

**Dueling Delusions:  
Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the United States Since 9/11**

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November 9, 2011

Prepared for presentation at the Program on International Security Policy  
University of Chicago, November 15, 2011

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**ABSTRACT:** A preliminary, if rather lengthy, set of ruminations on our ten years, and counting, of absurdity and delusion on the terrorism issue. 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 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. 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.

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 by far the most destructive terrorist act in history. As with the assassination case, there has been a general reluctance to maintain that such a monumental event could have been pulled off by a fundamentally trivial group, and there has consequently been a massive tendency to inflate the group's importance and effectiveness. At the preposterous extreme, the remnants of the tiny group have even been held to present a threat to American security that is “existential.” In result, we have been living a decade of tragic absurdity as 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 to be of only limited significance at least in the fullness of time.

On NBC's “Meet the Press” on October 21, 2001, as Taliban and al-Qaeda forces in Afghanistan were being routed, host Tim Russert posed a question to his two guests, Senators Joseph Lieberman and John McCain, that he said had been suggested by his son: “What is Osama bin Laden going to be for Halloween?” Both guests instantly replied, “dead.”

That confident prediction proved to be more than a bit premature. But eventually, nearly a decade later, the most costly and determined manhunt in history finally culminated in Pakistan when a high-tech hit squad with dashing made-for-TV derring-do killed bin Laden, one of the chief authors of 9/11 and one of history's most cartooned demons. It was a daring and dramatic venture that diverted attention from problems in the economy for a while and gave President Barack Obama a boost in popularity of four to six percentage points that lasted a good 10 days.

Taken away with bin Laden's bullet-shattered body, which was soon to be ceremoniously dumped at sea, were a written document of some 10 to 20 pages that was called a “personal diary” as well as 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.<sup>1</sup> Poring through the material with great dispatch, however, a crack 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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. Length of diary: Jeff Bliss and Justin Blum, “Osama Bin Laden's Journal Said to Outline Terror Plots, Political Games,” [bloomberg.com](http://bloomberg.com), May 12, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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.

This paper is a preliminary, if rather lengthy, set of ruminations on our ten years, and counting, of absurdity. To appropriate a phrase suggested by Glenn Carle, a 23-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency where he was deputy national intelligence officer for transnational threats: during the 9/11 decade both terrorists and counterterrorists have been “victims of delusion.” and that condition shows every sign of continuing.<sup>3</sup>

### **Terrorism: Assessing the “Adversary”**

In the wake of 9/11, recalls Rudy Guiliani, 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.”<sup>4</sup>

But 9/11 has proven to be an aberration, not a harbinger, and this is largely because people like Guiliani and others, including a whole raft of “security experts,” have massively exaggerated the capacities of what they portentously and absurdly 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 all the cases that have come to light of Islamic 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.<sup>5</sup> These cases, of course, comprise (or generate) the chief terrorism fear for Americans.

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 9) 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

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<sup>3</sup> Glenn L. Carle, *The Interrogator: An Education*. New York: Nation Books, 2011, 269, 293, 298-99. Delusion, notes Carle, can be defined as “a persistent false belief in the face of strong contradictory evidence” (293n).

<sup>4</sup> CNN, July 22, 2005. See also the reflections of Ross Douthat, “Death of a Failure,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> John Mueller (ed.), *Terrorism Since 9/11: The American Cases*. Columbus, Ohio: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2011. This free web book can be accessed through [polisci.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/since.html](http://polisci.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/since.html) The case numbers given throughout this paper refer to this source.

be found, and that their target list included a military base that didn't exist, is also the stuff of comedy.

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 bomb in the middle of 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 22). 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 9).

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 7). Or even more so, there is the wild fantasy of the leader of the Sears Tower plot (Case 12) 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 from which he would 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 19).

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 13).

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 10, 23, 30, 31).

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 22 and 33), 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.

With remarkably few exceptions, the authors of the case studies characteristically describe their subjects with words like incompetent, ineffective, unintelligent, idiotic, ignorant, inadequate, unorganized, misguided, muddled, amateurish, dopey, unrealistic, moronic, irrational, and foolish.<sup>6</sup> And in just about all of the many cases where an FBI informant was

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

plying his well-compensated trade, the most appropriate descriptor would be “gullible.” In many instances, however, it may perhaps be a bit better to view the perpetrators or would-be perpetrators not so much as stupid or foolish as emotionally underdeveloped or incompetent or inadequate.

The bumblers in “The Four Lions” do manage to pull off at least some lethal mayhem. It is here, however, that the portrayal of the fictional terrorists strains credulity: All of their bombs actually explode, albeit usually in the wrong place, whereas 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 of the “Four Lions.” In many instances, the only explosive on the scene was a fake one supplied by the FBI, and it is clear that the would-be terrorists totally lacked the capacity to create or acquire one on their own (Cases 14, 18, 22, 29, 31). In the cases in which the terrorists did try to create a bomb after extensive training abroad, or were actually given one by a terrorist group abroad, the plot was disrupted or the bomb failed (Cases 1, 5, 13, 21, 26, 27). In result, the only method by which Islamic terrorists have managed to kill anyone at all in the United States since 9/11 has been through the firing of guns—in the Little Rock and Fort Hood cases (19 and 25).<sup>7</sup>

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

measured by the number of terrorist attacks, the volume of domestic terrorist activity was much greater in the 1970s. That tumultuous decade saw 60 to 70 terrorist incidents, mostly bombings, on U.S. soil every year—a level of terrorist activity 15 to 20 times that seen in the years since 9/11, even when foiled plots are counted as incidents. And in the nine-year period from 1970 to 1978, 72 people died in terrorist incidents, more than five times the number killed by jihadist terrorists in the United States in the almost nine years since 9/11.

In the 1970s, terrorists, on behalf of a variety of causes, hijacked airliners; held hostages in Washington, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco; bombed embassies, corporate headquarters, and government buildings; robbed banks; murdered diplomats; and blew up power transformers, causing widespread blackouts. These were not one-off attacks but sustained campaigns by terrorist gangs that were able to avoid capture for years. The Weather Underground was responsible for 45 bombings between 1970 and 1977, the date of its last action, while the New World Liberation Front claimed responsibility for approximately 70 bombings in the San Francisco Bay area between 1974 and 1978 and was believed to be responsible for another 26 bombings in other Northern California cities. Anti-Castro Cuban exile groups claimed responsibility for nearly 100 bombings. Continuing an armed campaign that dated back to the 1930s, Puerto Rican separatists, reorganized in 1974 as the Armed Front for National Liberation

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<sup>7</sup> In addition, a shooting in 2002 in which a lone gunman killed two people at an El Al counter at Los Angeles airport is sometimes taken to be an act of terrorism.

(FALN), claimed credit for more than 60 bombings. The Jewish Defense League and similar groups protesting the plight of Jews in the Soviet Union claimed responsibility for more than 50 bombings during the decade. Croatian and Serbian émigrés also carried out sporadic terrorist attacks in the United States, as did remnants of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>8</sup>

As this documents, terrorists in the United States (as well, of course, as those in other places in the developed world like Northern Ireland and Spain) have been fully able to create and set off bombs. It is especially impressive in sizing up the scope of the threat from domestic terrorism that, since 2001, no Islamic extremist terrorist has been able to do so in the United States.

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.”<sup>9</sup> 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 DHS (to be discussed below) and with the imperatives listed by Dalmia, Islamic militants there are operationally unsophisticated, short on know-how, prone to make mistakes, poor at planning, and limited in their capacity to learn.<sup>10</sup> Another study documents the difficulties of network coordination that continually threaten operational unity, trust, cohesion, and the ability to act collectively.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it is not all that clear that even the bombers in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where explosive assemblers and operations managers operate in a permissive environment, are all that competent either. According the Daniel Byman and Christine Fair, half of the suicide bombers in Afghanistan manage to kill only themselves, and bomb-bearing

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<sup>8</sup> 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, 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> Shikha Dalmia, “What Islamist Terrorist Threat?” *reason.com*, February 15, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Kenney, “‘Dumb’ Yet Deadly: Local Knowledge and Poor Tradecraft Among Islamist Militants in Britain and Spain,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33(10) October: 911-22. See also Risa A. Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism in the United States: How Serious is the Threat?” *International Security*, Fall 2011. To demonstrate how we face “a thinking enemy that is constantly adapting to defeat our countermeasures” former deputy secretary of homeland security James Loy argues that when cockpit doors were hardened to prevent hijackings, the terrorists moved to shoe bombs (Case 1) to “penetrate our defenses.” However, the hardened doors (which anyway were not much in place in late 2001 when the shoe bomber made his move) were in no sense a defense against bombings, only, as Loy admits, against hijacking. “Al-Qaeda’s undimmed threat,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Calvert Jones, “Assessing the Dangers of Illicit Networks,” *International Security*, Fall 2008.

warriors rather frequently blow each up in manly embraces as they are about to set off on their missions.<sup>12</sup>

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, 5, 7, 12, 16, 22, 23), these were all wild fantasies, far beyond their capacities however much they may have been encouraged in some instances by FBI informants. 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 14). 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 9). Or there was the terrorist who, after several failed efforts, went home and, with no plan at all, shot at a military recruiting center three miles from his apartment, killing one (Case 19). 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.<sup>13</sup>

Although the post-9/11 terrorism efforts in the United States often demonstrate the would-be perpetrators to be, like those in "The Four Lions," pathetic, even comical or absurd, the comedy remains a dark one of course. With a few possible exceptions, left to their own devices at least some 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.<sup>14</sup>

### **The foreign adversary**

The 9/11 terrorist attacks were by far the most destructive terrorist attacks 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."<sup>15</sup>

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

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<sup>12</sup> Byman and Fair, "The Case for Calling them Nitwits." In his book, *Mastermind: The Many Faces of the 9/11 Architect, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), Richard Minter begins by listing his subject's admitted 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 (p. 2). Except for the Bali bombings, all of these failed or never even began to approach fruition, and KSM's role in the Bali case, according to Minter, was simply to supply some money (p. 157).

<sup>13</sup> John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements*. London and New York: Routledge, 44.

<sup>14</sup> John J. Miller, "FBI Response to Rolling Stone Magazine Article," *Rolling Stone*, February 22, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Russell Seitz, "Weaker Than We Think," *American Conservative*, December 6, 2004; see also John Mueller, "Harbinger or Aberration?" *National Interest*, Fall 2002, 45-50.

essentially delusional threats—an array of these can be found in Table 1. 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.<sup>16</sup>

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 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."<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, as Patrick Porter of Britain's Joint Services Command and Staff College notes, the group has a "talent at self-destruction."<sup>18</sup> Its activities, beginning with 9/11—or even with the bombings of two American embassies in Africa in 1998—have also turned many radical Islamists against them, including some of the most prominent and respected.<sup>19</sup> As one disillusioned former al-Qaeda associate says, "al-Qaeda committed suicide on 9/11 and lost its equilibrium, skilled leaders, and influence."<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, 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

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<sup>16</sup> See Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008; David Ignatius, "The Fading Jihadists," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Glenn L. Carle, "Overstating Our Fears," *Washington Post*, July 13, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Porter, "Long Wars and Long Telegrams: Containing Al-Qaeda," *International Affairs* 85(2) March 2009, 300.

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> Fawaz Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Joby Warrick, "U.S. Cites Big Gains against Al-Qaeda," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2008. See also Gerges, *Far Enemy*, ch. 5.

<sup>22</sup> For an extended discussion, see 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), ch. 2.



threatened by the militant network, and their diligent and aggressive efforts have led to important breakthroughs against al-Qaeda.<sup>23</sup>

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. Some inept terrorist bombings in Casablanca in 2003 inspired a similar determined crackdown by Moroccan authorities. 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, in polls, 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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> 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.”<sup>26</sup> In Iraq as in other places, “al-

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<sup>23</sup> Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 232, and, for a tally of policing activity, 318–319; see also Paul R. Pillar, *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003, xxviii–xxix; Marc Lynch, “Al-Qaeda’s Media Strategies,” *National Interest*, Spring 2006, 54–55; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, 149; Juan Cole, *Engaging the Muslim World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 163.

<sup>24</sup> Indonesia: Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, 53, 142, 173. Saudi Arabia: Gerges, *Far Enemy*, 249; Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 53, 144. Morocco: Sageman *Understanding Terror Networks*, 53–54. Jordan polls: Pew Global Attitudes Project, “The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other,” June 22, 2006, [pewglobal.org](http://pewglobal.org); see also Lynch, “Al-Qaeda’s,” 54–55. Religious grounds: Fawaz Gerges, “Word on the Street,” *Democracyjournal.org*, Summer 2008, 75. See also Pillar, *Terrorism*, xxiv; Fareed Zakaria, “Post-9/11, We’re Safer Than We Think,” *Washington Post*, September 13, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> 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, 47–55.

<sup>26</sup> 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, 15–17.

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.”<sup>27</sup>

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 26). 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup> None have yet shown up, 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. 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.

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 3) when a smooth-talking agent returned to the upstate New York town in early 2000 and tried to convert young Yemini-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

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<sup>27</sup> 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, 191

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

<sup>29</sup> “Boeing 747 survives simulation bomb blast,” BBC, March 4, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Anna Schecter and Brian Ross, “Obama Orders Air Marshal Surge by Feb. 1: ‘Race Against Time,’” abcnews.com, January 6, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> “Cargo planes bomb plot,” Wikipedia, accessed May 3, 2011.

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.

After 9/11, al-Qaeda became exceedingly wary of taking on American recruits even if they seem to be genuinely devoted. This is presumably in sensible concern that the recruits might actually be agents of the CIA or other such forces.

It does not seem, however, that the CIA has ever been able to infiltrate an operator 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 17 and 21), Americans acting on their own, and 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, although previously "radicalized," 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.

### Counterterrorism: Assessing the Reaction

Absurdity and delusion is suggested not only in the poses and actions of some of the would-be terrorist perpetrators, but also by the poses and actions of the threatened counterterrorists, and many of these often resemble self-parody.

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.

As 9/11 is an extreme outlier among terrorist events, Carle is an extreme outlier among officials. 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."<sup>32</sup> Yet, despite the importance to responsible policy of seeking to communicate 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.<sup>33</sup> It might be noted that, despite this outburst, Bloomberg still managed to be re-elected two years later.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*, ch. 2.

<sup>33</sup> 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

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 another fairy tale, Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes." The con artists in this fable 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) very stupid, or b) unfit for the profitable office they hold. Since all in the court, including the Emperor, know quite well that they are not 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"?

Or consider the somber and alarming 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.<sup>35</sup> Cells, they confidently told rapt and characteristically 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."<sup>36</sup>

Similar office-saving 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 those many, many al-Qaeda cells rattling around in the US, "I remain very

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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.

<sup>34</sup> One might also want to consider a pronouncement in a 2004 book written by Senator John McCain: "Get on the damn elevator! Fly on the damn plane! Calculate the odds of being harmed by a terrorist! It's still about as likely as being swept out to sea by a tidal wave. Watch the terrorist alert and go outside again when it falls below yellow. Suck it up, for crying out loud. You're almost certainly going to be okay. And in the unlikely event you're not, do you really want to spend your last days cowering behind plastic sheets and duct tape? That's not a life worth living, is it?" (John McCain with Mark Salter, *Why Courage Matters: The Way to a Braver Life*, New York: Random House, 2004, 35–36). The inclusion in his peroration of the counsel to go outside when the alert level falls below yellow is, to say the least, odd. The ever-watchful and ever-cautious Department of Homeland Security seems unlikely *ever* to lower the threat level below yellow (or, now, its equivalent), and McCain's admonition therefore seems effectively to contradict the spirit in the rest of the passage by encouraging everyone to cower inside for the rest of their lives. An e-mail inquiring about the apparent inconsistency was sent to Senator McCain's office in August 2004, but it has yet to generate a reply.

<sup>35</sup> 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 Qaeda Cells Attacked," UPI, October 31, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Sale, "US al Qaeda Cells."

concerned about what we are not seeing,” a sentence that is rendered in bold lettering in his prepared text. Moreover, like those in the Emperor’s court, he claimed somehow to know 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.”<sup>37</sup>

Equal certainty, or vision, was present when, late in the same year, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge divined that “extremists abroad are anticipating near-term attacks that they believe will either rival, or exceed” those of 2001.<sup>38</sup> And in 2004, Attorney General John Ashcroft, with FBI Director Mueller at his side, announced that “credible intelligence from multiple sources indicates that al Qaeda plans to attempt an attack on the United States in the next few months,” that its “specific intention” was to hit us “hard,” and that the “arrangements” for that attack were already 90 percent complete.<sup>39</sup> (Oddly enough, Ashcroft fails to mention this memorable headline-grabbing episode in *Never Again*, his 2006 memoir of the period.)

Lest this suggest that all the absurdity about the invisible adversary has its origins in Washington, let us transfer attention to another center of sustained hysteria: official New York. (Space limitations do not permit at this time a similar assessment of other such centers like Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Weather Channel.)

In a 2008 book Michael Sheehan, New York 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.<sup>40</sup>

And so, it seems, Sheehan kept his views rather quiet for several years, and all three officials continued to pretend that terrorists were everywhere. Thus, all kept their well-paid offices, support for counterterrorism did not “crumble,” the newspapers were kept from revealing a 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.

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<sup>37</sup> Testimony by Director Mueller can be found through [www.fbi.gov/congress/congress.htm](http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress.htm). In 2005, Mueller testified that, although his top concern was “the threat from covert operatives who may be inside the U.S.” and although he considered finding them to be his top priority, the Bureau had been unable to find any (Dana Priest and Josh White, “War Helps Recruit Terrorists, Hill Told; Intelligence Officials Talk Of Growing Insurgency,” *Washington Post*, February 17, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Press Office release, Department of Homeland Security, December 21, 2003

<sup>39</sup> John Mueller, *Overblown*. New York: Free Press, 2006, 162.

<sup>40</sup> Michael A. Sheehan, *Crush the Cell: How to Defeat Terrorism without Terrorizing Ourselves*. New York: Crown, 2008, 14. Christopher Dickey, *Securing the City: Inside American’s Best Counterterror Force—the NYPD*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009, 118–119.

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

### **Ridding the world of evil**

George W. Bush entered the presidency proposing that a sensible foreign policy should be “modest.” But after 9/11 he instantly shucked any semblance of modesty aside and preposterously proclaiming he was now taking upon himself the distinctly unhumble responsibility to “rid the world of evil.”<sup>41</sup> One, of course, was inclined to wish him luck. The proclamation about his truly amazing and ambitious mission occasioned almost no commentary in the press at the time, though the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* did modestly suggest in an editorial that “perhaps the president over-promised.”<sup>42</sup>

Interestingly, the chief earlier recorded effort to expunge evil from the world was carried out some years ago by God who systematically drowned every being on the planet except for one arkload of people and paired animals, a venture that, subsequent history strongly suggests, failed fully to accomplish its apparent objective. Bush, therefore seems to have taken on the remarkable burden of seeking to outdo *both* his fathers: his earthly one by ridding Iraq of Saddam, his heavenly one by ridding the world of evil.

### **Visions of the “adversary”**

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 begins by devoting two sentences in its description 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.

It then shifts course and spins out several sentences on terrorist targets to conclude its discussion:

Analysis of terrorist goals and motivations points to domestic and international CIKR [critical infrastructure and key resources] as potentially prime targets for terrorist attacks. As security measures around more predictable targets increase, terrorists are likely to shift their focus to less protected targets. Enhancing countermeasures to address any one terrorist tactic or target may increase the likelihood that terrorists will shift to another, which underscores the necessity for a balanced, comparative approach that focuses on managing risk commensurately across all sectors and scenarios of concern. Terrorist organizations have shown an understanding of the potential consequences of carefully planned attacks on economic, transportation, and symbolic targets, both within the United

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<sup>41</sup> Memorial Service speech at the National Cathedral, September 14, 2001.

<sup>42</sup> September 16, 2001.

States and abroad. Future terrorist attacks against CIKR located inside the United States and those located abroad could seriously threaten national security, result in mass casualties, weaken the economy, and damage public morale and confidence.<sup>43</sup>

Some of this may describe the qualities and goals of some terrorists somewhere, including those involved in the 9/11 attacks. However, as the discussion above suggests, it scarcely describes the vast majority of those picked up on terrorism charges in the United States and the inability of the DHS even to consider this in its fleeting discussion is really quite amazing—or absurd.

Pushing such discussion to the highest point, there has been since 9/11, a nearly continual chant, or cant, holding that terrorism presents an “existential” threat to the United States. This was raised to a special level by DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff in 2008 when he uttered the bizarre, if exquisitely nuanced, observation to a couple of rapt, unquestioning reporters that the threat from terrorism is actually “a significant existential” one.<sup>44</sup>

Absurdity or delusion is also suggested when authorities—and the media—soberly take seriously the ridiculous fulminations of pathetic schemers about how they want to launch “a full ground war” against the United States (Case 12), or when they uncritically relay the childish jihadist drivel of Mohamad Shnewer in the Fort Dix episode (Case 15).

Mostly focused on terrorism abroad, Carle recalls that in the CIA he often found a particular phrase useful: “the closer you look, the less you see.”<sup>45</sup> The American cases suggest that phrase would apply to domestic terrorism as well. Occasionally a sign of healthy skepticism does crop up in the media. Thus, a *New York Times* article in 2009 observed, “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.”<sup>46</sup> Such comments, however, are rare—and that one certainly seems to be a very considerable understatement. Overall, the media should not be excluded from blame for the fundamentally absurd and delusion-inducing process of hype and threat-exaggeration. Far more typical: on the fifth anniversary of 9/11, Charles Gibson intoned on ABC television, “Now putting your child on a school bus or driving across a bridge or just going to the mall—each of these things is a small act of courage. And peril is a part of everyday life.”

### **The persistent misidentification of terrorist motivations: It’s the foreign policy, stupid**

In “The Four Lions,” the terrorists almost never actually explain what they are seeking, but at one point the leader does say that they are striking out at the materialism and “spiritual void” that characterizes western society. However, almost none of the terrorist characters in the American cases had any Qutb-like problem with American society—indeed, many of them show a deep and quite nuanced appreciation for American girls. However, they do display plenty of outrage at foreign policy in the middle east—and this includes most decidedly the transatlantic

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<sup>43</sup> Department of Homeland Security, *National Infrastructure Protection Plan: Partnering to enhance protection and resiliency*. Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2009, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Shane Harris and Stuart Taylor Jr., “Homeland Security Chief Looks Back, and Forward,” *GovernmentExecutive.com*, March 17, 2008. See also Carle, *Interrogator*, 293.

<sup>45</sup> Carle, *Interrogator*, 275.

<sup>46</sup> David Johnston and Scott Shane, “Terror Case Is Called One of the Most Serious in Years,” *New York Times*, September 25, 2009.

airliner bombers plotting away in London in 2006 (Case 13) on which the film seems to be loosely modeled.

There were a few cases in which it could probably be said there was no notable motivation at all (Cases 3, 6, 12). 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, but it was not that they had a burning urge to spread Islam and Sharia law or to establish caliphates. Rather it was the desire to protect the religion against what was commonly seen to be a concentrated war upon it in the Middle East by the United States government and military.<sup>47</sup> 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 on the 1980s.

That they display remarkably little hostility to American culture or society or to its values or, certainly, 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, Tarek Mehanna (an apparently genial and gracious guy who, with his PhD in pharmacy, was decidedly not a misfit or loser) who was substantially motivated by hostility toward, or at least discomfort with, American society (Case 24). 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, as it happens, that all of the 14 deaths caused by Islamic extremists since 9/11 have been inflicted—and only one of those killed was a civilian (Cases 19 and 25).

In addition to those would-be terrorists focusing on targets within the country, 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.

However, although hostility toward American policy is a primary motivator in terrorism cases, there are a huge number of people (Muslim and non-Muslim) who have also been strongly opposed to American policy in the Middle East—including for most of the time a very large

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<sup>47</sup> 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, 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](http://foreignpolicy.com), November 30, 2009; Peter Bergen, “Five myths about Osama bin Laden,” [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com), May 6, 2011. 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*, 74-75.



percentage of the Americans who identify themselves as Democrats.<sup>48</sup> Although the tiny number of people plotting terrorism in the United States display passionate hostility to American foreign policy, there is a far, 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.<sup>49</sup>

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.<sup>50</sup> 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. What seems primarily to have driven them to contemplate violence is not an increasing religiosity, but an increasing desire to protect the religion and its attendant way of life against what they saw as a systematic attack upon it abroad.

### Unrecalled predictions

Throughout the decade we have been regaled by predictions about terrorism that have fallen flat. A bare sampling:

- 2004: It's practically an article of faith among counterterrorism officials that Al Qaeda will try to hit the U.S. homeland in the run-up to the presidential election.<sup>51</sup>
- 2004: Bush has argued that bin Laden's videotape is a sign that bin Laden was too weak to attack before the election. But [Bruce] Hoffman and others say the tape was actually an indication that the months after the election may turn out to be more threatening than the months that preceded it. “Bin Laden, having uttered his warning, will be marshalling his resources to make good on his promise that Americans will not be able to avoid a new 9/11,” Hoffman says. “It'll be a race against time.”<sup>52</sup>
- 2005: I believe in the U.S. we'll see few attacks, spread farther apart, but catastrophic in nature.—Stephen E. Flynn<sup>53</sup>
- 2006: Ever since 9/11, the United States has been on alert for another terror attack. And now, after Canadian authorities broke up a terror plot over the weekend, US officials believe an attack is likely here and they say it could happen soon.<sup>54</sup>
- 2007: ABCNews.com, quoting an unidentified source, reported Sunday that U.S. officials fear a “spectacular” al-Qaeda attack here this summer.<sup>55</sup>
- 2007: gut saying there would be an attack this summer—Michael Chertoff<sup>56</sup>

<sup>48</sup> See, in particular, Gary C. Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*. New York: Pearson, 2006.

<sup>49</sup> See also Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism.”

<sup>50</sup> See also Mark Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2010, 479-94; Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism.”

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Klaidman, “Homeland Security: If Terror Strikes the Polls,” *Newsweek*, October 18, 2004.

<sup>52</sup> Siobhan Gorman, “War on Terror, Phase 2,” *National Journal*, 11/20/04, 3534.

<sup>53</sup> Scott Shane, “London, Madrid, Bali. And Yet Nothing Here,” *New York Times*, September 11, 2005

<sup>54</sup> CBS Evening News, June 5, 2006.

<sup>55</sup> Eugene Robinson, “Why Not Here?” *Washington Post*, July 3, 2007.

- 2007: We believe the United States is long overdue for a jihadist attack. Like U.S. Homeland Secretary Michael Chertoff, we believe the elements are in place for such an attack in the near future.<sup>57</sup>

And then there is Richard Clarke, counterterrorism coordinator from the Clinton administration, who issued a scenario that appeared as a cover story in the *Atlantic* in early 2005. In it he darkly envisioned shootings at casinos, campgrounds, theme parks, and malls in 2005, bombings in subways and railroads in 2006, missile attacks on airliners in 2007, and devastating cyberattacks in 2008.<sup>58</sup> With that perfect record of prophecy, he has now become an energetic and central figure in the escalating concern about cyberterrorism.<sup>59</sup>

Michael Sheehan observes candidly that “No terrorism expert or government leader wants to appear soft on terrorism. It’s always safer to predict the worst; if nothing happens, the exaggerators are rarely held accountable for their nightmare scenarios.”<sup>60</sup> That such a condition should hold true, that confident failed proclamations are so readily issued and so rarely remembered after they failed, is the stuff of absurdity.<sup>61</sup>

### **The discovery of the “homegrown”**

In the early years after 9/11 the context for the authorities was one of massive, even overwhelming, alarm. In 2005, as noted earlier, Mayor Guiliani New York recalled that all the security experts around seemed to be anticipating “dozens and dozens and multiyears” of large attacks. The alarm of the early years is perhaps best illustrated in the saga of Cofer Black, head of the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center who insisted that unless his staff was increased by hundreds or even thousands, “people are going to die,” and that Western civilization hung in the balance. When he went home, according to his wife, he would turn off the lights and sit in the dark with a drink and a cigar, sunk in an apocalyptic gloom.<sup>62</sup> In that atmosphere, authorities were looking high and low, often with considerable imagination, to locate and break up all those sleeper cells that they were convinced must be there somewhere.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>56</sup> E. A. Torriero, “U.S. Security Chief Warns of Rising Risk: Chertoff Cites Worry over Summer Attack,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 11, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, “Al Qaeda and the Strategic Threat to the U.S. Homeland,” Stratfor, July 25, 2007.

<sup>58</sup> “Ten Years Later,” *Atlantic*, January/February 2005, 61-77.

<sup>59</sup> Richard A. Clarke and Robert K. Knake, *Cyber War: The Next Threat to National Security and What to Do About It*. New York: Ecco, 2010

<sup>60</sup> *Crush the Cell*, 7

<sup>61</sup> On the issue of expert prediction more broadly, see Dan Gardner, *Future Babble*. New York: Dutton, 2010. For additional examples of terrorism prediction, see Mueller, *Overblown*, 161-64.

<sup>62</sup> Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side*. New York: Doubleday, 2008, 179-80.

<sup>63</sup> That is certainly the experience of former Assistant United States Attorney Christine Biederman who was in the fray in the years after 9/11. When the PBS Frontline series telecast in 2006 an assessment of the Lodi episode (Case 8), she wrote the program recalling, “I cannot begin to describe the pressure prosecutors face to produce convictions to justify the massive expenditures in the ‘war on terror.’ Most AUSAs are, like the one interviewed, good soldiers who believe in the ‘war’ the way they believe in God and family and apple pie—because they were raised that way and always have, because these form the core of their belief system and because questioning the mission would trigger all kinds of crises: moral, political, professional and, in the end, financial.” Frontline, *The enemy within*, pbs.org, October 10, 2006.

In his 2005 reflections, Guiliani added “It hasn’t been quite that bad,” a bit of an understatement since not only had there not been “dozens and dozens” of attacks like 9/11, but there hadn’t been any successful attacks of any magnitude at all in the United States. In a report that was kept secret for some reason, the FBI and other investigative agencies in 2005 noted that, after years of well-funded sleuthing, they had been unable to uncover a single true al-Qaeda sleeper cell anywhere in the United States.<sup>64</sup> And in 2007, this finding (or non-finding) was publicly acknowledged in a press conference and when the officer who drafted that year’s National Intelligence Estimate told the press “we do not see” al-Qaeda operatives functioning inside the United States.<sup>65</sup> And, on January 11, Director Mueller, while maintaining that “we believe al-Qaeda is still seeking to infiltrate operatives into the U.S. from overseas,” testified that his chief concern within the United States had now become homegrown groups.

Over the ensuing years, the fear of the homegrown has become standard. It was endorsed by Obama’s Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano in 2009.<sup>66</sup> And by 2010, two top terrorism analysts, Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman, were concluding that, although the terrorists appeared to be incapable of launching a mass-casualty attack in the U.S., local terrorists would still be able to carry out “less sophisticated operations,” a “trend” they somehow deemed to be “worrisome.”<sup>67</sup>

Some absurdly deft arithmetic was spelled out by top officials in 2011 when they announced at a press conference that, although the “likelihood of a large-scale organized attack” had been reduced, this meant that al-Qaeda franchises were now able “to innovate on their own” (presumably developing small-scale disorganized attacks) with the result that that threat was now the highest since 9/11.<sup>68</sup> This essentially preposterous assertion—that danger is heightened when a big problem diminishes but a smaller one continues—seems to have generated no skeptical commentary in the media at all. Actually, as Heather Mac Donald notes, media reports of the press conference in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* solved the quantitative dilemma by failing to mention the announcement about the reduced likelihood of large-scale organized attacks.<sup>69</sup>

Overall, there has scarcely been anything like a “trend.” Although there were a few, a very few, al-Qaeda operatives working in the country in the first years after 9/11 (Cases 2, 3, and

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<sup>64</sup> 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.

<sup>65</sup> Press conference: Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball, “The Flip Side of the NIE,” Newsweek.com, August 15, 2007. Officer: Bill Gertz, “Al Qaeda Seen In Search of Nukes: Defense Official Warns U.S. Still Group’s Target,” *Washington Times*, July 26, 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Spencer S. Hsu, “Homeland Security chief warns of threat from al-Qaeda sympathizers in U.S.,” *Washington Post*, 3 December 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman, *Assessing the Terrorist Threat: A Report of the Bipartisan Policy Center’s National Security Preparedness Group*, Washington, DC Bipartisan Policy Center, September 10, 2010, 4 (mass-casualty), 32 (less sophisticated operations, worrisome trend). See also Philip Mudd, “Evaluating the Al-Qa’ida Threat to the Homeland,” *CTC Sentinel*, August 2010, 1-4. For additional argument on the unlikelihood of a major attack on the U.S., see “Biden: Major terror attack on U.S. unlikely,” cnn.com, February 11, 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Richard A. Serrano, “U.S. faces ‘heightened’ threat level,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Heather Mac Donald, “The ever-renewing terror threat,” secularright.org, February 13, 2011.

4) and although there have been a few instances of terrorists abroad planning attacks in—or mostly on airplanes bound for—the United States (Cases 1, 5, 13, 17, 26), any real or imagined threat from terrorism within the country has been almost entirely “homegrown” from the beginning.<sup>70</sup> What is changed is not a new appearance of the homegrown, but the evaporation, or the discrediting, of the notion that there are a bunch of non-homegrown terrorists abroad in the land.<sup>71</sup>

Going even further, public officials have also publicly expressed alarm that the “greatest concern” has now become the “lone wolf” terrorist. As Leon Panetta put it when he was Director of the CIA, “It’s the lone wolf strategy that I think we have to pay attention to as the main threat.” This concern may be a valid one—and, indeed, it is only lone wolves who have managed to kill anyone at all in the United States since 9/11 (Cases 19 and 25). However, those who find this “worrisome” should also note the observation by Max Abrahms that “lone wolves have carried out just two of the 1,900 most deadly terrorist incidents over the last four decades.”<sup>72</sup>

### **WMD: massive extrapolation**

Concerns about terrorists with atomic bombs or other “weapons of mass destruction” escalated greatly after the September 11 attacks, a rather preposterous extrapolation since the terrorists used weapons no more sophisticated than box-cutters on that terrible day. 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.<sup>73</sup>

Such fears were not completely new. In 1974, physicist Theodore Taylor proclaimed that “It is already too late to prevent the making of a few bombs, here and there, now and then.... In another ten or fifteen years, it will be too late.”<sup>74</sup> And in 1995, Graham Allison let be known that “In the absence of a determined program of action, we have every reason to anticipate acts of nuclear terrorism against American targets before this decade is out.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> See also Joshua L. Dratel, “Nothing New about Homegrown Terrorism,” *centerlineblog.org*, July 27, 2010; Romesh Ratnesar, “The Myth of Homegrown Islamic Terrorism,” *Time*, January 24, 2011; and especially Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism.”

<sup>71</sup> Garrett M. Graff, *The Threat Matrix: The FBI at War in the Age of Terror*. New York: Little, Brown, 2011, 557. For the suggestion that the authorities may have become more capable in recent years of working some of these cases up enough so that terrorism charges can be filed, see Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism.”

<sup>72</sup> Max Abrahms, “Fear of ‘lone wolf’ misplaced,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 5, 2011. In what could be taken to be a crisp example of the “managing by inbox” that the Department of Homeland Security has been accused of (James A. Thomson, “DHS AWOL? Tough Questions About Homeland Security Have Gone Missing,” *RAND Review*, Spring 2007), a DHS assessment in 2011 concludes “Our review of attempted attacks during the last two years suggests that lone offenders currently present the greatest threat.” Associated Press, “Suspect in Seattle terror plot intent on attacking a recruiting station to ‘wake the Muslims up,” *oregonlive.com*, June 23, 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Jenkins, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* 250-51.

<sup>74</sup> John McPhee, *The Curve of Binding Energy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974, 195-97.

<sup>75</sup> Graham Allison, “Must We Wait for the Nuclear Morning After?” *Washington Post*, April 30, 1995.

But, notes the *New York Times*' Bill Keller, 9/11 turned "a theoretical possibility into a felt danger," giving "our nightmares legs," and by 2003, John Negroponte, the American ambassador to the United Nations, had come to the conclusion that "There is a high probability that within two years al-Qaeda will attempt an attack using a nuclear or other weapon of mass destruction."<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, Allison, unabashed by the utter failure of his 1995 prediction, recalculated and declared in 2004 that "It is my considered judgment that on the current path, a nuclear terrorist attack on America in the decade ahead is more likely than not."<sup>77</sup> Michael Scheuer declared on CBS' *60 Minutes* on November 14, 2004, that nuclear terrorism was "probably a near thing." Some 85 foreign policy experts polled by Senator Richard Lugar in 2004 and 2005 suggested on average that was a 29 percent likelihood a nuclear explosion would occur somewhere in the world within the next ten years, and overwhelmingly they anticipated that this would likely be carried out by terrorists, not by a government.<sup>78</sup> And in 2007, physicist Richard Garwin put the likelihood of a nuclear explosion on an American or European city by terrorist or other means at 20 percent per year which would work out to 87 percent over a ten-year period.<sup>79</sup> There were also repeated, and repeatedly erroneous, rumors about loose nukes that had alarmingly escaped or been stolen from Russian clutches.<sup>80</sup> 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."<sup>81</sup>

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.<sup>82</sup> 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.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Bill Keller, "Nuclear Nightmares," *New York Times Magazine*, May 26, 2002. Negroponte: [www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2003/n0335167.pdf](http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2003/n0335167.pdf).

<sup>77</sup> Graham T. Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe*. New York: Times Books, 2004, 15.

<sup>78</sup> Richard G. Lugar, *The Lugar Study on Proliferation Threats and Responses*. Washington, DC: Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2005, 14-15.

<sup>79</sup> Graham T. Allison (in debate with Michael A. Levi), "How Likely is a Nuclear Terrorist Attack on the United States?" New York: Council on Foreign Relations, April 2007.

<sup>80</sup> John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al Qaeda*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 165-68.

<sup>81</sup> Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, xi.

<sup>82</sup> Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida's Quest for Weapons of Mass Destruction: The History behind the Hype*. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008, 35-36.

<sup>83</sup> For the extended argument that the likelihood of atomic terrorism is vanishingly small, see John

If the miscreants in the American cases were unable to create and set off even the most simple forms of conventional bombs (not including, of course, the fake bombs helpfully supplied many of them by the FBI), 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 one exception, none ever even seems to have dreamed of the prospect. And the exception is Jose Padilla 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 make himself into a human centrifuge by swinging the pail around in great arcs.<sup>84</sup>

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 set them off. Thus far, the talent pool appears to be, to put mildly, very thin.

### **WMD: definitional absurdity**

Many of those arrested for terrorism in the United States 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 or two in a trash bin. This is the result of a patently absurd legal expansion of the concept of “weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>85</sup>

The concept 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.<sup>86</sup>

Then in 1992 the phrase was explicitly rendered into American law to include those weapons, but in the process of codification the definition was absurdly 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. Included as well, it seems, would be a maliciously-designed toy rocket even if it doesn't have a warhead as well as a missile-propelled firecracker if its detonators intended it to be a weapon.

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

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Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, chs. 12-15. See also Jenkins, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?*

<sup>84</sup> Graff, *Threat Matrix*, 366.

<sup>85</sup> 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](http://www.foreignpolicy.com), July 7, 2009; David C. Rapoport, “Terrorists and Weapons of the Apocalypse,” *National Security Studies Quarterly*, 5(1) Summer 1999: 49–67; Peter Bergen, “WMD terrorism fears are overblown,” [cnn.com](http://cnn.com), December 5, 2008; Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 11-15.

<sup>86</sup> On this issue, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 11-13.

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.<sup>87</sup>

### **Additional definitional absurdity**

There is absurdity as well in the pompous concepts of “critical infrastructure” and “key resources” that are constantly applied to elements that, by any sensible criterion, are neither.

Applying common sense English about what “critical infrastructure” could be taken to mean, it should be an empty category. If any element in the infrastructure is truly “critical” to the operation of the country, steps should be taken immediately to provide redundancies or backup systems so that it is no longer so. An official definition designates “critical infrastructure” to include “the assets, systems, and networks, whether physical or virtual, so vital to the United States that their incapacitation or destruction would have a debilitating effect on security, national economic security, public health or safety, or any combination thereof.”<sup>88</sup> Yet vast sums of money are spent under the program to protect elements of the infrastructure whose incapacitation would scarcely be “debilitating” and would at most impose minor inconvenience and quite limited costs.

And the same essentially holds for what DHS designates as “key resources.” These are defined to be those that are “essential to the minimal operations of the economy or government.”<sup>89</sup> It is difficult to imagine what a terrorist group armed with anything less than a massive thermonuclear arsenal could do to hamper such “minimal operations.” The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were by far the most damaging in history, yet, even though several major commercial buildings were demolished, both the economy and government continued to function at considerably above the “minimal” level.

The very phrase, “homeland security,” contains aspects of a similar inflation in its suggestion that that the essential security of the entire country is at stake. In Canada, the comparable department is labeled with more accuracy and less drama simply as “public safety.” Given the actual magnitude of the terrorist hazard, the homeland is, as it happens, really quite secure, though there may be justifiable concerns about the public’s safety under some conditions.

### **Multiplying the size of the haystack**

After 9/11, the entire population made itself into something of a surveillance force, and tips have frequently played an important role in police terrorism investigations. Thus a specific tip was crucial in Lackwanna (Case 3), one from a Yemeni grocer eventually led to terrorism arrests in Miami (Case 12), and one from a clerk in a video-duplicating establishment set an investigation going into a potential plot to raid Ft. Dix in New Jersey (Case 15). Sometimes

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<sup>87</sup> Actually, however, the fact that the “weapons of mass destruction” supplied to would-be terrorists in several cases were essentially “redesigned” to be something other than a weapon—i.e. a fake—might make them non-WMDs. The law specifically excludes from the category “any device, although originally designed for use as a weapon, which is redesigned for use as a signaling, pyrotechnic, line throwing, safety, or similar device.” If defense lawyers have tried to exploit this potential loophole, it apparently hasn’t worked.

<sup>88</sup> Office of Management and Budget, *Analytical Perspectives, Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2011*, Washington, DC, 381.

<sup>89</sup> Department of Homeland Security, *National Infrastructure Protection Plan*, 15n.

people have even effectively made themselves into an active policing force: both the shoe bomber of 2001 (Case 1) and the underwear bomber of 2009 (Case 26) were forcibly and effectively interfered with by crew and passengers when they tried to set off their bombs on airliners. One study conducted by a six-person research team surveyed 68 terrorist plots (both Islamist and non-Islamist) that were foiled in the United States between 1999 and 2009 and found that the “initial clues” were supplied by the public in 29 percent of them (19 or 20).<sup>90</sup>

This surveillance force certainly (and especially) includes the Muslim community. Although the 9/11 conspirators wisely mostly avoided the Muslim community, homegrown terrorists or would-be terrorists, have often foolishly failed to do so. Often they have come out of it—and have been exposed in consequence. In fact, for 48 of the 120 instances in which Muslim-American have been arrested for terrorism and in which the initial source of information has been disclosed, the initiating tip came from the Muslim-American community. Indeed, reports Charles Kurzman, “in some communities, Muslim-American have been so concerned about extremists in their midst that they have turned in people who turned out to be undercover informants.”<sup>91</sup>

However, although informants and tips are important in many cases, there are huge—even absurd—attendant costs of sorting through the haystack of tips, all of which need to be processed in one way or another. (In fact maybe the common metaphor should be advanced: with enough hay, you won’t even be able to find the haystack.) In particular, it does not appear that the prominent “If You See Something, Say Something” counterterrorism hot line run by the New York City police has made any contribution at all. It generates thousands of calls each year—8,999 in 2006 and more than 13,473 in 2007—but not one of these led to a terrorism arrest.<sup>92</sup> This could be taken to suggest that the tipster campaign has been something of a failure. Or perhaps it could be taken to suggest that there isn’t all that much out there to be found. Undeterred by repeated failure, the number of calls then reportedly skyrocketed to 27,127 in 2008 before settling down some in 2009 to 16,191. That comes to 44 each day for the year, more than twice a decade’s worth of success stories trumpeted in the six-person survey.<sup>93</sup> For its part, the FBI celebrated the receipt of its 2 millionth terrorism tip from the public in August 2008, though there seem to be no public information on whether these tips proved in general to be more useful than those supplied to the New York police.<sup>94</sup>

It turns out that New York has received a trademark on its snappy slogan from the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, and it has been willing to grant permission for its use by other organizations. However, it has refused permission sometimes because, according to a spokesman, “The intent of the slogan is to focus on terrorism activity, not crime, and we felt that use in other spheres would water down its effectiveness.” Since it appears that the slogan has

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<sup>90</sup> Kevin Strom, John Hollywood, Mark Pope, Garth Weintraub, Crystal Daye, Don Gemeinhardt, *Building on Clues: Examining Successes and Failures in Detecting U.S. Terrorist Plots, 1999-2009*, Institute for Homeland Security Solutions, October 2010, 12.

<sup>91</sup> Charles Kurzman, *Muslim-American Terrorist Since 9/11: An Accounting*, Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, February 2, 2011.

<sup>92</sup> William Neuman, “In Response to M.T.A.’s ‘Say Something’ Ads, a Glimpse of Modern Fears,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2008.

<sup>93</sup> Manny Fernandez, “A Phrase for Safety After 9/11 Goes Global,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2010.

<sup>94</sup> Donna Leinwand, “Psst--Leads from Public to FBI Rise,” *USA Today*, August 15, 2008.



been *completely* ineffective at dealing with its supposed focus, terrorism, any watering down would appear, not to put too fine a point on it, impossible. In consequence, the irreverent may be led to wondering whether the \$2 million to \$3 million New York pays each year (much of it coming from grants from the federal government) to promote and publicize the hotline is perhaps not the wisest investment of taxpayer dollars.<sup>95</sup>

Those grants are likely to keep coming: 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.<sup>96</sup>

### **The creation of witches and terrorists**

The police seem increasingly to be getting better at creating terrorists.<sup>97</sup> The process involves finding some Muslim hothead and linking him up with an informant who encourages the hotheadedness and eventually reveals that he just happens to have a unused truck bomb available in his garage. When the hothead takes possession of the weapon or, more commonly of late, plants it near his target and then presses a phony detonator button, he is arrested (see, in particular, Cases 14, 15, 18, 22, 23, 29, 31, 33). 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 would never have gotten around to much of anything without the inventive, elaborate, and costly sting efforts of the police.

An interesting, if not entirely fair, comparison is with the creation of witches in Europe.<sup>98</sup> Between about 1480 and 1680, hundreds of thousands of people, the vast majority of them women, were executed, mostly by being burned at the stake, after they had confessed, generally under torture, to such crimes as, in Steven Pinker's enumeration, "eating babies, wrecking ships, destroying crops, flying on broomsticks on the Sabbath, copulating with devils, transforming their demon lovers into cats and dogs, and making ordinary men impotent by convincing them that they had lost their penises."<sup>99</sup> For example, notes Hugh Trevor-Roper, one square in a German town "looked like a little forest, so crowded were the stakes," and during an eight year reign one prince-bishop "burnt 900 persons, including his own nephew, nineteen Catholic priests, and children of seven who were said to have had intercourse with demons."<sup>100</sup>

A few people tried to debunk the process—and some were tortured and executed themselves because of such heresy. However, one who succeeded in changing at least some

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<sup>95</sup> Fernandez, "A Phrase for Safety After 9/11 Goes Global."

<sup>96</sup> Spencer S. Hsu, "Security Chief Urges 'Collective Fight' Against Terrorism," *Washington Post*, July 29, 2009.

<sup>97</sup> See also Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism;" Schneier, "Portrait of the Modern Terrorist;" Trevor Aaronson, "The Informants," *Mother Jones*, October 2011, 30-43.

<sup>98</sup> On this issue, see also John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "Witches, Communists, and Terrorists: Evaluating the Risks and Tallying the Costs," *ABA Human Rights Magazine*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Winter 2011, 18-20. For a comparison of the quest for domestic terrorists with the quest for domestic Communists during the Cold War, see Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*, 185-91.

<sup>99</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking, 2011.

<sup>100</sup> Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and Other Essays*. New York, Harper & Row, 1960, 154, 156.

minds was, as Pinker continues, an Italian judge who “killed his mule, accused his servant of the misdeed, and had him subjected to torture, whereupon the man confessed to the crime and refused to recant on the gallows for fear of being tortured again.”<sup>101</sup>

In Scotland, 50 witches were created and executed per year, whereas in England the number was only five.<sup>102</sup> The usual explanation for this discrepancy is that torture was used in Scotland and not in England, though there are those who might be inclined to think that Scotland (the setting for Shakespeare’s witch-play, “Macbeth”) simply attracted more witches because its climate is more conducive to broomstick riding and cauldron bubbling and dark orgies.

Although this suggests contemporary police would be able to create more terrorists if they had torture in their bag of tricks, it is impressive that in England, without using torture at all, authorities were able to get five people a year to confess, at the known consequent loss of their own lives, to the usual litany of impossible crimes.

There are no accusations in any of the American cases that the authorities used torture to create terrorists.<sup>103</sup> However, the self-interested efforts of the FBI informants did clearly have 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 was set among the gullible.<sup>104</sup> Interestingly, as noted earlier, the informant usually seems to have been considerably older than the informed-upon, and there is 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. In several instances (Cases 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 22, 23, 29, 31, 33), it is highly questionable whether the created terrorists, if left to their own devices, would have ever done anything violent at all. But, then again, some of them might have, and there is no way to determine which ones.

Plea bargaining is not, technically speaking, a form of torture. But 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.<sup>105</sup> Also on their side are judges who, in fear of terrorism, are

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<sup>101</sup> Pinker, *Better Angels of Our Nature*.

<sup>102</sup> Trevor-Roper, *European Witch-Craze*, 162n2.

<sup>103</sup> However, sleep-deprivation is not usually considered torture, but it was a common, and most successful, method applied during the witch craze. Notes Trevor-Roper, “nothing was so effective as the *tormentum insomniae*, the torture or artificial sleeplessness which has been revived in our own day. Even those who were stout enough to resist the *estrapade* [‘a pulley which jerked the body violently in mid-air’] would yield to a resolute application of this slower but more certain torture, and confess themselves to be witches.” *European Witch-Craze*, 120-21.

<sup>104</sup> 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’ Terrorists;” Charlie Savage, “F.B.I. Casts Wide Net Under Relaxed Rules for Terror Inquiries, Data Show,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2011.

<sup>105</sup> 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, it has greatly added to the prosecution’s plea bargaining arsenal in many cases.

anxious to set deterring examples. Moreover, as Jenkins puts it, “juries comprised of frightened citizens do not always reach unbiased verdicts.”<sup>106</sup>

### **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.”<sup>107</sup> This is not at all new (nor does Jenkins say it is), but by any standard—except those embraced by those in charge—it is logically far less threatening than the large conspiracies and sustained attacks once envisioned, or anticipated, to be the norm.

Jenkins also stresses that the number of homegrown Islamist terrorists is “tiny,” representing in his collection of 46 cases 125 people, or one out of every 30,000 Muslims in the United States. This “very low level” of recruitment, continues Jenkins, finds very little support in the Muslim community at large: “they are not Mao’s guerrillas swimming in a friendly sea.”<sup>108</sup> Indeed, as noted earlier, the Muslim community has acted as an extensive anti-terrorism surveillance force. In the meantime, other researchers calculated in early 2010, Muslim extremists have been responsible for one fiftieth of one percent of the homicides committed in the United States since 9/11.<sup>109</sup>

Yet, although there has been something of a tapering-off of official alarmism, at least with respect to a large-scale, well-organized attack like 9/11, concern and fear within the public did not really decline in the years after 9/11 as Figure 1 documents.

Some of this may be due to the fact that officials have rolled with the punch and have been quite adept at stoking fear even though almost no Islamic extremist attacks whatever have taken place. One stratagem is to apply the absurd logic, discussed earlier, that although the likelihood of a large-scale organized attack is diminished, the continued danger of a small-scale disorganized attack means that the terrorist threat is somehow higher than at any time since 9/11.

Moreover, failed plots can seem, or can to 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.<sup>110</sup> Thus, one would-be terrorist planned in 2008 to set off four suicide bombs on the New York subway (Case 21). Various experts, including the Attorney General of the United States, opined that the attack, if successfully pulled off, might kill between 200 and 500.<sup>111</sup> 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 potentially have killed more if, in the first case, the bombs had been placed differently or, in the second, if the bombs had been constructed properly. However, since we know how many they

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<sup>106</sup> Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors*, 10.

<sup>107</sup> Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors*, 13.

<sup>108</sup> Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors*, 4-5.

<sup>109</sup> Schanzer et al., “Anti-Terror Lessons,” 16.

<sup>110</sup> See also Schneier, “Portrait of the Modern Terrorist.”

<sup>111</sup> 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.

actually killed, it is that number, not an imagined one, that ought to be the basis of comparison. There were also extravagant death tallies imagined for the transatlantic airliner plot of 2006 (Case 13).

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 12). 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 (though they presumably could have tried to kick the tower down with the new boots they had been recently issued by the ever-helpful FBI), and so this desire is not taken seriously even though the plot is generally known as the Sears Tower case. That sort of reasonable reticence should be applied more broadly for aborted or foiled plots of destruction.

Part of the persistent alarm, particularly as compared to that generated by other terrorist groups, stems 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 the traumatic experience of 9/11.

Fear has also been notably maintained since 9/11 by the popularity and the often knee-jerk acceptance of the notion that terrorists will eventually (or even soon) get weapons that can kill massively and then gleefully set them off in an American city, an issue discussed earlier.

### **The spending bonanza**

Perhaps the ultimate absurdity, however, is the one played on the taxpayers. Since 9/11, expenditures on domestic homeland security alone—that is, excluding overseas expenditures as on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—have expanded by a total of over \$1 trillion.<sup>112</sup> This, even though a reasonable assessment of the capacities of the small number of would-be terrorists would suggest that the problem or threat presented by domestic terrorism scarcely justifies such great alarm and such massive expenditure.

Compounding this absurdity is the fact that, according to a careful assessment by a committee of the National Academy of Sciences in 2010, these funds have been expended without any serious analysis of the sort routinely required in other areas of the government. 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.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*, 1-3.

<sup>113</sup> 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; emphasis added. The report does note, however, 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.

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.” After receiving a “steady diet of vague but terrifying information from national security officials,” they note, 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 officials have decided it would gravely harm national security to share such classified information—and because the officials themselves don’t actually know.<sup>114</sup>

Absurdly in all this, 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?”<sup>115</sup>

The extent of the over-spending on domestic homeland security can be assessed by applying the kind of standard cost-benefit and risk-analytic procedures of the sort called for by NAS that have been codified in many international conventions.<sup>116</sup>

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

<sup>114</sup> Dan Priest and William M. Arkin, *Top Secret America: The Rise of the New American Security State*. New York: Little Brown, 2011, xviii-xix, 103.

<sup>115</sup> For an extended discussion, see Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*.

<sup>116</sup> Such as the International Organization for Standardization standard, *Risk Management—Principles and Guidelines* ISO 31000–2009, AS4360–2004, Geneva, Switzerland, 2009. For a much more extensive application and discussion of this approach, see Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*.

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 *reduction of risk* of 50 percent or .50. The *benefit* of the safety measures, applying the previous equation to this example, would then be \$5 million  $\times$  .20  $\times$  .50, or \$500,000.

One would then need to compare this with the *cost* of the risk reduction measures. Included in this consideration would be not only the costs of erecting the road signs or the barrier but also indirect ones—for example, before the changes were made, the vast majority of cars were able to negotiate the curve without mishap, and to shift the speed limit on a road introduces a degree of complexity that might itself increase the danger of an accident. If the cost of the risk-reduction measures, all things considered, were less than \$500,000 per year, the benefits would outweigh the costs, and the measures would be deemed cost-effective.

This same approach can be used in a “break-even analysis” to calculate how many 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 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.<sup>117</sup>
2. 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.
3. 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

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<sup>117</sup> 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*, 263.

many other expenditures including those incurred by the private sector, opportunity costs, and the costs of the terror-related wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

4. We deal with the consequences of an attack something like the car bomb attempt at Times Square in 2009 which might have been able to do about \$100 million in damage.

For an enhanced security cost of \$75 billion, losses sustained set at \$100 million, and the 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

$$\$75 \text{ billion} / [\$100 \text{ million} \times .45] = 1667$$

That is, for enhanced U.S. expenditures on homeland security to be deemed cost-effective under our approach—which substantially biases the consideration toward the opposite conclusion—they would have to deter, prevent, foil, or protect against as many as 1,667 otherwise successful attacks roughly like the one on Times Square every year. That would be more than four per day.

That, it would appear, neatly supplies us with something like the ultimate absurdity.

### **Final ruminations**

Brian Jenkins: Needless alarm, exaggerated portrayals of the terrorist threat, unrealistic expectations of a risk-free society, and unreasonable demands for absolute protection will only encourage terrorists' ambitions to make America fibrillate in fear and bankrupt itself with security.<sup>118</sup>

Glenn Carle: Our own atavistic reflexes and errors are the deepest failure of 9/11, not the attacks themselves, because although we sometimes must suffer the deeds of others, we always must be responsible for our own.<sup>119</sup>

Macbeth: Present fears are less than horrible imaginings.

Lady Macbeth: 'tis the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil.

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<sup>118</sup> Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors*, 13.

<sup>119</sup> Carle, *Interrogator*, 296.

Table 1: 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

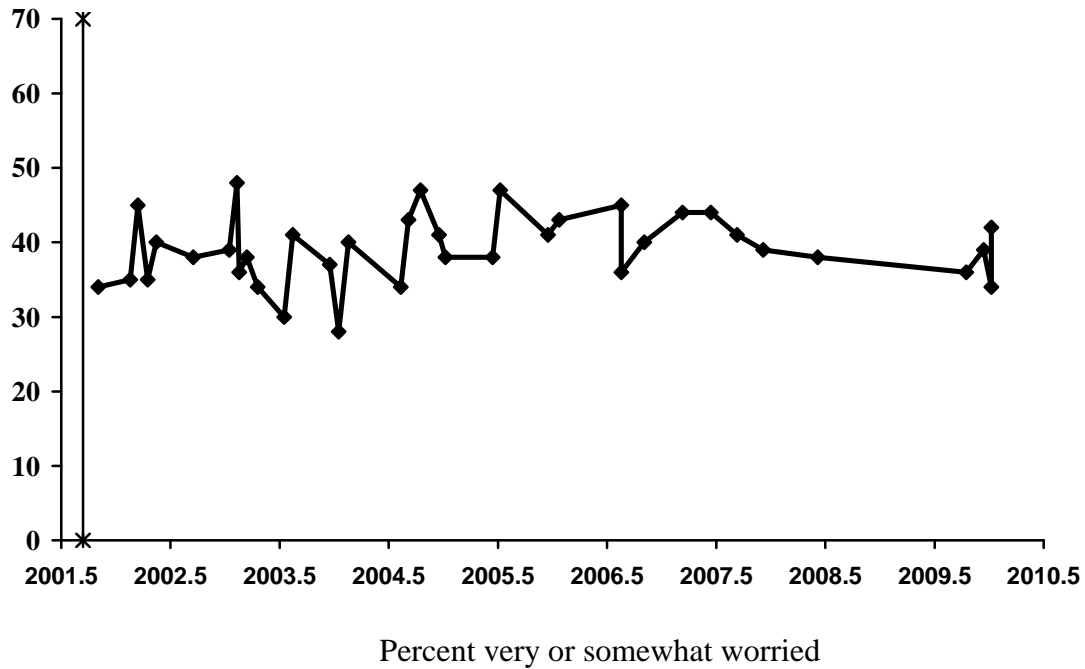
As for the delay in carrying out similar operations in America, this was not due to failure to breach your security measures. Operations are under preparation, and you will see them on your own ground once they are finished, God willing.—Osama bin Laden, January 2006

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

Sources: see Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*, 36.



Figure 1: WORRY ABOUT TERRORISM SINCE 9/11



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