

## Response

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I would very much like to thank Richard Betts, Daniel Byman, and Martha Crenshaw for taking the time to tangle so thoughtfully with my ramblings. There was somewhat more agreement than I might have expected, but in my reply I will deal mostly with points of disagreement or semidisagreement—five of them, to be exact.

### Declining Fears?

Betts suggests that “the public is hardly hysterical anymore” three years after September 11. There seems to be mixed evidence on this score.

As Betts appropriately stresses, real estate prices in Manhattan continue to rise, and (I would add) much the same can be said for the other September 11 target: Washington DC. Similarly, a Columbia University study noted (with alarm) that two years after September 11 only 23 percent of Americans and 14 percent of New Yorkers confessed to making even minimal efforts to prepare for disaster—such as stocking a couple of days worth of food and water (no data on duct tape), buying a flashlight and a battery-powered radio, and arranging for a meeting place for family members.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, surveys conducted since September 11 show no decline of fears about terrorism, except maybe in the immediate aftermath of the attacks as some of the initial shock wore off. Consistently since the end of 2001, some 40 percent say they are very worried or somewhat worried about becoming a victim of terrorism. Moreover, well over 50 percent hold the likelihood of a terrorist attack in the United States over “the next few months” to be very or somewhat likely while less than 10 percent have chosen the option that has proved to be correct, “not at all likely.”<sup>2</sup> That, it seems to me, could reasonably be labeled a false sense of insecurity.

In addition, as noted in my article, while people do not seem to be trampling each other in a rush to vacate New York or Washington, DC they have widely adopted other forms of defensive behavior—and the costs of these have been considerable. Airline travel was down for years, along with tourism to places like Washington DC (not to mention Bali). And the U.S. Postal service continues to spend billions on anthrax defense while the budgets for the Department of

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Homeland Security (DHS) and the Transportation Security Administration (we still get to remove our shoes in terrified Columbus) routinely escalate annually.

Moreover, my main concern in the article was not so much the behavior of the public as the fear-inducing public pronouncements of the chattering classes, of politicians of both parties, and of bureaucrats. These continue apace, and this may suggest that they still believe that treating terrorism in nonhysterical terms is a nonstarter with the public.

For example, we still get “I think, therefore they are” spookiness from our officials, all of it embraced with studied and consummate sobriety. Thus in February 11, 2003, congressional testimony, FBI head Robert Mueller proclaimed that “the greatest threat is from Al Qaeda cells in the U.S. that we have not yet identified,” that this threat was “increasing in part because of the heightened publicity” surrounding such things as the Washington DC sniper shootings and the anthrax letter attacks, and that “Al Qaeda maintains the ability and the intent to inflict significant casualties in the U.S. with little warning.” Despite that ability and intent and (God knows) continued publicity about terrorism, and despite presumably severe provocation attending the subsequent U.S. invasion of Iraq, no casualties (significant or otherwise) were suffered in the United States with or without warning. However, Director Mueller is unflappable. In February 16, 2005, testimony he intoned, “I remain very concerned about what we are not seeing,” a vaporous profundity dutifully rendered in bold type in his published script. As it happens, a secret FBI report had in the meantime wistfully noted that after more than three years of intense hunting, the agency had been unable to identify a single true Al Qaeda sleeper cell anywhere in the country.<sup>3</sup> Apparently for the FBI director, absence of evidence is evidence of existence.

Or there is the widely published punditry of such people as the Harvard-based Michael Ignatieff. He assured us in May 2004 that “we can confidently expect that terrorists will attempt to tamper with our election in November.” Undimmed by that failed prediction, he moved on to warn that “a group of only a few individuals equipped with lethal technologies” threaten “the ascendancy of the modern state” and that “inexorably, terrorism, like war itself, is moving beyond the conventional to the apocalyptic.” Some interested, if unkind, observers might be inclined to see just a bit of overheated rhetoric, even hysteria, in such utterances.

### **Nearly Over?**

Crenshaw questions whether it is premature to declare terrorism “nearly over.” The standard I applied in the article derives from Stephen Flynn: can the American people “conclude that a future attack on U.S. soil will be an exceptional event that does not require wholesale changes in how they go about their lives.” Like crime (which also can be accomplished by a single individual), terrorism itself has always existed and presumably always will, and I am certainly not arguing that no terrorist act will ever again take place in the United States. But I think a good, if speculative, case can be made that the Flynn standard has been achieved. At any rate, at the very least it is something we ought to consider and discuss.

Moreover, there is an expanding literature questioning the capacity of radical Islamists. Thus Gilles Kepel’s extensive assessment notes that, although they did expand in influence particularly in Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan in the 1980s and early 1990s and fought viciously to do so in Algeria, the pattern since has been mostly one of retreat or utter collapse. Moreover, their acts of spectacular terrorist

violence, he concludes, far from spurring “the masses into a general upheaval” as they hoped, have proved “to be a death trap for Islamists as a whole, precluding any capacity to hold and mobilize the range of constituencies they need to seize political power.” In this view, the September 11 attack was “a desperate symbol of the isolation, fragmentation and decline of the Islamist movement, not a sign of its strength and irrepressible might.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, the justly respected Paul Pillar thinks that Al Qaeda has been substantially dismembered, though he still harbors concerns about how things “may very well be even more complex” now because we have to worry about “groups that may represent an emerging terrorist threat but have not yet resorted to terrorism.”<sup>7</sup> Almost sounds like the FBI.

There is also a danger in extrapolating from a spectacular event to overestimate the capacity of the perpetrators. As Russell Seitz suggests, “9/11 could join the Trojan Horse and Pearl Harbor among stratagems so uniquely surprising that their very success precludes their repetition,” and “Al Qaeda’s best shot may have been exactly that.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Low-Probability, High-Consequence Threats?**

Betts argues that “low-probability threats with extreme consequences warrant more concern than high-probability threats with minor consequences.” I agree, but that doesn’t relieve us of the obligation to make some assessment about how much more concern remote contingencies (or fantasies) are worth since there are always opportunity costs: the money and effort expended hedging on them must invariably be taken away from other endeavors such as public health, safe highway construction, tax reduction, or education. In retrospect, it does seem likely that the trillions of dollars spent to deter a Soviet attack in Europe were substantially wasted. Even if one grants that a certain amount of hedging for this eventuality was called for given the uncertainties of the times, such massive expenditures were not. A few lonely voices pointed this out at the time, but the underexamined fantasies of worst case scenarists in those days kept the pot boiling and the money pouring out.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, acting on the scenarios can have catastrophic consequences. As cold warriors plunged into the horrific Vietnam War to service their imaginings about the dangers of toppling dominoes, today’s alarmists—like Democratic advisor Graham Allison and Republican adviser Richard Perle—consider a war in Korea to be preferable to their nightmare scenarios about what a nuclear North Korea might do.<sup>10</sup> Sanctions imposed on Iraq in the 1990s derived in part from a fantasy that without them Saddam Hussein’s pathetic regime would somehow come to dominate the Middle East; however, the sanctions themselves appear to have been necessary cause of more deaths in Iraq, mostly of children, than have been inflicted by all weapons of mass destruction in all of history.<sup>11</sup>

Actually, if we’re going to worry about worst case scenarios, why don’t we focus on the big one: the remote, but nonzero, possibility that the earth could be struck any day now by a large meteor or comet tidily vaporizing us all in one fell swoop? Although it has been the subject of innumerable books and movies including, I understand, Disney’s upcoming updating of the Chicken Little fable, for some reason it has never really caught the attention of the alarmists.<sup>12</sup>

In arguing against complacency, Crenshaw warns that “there are real sharks out there.” But my plea would be simply to add a notice in such warnings that coconuts kill far more people each year,<sup>13</sup> and that (outside of 2001) international terrorism isn’t that much out of the coconut class. I’m not sure this justifies complacency,

but it surely suggests that alarmism about terrorism (or coconuts) could be just a bit misplaced.

Moreover, there are important economic benefits to complacency. People wallowing in it get on airplanes and spend money while their terrified counterparts cower at home; plaster their cars with cheap flag decals (most of them probably made in China); and loudly, defiantly, and pointlessly bellow anthems about “the home of the brave.” Given the alternative, I should think we could perhaps raise at least two cheers for complacency.

### **The Impact of Terrorism?**

Byman gives far more credit than I think is justified to terrorists, and particularly to Al Qaeda, for fostering insurgencies around the world. But he is certainly correct to suggest that many of them began with low-level violence like kidnapping, assassination, raids, or provocative explosions. However (as he also notes), these events commonly escalated to often massively destructive civil wars primarily because of the foolish—and often breathtakingly incompetent—overreaction of governments. For example, when a small rebellion broke out in Sierra Leone, the government rapidly expanded its not-very-good army of three thousand to a really terrible one of fourteen thousand and sent it—underpaid, undertrained, and underfed—into combat under commanders who had a distinct preference for leading from the rear. Rather than taking the rebels on, the troops quickly fragmented into bandit gangs and sought to profit from the chaos. In case after case—including the one in Chechnya noted in my article—the major problem wasn’t with the terrorists or insurgents, but with the massively destructive overreaction.<sup>14</sup>

Some terrorists have apparently had the goal of sabotaging talks which could lead to peace settlements, but any successes have often been the result of the overreaction they inspire. Palestinian bombings led Israelis to react by electing prime ministers hostile to the peace process in 1996 and 2001, just like the terrorists wanted. Similarly, regimes have often allowed their participation in peace talks to be importantly affected by terrorists. By stating that they will not negotiate as long as terrorist attacks continue, both the Israeli government and the British government (over Northern Ireland) effectively permitted individual terrorists to set their agendas. Of course, if those governments actually didn’t want to negotiate anyway, the terrorist acts simply supplied a convenient excuse, as they did for the Austrians on Serbia in 1914 and for the Americans on Iraq in 2003.

Byman and Crenshaw seem to argue that, since we can’t help ourselves from overreacting, we have to try to stop the terrorists. While policing terrorism is certainly worthwhile, it seems to me that it is even more important to keep ourselves from engaging in self-destructive—and terrorism-enhancing—overreaction.

### **Managing Public Fears?**

Crenshaw and Byman both stress the difficulties of trying to manage the public’s fears over terrorism, and (as I suggest in the article) I share much of this skepticism. However, it seems to me that there should at least be some efforts to try to put the threat in context—to indicate how few people are ordinarily killed by terrorism and to convey some sense of the probability that any individual will become a victim. They both give examples of people in what Byman calls “the analytic community

on terrorism” who have tried to do so. However, since September 11 those voices rarely emphasize the possibility that the phenomenon they are analyzing may prove to be quite a minor one, and they are vastly outweighed by the cries of alarm and the visions of apocalypse and armageddon promulgated so regularly by the terrorism industry.

In time, perhaps, these utterances will lose their charm—after all, we have now ceased to lose sleep over dragons, witches, anarchists, communists under the bed, Japan’s economic takeover, strategic thermonuclear war, the spread of ethnic war, and devils du jour like Qaddafi and Castro.<sup>15</sup> But even then, the costly governmental enterprises the fears have swept into being have become institutionalized and will be resistant to changing perspectives. The DHS will likely always be there, just like the Defense Department (which creatively went on a quest for “force justifiers” when the cold war ended). And things are likely to be even worse in this regard for concerns about terrorism: the cold war cannot be reinstated by one lonely guy with a bomb, but fears about terrorism can.

At base, then, it may well be that not all that much can be done about unwarranted fears and costly overreaction—they seem to be nearly inevitable in cases like this. People will always jump at some spooks (but it is not always predictable which ones) and imagine them to be far more potent than they are, and they will always evaluate risks perversely. Politicians will always sanctimoniously play to those fears, become convinced themselves, and expend funds and deploy armed force foolishly, even counterproductively. Bureaucrats will always stoke the same fears since they need, after all, to cover their rears against any conceivable uncertainty and have no incentive to work themselves out of a job. The entrepreneurs of the terrorism industry may eventually move on to the next governmental cash cow, but they will always first work very hard to sustain and milk their current one. And if it bleeds, it will always, always, always lead.

## Notes

1. National Center for Disaster Preparedness, *How Americans Feel about Terrorism and Security: Two Years after 9/11* (New York: Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 2003), see also Siobhan Gorman, “Shaken, Not Stirred,” *National Journal*, September 13, 2003, 2776–81.

2. Data are readily available on this at <http://pollingreport.com>.

3. Brian Ross, “Secret FBI Report Questions Al Qaeda Capabilities,” *ABC News*, ABC March 9, 2005, <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Investigation/story?id=566425&page=1>. Accessed 11 March 2005.

4. Michael Ignatieff, “Lesser Evils: What It Will Cost Us to Succeed in the War on Terror,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 2, 2004.

5. Michael Ignatieff, *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 146–47. Ignatieff patiently explains in some detail how we will destroy ourselves in response. Although Americans did graciously allow their leaders one fatal mistake in September 2001, they simply “will not forgive another one.” If there are several large-scale attacks, he confidently predicts, the trust that binds the people to its leadership and to each other will crumble, and the “cowed populace” will demand that tyranny be imposed upon it—and quite possibly break itself into a collection of rampaging lynch mobs devoted to killing “former neighbors” and “onetime friends.” The solution, he thinks, is to crimp civil liberties now in a desperate effort to prevent the attacks he is so confident will necessarily impel us to commit societal, cultural, economic, and political self-immolation. Ignatieff, 46–48.

6. Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 19–20, 375–76. Also see the excellent review essays on this literature by Daniel Byman in *World Politics*, October 2003, and *National Interest*, Spring 2005.

7. Paul Pillar, “Counterterrorism after Al Qaeda,” *Washington Quarterly* (2004): 102, 106.

8. Russell Seitz, “Weaker Than We Think,” *American Conservative*, December 6, 2004. Interestingly, historian H.P. Willmott observes of the Japanese army in World War II that “not a single operation planned after the start of the war met with success.” H.P. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1982), 91.

9. For a discussion see Robert H. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1994). I very much share Crenshaw’s enthusiasm for this book. It is now out of print, but by arrangement with the author and publisher I have been able to make it available on the web in PDF form at no charge. Information is at <http://psweb.sbs.ohio-state.edu/faculty/jmueller/books.html>.

10. On Allison, see my article above. On Perle, see his comments on “Kim’s Nuclear Gamble,” *Frontline*, PBS, April 10, 2003.

11. John and Karl Mueller, “Sanctions of Mass Destruction,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1999, 43–53.

12. For a thoughtful examination of this puzzle, see Clark R. Chapman and David Morrison, *Cosmic Catastrophes* (New York: Plenum, 1989), chapter 19. For analysis by one whose attention has been arrested by such dark possibilities, see Richard A. Posner, *Catastrophe: Risk and Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

13. At least according to <http://unisci.com/stories/20022/0523024.htm>. Accessed 30 July 2005.

14. John Mueller, *Remnants of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), chapters 6, 9. As David Keen has observed, counterinsurgency forces have “repeatedly alienated their potential civilian supporters, and this has often continued even when evidently counter-productive from a military point of view,” and clever rebels—as in Kosovo—have often sought to provoke them in hopes that it “will have precisely these counter-productive effects.” David Keen, *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi Paper No. 320, 1998), 21.

15. For a discussion, see John Mueller, “Simplicity and Spook: Terrorism and the Dynamics of Threat Exaggeration,” *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no.2 (2005): 208–24.