

BLIP OR STEP FUNCTION?¹

John Mueller
Department of Political Science
Ohio State University
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Mershon Center
1501 Neil Avenue
Columbus, OH 43201-2602 USA
614-247-6007
614-292-2407 (fax)
bbbb@osu.edu
<http://psweb.sbs.ohio-state.edu/faculty>

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ABSTRACT No single act of terrorism has ever remotely done as much damage as the one on September 11, 2001. Will such spectacularly destructive terrorist acts become commonplace as is generally assumed? Experience suggests that it is entirely possible that they will not. There have been quite a few extreme and highly alarming events over the last several decades that seemed to presage future patterns but failed completely to do so. The efforts against terrorism should be considered more like a campaign against crime than like a war. Alarmism can be harmful, particularly economically, and it can help create the damaging consequences the terrorists seek but are unable to perpetrate on their own. Moreover, many of the extreme forms alarmism has taken verge on hysteria. The United States is hardly "vulnerable" in the sense that it can be toppled by dramatic acts of terrorist destruction, even extreme ones. The country can, however grimly, readily absorb that kind of damage.

The September 11, 2001 attack was quite literally off the charts: no single act of terrorism has ever remotely done as much damage. Over the course of the entire twentieth century fewer than 20 terrorist attacks managed to kill as many as 100 people, and none killed more than 400. The economic destruction on September 11 was also unprecedented, of course.

Until 2001, as Figure 1 demonstrates, far more Americans were killed by lightning in any grouping of years than were killed by all forms of international terrorism. A central issue now is: will we revert to those levels or have we entered a new era? Most commentators generally hold to the latter: the attacks represent a sort of historical step function ("everything has changed") suggesting that such extensive destruction will now become common or even routine. However, a case can be made--though certainly not proved--that, rather than foreshadowing the future, the attacks may turn out more nearly to be a tragic blip or outlier.

¹ The article is an elaborated and extended version of Mueller 2002.

A record of predictions following extreme events

There have been quite a few extreme and highly alarming events over the last several decades that seemed to presage future patterns. A quick survey suggests that many failed completely to do so.

World War II was the most destructive war in history. It has yet to inspire a sequel, but that is not how it looked to most in its immediate aftermath when historian Arnold Toynbee confidently argued, "In our recent Western history war has been following war in an ascending order of intensity; and today it is already apparent that the War of 1939-45 was not the climax of this crescendo movement" (1950, 4). In 1945, Ambassador Joseph Grew, one of America's most perceptive diplomats, concluded that "a future war with the Soviet Union is as certain as anything in this world" (quoted, Gaddis 1987, 218n). Soviet dictator Josif Stalin concurred: "We shall recover in fifteen or twenty years and then we'll have another go at it" (quoted, Djilas 1962, 114-15). Public opinion polls conducted in the United States in the mid-1940s characteristically found 30 to 75 percent opining that the next world war would occur within twenty-five years (Mueller 1979, 303-7). Even decades later, the prominent political scientist, Hans J. Morgenthau, announced that "the world is moving ineluctably towards a third world war--a strategic nuclear war. I do not believe that anything can be done to prevent it. The international system is simply too unstable to survive for long" (quoted, Boyle 1985, 73). We continue to wait.

When the Communists successfully fomented a coup in democratic Czechoslovakia in 1948, there were great fears that this would soon be followed by further Communist takeovers in Europe, especially in Italy and France. But it was not.

Communist aggression in Korea in 1950 was deeply alarming. As President Harry Truman put it, "The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war" (Shulman 1963, 150). As Bernard Brodie recalls, the Joint Chiefs "were utterly convinced that the Russians were using Korea as a feint to cause us to deploy our forces there while they prepared to launch a 'general' (total) war against the United States through a major attack on Europe" (1973, 63). They weren't. In fact, there were no Koreas after Korea. (Vietnam arose from Communist insurgency, not from direct invasion.)

It was feared that Castro's 1959 victory in Cuba and his subsequent embrace of Soviet Communism would be repeated all over Latin America. It wasn't.

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 was the most extreme crisis of the Cold War, and when it was resolved, many felt the Soviets would respond to failure there by creating trouble somewhere closer to home, probably in Berlin. In the speech that opened the public phase of the crisis, President John Kennedy specifically warned the Soviets about such a move, and at its end Defense Secretary Robert McNamara predicted, "sure as hell they're going to do something there" (Bundy and Blight 1987/88, 92).² Conditioned by several years of Soviet bluster and swagger, the Americans poised themselves for the next challenge. But it never came: Cuba proved to be the last major direct military crisis between the U.S. and the USSR of the Cold War.

When the Soviet Union invaded neighboring Afghanistan in 1979, many saw it as an aggressive ploy relevant to the entire Middle East and South Asia. Alarmed that the Soviet probe might merely be a prologue to further adventures in the oil-rich Persian Gulf area, President Jimmy Carter sternly threatened to use "any means necessary" to counter a further Soviet military move in the area, a threat basically reiterated by his replacement, Ronald Reagan, the next year (Halperin 1987, 45). It was the first time Soviet forces had been sent directly into a country outside their empire since 1945; it was also the last.

² According to one senior member of the British Foreign Office, everyone in the office "expected the Russians would be in West Berlin" on the day following Kennedy's speech (Brodie 1973, 431).

When ethnic warfare alarmingly broke out in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s many expected it to metastasize all over Eastern Europe, maybe even leading to a nuclear war between Russia and Ukraine (Kaplan 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Mearsheimer 1990; Moynihan 1993). The wars mostly fizzled away and did not spread.

A similar pattern holds with some extreme acts of terrorism. Since its alarming release of poison gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995, an attack that sickened thousands and killed 12, the apocalyptic group, Aum Shinrikyo, appears to have abandoned the terrorism business. And Timothy McVeigh's destructive truck bombing in Oklahoma City has, at least thus far, failed to inspire American imitators. Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, a devil du jour of terrorism of the 1980s, seems to become gone on to other things.

A record of alarmist prediction

Many other alarmist and doomsday predictions have failed to hold. Among these are the nearly unanimous expectation in the 1950s and 1960s that dozens of countries would have nuclear weapons by now. For example, in 1958 the National Planning Association predicted "a rapid rise in the number of atomic powers...by the mid-1960s" (1958, 42). A couple of years later, C.P. Snow sagely predicted that, "Within, at the most, six years, China and several other states [will] have a stock of nuclear bombs (1961, 259); and John Kennedy observed that there might be "ten, fifteen, twenty" countries with a nuclear capacity by 1964 (Kraus 1962, 394).³

Or there was the reaction to the Soviet Union's dramatic launch in 1957 of Sputnik, the first artificial space satellite. It was generally assumed that, since the Soviets enjoyed such an overwhelming lead in the space race, they would surely get to the moon first. They didn't. In that connection, deeply alarmed by that development and by the Soviet Union's apparent economic progress, the hastily-assembled, if august and authoritative, President's Commission on National Goals declared the democratic world to be in "grave danger" from Communism's "great capacity for political organization and propaganda" and from the "specious appeal of Communist doctrine to peoples eager for rapid escape from poverty" (1960, 1-2). And the CIA helpfully extrapolated in 1960 that the Soviet Union's Gross National Product might be triple that of the United States by the year 2000 (Reeves 1993, 54).⁴

Or there was the common fear during the Cold War that a nuclear weapon would inevitably explode somewhere and soon; for example, C.P. Snow in a 1960 speech: "Within, at the most, ten years, some of those bombs are going off. I am saying this as responsibly as I can. *That is the certainty*" (1961, 259; emphasis in the original). Or there was the wisdom that the oil shocks of the 1970s proved that world power was shifting to the middle east.

There has also been recurring pessimism that democracy was doomed or at least stagnated. In 1975, the usually ebullient Daniel Patrick Moynihan proclaimed that democracy "increasingly tends to the condition of monarchy in the 19th century: a holdover form of government, one which persists in isolated or peculiar places here and there" but "which has simply no relevance to the future" (1975, 6). In a similar mood, Germany's Willy Brandt was reported to believe at the time that "Western Europe has only 20 or 30 more years of democracy left in it; after that it will slide, engineless and rudderless, under the

³ More recently, Christopher Layne has confidently insisted that Japan by natural impulse must soon come to yearn for nuclear weapons (1993, 37) while John Mearsheimer equally confidently argues that "Germany will feel insecure without nuclear weapons" (1990, 38), even though the Japanese and the Germans themselves continue uncooperatively to seem viscerally uninterested. On this issue more generally, see Mueller 1967, 1998; Meyer 1984; Graham 1991; Reiss 1995.

⁴ On the Soviet Union's apparent economic strength at the time, see Yergin and Stanislaw 1998, 22, 272.

surrounding sea of dictatorship" (quoted, Crozier et al. 1975, 2). In 1984, in the midst of what he was later to label the "third wave" of democratization, Samuel Huntington looked to the future and essentially concluded that democracy could only emerge through economic development or through force: "with a few exceptions, the prospects for the extension of democracy to other societies are not great. These prospects would improve significantly *only* if there were major discontinuities in current trends--such as if, for instance, the economic development of the Third World were to proceed at a much faster rate and to have a far more positive impact on democratic development than it has had so far, or if the United States reestablished a hegemonic position in the world comparable to that which it had in the 1940s and 1950s. In the absence of developments such as these, a significant increase in the number of democratic regimes in the world is unlikely" (1984, 218, emphasis added).

Similarly, Robert Dahl concluded in 1971 that, "In the future as in the past," democracy is "more likely to result from rather slow evolutionary processes" and "the transformation of hegemonic regimes" into democracies "is likely to remain a slow process, measured in generations" (1971, 45, 47). In early 1989, on the brink of a major expansion of democracy as the Soviet empire collapsed, he concluded that "it would be surprising" if the proportion of the countries in the world that are democratic "were to change greatly over the next twenty years" (1989, 264). And, in late 1993, economist Robert Barro crisply applied an economic model of democratic development to South Africa and came to a decisive conclusion: "Considering the country's level and distribution of income, the ethnic divisions, and the political and economic experiences of most of the countries of Sub-Sahara Africa, this event would perhaps be the greatest political accomplishment in human history. To put it another way, it's not going to happen." When that country unoblingly became a democracy a few months later, an unbent Barro predicted that "The political changes in South Africa in 1994 have probably already overshot the mark, and a substantial decline of political freedom is likely after this year."⁵

Caveats

None of this is to suggest that all extreme events prove to be the last in their line or that nothing bad ever happens, of course. At the time World War I, called the Great War for decades, was the worst war of its type. Yet an even more destructive one followed.

Nor is it to suggest that deep concern about extreme events is unreasonable or necessarily harmful. Aid and alliances in Western Europe may have helped to keep the area out of Communist hands, the forceful response in Korea to dissuade the Communists from further direct military probes, anti-Castro efforts in Latin America to prevent further Communist gains there, the reaction to the Soviets' Cuban venture to discredit crisis as a tactic, intervention in the Balkans to contain the conflicts. Thus, efforts to confront terrorism and to reduce its incidence and destructiveness are certainly wise and justified.

Moreover, while Aum Shinrikyo and Qaddafi may be under control, Al Qaeda and like-minded terrorist groups are unlikely to die out any time soon: September 11 marked, after all, their second attempt to destroy the World Trade Center. Much of the current alarm is generated from the knowledge that many of today's terrorists simply want to kill, and kill more or less randomly, for revenge or as an act of what they take to be war. At one time, it was probably safe to conclude that terrorism was committed principally for specific political demands or as a form of political expression, and therefore in the oft-repeated observation of terrorism expert Brian Jenkins, that "terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead." Moreover, the suicidal nature of many attacks, while not new, can be very unsettling since deterrence by threatening punishment to the would-be perpetrator becomes impossible.

⁵ On the pessimism issue, see also Fukuyama 1992, ch. 1; Muravchik 1992, ch. 6.

And, of course, terrorism itself will never go away: it has always existed and always will.

The central issue, however, is whether such spectacularly destructive terrorist acts will become commonplace. Experience suggests that it is entirely possible that they will not.

Combating terrorism: the "war" image

As we wait to find out, it seems to me that the efforts against terrorism should be considered more like a campaign against crime than like a war, however much the war imagery may get the juices flowing (see also Howard 2002). Wars end, but since they are carried out by isolated individuals or by tiny groups at times of their own choosing, terrorism and crime never do. One cannot, therefore, "conquer" terrorism or "bring it to an end." Like crime, one can at best seek to reduce its frequency and destructiveness so that people feel reasonably--but never perfectly--safe from it. Of course, military measures may sometimes be highly useful in the campaign, as they have proved to be in Afghanistan. But to frame the campaign against terror as a "war" risks the danger of raising unreasonable expectations.

The war imagery also suggests that people should be asked somehow to make sacrifices. This popular conclusion is at least partly fanciful. Few Americans except those directly involved in the wars in Korea or Vietnam really made much of a sacrifice, and, although there were inconveniences on the homefront during World War II, consumer spending by the Greatest Generation generally surged. A goal of terrorism presumably is to hamper the economy, and therefore the best response to it, hardly much of a "sacrifice," would be to go out and buy a refrigerator or to take an airplane to a vacation resort. The war imagery suggests we should be cutting back; but cutting back actually helps the terrorists.

Living with fear rather than living in fear

It makes great sense in all this to heighten security and policing measures, and to ask people to maintain awareness--as with crime, to report any suspicious behavior to authorities. But it is important that this be done without inducing hysteria. In the extreme foreign policy events noted above, the creation of panic and hysteria was only a byproduct of the concern; in the case of terrorism, it is a central objective. Thus alarmism can be harmful, particularly economically, and it can help create the damaging consequences the terrorists seek but are unable to perpetrate on their own. As Michael Osterholm of the University of Minnesota Medical School has put it, people should be prepared to live *with* fear, not to live *in* fear.

This is a difficult challenge, but it might be useful to that end for officials and the press sensibly to assess probabilities and to put them in some sort of context rather than simply to stress extreme possibilities so much and so exclusively. It is certainly reasonable to point out that an atomic bomb in the hands of a terrorist could kill tens of thousands of people, but it may also be worthwhile to note that making such a bomb is an extraordinarily difficult task and that warnings about terrorists with nuclear weapons have been repeatedly uttered since the 1950s when the "suitcase bomb" became a practical possibility. And while a "dirty bomb" might raise radiation 25 percent over background levels in an area and therefore into a range the Environmental Protection Agency officially considers undesirable, there ought to be some discussion about whether that really constitutes "contamination" or indeed much of a danger given the somewhat arbitrary and exceedingly cautious levels declared to be acceptable by the EPA.

Nor would it necessarily be remiss to note that biological and chemical weapons have not proven to be great killers. Although the basic science about them has been well known for a century at least, both kinds of weapon are notoriously difficult to create, control, and focus. Thus far, biological weapons have killed almost no one. And the notion that large numbers of people could be killed by exploding a small number of chemical weapons is highly questionable. Although they obviously can be hugely lethal when released in gas chambers, their effectiveness as weapons in warfare has been unimpressive. In

World War I, for example, chemical weapons caused less than one percent of the total combat deaths; on average, it took a ton of gas to produce one fatality. In the conclusion to the official British history of the war chemical weapons are relegated to a footnote which asserts that gas "made war uncomfortable...to no purpose" (Edmonds and Maxwell-Hyslop 1947, 606). A 1993 analysis by the Office of Technology Assessment finds that a terrorist would have to deliver a full ton of Sarin nerve gas perfectly and under absolutely ideal conditions over a heavily populated area to cause between 3000 and 8000 deaths, something that would require the near-simultaneous detonation of dozens, even hundreds, of weapons. Under slightly less ideal circumstances--if there was a moderate wind or if the sun was out, for example--the death rate would be only one-tenth as great (1993, 54).⁶

Interestingly, if chemical and biological attacks are so easy and attractive to terrorists, it is impressive that none have so far been used in Israel. Although there have been plenty of terrorist attacks in that area, all have used conventional explosives.

Actually, it is somewhat strange that so much emphasis has been put on the dangers of high tech weapons. Some of the anxiety may derive from the post-September 11 anthrax scare even though that terrorist event killed only a few people. The bombings of September 11 by contrast were remarkably low tech, and could have happened long ago: both skyscrapers and airplanes have been around for a century now. At the same time, it seems unlikely that terrorists will be able to commandeer an airliner and ram it into a target in the future. It worked in 2001 because the hijackers had the element of surprise working for them: previous airline hijackings had mostly been fairly harmless as hijackers generally landed the planes someplace and released the passengers. The passengers and crew on the fourth plane on September 11 had fragmentary knowledge about what the earlier hijackings that day had led to, and they prevented the plane from reaching its target. This is likely to hold even more for any later attempted hijackings.

Hysteria vs. absorption

A problem with getting coherent thinking on the issue of terrorism is that reporters and politicians mostly find that extreme and alarmist possibilities arrest their audience's attention more than discussions of broader context.

Moreover, there is more reputational danger in underplaying risks than in exaggerating them. People routinely ridicule futurist H.G. Wells' prediction that the conflict beginning in 1914 would be "the war that will end war," but not his equally confident declaration at the end of the Second World War that "the end of everything we call life is close at hand" (1968, 67). Disproved doomsayers can always claim that caution induced by their warnings prevented the predicted calamity from occurring. (Call it the Y2K effect.) Disproved Pollyannas have no such convenient refuge.

The record with respect to fear about crime suggests that efforts to deal responsibly with the risks of terrorism will prove difficult. Fear of crime rose notably in the mid-1990s even as statistics were showing it to be in pronounced decline. When David Dinkins, running for re-election as Mayor of New York, pointed to such numbers, he was accused by A.M. Rosenthal of the New York Times of hiding behind "trivializing statistics" that "are supposed to convince us that crime is going down" (1993, A31).⁷

New Yorkers did eventually come to feel safer from crime in the 1990s than they had in the

⁶ For an excellent overview of these issues, see Easterbrook 2002. See also McNaugher 1990; Meselson 1991; Mueller and Mueller 1999, 45-47; Mueller and Mueller 2000, 166-68.

⁷ For data showing that crime peaked in New York in 1990 and declined steadily thereafter, see New York Times, 19 February 1998, A16. For a discussion of the fear of crime, see Warr 2000.

1980s, but this was probably less because crime rates actually declined than because graffiti, panhandlers, aggressive windshield washers, and the homeless were banished or hidden from view. So it may have made sense in the months after the September 11 attacks to have armed reservists parading menacingly around in airports. It is not clear how they prevented terrorist attacks, and pulling them from productive jobs hardly helped the economy. But if they provided people with a sense of security, their presence may have been worth it.

However, many of the extreme forms alarmism has taken are not reasonable--in fact they often verge on hysteria. Some commentators are now arguing that the United States has become "vulnerable," even "fragile" (Gergen 2002). Others proclaim that the threats posed to the United States by terrorists and by pathetic, impoverished tyrannies like Iraq and North Korea are "existential" (Krauthammer 2002/03, 9). All societies are "vulnerable" to tiny bands of suicidal fanatics in the sense that it is impossible to prevent every terrorist act. But the United States is hardly "vulnerable" in the sense that it can be toppled by dramatic acts of terrorist destruction, even extreme ones.

In fact, the country can, however grimly, readily absorb that kind of damage. To put things in a bit of context, it might be pointed out that the country already "absorbs" some 40,000 deaths each year from automobile accidents. Moreover, the economy was only minimally affected by the September 11 attacks--in fact, the major economic effect was not in their immediate impact but in the costly and often hasty, even hysterical, efforts to prevent a repetition.

Hysteria rarely makes much sense, yet politicians and the media are often drawn to it. The preoccupation of the media and of Jimmy Carter's presidency with the hostages taken by Iran in 1979 to the exclusion of almost everything else looks foolish in retrospect, as Carter's Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, reflects in his memoirs (1983, 380). Similarly, the Reagan administration became fixated on a handful of American hostages held by terrorists in Lebanon. At the time, Reagan's normally judicious Secretary of State, George Shultz, was screaming that we needed desperately to blast somebody somewhere "on a moment's notice" even without adequate evidence in order to avoid looking like the indecisive "Hamlet of nations" (Gwertzman 1984). He apparently preferred the King Lear approach. Normally, however, only lunatics and children rail at storms; sensible people invest in umbrellas and lightning rods (see also Mueller 1984, 1987).

Conclusion

No one knows, of course, whether the September 11 attacks will prove to be a blip or a step function. The record suggests, however, that terrorists will find it difficult to match or top them. Moreover, the extreme destruction of those events has raised the bar, reducing the impact of less damaging attacks. That terrorists will fail to be able to match their achievement seems at least as likely as that they will succeed.

There are, as always, uncertainties out there, and, as always, plenty of dangers and threats. But none of these is existential. The sky, as it happens, is not falling.

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Figure 1: International Terrorism and Lightning

