CHASING GHOSTS

THE POLICING OF TERRORISM

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From the Introduction:

In *Decision Points*, a memoir of his time as president, George W. Bush recalls a briefing he received from the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation a few weeks after the terrorist tragedy of September 11, 2001. The director informed him "that there were 331 potential al-Qaeda operatives inside the United States."

Bush says his routine at the time was to pepper such reports with questions: "How credible was each threat? What had we done to follow up on a lead?" However, when writing his book nearly a decade later, he apparently did not feel it useful to reflect critically (or ironically) on the director's impressive and remarkably precise number. If he had, he would likely have concluded that virtually all of the 331 envisioned terrorists turned out to be ghosts.

Over the next year, the official ghost count rose considerably. Intelligence sources were soon telling rapt and uncritical reporters—and presumably the President of the United States—that the number of trained al-Qaeda operatives in the United States was between 2,000 and 5,000. However, scarcely any of these have ever been unearthed. The government has been far better at counting al-Qaeda operatives in the country than at finding them.

Impelled by such extravagant perceptions of threat, there have been great increases in spending on policing and intelligence to chase (and count) terrorists in the U.S. By 2009 there were something like 1,074 federal government organizations and almost 2,000 private companies devoted to counterterrorism, homeland security, and intelligence spread over more than 17,000 locations within the country. Collectively this apparatus has launched far more covert operations in the aftermath of 9/11 than it had during the entire 45 years of the Cold War. Indeed, the United States has created or reorganized more than two entire counterterrorism organizations for every terrorist arrest or apprehension it has made of people plotting to do damage within the country.

Central to this massive enterprise is what in the FBI has actually often come to be called "ghost-chasing." Agencies like theirs, redirecting much of their effort from organized crime and white collar embezzlement, have kept their primary focus on terrorism. Overall, the government has followed up on more than ten million tips or leads—or "threats" as they are called internally—since 2001. And the vast majority of those deemed worthy of pursuit seem to have led to terrorist enterprises that were either trivial or at most aspirational. But the chase will continue of course, because no one wants to be the one whose neglect somehow leads to another catastrophe—or in the casual hyperbole of an official at the FBI's National Threat Center, "it's the one you don't take seriously that becomes the 9/11."

Chasing ghosts is an expensive, exhausting, bewildering, chaotic, and paranoia-inducing process. At times, in fact, it seems to be an exercise in 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.

No defense of civil liberties is likely to be terribly effective as long as people believe the threat from terrorism is massive, even existential. If Americans have come to believe that the chance every year of being killed by a terrorist is dangerously high rather than one in four million (which it actually is), they are unlikely to be moved by concerns about civil liberties infringements or about counterterrorism expenditures that are designed to keep, or to make, them safe. Thus to undo, or even modify, the vast security system that has burgeoned since 2001, one must assess not simply the costs and consequences of the system, but the premises that furnish its essential engine.

This book takes on that task. It seeks to evaluate—to put into sensible context—the premises that drive the vast policing and intelligence venture to counter terrorism within the United States. We do not argue that there is nothing for the ghost-chasers to find—the terrorist "adversary" is real and does exist. The question that is central to the exercise, but one the ghost-chasers never really probe, is an important and rather straight-forward one: is the chase worth the effort? Or is it excessive given a serious evaluation of the danger that terrorism actually presents?