Witches, Communists, and Terrorists Evaluating the Risks and Tallying the Costs

By John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart

The risk from terrorism, like that from witches and domestic Communists in the past, has been massively exaggerated, but it has only very rarely been explained or even examined by those who are appalled at the security system those exaggerations have spawned.

In contrast, as with the hunts for witches and Communists, the chief challenge to the domestic counterterrorism system in the United States is at what might be called the "periphery." Thus, concerns are raised about prosecutorial misconduct, the potential entrapment or misidentification of suspects, and the legality of the Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, detention facility. These are entirely legitimate concerns, of course, but ones likely to be ineffective in front of judges anxious to set deterring sentences and juries composed of frightened citizens.

No defense of civil liberties is likely to be terribly effective as long as people believe the threat from terrorism is massive, even existential. To undo, or even modify, the security system that has burgeoned in the United States during the last ten years, those who oppose it must attack not simply the consequences of the system, but also the premise that furnishes its essential engine.

"Threats" of the Past

Between about 1480 and 1680, hundreds of thousands of people, the vast majority of them women, were executed in Europe, mostly by being burned at the stake. This took place after they had confessed, generally (but not always) under torture, to such crimes as eating babies, flying on broomsticks, and copulating with devils. Notes historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (in The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (1969)), 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."

During this long period, a few people tried to debunk the process—and some were tortured and executed themselves because of such heresy. But their attacks on it were ineffectual because they went after the consequences of the system, not its premise: that witches exist and that they are a key element in an ongoing battle on earth between God and the Devil.

Let us flash forward. In his fascinating 2000 book *Communazis*, Alexander Stephan describes the U.S. government's surveillance of a group of émigré writers during and after World War II. None was found to pose much of a subversive threat, and the surveillance never led to real persecution—indeed, few of the writers noticed they were being watched. Instead, what impresses Stephan is the essential absurdity of the situation, as huge numbers of government employees intercepted and catalogued communications, meticulously recorded comings and goings, and sifted enterprisingly through trash bins, exhibiting a "combination of high efficiency with grotesque overkill"—and all, of course, "at taxpayers' expense."

At the time, critics of this process, like those for the witch craze, focused almost entirely on the potential for civil liberties violations. But no one, it seems, attacked the premise of the system—that Communists were everywhere and posed a severe threat. More specifically, at no point during the Cold War does it appear that anyone said in public "many domestic Communists adhere to a foreign ideology that ultimately has as its goal the destruction of capitalism and democracy and by violence if necessary; however, they do not present much of a danger, are actually quite a pathetic bunch, and couldn't subvert their way out of a wet paper bag. Why are we expending so much time, effort, and treasure over this issue?"

In fact, despite huge anxieties about it at the time, there seem to have been few, if any, instances in which domestic Communists engaged in anything that could be considered espionage after the Second World War. Moreover, at no time did any domestic Communist ever commit anything that could be considered violence in support of the cause.

Nonetheless, the fear of domestic Communism and the consequent costly anti-Communist surveillance system persisted for decades. Thus, in 1972, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in full perpetual motion mode opened 65,000 new files as part of its costly quest to ferret out Communists in the United States. The pursuit died out only when international Communism collapsed at the end of the Cold War.

Terrorist Risks Assessed

Something comparable has now hap-

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pened for the terrorist threat, and key to its dynamic is that Americans apparently continue to remain unimpressed by several inconvenient facts:

1. There have been no al-Qaeda attacks whatsoever in the United States since 2001.

2. No true al-Qaeda cell (nor scarcely anybody who might even be deemed to have a "connection" to the diabolical group) has been unearthed in the country.

3. Since 9/11, the number of homicides committed by Muslim extremists within the United States represents one-fiftieth of 1 percent of the total.

4. The homegrown "plotters" who have been apprehended, while perhaps potentially somewhat dangerous at least in a few cases, have mostly been flaky or almost absurdly incompetent.

5. The total number of people killed worldwide by al-Qaeda types, maybes, and wannabes outside of war zones since 9/11 stands at some 300 or so a year (smaller than the yearly number of bathtub drownings in the United States alone).

6. Unless the terrorists are able somehow massively to increase their capacities (and, if anything, attacks have declined in intensity and sophistication), the likelihood a person in the United States will perish at the hands of an international terrorist over an eighty-year period is about one in 85,000 (as compared to one in 100 for perishing in an automobile crash).

Instead, the public has chosen, it appears, to wallow in what philosopher Leif Wenar has labeled a false sense of insecurity. Accordingly, the public will presumably continue to demand that its leaders pay due deference to its insecurities and will uncritically approve as huge sums of money are shelled out in a quixotic and often mostly symbolic effort to assuage those insecurities.

Accordingly, agencies like the FBI have redirected much of their effort from such unglamorous enterprises as dealing with organized crime and white-collar embezzlement to focus primarily on the terrorist threat. Like their predecessors during the quests to quash witchery and domestic Communism, they have dutifully and laboriously assembled masses of intelligence data and have pursued an endless array of leads. Almost all of this activity has led nowhere, but it will continue because, of course, no one wants to be the one whose neglect somehow leads to "another 9/11."

Despite the importance of a responsible policy of seeking to communicate risk, and despite the costs of irresponsible fear-mongering, 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 is a bit off the mark, but roughly sound.

Or, put more broadly, the continual question, "are we safer?" is never answered with: "At present rates, your chances of being killed by a terrorist are about one in 3.5 million per year; how much safer do you want to be?"

Instead, the fear of terrorism, stoked during the George W. Bush administration and still promoted under Barack Obama, goes almost completely unexamined by pundits and the press. In 2008, then Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff uttered the bizarre, if exquisitely nuanced, observation to a couple of reporters that the threat from terrorism is "a significant existential" one. And at a recent press conference, current Homeland Security chief Janet Napolitano opaquely announced that, though 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 higher than at any time since 9/11. Neither contention prompted skeptical query from their rapt auditors.

The point is not that there is nothing to find, but that excesses can only be reduced if the internalized hysteria about terrorism is substantially dampened. If people have come to believe that the chance every year of being killed by a terrorist is dangerously high (rather than one in 3.5 million), they are unlikely to be moved by concerns about Miranda rights.

In addition to a sensible assessment of the limited risk terrorism presents, there ought to be a systematic effort to evaluate the costs of homeland security spending.

These costs, like those entailed in the hunts for witches and domestic Communists, have become massive. Tallying the expenditures on domestic homeland security and adding in opportunity costs—but leaving out related overseas costs such as those entailed by the terrorism-induced wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—the increase in expenditures on domestic homeland security during the past decade exceeds $1 trillion. As author Alexander Stephan might amazedly suggest, taxpayers really ought to take note.

But no one has really been doing so, something noted in a 2010 report of the National Academy of Sciences that assesses the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Unable to "find any DHS risk analysis capabilities and methods that are yet adequate for supporting DHS decision making" on terrorism, it notes that "little effective attention was paid to the features of the risk problem that are fundamental." This is particularly impressive because, as the report also notes, risk and cost-benefit analyses of *natural* hazards conducted within the same department are state of the art.

Overall, it seems, security concerns that happen to rise to the top of the agenda are serviced without much in the way of full evaluation—security trumps economics, as one insider puts it—and such key issues as acceptable risk are rarely discussed while extravagant worst-case scenario thinking dominates, and frequently savagely distorts,

the discussion. Management, as the president of the RAND Corporation has suggested, is "by inbox."

Homeland Security Costs Examined

It is clearly time to examine the massive increases in homeland security expenditures (increases mainly, of course, impelled by escalated concerns about terrorism) in a careful and systematic way. This would involve applying the kind of analytic risk management approaches emphasizing cost-benefit analysis and determinations of acceptable and unacceptable risks that are routinely required of other governmental agencies and that have been standard coin for policy decision making for decades throughout the world when determining regulations and expenditures. These approaches have been successfully applied even in such highly charged and politicized decisions as those regarding where to situate nuclear power plants, how to dispose of toxic waste, and how to control pollution.

When these standard procedures are applied, it is discovered in order for enhanced U.S. expenditures on homeland security to be deemed cost-effective, they would have had to deter, prevent, foil, or protect against 1,667 otherwise successful car bomb attacks (something like the one attempted on Times Square in 2010) per year, or more than four per day. And it appears that the protection of a standard office-type building would be cost-effective only if the likelihood of a sizable terrorist attack on the building is a thousand times greater than it is at present. Something similar holds for the protection of bridges. On the other hand, hardening cockpit doors on airliners may be cost-effective, though the provision for air marshals on the planes is decidedly not.

Not only has the DHS failed to do such standard and straight-forward analyses of risks and costs, but it also has at times ignored calls by other government agencies to do so. In 2010, the department began deploying full-body scanners at airports, a technology that will cost $1.2 billion per year. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) *specifically* declared that conducting a cost-benefit analysis of this new technology to be "important." As far as the authors can tell, no such study was conducted (in our analysis, the cost-effectiveness of the technology is questionable at best). Or there was GAO's request that the DHS conduct a full cost-benefit analysis of the extremely costly process of scanning 100 percent of U.S.-bound containers. To do so would require the dedicated work of a few skilled analysts for a few months or possibly a year. Yet, the DHS replied that, although it agreed that such a study would help "frame the discussion and better inform Congress," to actually carry it out "would place significant burdens on agency resources."

In the end, one might darkly suspect, such evasions are grasped because, if realistic probabilities that a given target would be struck by terrorists were multiplied into the risk calculation and if the costs of protection from unlikely threats were sensibly calculated following standard procedures, it would be found that a vast amount of money has been misspent.

Politicians and bureaucrats do, of course, face considerable political pressure on the terrorism issue. However, although political pressures may force actions and expenditures that are unwise, they usually do not precisely dictate the level of expenditure. Thus, although there are public demands to "do something" about terrorism, nothing in that demand specifically necessitates removing shoes in airport security lines, requiring passports to enter Canada, spreading bollards like dandelions, or making a huge number of buildings into forbidding fortresses.

The United Kingdom, which seems to face an internal threat from terrorism that is considerably greater than that for the United States, appears nonetheless to spend proportionately much less than half as much on homeland security, and the same holds for Canada and Australia. Yet politicians and bureaucrats there do not seem to suffer threats to their positions or other political problems because of it.

And while political and public pressure furnish an understandable excuse for expending money, it is not a valid one: It does not relieve officials of the responsibility of seeking to expend public funds wisely. This is particularly the case in matters of public safety—domestic tranquility—the most fundamental function of government. To adopt measures that protect people at high cost while neglecting ones that may save far more lives at far lower cost is irresponsible, even immoral. And to do so without applying standard evaluative aids to decision making that have been developed and used in other areas for decades is even more so.

To be irrational with your own money may be to be foolhardy, to give in to guilty pleasure, or to wallow in caprice. But to be irrational with other people's money is to be irresponsible, to betray an essential trust. In the end, it becomes a dereliction of duty that cannot be justified by political pressure, bureaucratic constraints, or emotional drives.

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