction of 95 percent.

This can all be put together. For an enhanced security cost of \$75 billion, losses sustained set at \$500 million, with a reduction in risk of .45, the yearly probability of a successful attack for the enhanced expenditures to justify their cost would need to be at least

$$\$75 \text{ billion} / [\$500 \text{ million} \times .45] = 333$$

That is, for enhanced U.S. domestic expenditures on homeland security to be deemed cost-effective under a set of assumptions that substantially biases the consideration toward the opposite conclusion, they would have had to deter, prevent, foil, or protect against 333 very large attacks that would otherwise have been successful every year. That would be about one a day.

This may supply something of an illustrative estimate of the cost consequences of the counterterrorism delusion.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ This may substantially understate the risk reduction by pre-9/11 measures. Notes Michael Sheehan, “The most important work in protecting our country since 9/11 has been accomplished with the capacity that was in place when the event happened, not with any of the new capability bought since 9/11. I firmly believe that those huge budget increases have not significantly contributed to our post-9/11 security... The big wins had little to do with the new programs.” *Crush the Cell*, p. 263.

⁷⁹ These considerations focus, as noted, on the costs of domestic homeland security spending, not on those abroad. However, the costs may sometimes intersect. Because to the vagueness of the concept of “material support for terrorism,” many Somali-Americans were reluctant to aid in the catastrophic famine taking place in their home

Perpetual Delusion: The Curious (or Impressive) Persistence of Fear

In his assessment of the post-9/11 domestic terrorism situation, Jenkins concludes that what is to be anticipated is “tiny conspiracies, lone gunmen, one-off attacks rather than sustained terrorist campaigns.”⁸⁰ This is not at all new (nor does Jenkins say it is), but by any standard, it is logically far less threatening than the large conspiracies and sustained attacks once envisioned, or anticipated, to become the norm. Yet, although the American public and media have come to pay less attention to terrorism, concern and fear about it did not really decline in the years after 9/11 as Figure 1 documents. On display there is a remarkable phenomenon that has a distinctly delusory quality: Although an American’s chance of being killed by a terrorist is about one in 3.5 million per year, some 40 percent of the population has continued to profess worry throughout the 9/11 decade—even in the aftermath of the murder of bin Laden—that they or a family member might become a victim of terrorism.

Some of this may be due to the fact that officials have rolled with the punch and have been quite adept at stoking fear. One stratagem has been to announce that, although the “likelihood of a large-scale organized attack” has been reduced, this means that al-Qaeda franchises are now able “to innovate on their own” (presumably developing small-scale disorganized attacks) with the result that the threat “in a sense” is now the highest since 9/11.⁸¹ There is also a closely related focus on the “homegrown.” However, what has changed is not a new appearance of the homegrown, but the evaporation, or the discrediting, of the notion that large numbers of non-homegrown terrorists are abroad in the land.

Moreover, failed plots can seem, or can be made to seem, scarier than successful ones because the emphasis is on what the terrorist plotters hoped to do or might have been able to do, not with what they were likely to do—including, in particular, screwing up completely.⁸² Thus, one failed terrorist plot in 2009 sought to set off four suicide bombs on the New York subway (Case 28). Various experts, including the Attorney General of the United States, opined that the attack, if successfully pulled off, might kill between 200 and 500 people.⁸³ They seem to have been little troubled by the experience in July 2005 when two sets of terrorists each attempted to set off four bombs on the crowded transit system in London. The first set killed 52, while the second killed none because the bombs were ill-constructed. Presumably, the London bombers could have killed more if, in the first case, the bombs had been placed differently or, in the second, if they had been constructed properly. However, since we know how many they actually killed, it is that number, not an imagined one, that ought to be the basis of comparison.⁸⁴ There were also extravagant death tallies imagined for the foiled transatlantic airliner plot of 2006 (Case

country in areas partly occupied by a people officially designated as a terrorist group, resulting in a considerable human toll. Mary Beth Sheridan, “U.S. may ease anti-terror rules to help starving Somalis,” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2011.

⁸⁰ Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors*, p. 13.

⁸¹ Serrano, “U.S. faces ‘heightened’ threat level.” See also Mitchell D. Silber, “The mutating al Qaeda threat: Terrorists are adapting and expending,” *Washington Times*, December 30, 2011. Thus a senior Obama administration analyst implies things are just as bad as ever: “The organization lacks the ability to plan, organize and execute complex, catastrophic attacks, but the threat persists.” Ignatius, “The bin Laden plot.” For commentary, see Heather Mac Donald, “The ever-renewing terror threat,” *secularright.org*, February 13, 2011; Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism,” pp. 43-44.

⁸² See also Schneier, “Portrait of the Modern Terrorist.”

⁸³ Tom Hays, “Feds: Terror suspects’ mingling fed NYC threat,” *KIDK.com*, September 26, 2009. “Justice Department Oversight—Part 1—Newsflash,” *Associated Press*, April 14, 2010.

⁸⁴ The bombings of trains in Madrid in 2004 killed 191, but this was accomplished by detonating ten bombs, not four.

23) and for the amazingly inept would-be Times Square bomber of 2010 (Case 34).⁸⁵

But there has been something of a tapering off in official alarmism in general, and predictions that the country must brace itself for a large imminent attack, so common in the first several years of the 9/11 decade, have largely vanished.⁸⁶ Nor, of course, has there been a sizable attack, and the largest of the terrorist attacks that has taken place, the killing of 13 at Ft. Hood in 2009 (Case 32), scarcely had wide ramifications. Yet fear levels as measured in the poll question have not receded, and it seems substantially to be a bottom-up phenomenon rather than one inspired or generated by policy makers, risk entrepreneurs, politicians, and the media who seem more nearly to be responding to the fears (and exacerbating them) than creating them.

Part of the persistent fear stems, of course, from the peculiar trauma of 9/11 which, like Pearl Harbor, has proven to have had a lasting impact. And it may also stem from the perception that, unlike those terrorists who seem mainly out to draw attention to their cause (in Jenkins' tally, noted earlier, only 72 people perished in the hundreds of bombings of the 1970s), Muslim extremist terrorists, it seems, are out simply to kill, and to kill as many people as possible. This clearly is the lesson primarily drawn from of 9/11.

Fear has also been notably maintained since 9/11 by the popularity and the often knee-jerk acceptance of the highly questionable, if not precisely delusional, notion that terrorists will eventually (or even soon) get weapons that can kill massively and then detonate them off in an American city, an issue discussed earlier.

Whatever the genesis, the terrorism fear seems to have been internalized and politicians and policy makers have come to believe that they can defy it only at peril—the fear of seeming soft on terrorism has replaced the fear of seem to be soft on Communism, a phenomenon that lasted far longer than the dramatic episodes that generated it.⁸⁷

The delusion documented in Figure 1 may prove, then, to be perpetual.

⁸⁵ Interestingly, however, the plot dreamed up since 9/11 that could potentially have caused the most damage was the one that aspired to topple the Sears Tower in Chicago (Case 19). Even if the toppling failed to create the planners' hoped-for tsunami, thousands would have died—perhaps even tens of thousands—and the damage in the neighborhood would have been as monumental as that to the building. However, the plotters had no capacity whatever to carry out this colossal deed, and so this desire is not taken seriously even though the case is generally known as the Sears Tower plot. That sort of reasonable reticence should be applied more broadly for aborted or foiled plots of destruction.

⁸⁶ For a array of predictions, see polisci.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/PREDICT.PDF

⁸⁷ Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*, pp. 185-188.

Table 1: The American Cases

Cases that have come to light of Islamist extremist terrorism since 9/11, whether based in the United States or abroad, in which the United States itself has been, or apparently has been, targeted

Number, title, *type*, year, description

- 1 The shoe bomber 4 2001 British man tries to blow up a US-bound airliner with explosives in his shoes but is subdued by passengers and crew
- 2 Padilla 1 2002 American connected to al-Qaeda who had discussed a dirty bomb attack returns to US and is arrested
- 3 Mt. Rushmore 3 2002 Two men in Florida, one of them possibly connected to an al-Qaeda operative, plot, crucially aided by an informant, to bomb local targets as well as Mt. Rushmore before 9/11, and are arrested and tried the year after
- 4 El Al at LAX 4 2002 His business and marriage failing dismally, a depressed anti-Israel Egyptian national shoots and kills two at the El Al ticket counter at Los Angeles airport before being killed himself in an act later considered to be one of terrorism
- 5 Lackawanna 1 2002 Seven Americans in Lackawanna, NY, are induced to travel to an al-Qaeda training camp, but six return disillusioned, all before 9/11, and are arrested the next year
- 6 Columbus and the Brooklyn Bridge 2 2003 American connected to al-Qaeda discusses shooting up a shopping mall in Columbus, OH, with two friends, then scouts taking down the Brooklyn Bridge for al-Qaeda, but decides it's too difficult
- 7 Paracha 2 2003 A young Pakistani seeks to help an al-Qaeda operative enter the country to attack underground storage tanks and gas stations
- 8 Ali 2 2003 A US citizen joins a terrorist cell in Saudi Arabia and plots to hijack a plane in the US and to assassinate President Bush when he is arrested by the Saudis and extradited to the US for trial
- 9 Barot and the financial buildings 2 2004 Group in London tied to al-Qaeda scouts out financial buildings in US with an eye to bombing them, but never gets to the issue of explosives
- 10 Albany 3 2004 Two men in Albany, NY, effectively help fund an informant's terror plot
- 11 Nettles 3 2004 An American with a long history of criminal and mental problems plots under the nickname of "Ben Laden" to blow up a federal courthouse in Chicago and reaches out for help to a Middle Eastern terrorist group, but gets the FBI
- 12 Herald Square 3 2004 Loud-mouthed jihadist in New York and a schizophrenic friend attract informant who helps them lay plans to bomb Herald Square subway station
- 13 Grecula 3 2005 An American with visions of being an modern day Spartacus agrees to build a bomb to be exploded in the US for undercover agents claiming to be al-Qaeda
- 14 Lodi 1 2005 American in Lodi, California, who may have attended a training camp in Pakistan but with no apparent plan to commit violence is arrested with the aid of an informant
- 15 JIS 2 2005 American in jail masterminds a plot by three others to shoot up military recruitment centers, synagogues, and a non-existent military base in the Los Angeles area but, although close to their first attack, the plot is disrupted when they leave a cell phone behind at a funds-raising robbery
- 16 The pipeline bomber and the terrorism hunter 3 2005 An American offers on the internet to blow up pipelines in Canada as an aid to al-Qaeda, and attracts the attention of free-lance informant
- 17 U of North Carolina 4 2006 To punish the US government for actions around the world, a former student, after failing to go abroad to fight or to join the Air Force so he could drop a nuclear bomb on Washington, drives a rented SUV onto campus to run over as many Americans as possible and manages to injure nine
- 18 Hudson River tunnels 2 2006 Angered by the US invasion of Iraq, several men based in Lebanon plot to flood railway tunnels under the Hudson river, but are arrested overseas before acquiring bomb materials or

setting foot in the US

19 Sears Tower 3 2006 Seven men in Miami plot with an informant, whom they claim they were trying to con, to take down the Sears Tower in Chicago, then focus on closer buildings

20 Trans-atlantic airliner bombings 2 2006 Small group in London, under intense police surveillance from the beginning, plots to explode liquid bombs on US-bound airliners

21 Rockford 3 2006 Loud mouthed jihadist attracts attention of an informant and together they plot exploding grenades at a shopping mall in Rockford, IL

22 Fort Dix 3 2007 Small group target practices, buys guns, and plots to attack Ft. Dix, NJ, with the aid of an informant who joins the group when the FBI is told they took a jihadist video into a shop to be duplicated

23 JFK airport 3 2007 Small group, with informant, plots to blow up fuel lines serving JFK airport in New York

24 Vinas 2 2008 New York man travels to Pakistan, is accepted into al-Qaeda, and plots to plant a bomb in the US, but is being watched and talks after being arrested

25 Bronx synagogues 3 2009 Four men, with crucial aid from an informant, plot to bomb synagogues in Bronx, NY, and shoot down a plane at a military base

26 Little Rock 4 2009 American man travels to Middle East to get training, but fails, and on return, working as a lone wolf, eventually shoots and kills one soldier at a military recruitment center in Little Rock, AK

27 Boyd and Quantico 2 2009 Complicated conspiracy in North Carolina, including an informant, gathers weapons and may have targeted Quantico Marine Base

28 Zazi 2 2009 Afghan-American and two friends travel to Pakistan to join Taliban, but are recruited by al-Qaeda to plant bombs on NY subways instead, and are under surveillance throughout

29 Springfield 3 2009 Loud mouthed jihadist plots, with informants, to set off a bomb in Springfield, IL

30 Dallas 3 2009 Jordanian on a student visa rouses interest from the FBI in internet postings and, together with three agents, tries to detonate a fake bomb in the basement of a Dallas skyscraper

31 Mehanna 2 2009 Well-educated Muslim jihadist may have plotted briefly to shoot up a shopping center in the Boston area and tried to join insurgency in the Middle East, but is arrested for spreading jihadist propaganda

32 Fort Hood 4 2009 Military psychiatrist, acting as a lone wolf, shoots up a military deployment center in Ft. Hood, TX, killing 12 soldiers and one civilian, shortly before he is supposed to be deployed to the war in Afghanistan

33 The underwear bomber 4 2009 Nigerian man tries to blow up a US-bound airliner with explosives in his underwear but is subdued by passengers and crew

34 Times Square 4 2010 Pakistani-American gets training in Pakistan and on his own tries, but fails, to set off a car bomb at Times Square in New York

35 Alaska 3 2010 Muslim convert in a remote Alaska town plots the assassination of 20 with the aid of an informant

36 Parcel bombs on cargo planes 2 2010 An effort by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to set off parcel bombs implanted in printer cartridges on cargo planes bound for the United States is disrupted

37 DC Metro-bomb plot 3 2010 Pakistani-American aids FBI operatives posing as al-Qaeda in a plot to bomb the DC Metro

38 Oregon 3 2010 Teenaged Somali-American jihadist, unable to go abroad to fight, works with FBI operatives, apparently alerted by his father, to set off a van bomb at a Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Portland, OR

39 DC Metro-Facebook 2 2010 Virginia man brags without substance to a female Facebook correspondent that he will bomb the Washington Metro soon, and is quickly arrested for making interstate threats, receiving a light sentence

40 Baltimore 3 2010 Baltimore man seeks allies on Facebook for violent jihad, and the FBI supplies him with an informant and with a fake SUV bomb with which he tries to blow up a military recruitment center

- 41 Texas 2 2011 Saudi student in Texas, flunking out and displaying intense new discontent on his blog and Facebook profile, is arrested after buying bomb-making materials and considering potential targets including crowded streets in distant New York and a local residence of former President George W. Bush
- 42 Manhattan's pair of lone wolves 3 2011 Mentally ill American citizen, with accomplice and undercover officer, upset with how the US treats Muslims around the world, purchases weapons as the first step in a plot to blow up synagogues, the Empire State Building, and other targets in New York and New Jersey
- 43 Pentagon shooter 2 2011 A US marine reservist with jihadist literature shoots at military buildings in the DC area and is arrested as he seeks to desecrate the graves of veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan
- 44 Seattle 3 2011 Two financially-destitute men, exercised over US foreign policy, are arrested in Seattle after they purchase an FBI-supplied machine gun that they plan to use to attack a military recruiting center after they save up enough money to purchase bullets and other material
- 45 Abdo 2 2011 A US Army Private, unwilling to wage war on Muslims, is arrested after he buys ammunition and bomb materials to explode in a restaurant popular with soldiers
- 46 Model planes 3 2011 Seeking to "decapitate" the US "military center," a mentally-ill hobbyist plots with police operatives to attack the Pentagon and Capitol with remote-controlled model planes bearing explosives and then to assault the buildings
- 47 Iran and Scarface 2 2011 An Iranian-American used-car salesman from Texas, nicknamed "Scarface" from the results of an earlier street brawl, is arrested for engaging in a movie-like plot with another man (still at large), with members of the Iranian government, and with a police operative to hire a Mexican drug cartel to blow up Saudi Arabia's ambassador in a Washington restaurant for \$1.5 million (wiring the operative \$100,000 as a down payment) and to bomb the Israeli embassy in that city
- 48 Pimentel 3 2011 A naturalized US citizen and Muslim convert, hostile to US military ventures in the Middle East, seeks to make pipe bombs using match heads to attack various targets
- 49 Tampa 3 2012 Under suspicion after he walked into a store seeking to purchase an al-Qaeda flag, an Albanian-American loner plots in Tampa with a police operative to detonate a car bomb, fire an assault rifle, wear an explosive belt, take hostages, and bomb nightclubs, a police center, a bridge, and a Starbuck's coffee shop in order to avenge wrongs against Muslims and to bring terror to his "victims' hearts"
- 50 Capitol bomber 3 2012 A Moroccan man who had overstayed his visa for years and had been thrown out of his apartment for non-payment of rent, concludes that the war on terror is a war on Muslims, plots with FBI operatives, and is arrested as he seeks to carry out a suicide bombing at the Capitol

Case types

1. An Islamist extremist conspiracy or connection that, in the view of the authorities, might eventually develop into a plot to commit violence in the United States
2. An Islamist extremist terrorist plot to commit violence in the United States, no matter how embryonic, that is disrupted
3. An Islamist extremist plot to commit violence in the United States that was essentially created or facilitated in a major way by the authorities and then rolled up by arrest when enough evidence is accumulated
4. An Islamist extremist terrorist or terrorist group that actually reaches the stage of committing, or trying to commit, violence in the United States

Drawn from John Mueller (ed.), *Terrorism Since 9/11: The American Cases* (Columbus, Ohio: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2012), polisci.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/since.html

Table 2: Threats to the United States from al-Qaeda, 2001–2010

The United States is in retreat by the grace of God Almighty and economic attrition is continuing up to today. But it needs further blows. The young men need to seek out the nodes of the American economy and strike the enemy's nodes.—Osama bin Laden, December 2001

Understand the lesson of New York and Washington raids, which came in response to some of your previous crimes God is my witness, the youth of Islam are preparing things that will fill your hearts with fear. They will target key sectors of your economy until you stop your injustice and aggression or until the more short-lived of us die.—Osama bin Laden, October 2002

Leave us alone, or else expect us in New York and Washington.—Osama Bin Laden, November 2002

People of America, I remind you of the weighty words of our leaders, Osama bin Laden and Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri, that what took place on September 11 was but the opening salvo of the global war on America The magnitude and ferocity of what is coming your way will make you forget about September 11 The streets of America shall run red with blood . . . casualties will be too many to count and the next wave of attacks may come at any moment.—al-Qaeda spokesman Adam Gadahn, 2004

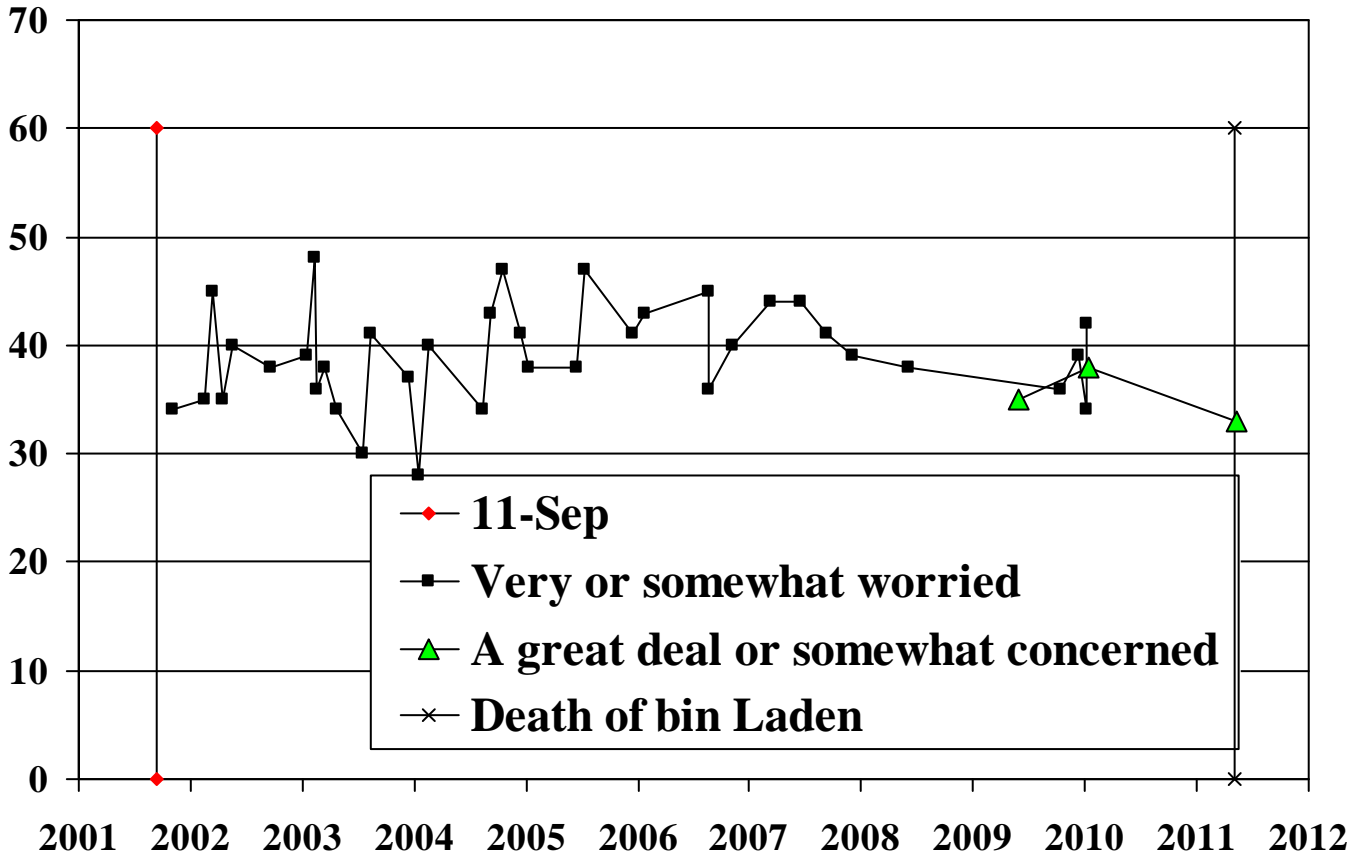
As for you, the Americans, what you have seen in New York and Washington, what losses that you see in Afghanistan and Iraq, despite the media blackout, is merely the losses of the initial clashes. If you go on with the same policy of aggression against Muslims, you will see, with God's will, what will make you forget the horrible things in Vietnam and Afghanistan.—Ayman Al Zawahiri, 2005

As for the delay in carrying out similar operations in America, this was not due to failure to breach your security measures. Operations are under preparation, and you will see them on your own ground once they are finished, God willing.—Osama bin Laden, January 2006

God willing, our raids on you will continue as long as your support for the Israelis continues.—Osama bin Laden, January 2010

Sources: See John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 36.

Figure 1: Worry, concern since 9/11 about being a victim of terrorism in the United States



How worried are you that you or someone in your family will become a victim of terrorism? Very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried, or not worried at all?
 CNN/US Today/Gallup/ORC

How concerned are you about the chance that you or your family might be a victim of a terrorist attack? Would you say a great deal, somewhat, not too much, or not at all?
 AP-Gfk

Source: pollingreport.com