



Strategic Autonomy
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Targeting needles, or adding more hay?

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The NSA has institutionalised alarmist thinking and is remarkably resistant to counter-information

Recently, US Secretary of State John Kerry suggested that America's National Security Agency (NSA) had perhaps "reached too far" in its massive collection of communications data. That is a monumental understatement. From the start of America's "war on terror", overreach has been the norm. Recall former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani: "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 multi-years of attacks like this."

The fears and concerns were plausible extrapolations from the facts then at hand. However, that every "security expert" should hold such erroneous views is fundamentally absurd. It was also an entirely plausible extrapolation from facts then at hand that 9/11 could prove to be an aberration rather than a harbinger. Yet it appears that no one in authority could even imagine that proposition to be true, even though it could have been taken to fit the available information fully as well as the passionately embraced alarmist perspective.

The "dozens and dozens" of 9/11 attacks never happened, of course, and the thousands of trained al-Qaeda operatives intelligence agencies imagined to exist in the US at the time turned out to be zero or exceedingly close to it. Nonetheless, alarmist thinking from the early days has been internalised and institutionalised, and it has proved to be notably resistant to counter-information. As anthropologist Scott Atran puts it, "Perhaps never in the history of human conflict have so few people with so few actual means and

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capabilities frightened so many." Central to the process, the NSA has continually expanded its spying efforts, searching for the needle by adding more and more hay.

When asked earlier this year about the NSA's massive data-gathering programmes, the agency's head, General Keith Alexander, contended that they were "crucial or critical" in disrupting "dozens" of terrorism plots. He then provided Congress with a list of 54 such cases. Although the list (unsurprisingly) is classified, Senator Patrick Leahy says that the notion that these cases represent disrupted plots is "plainly wrong". Indeed, "they weren't all plots and they weren't all thwarted."

When operatives at the NSA, sorting through their data collections, uncover leads, they are virtually never productive. At the FBI, reports journalist Garrett Graff, the NSA tips are often called "Pizza Hut" leads because, following them up, agents inevitably "end up investigating the local pizza delivery guy". At one point, FBI Director Robert Mueller bluntly told Alexander, "You act like this is some treasure trove; it's a useless time suck."

The most bizarre manifestation of all this is the creation and maintenance of a "Threat Matrix", an itemised catalogue of all the "threats"— or more accurately "leads"— needing to be followed up. According to Graff, it is filled with "whispers, rumours, and vacuous, unconfirmed information". There are more than 5,000 items on the list every day, suggesting that the government has pursued some six million or more terrorism leads since 9/11, a quest that has led to only a quite limited number of prosecutions, most of them on minor charges.

Whatever the ratio of needle to hay, living with the Threat Matrix seems to take a psychological toll on its daily readers. Graff says it comes off as "a catalogue of horrors" and as "a seeming tidal wave of Islamic extremist anger that threatened to unhinge American society". In essence, it is like being barricaded in a room and listening only to the police radio. Observes Jack Goldsmith, a reader of the Threat Matrix in the Bush administration, "It is hard to overstate the impact that the incessant waves of threat reports have." He quotes CIA Director George Tenet, "You simply could not sit where I did and read what passed across by desk on a daily basis and be anything other than scared to death about what it portended." This, writes Goldsmith, captures "the attitude of every person I knew who regularly read the threat matrix". Every person.

It appears that the fact that the "threats" scarcely ever have led to anything has never inspired analysts and policymakers to consider the rather plausible conclusion that there was little or nothing out there to fear. Rather, it caused them to embrace the dead opposite according to Goldsmith: "The want of actionable intelligence combined with a knowledge of what might happen produced an aggressive, panicked attitude that assumed the worst about threats." And Tenet talks about "the palpable fear" that we felt on the basis of the fact that there was so much we did not know.

Among the readers of the Threat Matrix, however, is one dissenter: Glenn Carle, a 23-year veteran of the CIA, where he was deputy national intelligence officer for transnational threats. He finds that intelligence analysts have become "victims of delusion", who spin "in self-referential circles", where "the avalanche of reporting confirms its validity by its quantity". This shows no sign of abating, 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 after a few years had passed, to be of limited significance.

"Present fears," observes Macbeth, "are less than horrible imaginings." Or, as his wife puts it, "'tis the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil."

The writer is a political scientist at Ohio State University and senior fellow, Cato Institute, US.



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