

Finally Talking Terror Sensibly

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Stewart, Benjamin H. Friedman | May 24, 2013





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In one respect at least, the reaction to the Boston Marathon bombings was commendably restrained. A number of commentators across the political spectrum have tried to put the danger in context and argued that the best way to undermine terrorism is to avoid being frightened by it.

To be sure there were some overwrought responses by public officials. The Federal Aviation Administration [established](#) a no-fly zone over the bombing site, San Francisco [banned back packs](#) at crowded events, and tourists near the White House were [backed off](#) an additional 40 yards.

And a few pundits immediately began making extravagant claims about the relevance of the attacks. The *New York Daily News* [proclaimed](#) that the Boston bombs “once [again](#) blew up the idea that any of us will ever be safe again,” and *The National Journal*’s Ron Fournier [claimed](#) that the bombing “makes every place (and everybody) less secure.”

Yet for pretty much the first time there has been a considerable

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amount of media commentary seeking to put terrorism in context—commentary that concludes, as a Doyle McManus article in the *Los Angeles Times* [put it](#) a day after the attack, “We’re safer than we think.”

Similar tunes were sung by [Tom Friedman](#) of the *New York Times*, [Jeff Jacoby](#) of the *Boston Globe*, [David Rothkopf](#) writing for CNN.com, [Josh Barro](#) at Bloomberg, [John Cassidy](#) at the *New Yorker*, and [Steve Chapman](#) in the *Chicago Tribune*, even as the *Washington Post* [told us](#) “why terrorism is not scary” and published statistics on its rarity. Bruce Schneier, who has been making these arguments for over a decade, [got 360,000 hits](#) doing so [for The Atlantic](#). Even neoconservative [Max Boot](#), a strong advocate of the war in Iraq as a response to 9/11, argues in the *Wall Street Journal*, “we must do our best to make sure that the terrorists don’t achieve their objective—to terrorize us.”

James Carafano of the conservative [Heritage Foundation](#) noted in [a radio interview](#) that “the odds of you being killed by a terrorist are less than you being hit by a meteorite.” Carafano’s odds may be a bit off, but his basic point isn’t. At [present rates](#), an American’s chance of being killed by a terrorist is about one in 3.5 million per year—compared, for example, to a yearly chance of dying in an [automobile](#) crash of one in 8,200. That could change, of course, if terrorists suddenly become vastly more capable of inflicting damage—as much commentary on terrorism has predicted over the past decade. But we’re not hearing much of that anymore.

In a *60 Minutes* [interview](#) a decade ago filmmaker Michael Moore noted, “The chances of any of us dying in a terrorist incident is very, very, very small.” Bob Simon, his interlocutor, responded, “No one sees the world like that.”

Both statements were pretty much true then. However, the unprecedented set of articles projecting a more restrained, and

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broader, perspective suggests that Simon's wisdom may need some updating, and that Moore is beginning to have some company.

When evaluating post-9/11 U.S. counterterrorism policy, including the increase of over \$1 trillion on domestic homeland-security spending, the starting question has typically been the wrong one: "are we safer?" Instead, reflected in the new commentary, it should have been "how safe are we?" Or, as risk analyst Howard Kunreuther put it in 2002, "How much should we be willing to pay for a small reduction in probabilities that are already extremely low?"

The beginnings of an adult reaction to the Boston attacks in the media suggest that politicians and policymakers might safely start to ask Kunreuther's question. In doing so they would be following the lead of New York mayor Michael Bloomberg who declaimed in 2007, "Get a life. You have a much greater danger of being hit by lightning than being struck by a terrorist."

Thus far, that has been just about the only instance in which an official has said such a thing, and Bloomberg received quite a bit of flack for the remark at the time. But politicians should note that he was still handily reelected two years later.

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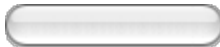
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