

RISK, REACTION, ELITE CUES, AND PERCEIVED THREAT IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

John Mueller
Ohio State University and Cato Institute
August 14, 2018

Prepared for presentation at the
Annual Convention of the American Political Science Association
Boston, Massachusetts, August 30, 2018

John Mueller
Senior Research Scientist, Mershon Center for International Security Studies
Adjunct Professor, Department of Political Science
Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43201

Cato Senior Fellow, Cato Institute
1000 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20001

politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/
+1 614 247-6007
bbbb@osu.edu

ABSTRACT: James Risen is certainly correct to observe that “fear sells.” However, not all fear- or threat- or risk-selling finds a receptive audience. As they sort through products on display, people pick and choose which threats to be afraid of. Americans have bought the terrorism threat, but at the same time they have been unaffected by those who wish them to find risk in genetically modified food, and a great many have remained substantially unmoved by warnings about global warming. Thus leaders, elites, and the media may propose, but that doesn’t mean people will necessarily buy the message. And on the occasions when they do, it is probably best to conclude that the message has struck a responsive chord, rather than that the public has been manipulated. Ideas are like commercial products. Some become embraced by the customers; indeed, some even go viral. However most, no matter how well packaged or promoted, fail to ignite acceptance or even passing interest.

This paper assesses the process as seen in the public’s reaction to three salient events: the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the rise of ISIS, and the runup to, and execution of, the Iraq War of 2003 (with some comparisons with the Gulf War of 1991). In general, it finds that the public is not very manipulable on such salient issues—the impetus is pretty much bottom up. After a fear about a risk has been clearly embraced by the public, leaders, elites, and the media will find more purchase in servicing it than in seeking to deflate it.

James Risen is certainly correct to observe that “fear sells.”¹ However, H. L. Mencken pushes too far when he says “The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins.”² Not all efforts to sell fear—or risk or threat—find a receptive audience. As they sort through products on display, people pick and choose what threats to be scared of. Americans have bought the terrorism threat, but at the same time they have been unaffected by those who wish them to fear genetically modified food, and a great many have remained substantially unmoved by warnings about global warming—even in the face of authoritative, or seemingly authoritative, warnings that sometimes are of apocalyptic proportions.

Ideas are like commercial products. Some become embraced by the customers; indeed, some even go viral. However most, no matter how well packaged or promoted, fail to ignite acceptance or even passing interest. “Build a better mousetrap,” Ralph Waldo Emerson supposedly once said, “and the world will beat a path to your door.” Since the modern mousetrap wasn’t really invented until several years after his death, the statement has understandably been presumed to be apocryphal. Emerson did say something similar about building better chairs or crucibles or church organs however, so whoever manipulated his wording got his essential meaning right. However, the implication of this homely homily is savagely mistaken: that all you have to do is create a better product and people will eagerly snap it up without further effort on your part. In fact, according to John Lienhard, there have been well over 4,400 patents issued for mousetraps in the United States and, although at least *some* of them must represent decided improvements, only a few have made any money.³ Indeed, the failure rate for new products and services is something like 80 to 90 percent.⁴ For high tech start-ups it may well be more like 95 percent.⁵

Moreover, although business acumen, hard work, and diligent application play a role, pure luck is often decisive. John D. Rockefeller did rather well at business, but what differentiated him from his competitors was not so much his skill as a businessman (many of his competitors were also skilled), but the fact that, as biographer Ron Chernow observes, he “benefited from a large dollop of luck in his life.”⁶ In the beginning, Rockefeller poured all his money into petroleum, a speculation most judicious investors considered a “rope of sand”

¹ James Risen, *Pay Any Price: Greed, Power, and Endless War* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2014), 203.

² H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Knopf, 1949), 29.

³ John H. Lienhard, *Inventing Modern: Growing up with X-rays, Skyscrapers, and Tailfins* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴ Kevin J. Clancy and Robert S. Shulman, *Marketing Myths That Are Killing Business: The Cure for Death Wish Marketing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 8, 140.

⁵ Robert X. Cringley, *Accidental Empires: How the Boys of Silicon Valley Make Their Millions, Battle Foreign Competition, and Still Can’t Get A Date* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992), 232.

⁶ Ron Chernow, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* (New York: Random House, 1998), 557. On this issue, see also John Mueller, *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ralph’s Pretty Good Grocery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 49-51. The importance of luck in business is very much stressed in Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011).

because of two “antithetic nightmares”: the oil wells might dry up or much more oil might suddenly be discovered, creating a glut which would cause prices to fall below overhead costs.⁷ Another of what Chernow characterizes as his “colossal gambles” was to invest heavily in some new oil that was almost completely unusable because when burned in kerosene lamps it smelled repellently—“skunk oil,” they called it. Rockefeller simply assumed, correctly as it turned out, that a method could be found to eliminate the smell.⁸ Later he poured money into the Mesabi iron range even though experts in the field like Andrew Carnegie considered the ore useless because it clogged furnaces when heated. Rockefeller gambled—again correctly—that a way could be found to remedy that defect.⁹ And Rockefeller’s truly *great* money was accumulated only after he had retired when someone else happened to invent automobiles with internal combustion engines causing demand for a petroleum waste product, gasoline, to skyrocket.¹⁰ At the same time, however, he made a number of extremely bad, even naive, investments on the stock market that cost him millions.¹¹

As many capitalists have found, a product introduced in March may fail while the same product introduced the next October might succeed. Or someone might gain a crucial advantage simply because of information casually picked up at a cocktail party or because a brother-in-law just happens to know someone who knows someone who is in the right position to help. Or a competitor happens to make an exceptionally foolish decision.

Another example of the process suggests that public relations people, focused on predicting what people will be interested in, are also at the mercy of the whims and caprices of those they are seeking to “manipulate.” Richard Reeves’s book *President Kennedy* came out in 1993. Seeking to imagine a hook for promoting the book, the publisher decided to try to link the Kennedy experience to that of Bill Clinton, an attractive, newsworthy Kennedy admirer who was then in his first year as president. As it happened, the book did come out at a commercially propitious time, but that had nothing to do with Clinton. As luck would have it, the year 1993 just happened to be the 30th anniversary of Kennedy’s assassination and, for some (or no?) reason, this stirred a flurry of interest that helped Reeves’s book sales considerably.¹² By contrast, there was no comparable flurry on the 40th or 50th anniversary, nor had there been one on the 25th. Who knew? Who knows?

Indeed, if extensive purposeful promotion could guarantee acceptance, we’d all be driving Edsels and drinking New Coke. Or, put another way, at any time there are a myriad of ideas swirling around, and anyone who can accurately and consistently anticipate which of these are actually going to turn people on would not be writing about it, but would move to Wall Street to become in very short order the richest person on the planet.¹³

Marketers of ideas may propose, but that doesn’t mean people will necessarily buy the message. And on the occasions when they do, it is probably best to conclude that the message

⁷ Chernow, *Titan*, 101, 133, 284.

⁸ Chernow, *Titan*, 285-288.

⁹ Chernow, *Titan*, 382-385.

¹⁰ Chernow, *Titan*, 343, 556.

¹¹ Chernow, *Titan*, 367-370

¹² Conversation with Reeves.

¹³ See also John Mueller, *War and Ideas: Selected Essays*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), x-xii.

has struck a responsive chord, rather than that the public has been manipulated. Like those seeking to peddle the better mousetrap, those who seek to sell ideas are at the mercy of the whims and caprices of those they are seeking to “manipulate,” and they fail far more often than they succeed.

One example, this one from international relations, may help to explain the dynamic.

A famine in Ethiopia in the mid-1980s inspired great public concern. This has often been taken to have been a media-generated issue because it was only after the famine received prominent coverage in the media that it entered the public’s agenda. But a study by Christopher Bosso suggests a different interpretation. At first the media were reluctant to cover the issue at all because they reckoned this African famine (like other ones) to be a dog-bites-man story. Moreover, the story had received some play, and it had stirred little response, thus suggesting that the customers were not interested. However, going against the journalistic consensus, NBC television decided to do a three-day sequence on the story in October 1984. This inspired a huge public response, whereupon NBC gave it extensive follow-up coverage and its television and print competitors scrambled to get on the bandwagon, deluging their customers with information that, to their surprise, was actually in demand.¹⁴

There is a sense, of course, in which it could be said that NBC led opinion and put the issue on the public’s agenda and that the media “magnified” the event. But the network is constantly doing three-day stories, and this one just happened to catch on. It seems more accurate to say NBC put the issue on the *shelf*—alongside a great many others—and that it was the public that put it on the agenda and demanded the magnification. Ironically, Bosso’s study is published in a book titled *Manipulating Public Opinion*. In a very important sense, it seems clear that in this case the public was manipulating the media, not the other way around.

Much the same holds for political campaigning. As Diana Mutz points out, “the scholarly consensus” on the degree to which campaign advertising shifts votes is that the impact “is marginal at most.”¹⁵ And the efficacy of the bully pulpit has often been found to be much overrated.¹⁶ President George W. Bush found this out when he vigorously tried to sell Social Security reform in the wake of his successful reelection of 2004: the more he tried to sell, the lower support for the idea sank.¹⁷

¹⁴ Christopher Bosso, “Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and the Discovery of Famine in Ethiopia,” in *Manipulating Public Opinion: Essays on Public Opinion as a Dependent Variable*, ed. Michael Margolis and Gary A. Mauser (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks, Cole, 1989), 153-74.

¹⁵ Diana C. Mutz, “The Great Divide: Campaign Media in the American Mind,” *Daedalus*, Fall 2012, 5. Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman, “The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 112, No. 1 (February 2018), 148-66.

¹⁶ George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). See also Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 4; James N. Druckman and Lawrence R. Jacobs, *Who Governs? Presidents, Public Opinion, and Manipulation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), ch. 6.

¹⁷ Gary C. Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 206-18.

As this suggests, the public can be remarkably capricious about which events and information it chooses to be moved by. Some offerings become salient or even go viral.¹⁸ But predicting which ones will do so is, to say the least, an uncertain business.

This paper looks at the public reaction to three episodes that became highly salient: 1) the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 dealing in particular with the fact that initial anxieties about terrorism have persisted; 2) the rise of the vicious insurgent or terrorist group, Islamic State or ISIS, in 2014; and 3) the Iraq War of 2003 with a focus on the degree to which the George W. Bush administration was able to manage public opinion in the run-up to the war and during its course, with some comparisons with public opinion on the Gulf War of 1991.

In general, it finds that the public is not very manipulable on such salient issues—the impetus is pretty much bottom up. The last section of the paper discusses that proposition more fully and broadly.

9/11 and the threat presented by terrorism

Concerns about terrorism erupted after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The number of people who replied “terrorism” when asked the perennial poll question, “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” registered at zero on the day before and 46 percent on the day after.¹⁹ This abrupt change, obviously, was created by the event itself, not by elite cues or authoritative narratives.²⁰

Absence of decline in fear over time

Poll questions specifically focused on terrorism generally find little decline since 2001 in the degree to which Americans voice concern about that hazard. Other issues—particularly economic ones—have often crowded out terrorism as a topic of daily concern.²¹ However, the 9/11 event and the fears it inspired clearly have continued to resonate in the American mind even though, as will be discussed in the next section, there are many reasons to have expected something of an erosion of concern.²²

¹⁸ Examples of the phenomenon for the pre-electronic age concerning national security policy and the waxing and waning of anxiety about nuclear weapons are traced and discussed in John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55-61, compare John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 269; and in John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 27-29.

¹⁹ For data, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 81.

²⁰ For the argument that it was “thanks to a successful narrative project” that al-Qaeda terrorism came to be seen as a “security threat,” see Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*, 25n104.

²¹ On this issue, see Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), ch. 3.

²² For a fuller treatment with much more trend data, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart *Public Opinion and Counterterrorism Policy* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute White Paper, February 20, 2018), from which much of the discussion in this section derives. That paper, in

In general, there have been two patterns. On some questions, concerns about terrorism soared at the time of the 9/11 attacks, dropped to lower levels in subsequent months, but then failed to decline much further in the years thereafter. On other questions, levels of concern tapped at the time of the attacks simply continued, remaining at much the same level over the subsequent decade and a half.²³

The first pattern is shown in the response to the vivid, clear, and personal question displayed in Figure 1. At the time of 9/11, those who professed to be very or somewhat worried that the respondent or a family member might become a victim of terrorism spiked up to around 60 percent. This declined to around 40 percent by the end of 2001, a level that has held ever since. The second pattern is displayed in Figure 2 dealing with a question about the likelihood of another terrorist attack “causing large numbers of American lives to be lost.” The percentage holding such an attack to be very or somewhat likely “in the near future” registered at over 70 percent in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and it was still at that level in late 2013. It spiked even higher at the time of the large terrorist attacks in London in 2005 and in Paris at the end of 2015.

Reasons to have expected a decline

In July 2014, on the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 Commission report, the Commission’s Chair and Vice-Chair voiced concern that “complacency is setting in.” Americans were exhibiting “counterterrorism fatigue” about the “evolving,” “grave,” and “undiminished” danger that, the commissioners insisted, terrorism continued to present, and there was a “waning sense of urgency.”²⁴ However, as suggested in the previous section, there is little evidence from the polls to support such a conclusion.²⁵

turn, revises, updates, and considerably extends material in chapter 2 in Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*. The figures in that book, in that paper, and in this one are also posted at John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Trends in Public Opinion on Terrorism*, July 2, 2018, politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/terrorpolls.pdf where they are routinely updated and embellished. The data are gathered from press releases and reports by the polling agencies, from material posted at pollingreport.com, and from the extensive iPoll collection of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at Cornell University.

²³ See also Brigette L. Nacos, Yaeli Block-Elkon, and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, the Media, and Public Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), ch. 3; Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza, *Whose Rights? Counterterrorism and the Dark Side of American Public Opinion* (New York: Russell Sage 2013), chs. 3, 6.

²⁴ Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, “Today’s Rising Terrorist Threat and the Danger to the United States: Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of *The 9/11 Commission Report*,” Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center, July 2014, 8, 13, 37.

²⁵ At the same time, Americans may have become decidedly wary about getting involved in extended ground wars in the quest to counter terrorism (something the politically-attuned Commissioners did not recommend), and public opinion seems to be poised to accept debacle in the Middle East if there are no direct attacks on Americans. For a discussion, see Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, 57-66.

This is rather surprising because there is reason to have expected that, however traumatic the initial experience of 9/11, concerns and anxieties about terrorism would have begun at least to erode over time.

To begin with, objectively speaking, there is little reason to fear terrorism. On February 16, 2003, filmmaker-provocateur Michael Moore happened to remark that “The chances of any of us dying in a terrorist incident is very, very, very small.” His “60 Minutes” interviewer, Bob Simon, promptly admonished, “But no one sees the world like that.” Remarkably, both statements were true then, and they continue to be so today. The overall probability that an American will be killed by a terrorist (whether Islamist or not) in the United States, with the events of 2001 included in the count, stands at about one in 4 million per year. For the period since 2001, the concern of this paper, the odds are far lower.²⁶

Moreover, nothing remotely comparable to 9/11 has occurred anywhere in the world since then. This, of course, was not the expectation at the time. Reflecting back four years after the event, New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani recalls that “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.”²⁷ However, the 9/11 attack stands out as an aberration.²⁸ Indeed, before or after that day, there has scarcely ever been a terrorist act, in a war zone or outside, that inflicted even one-tenth as much total destruction.

In fact, not only has there been no repeat of 9/11, but international terrorist groups have failed to consummate any attack of any magnitude whatever on American soil—or, for that matter, in the air around it. Indeed, despite extensive fears, no al-Qaeda cells have appeared in the United States. This is impressive, because over two billion foreigners have entered the United States legally since 9/11, and one would think international terrorist groups could have smuggled in a few operatives at least.²⁹

Also relevant is that there have been so few terrorist attacks from any source in the United States. Indeed, since 9/11, Islamist extremist terrorists (none of them directly linked to foreign terrorist groups except in some cases by inspiration) have managed to kill a total of about 100 people in the United States, something like six a year.³⁰ Moreover, homegrown terrorist

²⁶ For an extended array of such comparative data, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Responsible Counterterrorism Policy* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, Policy Analysis No. 755, 2014), 5; Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, 138.

²⁷ Interview by Miles O’Brien and Carol Costello, “Giuliani: ‘Have to Be Relentlessly Prepared,’” *CNN*, July 22, 2005.

²⁸ See John Mueller, “Harbinger or Aberration? A 9/11 Provocation,” *National Interest*, Fall 2002, 45-50; John Mueller, “False Alarms,” *Washington Post*, September 29, 2002, B7; John Mueller, “Blip or Step Function?” paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, February 27, 2003, available at politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/ISA2003.PDF; Russell Seitz, “Weaker Than We Think,” *American Conservative*, December 6, 2004.

²⁹ For a broader assessment of this issue, see Alex Nowrasteh, *Terrorism and Immigration: A Risk Analysis* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, Policy Analysis No. 798, September 13, 2014).

³⁰ John Mueller, ed., *Terrorism Since 9/11: The American Cases* (Columbus: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2018), available at politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/since.html. Half of these (49) were killed in the shooting spree at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in 2016 by

“plotters” who have been apprehended have mostly proved—while perhaps potentially somewhat dangerous at least in a few cases—to be amateurish and almost absurdly incompetent. Brian Jenkins’ summary assessment is apt: “their numbers remain small, their determination limp, and their competence poor.”³¹ And, for the most part, terrorist attacks in the United States have generated little long-term interest. With a very few exceptions, media coverage has generally lasted only a very few days for each.

In addition, there were remarkably few major attacks in other countries in the developed world, particularly during the decade after 2005. One might expect that public concern about terrorism would have shown signs at least of waning over that long interval. But it didn’t.³²

Nor did the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011. That act might have been anticipated to serve as a closure moment, allowing the public to relax a bit on the terrorism issue, but this has not occurred.

Important to the purpose of this paper, official and media alarmism on the issue has declined at least somewhat over the years. To be sure, U.S. government officials have maintained their willingness and ability to stoke fear. For example, when it was announced by counterterrorism officials in 2010 that the “likelihood of a large-scale organized attack” had been reduced, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano rather opaquely explained that this meant that al-Qaeda franchises were now able “to innovate on their own” (presumably continuing to develop small-scale disorganized attacks), with the result that the threat “in some ways” was now the highest it had been since September 11.³³

a private security guard who was trained in the use of firearms. For details, see Mueller, *Terrorism Since 9/11*, case 80.

³¹ Brian Michael Jenkins, *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies: Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States Since 9/11* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2011), 1. See also Bruce Schneier, “Portrait of the Modern Terrorist as an Idiot,” schneier.com, June 14, 2007; Risa Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism in the United States: How Serious Is the Threat?” *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2011), 7-47; John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, “The Terrorism Delusion: America’s Overwrought Response to September 11,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Summer 2012), 81-110; Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, ch. 3; Mueller, *Terrorism Since 9/11*. For evidence that much of the script of the satirical British comedy film, “Four Lions,” reflects reality, see Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, 112-15.

³² Actually, the amount of damage Islamist terrorism has visited anywhere in the world outside war zones has been quite limited. Indeed, the total number of people killed worldwide by al-Qaeda types, maybes, and wannabes outside of war zones for the several years after 9/11 stands at some 300 or so a year—smaller than the yearly number of bathtub drownings in the United States alone (for sources and specific numbers, see Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, 306n4). For later years, the results would likely be comparable although “war zones” in, say, 2013 would include Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Nigeria. Beginning in 2014, the rise of ISIS and its inspirees and associated groups raised these deadly tallies through terrorist acts in places like Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and the Sinai in the Middle East and in France, Belgium, and the United States outside it. In total, the yearly number should perhaps be doubled for those years—but the total number still remains rather small.

³³ Richard A. Serrano, “U.S. Faces ‘Heightened’ Threat Level,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 2011. See also Mitchel D. Silber, “The Mutating al Qaeda Threat: Terrorists Are Adapting

However, official alarmism has actually tapered off in recent years. Ronald Krebs documents a (rather limited) official mellowing of the “war on terror” rhetoric.³⁴ In 2002, intelligence sources informed rapt and uncritical reporters that the number of trained al-Qaeda operatives in the United States was between 2,000 and 5,000.³⁵ We do not hear that anymore. In addition, explicit predictions that the country must brace itself for a large imminent attack, so common in the years after September 11, are rarely heard. Thus in the run-up to the 2004 election, Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge informed us that “extremists abroad are anticipating near-term attacks that they believe will either rival, or exceed, the attacks that occurred in New York and the Pentagon and the fields of Pennsylvania.” And Attorney General John Ashcroft, with FBI Director Robert Mueller standing beside him, announced that “Al Qaeda plans to attempt an attack on the United States in the next few months [with the] specific intention to hit the United States hard.”³⁶ There have also been extravagant assertions by

and Expanding,” *Washington Times*, December 30, 2011. As part of this process, officials have shifted their focus to “homegrown” terrorism with some success, even though this reflects not so much the rise of local would-be terrorists as the abandonment, or the discrediting, of the once widely-accepted official notion that large numbers of non-homegrown terrorists are abroad in the land. See also Peter L. Bergen, *United States of Jihad: Investigating America’s Homegrown Terrorists* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2016), 54. For commentary on the phenomenon, see Heather Mac Donald, “The Ever-Renewing Terror Threat,” *Secular Right*, February 13, 2011; Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism in the United States”; and John Mueller, “Why al Qaeda May Never Die,” *nationalinterest.org*, May 1, 2012.

³⁴ Ronald R. Krebs, “The Rise, Persistence, and Decline of the War on Terror,” in James Burk, ed., *How 9/11 Changed Our Ways of War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 56-85; Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*, 269-75.

³⁵ 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. In a 2007 book, former CIA Director George Tenet says “it was inconceivable to us that Bin Laden had not already positioned people to conduct second, and possibly third and fourth waves of attacks inside the United States,” goes on to assert that “getting people into this country—legally or illegally—was no challenge before 9/11,” and proclaims that “nothing I had learned in the ensuing three years ever led me to believe that our initial working assumption that al-Qa’ida had cells here was wrong.” George Tenet and Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 239. However, the chief architect of the 9/11 attacks had repeatedly confessed under various forms of interrogation that the most difficult part of the scheme had been to infiltrate operatives into the United States. Terry McDermott and Josh Meyer, *The Hunt for KSM: Inside the Pursuit and Takedown of the Real 9/11 Mastermind, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 141. And by the time Tenet wrote his book, the FBI, after exhaustive and frantic investigation, had been unable to find a single true al-Qaeda cell in the country. Brian Ross, “Secret FBI Report Questions Al Qaeda Capabilities: No ‘True’ Al Qaeda Sleeper Agents Have Terrorism Been Found in U.S.” *ABC News*, March 9, 2006. That continues to the present day.

³⁶ Ashcroft neglects to mention this episode in *Never Again*, his 2006 memoirs. On these and other alarms, see John Mueller, “The 9/11 Anniversary: 15 Years of Alarmism—and Counting,” *nationalinterest.org*, September 23, 2016. See also Nacos et al., *Selling Fear*. For an array of

officials that terrorism presents an “existential” threat—or even, in Department of Homeland Security Director Michael Chertoff’s characterization of 2008, a “significant existential” one.³⁷ Though still heard, such proclamations seem to have declined.³⁸ It even seems possible—though it is difficult to be certain—that there has been something of a reduction in concern that terrorists will get weapons of mass destruction, or at least nuclear ones, a major preoccupation for several years after 9/11.³⁹

In addition, media attention to terrorism has generally declined over most of the period since 9/11 although that changed somewhat after the dramatic and attention-arresting rise of ISIS in 2014. The general decline in interest is suggested in the public opinion data as gathered in Figures 1 and 2: polling agencies have substantially reduced the frequency with which they have polled on the terrorism issue over the years.

There are two other reasons to have expected a decline of concern about terrorism.

First, one might have expected that the huge increases in counterterrorism efforts and spending—totaling well over \$1 trillion—might have had some reassuring effect. National Security Agency Director Michael Hayden recalls a dictum he issued two days after 9/11: “We were going to keep America free by making Americans feel safe.”⁴⁰ America has remained free, but the polls strongly suggest it is not because Americans have come to feel safe. And second, it is rather easy to register a change of opinion in polls. Most questions give those polled a response range with gradations that should facilitate a change if one is so inclined. For example, respondents are not obligated to choose between deeming another terrorist attack to be either likely or unlikely. Rather they can go from “very likely” to “somewhat likely” or from “somewhat likely” to “not too likely.” For the most part, they have declined to do so, at least in the aggregate.

Explaining the absence of decline

Several elements in the situation may help to explain this puzzling phenomenon.

such predictions, see John Mueller and Ezra Schricke, *Terror predictions*, 2012, available at politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/PREDICT.PDF.

³⁷ John Mueller and Mark Stewart, “Terrorism poses no existential threat to America. We must stop pretending otherwise,” *theguardian.com*, February 24, 2015. Chertoff: Shane Harris and Stuart Taylor, Jr., “Homeland Security Chief Looks Back, and Forward,” *governmentExecutive.com*, March 17, 2008.

³⁸ Thus, a compilation of alarmist predictions about terrorism has no entry after 2011: Mueller and Schricke, *Terror predictions*. No update has been necessary.

³⁹ It was in 2004 that Harvard’s Graham Allison issued his “considered judgment that on the current path, a nuclear terrorist attack on America in the decade ahead is more likely than not” and former Secretary of Defense William Perry calculated an even chance of a nuclear terror strike within the next six years, while 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. Mueller, “The 9/11 Anniversary: 15 Years of Alarmism—and Counting.” For the antidote, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, chs. 12-15.

⁴⁰ Shane Harris, *The Watchers: The Rise of America’s Surveillance State* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 137.

There is likely to have been a special impact of 9/11. And it is possible that initial alarm was importantly reinforced or reified by the (unrelated) anthrax attacks that followed shortly after.⁴¹ However, if September 11 is an aberration, as it increasingly appears, it would seem to follow that the experience might gradually come to be seen as a tragic irrelevance, not one that fundamentally determines consequent activities, perceptions, planning, and expenditures. But that has not happened.

Anxiety may also derive from the perception that Muslim extremist terrorists, like those of 9/11, seem to be out to kill more or less at random. In some respects, fear of terror may be something like playing the lottery except in reverse. The chances of winning the lottery or of dying from terrorism may be microscopic, but for monumental events which are, or seem, random, one can irrelevantly conclude that one's chances are just as good, or bad, as those of anyone else. The fact that Muslim terrorists seem to want to kill as many people as possible also impresses.

However, reticence about killing and randomness about doing so does not characterize *all* non-Muslim terrorism. Timothy McVeigh who perpetrated the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that resulted in 168 deaths—the second most destructive terrorist act ever in the United States and one of the worst in history—was clearly out to kill a large number of people and to do so essentially randomly. He was determined to blow up a government building and scouted in five states before settling on one in Oklahoma City, and he attacked during business hours and had no concern about who might happen to be in the building at the time. Yet, as will be discussed more fully shortly, his case did not lead to perpetual fear in the way Islamist terrorism has.

The seemingly constant stream of well over 100 small-time terrorism cases that have come to light in the United States since 9/11 may have kept the pot boiling.⁴² Although few of these have generated much in the way of lasting media interest, the fairly relentless drum beat of these cases may have had an effect by continually reminding people that there are still terrorists out there.

In addition, there is some reason to believe that, although noticeable security items like armed guards, high walls, and barbed wire make people feel less vulnerable to crime, these same devices can make people feel tense, suspicious, and fearful when they are instituted in the context of dealing with the threat of terrorism.⁴³ Conceivably, even seeing Muslim women in headscarves may contribute as a continuing semi-conscious reminder.

However, the most plausible explanation for the remarkable absence of erosion in concern is that special fear and anxiety has been stirred by the fact that Islamist terrorism is taken to be part of a large and hostile conspiracy and network that is international in scope and rather

⁴¹ In fact, fears about being harmed by terrorists as tallied in the question in Figure 1 began to decline in the days after 9/11 and then were pushed to their highest levels ever when the anthrax story came out after which they resumed their decline until the end of the year. On the important impact the anthrax attacks had in the White House, see Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 162-63, 170.

⁴² Mueller, *Terrorism Since 9/11*. Bergen, *United States of Jihad*.

⁴³ Kevin R. Grosskopf, "Evaluating the Societal Response to Antiterrorism Measures," *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2006). See also John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 159.

spooky.⁴⁴ In the words of Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza, it is seen to be a “subversive enemy” that is “foreign in origin but with possible domestic supporters organized in covert cells, hidden yet seemingly everywhere, and providing a direct and open challenge to American democracy and capitalism.”⁴⁵

There were hundreds of terrorist attacks in the 1970s, but these were mainly domestic in apparent origin and scope: for the most part, they did not have a significant foreign or external referent. That quality holds as well for the highly destructive 1995 Oklahoma City attack. In the aftermath of that bombing, as can be seen in Figure 1, over 40 percent of the public said it worried about becoming a victim of terrorism. However, unlike the situation after 2001, this percentage declined considerably in the next few years.

Also suggestive are the results generated by a poll question that seeks to tap the public’s concern about the threat presented by international terrorism (as opposed to domestic terrorism) to the vital interests of the United States (Figure 3). Although the number of those holding international terrorism to be a “critical threat” rose notably in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the percentage holding this view has been very high ever since pollsters started asking about it in 1994, and it has remained high over the years after 9/11.⁴⁶ And at no time has more than 4 percent of the public deemed international terrorism to be “not an important threat at all.”

A potentially instructive comparison in this regard is with concerns about domestic Communists during the Cold War.⁴⁷ Like Islamist terrorists within our midst, many Americans believed domestic Communists were connected to, and agents of, a vast, foreign-based conspiracy to topple America. Extravagant alarmist proclamations about the degree to which such “masters of deceit” and “enemies from within” presented a threat to the republic found a receptive audience.⁴⁸ There apparently was no audience during the Cold War for the proposition that the threat presented by domestic Communists was overblown. That is, *no one* ever seems to have 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

⁴⁴ On this issue, see also Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism in the United States”; Michael German, *Thinking Like a Terrorist: Insights of a Former FBI Undercover Agent* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2007), ix.

⁴⁵ Brooks and Manza, *Whose Rights?* 40.

⁴⁶ The high number registered in late 1998 is likely an effect of terrorist bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa that had taken place in August of that year. Figure 3 is developed from responses to the question as deposited at the Roper Public Opinion Research Center. For a somewhat different array, see Dina Smeltz and Ivo Daalder, *Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment: Results of the 2014 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2014), 20.

⁴⁷ See also John Mueller, “Questing for Monsters to Destroy,” in Melvyn Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro (eds.), *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy after the Berlin Wall and 9/11* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 124.

⁴⁸ J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1958), 81. See also Joseph McCarthy, “Enemies from Within.” Speech to the Women’s Club, Wheeling, West Virginia, February 9, 1950.

subvert their way out of a wet paper bag. Why are we expending so much time, effort, and treasure on this issue?”

Press and political concern about the internal Communist enemy probably peaked in 1954, when some 40 percent of the public deemed domestic Communists to present a great or very great danger. Although the central attention of the press (and of the public) turned to other matters (as it did after 9/11), concern about domestic Communists, like that about domestic terrorism after 9/11, seems to have been internalized: the percentage considering them a danger barely declined in the ensuing 10 years even though media interest fell greatly—indeed, by a factor of about 10 (Figure 4). When last tapped, in the mid-1970s, a full 20 years after its probable peak, concern about the domestic Communist danger had declined only to 30 percent at a time when press attention to that internal enemy, as Figure 4 shows, had fallen literally to zero.⁴⁹ This also suggests that continuous reminders about the threat are not needed for alarm to be sustained.

An eventual erosion?

If it is difficult to explain which events, information, and threats will be embraced or ignored, it is likely even more difficult to explain how long an embraced threat will linger in the public consciousness.

Sometimes opinion on a policy issue does change. Public support for the “war on drugs” lasted for decades, even though the policy could objectively be said to have failed miserably.⁵⁰ But then, only quite recently, popular support seems to have significantly waned. There has been a similar experience with gay rights and particularly with the issue of gay marriage. There was very little increase of popular support over several decades.⁵¹ But then what appears to be a very substantial change of opinion on the issue took place in just the last few years.

As noted, fears about domestic Communists did eventually decline during the Cold War—albeit only after 20 years. And ultimately fears about the danger presented by domestic Communists could be alleviated by the collapse of the perceived grand international Communist conspiracy. However, unlike international terrorism, anxieties about domestic Communists were not routinely jiggered by small-scale, but notable, arrests of violent plotters that were routinely, if briefly, covered in the media. Nor was there fear that domestic Communists might contrive to set off a nuclear weapon within the country: concern that the Soviet Union might launch one from abroad was a different matter.

The poll data on terrorism suggest that there is as yet no light at the end of the tunnel, and perhaps this one might have no end at all. Terrorism, like murder, has always existed in some form or other and always will. And, because of the special formlessness, even spookiness, of

⁴⁹ See also John Mueller, “Trends in Political Tolerance,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 52 (Spring 1988), 1-25.

⁵⁰ Renee Scherlen, “The Never-Ending Drug War: Obstacles to Drug War Policy Termination,” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (January 2012), 67-73. See also Christopher C. Coyne and Abigail R. Hall, *Four Decades and Counting: The Continued Failure of the War on Drugs* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, Policy Analysis No. 811, April 12, 2017).

⁵¹ Kenneth Sherrill, “The Political Power of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals,” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (September 1996), 469-73. Alan S. Yang, “Trends: Attitudes toward Homosexuality,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Fall 1997), 477-507.

terrorism's hostile foreign referent in this case, it may be exceptionally difficult to get people to believe that the threat has really been extinguished—or at least that it is no longer particularly significant.⁵²

The threat presented by ISIS

One of the most remarkable phenomena of the last few years is the way an especially vicious militant group calling itself the Islamic State, or ISIS, captured and exercised the imagination of the public in Western countries. It burst into official and public attention with some military victories in Iraq and Syria—particularly taking over Iraq's second largest city, Mosul in June 2014.⁵³ Former NSA and CIA head Michael Hayden was quick to stoke alarm by proclaiming that “this is quite a dangerous thing that we're seeing unfold here” and applying the predictable comparison: “It's probably not 9/11, but it's certainly in the same area code.”⁵⁴ And Senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham swiftly declaimed that the group presented an existential threat to the United States.⁵⁵

As can be seen in Figure 5, however, the American public at first saw the situation in Iraq as minor problem—at any rate, having withdrawn from Iraq in 2010, it was unprepared to send American troops to help when civil war seemed to erupt yet again in the beleaguered country.⁵⁶

⁵² See also Mac Donald, “The Ever-Renewing Terror Threat;” Jeremy Shapiro, “Why we think terrorism is scarier than it really is (and we probably always will),” *vox.com*, March 28, 2016.

⁵³ The conquest of Mosul was essentially a fluke. The attackers' intention seems to have been merely to hold part of the city for a while in an effort to free some prisoners. Dexter Filkins on “The Rise of ISIS,” *Frontline* (PBS), October 28, 2014. The defending Iraqi army had been trained by the American military at a cost to U.S. taxpayers of more than \$20 billion. Loveday Morris and Missy Ryan, “After more than \$1.6 billion in U.S. aid, Iraq's army still struggles,” *washingtonpost.com*, June 10, 2016. Nonetheless, it simply fell apart in confusion and disarray, abandoning weaponry, and the city, to the tiny group of seeming invaders even though it greatly outnumbered them by perhaps 30 to one—even taking into account the fact that many soldiers had purchased the right to avoid showing up for duty by paying half their salary to their commanders. Ned Parker, Isabel Coles, and Raheem Salman, “How Mosul Fell.” *Special Report*, Reuters, 2014. graphics.thomsonreuters.com/14/10/MIDEAST-CRISIS:GHARAWI.pdf; Daniel Byman, “Trump and Counterterrorism,” *National Interest*, January/February 2017, 72. See also John Mueller and Mark Stewart, “Misoverestimating ISIS: Comparisons with Al-Qaeda,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (August 2016); John Mueller and Mark Stewart, “The Islamic State Phenomenon,” paper presented at the National Convention of the International Studies Association, Baltimore, MD, February 25, 2017 politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/ISISisa2017.pdf

⁵⁴ Fox News Sunday, June 29, 2014.

⁵⁵ McCain: Morning Joe, *msnbc.com*, June 13, 2014. Graham: Amanda Terkel, “Lindsey Graham: If Obama Doesn't Go On Offense, Terrorists Are ‘Coming Here’,” *huffingtonpost.com*, August 11, 2014.

⁵⁶ A poll in relatively war-approving Alabama as early as 2005 asked whether the United States should be prepared to send back troops to established order if full-scale civil war erupted after an American withdrawal. Only one third approved doing so. Sean Reilly, “Poll Shows

And, initially at least, ISIS was focused on establishing what it called a Caliphate in the Middle East.

However, outraged at Islamic State's brutality, the United States and other western nations began bombing its positions in 2014 after the fall of Mosul. In response to this, ISIS members, unable to attack the attacking countries directly, retaliated by performing and webcasting several beheadings of defenseless Western hostages in the late summer and fall of 2014.⁵⁷ This caused alarm greatly to escalate. Following the web-cast beheadings of Americans—tragic and disgusting, but hardly of the order of the magnitude of destruction wreaked on 9/11—some 60 to 80 percent of the American public came to view ISIS as a major security threat to the United States (Figure 5). And although only 17 percent had advocated sending American ground troops to fight ISIS immediately after it surprisingly routed American-trained (and spectacularly ill-led) Iraqi forces in Mosul, the beheadings boosted that support to over 40 percent. For a while in February 2015, after the death (apparently in a Jordanian airstrike) of an American captive, Kayla Mueller, support spiked even higher—to upwards of 60 percent (Figure 5). By 2016, 77 percent said on polls that they deemed ISIS to present “a serious threat to the existence or survival of the US” (Figure 6).

Elites were soon feeding the alarm. Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein insisted that “The threat ISIS poses cannot be overstated”—effectively proclaiming, as columnist Dan Froomkin suggests, hyperbole on the subject to be impossible.⁵⁸ Equally inspired, Senator Jim Inhofe, born before World War II, has extravagantly claimed that “we’re in the most dangerous position we’ve ever been in” and that ISIS is “rapidly developing a method of blowing up a major U.S. city.”⁵⁹ And Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel soared ever skyward, saying, “we’ve never seen a threat” like this before, a “comprehensive threat” with sophistication, armaments, strategic knowledge, funding, capacity, ideology. “It’s new. The threat is significantly worse than we’ve seen before, not just in Iraq, but in the Middle East.”⁶⁰

With the surge of public alarm, the media responded and quickly became canny about weaving audience-grabbing references to the arrestingly diabolical ISIS into any story about terrorism. Especially impressive was the ingenious ploy of the editors at the Daily Beast when it published a thoughtful article, entitled, “How ISIS’s ‘Attack America’ Plan Is Working.”⁶¹ The teaser for the article left out the word, “How,” cleverly transforming the message of the piece in

Alabamians Still Support President,” *Mobile Register*, May 22, 2005.

⁵⁷ Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid. The Threat of Terrorism from Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, Policy Paper 34, November 2014), 17.

⁵⁸ Dan Froomkin, “The Congressional Hyperbole Caucus.” firstlook.org/theintercept, September 10, 2014. See also Micah Zenko, “Exaggeration Nation,” foreignpolicy.com, November 12, 2014.

⁵⁹ Phil Cross, “Senator Inhofe warns of potential terrorist attacks on U.S. soil,” okcfox.com, August 20, 2014.

⁶⁰ Micah Zenko, “Exaggeration Nation.”

⁶¹ Susan Zalkind, “How ISIS’s ‘Attack America’ Plan Is Working.” dailybeast.com, June 22, 2015.

an effort, presumably, to attract frightened readers and to service their alarm. Every terrorist act reported anywhere was explored for possible links to the dreaded and diabolical ISIS.⁶²

The demise of ISIS

Outrage at the tactics of ISIS was certainly justified, and the group certainly presented a threat to the people under its control and in its neighborhood and could contribute damagingly to the instability in the Middle East that followed serial intervention there by the American military. However, as with al-Qaeda after 9/11, it scarcely presented a challenge to global security.⁶³

Islamic State was eventually overcome by the same defects as the group from which it emerged, the al-Qaeda branch in Iraq. As Middle East specialist Ramzy Mardini put it in 2014, “the Islamic State’s fundamentals are weak”; “it does not have a sustainable endgame”; its “extreme ideology, spirit of subjugation, and acts of barbarism prevent it from becoming a

⁶² This continued even as the group went into decline. In one case, for example, reporters somehow concluded that, by massacring people in various locales in various countries, the group was actually growing in appeal—or in “allure” in the words of the headline writer. Carol Morello and Joby Warrick. “Islamic State’s ambitions and allure grow as territory shrinks,” *washingtonpost.com*, July 4, 2016; see also Warrick, *Black Flags*, 314. How this remarkable process has come about is not explained, nor is evidence given to back it up. Indeed, ISIS was following policies and military approaches that repeatedly proved to be counterproductive in the extreme in enhancing its “appeal” and/or “allure.” By 2016, opposition to the group among Arab teens and young adults had risen from 60 percent to 80 percent. Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Number of foreign fighters entering Iraq and Syria drops by 90 percent, Pentagon says,” *washingtonpost.com*, April 26, 2016. Any allure the group may have had in Iraq certainly failed to register on a poll conducted there in January 2016 in which 99 percent of Shiites and 95 percent of Sunnis express opposition to it. Minquith al-Dagher and Karl Kaltenthaler, “Why Iraqis living under the Islamic State fear their liberators,” *washingtonpost.com*, April 11, 2016; see also Mark Tessler, Michael Robbins, and Amaney Jamal, “What do ordinary citizens in the Arab world really think about the Islamic State?” *washingtonpost.com*, July 27, 2016. And its appeal among jihadists as dynamic, victorious, and unstoppable was severely undercut: the flow of foreign fighters going to join the group plunged, and there was a clear decline in the degree to which it inspired what commentator Kurt Eichenwald calls “jihadist cool” and “Rambo envy.” “Jihadi Cool: Why Belgium’s new extremists are as shallow as they are deadly,” *newsweek.com*, April 18, 2016; see also Byman, “Understanding the Islamic State,” 146, Max Abrahms, “Op-Ed Pundits think Islamic State’s Baghdadi is smart because he’s cruel. That’s nonsense,” *latimes.com*, November 6, 2016, Griff Witte, Sundarsan Raghavan, and James McAuley, “Flow of foreign fighters plummets as Islamic State loses its edge,” *washingtonpost.com*, September 9, 2011. Another article acknowledged that the appeal of Islamic State as “the promise of living in an Islamist utopia” and as a victorious military force was in severe decline, and that the group had suffered many defections in the ranks as well. But the group’s shift in focus from dealing with territorial degradation to slaughtering civilians in random attacks was taken not to be a sign of its “desperation and weakness,” but one that demonstrates its “strength and long-term survival skills.” Hassan Hassan, “Is the Islamic State Unstoppable?” *nytimes.com*, July 9, 2016.

⁶³ Mueller and Stewart, “Misoverestimating ISIS.”

political venue for the masses”; its foolhardy efforts to instill fear in everyone limits “its opportunities for alliances” and makes it “vulnerable to popular backlash”; “its potential support across the region ranges from limited to nonexistent”; and it “is completely isolated, encircled by enemies.”⁶⁴ In particular, its brutalities, such as staged beheadings of hostages, summary executions of prisoners, and the rape and enslavement of female captives greatly intensified opposition to the group. As Daniel Byman notes, it had a “genius for making enemies,” couldn’t make common cause even with other Sunni rebel groups, and, by holding territory, presented an obvious and clear target to military opponents.⁶⁵

These observations have proved prescient. After the heady days of 2014 and early 2015, ISIS went into considerable disarray. Its advances were stopped and then reversed, and it was in clear decline in its main base areas in the Middle East.⁶⁶ Driven from the cities and towns it occupied in 2014 and 2015, ISIS sought to exact revenge and to remind the world of its continued existence by launching sporadic and vicious terrorist attacks in the Middle East and by inspiring them abroad in any country at all, not just ones participating in the fight against ISIS. Thus ISIS claimed responsibility for—or, more accurately, boorishly celebrated—terrorist attacks abroad like those in Paris, Brussels, Nice, Munich, Berlin, London, Manchester, and Barcelona. But there is little indication that ISIS central planned or significantly participated in them.⁶⁷ Moreover, the damage residual inspirees managed to commit remained limited, if tragic. Even if all the terrible outrages committed in Europe in 2015 and 2016 are taken to be ISIS-

⁶⁴ Ramzy Mardini, “The Islamic State Threat Is Overstated,” *washingtonpost.com*, September 12, 2014. See also Aymenn al-Tamimi, “A Caliphate under Strain: The Documentary Evidence,” *CTC Sentinel*, April 2016; John Mueller, “The Islamic State will probably be defeated, but it’s not thanks to President Obama,” *washingtonpost.com*, September 16, 2014; Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 284-89; Daniel Byman, “Understanding the Islamic State,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 2016), 138-39, 150-53; John Mueller and Mark Stewart, “ISIS Isn’t an Existential Threat to America,” *reason.com*, May 27, 2016; Mueller and Stewart, “Misoverestimating ISIS.”

⁶⁵ Byman, “Understanding the Islamic State,” 160, 152. See also Gerges, *ISIS*, 165-69, 233, 264. On the near-total rejection of ISIS’s interpretation of Islam by scholars and theorists, including those very sympathetic to jihad, see Gerges, *ISIS*, 279-84.

⁶⁶ On the demise of the once much-feared ISIS, see Mueller and Stewart, “Misoverestimating ISIS” and “The Islamic State Phenomenon.”

⁶⁷ Moreover, like the webcast beheadings of 2014 or the burning alive of a captured Jordanian pilot in early 2015, such terrorism has been spectacularly counterproductive and tends, as Benjamin Friedman notes, “to provoke nationalistic anger, unifying nations against attackers rather [than leading to] acquiescence in their demands.” Benjamin H. Friedman, “Does ISIS Even Have a European Strategy?” *nationalinterest.org*, April 2, 2016. See also Grame Wood, “ISIL: Who’s Calling the Shots?” *politico.com*, November 14, 2015. On the reaction to the killing of the Jordanian pilot, see Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (New York: Doubleday, 2015), pp. 311-16.

related, far more people on that continent perished yearly at the hands of terrorists in most years in the 1970s and 1980s.⁶⁸ The existence and survival of the continent were scarcely imperiled.

By 2015, ISIS appeared to have decided to lash out abroad to strike, in particular, foreign countries fighting it, perhaps in part to divert attention from its territorial losses. There was great concern after the Brussels attack in the spring of 2016 that ISIS returnees would wreak havoc particularly in Europe.⁶⁹ However, this proved to be a quite limited phenomenon. In part, this is because, as Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro detailed in 2014, foreign fighters tend to be killed early (they are common picks for suicide missions); often become disillusioned, especially by infighting in the ranks; and do not receive much in the way of useful training for terrorist exercises back home.⁷⁰ Despite great fears at the time, there have been no attacks by ISIS returnees in Europe in the 2 ½ years since Brussels.⁷¹

Assessing the public alarm

In a thoughtful analytic perspective, Middle East specialist Marc Lynch concluded that ISIS was “a fairly ordinary insurgency that has been unduly mystified and exoticized in the public discourse.”⁷² It does not differ from many other insurgencies in that it is peculiarly vicious or in that it applies a crackpot ideology—Boko Haram in Nigeria, for example, often seems to exhibit similar qualities as well.⁷³ Rather, ISIS differed in the sense of mystery and exoticism it generated not only in a considerable number of supporters around the globe but in its deeply alarmed opponents worldwide.

⁶⁸ Chris York, “Islamic State Terrorism Is Serious But We’ve Faced Even Deadlier Threats In The Past,” huffingtonpost.co.uk, November 29, 2015. Byman, “Trump and Counterterrorism,” 67.

⁶⁹ For example, see Rukmini Callimachi, “A Global Network of Killers, Built by a Secretive Branch of ISIS,” *New York Times*, August 4, 2016, A1.

⁷⁰ Byman and Shapiro, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid*.

⁷¹ ISIS also engaged in long distance “coaching”: a few ISIS operatives tried through internet communication to stir up violence by sympathetic would-be jihadists around the world—a development that some see as a new “threat.” Rukmini Callimachi, “Not ‘Lone Wolves’ After All: How ISIS Guides World’s Terror Plots from Afar,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2017, A1; Seamus Hughes and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, “The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State’s Virtual Entrepreneurs,” *CTC Sentinel*, March 2017, 1-8. However, for the most part, this effort has been an abject, even almost comedic, failure. One of those coached, shot himself in leg, another was supposed to drive over people but attacked with an ax instead because he didn’t have a driving permit, a third detonated a bomb prematurely killing only himself, and an explosive in a suicide vest proved not lethal enough to smash a nearby flowerpot. About the only “success” for the “cybercoaches” seems to have been the slitting of the throat of an 85-year-old priest in northern France—perhaps the most pointless and thoroughly counterproductive act of terrorism in history. John Mueller, “The Cybercoaching of Terrorists: Cause for Alarm?” *CTC Sentinel*, October 2017.

⁷² Mark Lynch, “Contesting the Caliphate,” washingtonpost.com, July 22, 2015.

⁷³ On the decline of the once much-feared Boko Haram, see Nathaniel Allen, “Charting Boko Haram’s Rapid Decline,” warontherocks.com, September 22, 2016.

What is impressive about the ISIS phenomenon is how transfixed the American public. For example, in 2015 a woman in Salem, Illinois, misunderstood a message stating that retired minister Michael Ice and his wife were coming to her church, and called the Sheriff to report with alarm that the ISIS were coming.⁷⁴

It was a dramatic (and disgusting) event, the webcast beheadings in the Middle East, that seems to have been critical even though these were nothing like the 9/11 attacks which were, of course, vastly more destructive and took place in the United States itself. President Barack Obama arrestingly commented on the phenomenon in an interview in 2014. He noted that ISIS had made a major strategic error by killing the hostages because the anger it generated resulted in the American public's quickly backing military action. If he had been "an adviser to ISIS," Obama added, he would not have killed the hostages but released them and pinned notes on their chests saying, "Stay out of here; this is none of your business." Such a move, he speculated, might have undercut support for military intervention.⁷⁵

He may well be right. At any rate, the impact of ISIS on public opinion can be seen in the rise in anxiety documented in Figures 1 and 2, particularly after the attacks by ISIS returnees in Paris in November 2015. By 2017, however, both trend lines had retreated to where they had been before the rise of ISIS. Figure 7 suggests that the rise of ISIS increased support for the war in Iraq. Other data show a similar effect on support for the war in Afghanistan.⁷⁶

The threat presented by Saddam Hussein's Iraq

Throughout the decade after the Gulf War of 1991, polls document a fair degree of support for the use of military force to depose Saddam Hussein.⁷⁷ In early 2001, as Figure 8 documents, 55 percent still responded favorably to the idea of "invading Iraq with US ground troops in an attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power."

However, despite this potential opening, hawkish politicians and elites apparently still considered an invasion to be a nonstarter, and few, if any, advocated such a course at the time: there were public declarations and congressional appropriations to support opposition groups, but no one was really calling for a war to depose him. For example, defense department advisor Richard Perle, who would prove to be one of the most ardent proponents of war in 2003, published an article in 2000 that, while strongly advocating a policy hostile toward Saddam, recommended only protecting and assisting resistance movements within Iraq, not anything resembling an invasion by American troops.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Bruce Kropp, "ISIS Not Coming, but the Ice's Are." WJBRadio.com/LocalNews, February 23, 2015. Posted at politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/ISISinIllinois.pdf.

⁷⁵ Peter Baker, "Paths to War, Then and Now, Haunt Obama," *nytimes.com*, September 13, 2014.

⁷⁶ For the Afghanistan data, see Mueller and Stewart, *Trends in Public Opinion on Terrorism*, 18.

⁷⁷ Eric V. Larson and Bodgan Savych, *American Public Support for US Military Operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005), 132-8.

⁷⁸ Richard N. Perle, "Iraq: Saddam Unbound," in *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy*, ed. Robert Kagan and William Kristol (San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2000), 108-9.

Selling the war

As Figure 8 also discloses, the percentage favoring an invasion of Iraq leaped to nearly 75 percent after 9/11, a reaction presumably inspired entirely by the event itself, not by opinion leaders. However, it may have helped encourage the discussions that began at that time within the George W. Bush administration about launching such a war. At any rate, by January 2002 Bush had publicly positioned Iraq prominently on his “axis of evil” hit list while announcing that the United States had come to imagine that Saddam presented a “grave and growing danger.”⁷⁹

Despite such dramatic fulminations from the bully pulpit and despite the fact that polls found around half of the population professing to believe Saddam had been personally involved in the 9/11 attacks,⁸⁰ support for invading Iraq, as can be seen in Figure 8, dwindled during the next several months to about where it had stood before 9/11.

Then, beginning in August and September 2002, the administration launched a concentrated campaign to boost support for going to war with speeches by Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. Despite strenuous efforts, they were unable notably to increase support for going to war before launching the war itself in March 2003 (Figure 8). There was something of a bump upwards to 63 percent at the time of Secretary of State Colin Powell’s much publicized speech at the United Nations on February 5, 2003, but this lift proved to be temporary. There is also an upward push in the last poll of the series, but that one was conducted as the war was beginning in mid-March and represents part of a “rally ‘round the flag’” effect as troops were being sent into action. With those exceptions, approval for sending the troops never ranged more than 4 percentage points higher or lower than the 55 percent figure tallied when George W. Bush was taking office, nine months before 9/11.⁸¹

Some evidence suggests that if an alternative perspective on the evidence for going to war had been more effectively promulgated in the run-up to the Iraq War it might have been effective. In their *Going to War in Iraq*, Stanley Feldman and his colleagues argue that some people, well-informed Democrats and independents in particular, were responsive to the certain arguments opposing the Iraq War during its runup. For the most part, such people could find these arguments only in a subset of newspapers, but if they came across the arguments, the arguments “had resonance” or found a “receptive” audience or “aroused strong opposition.” At the same time, Republicans so informed chose to remain utterly unmoved. Thus, in this case “newspaper content”—that is, information that happened to be presented, or put on the shelf, by some newspapers—“appears to have shaped directly public support for the war,” at least for those predisposed to being shaped.⁸²

⁷⁹ George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002.

⁸⁰ Jacobson, *A Divider*, 139.

⁸¹ For similar data using a wide variety of questions, see Jacobson, *A Divider*, 97, 109. See also Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, revised edition (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 278. By contrast, see Chaim Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,” *International Security* Vol. 29, No.1 (Summer 2004), 30-32.

⁸² Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy, and George E. Marcus, *Going to War in Iraq: When Citizens and the Press Matter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), responsive: 113, 157, 167; Republicans: 19-20, 26, 165-66, 174-75, 204n11; shaped directly: 137.

In another study, Matthew A. Baum and Philip P. K. Potter stress the role of parties or party elites who, mainly through the media, are able to alert voters to what they consider to be foreign policy missteps and failures. They find that opposition to the Iraq War was generally strongest in countries where, for various reasons concerning electoral structure and media access, the anti-war argument was most successfully promulgated.⁸³ However, this seems to be more nearly a commentary on the potency of the anti-war argument than on the effectiveness or agility of those bearing the message.

An interesting comparison can be made with the run-up to the 1991 war presided over by Bush's father. He, too, spent a great deal of time and effort seeking to boost support for sending the American military into action to force Iraq's forces from Kuwait. For the most part, however, during the entire course of the debate over war, there was little change in the degree to which popular opinion supported the idea of initiating a war in the Gulf. People did not become consistently more hawkish or dovish, more war eager or war averse, or more or less supportive of Bush or his policies. And their perceptions of the reasons behind involvement and the reasons for going to war apparently did not change very much either. There was, however, an increase in fatalism—in the percentage who saw the war as inevitable.⁸⁴

Overall, then, neither Bush was able to swing public opinion toward war—though, conceivably, they were able to arrest a deterioration of support for war. This experience again suggests that there are rather distinct limits to the effectiveness of the bully pulpit.

Obviously, each president still did manage to get his war. But this was because, as president, each was able to order troops into action, not because of his ability increasingly to move the public to his point of view. Moreover, each was able to keep the issue brewing as an important one and could unilaterally commit the country to a path that dramatically increased a sense of fatalism—even one entrapment and inevitability—about the war.

Maintaining support for the war

More generally, it does not appear that the president necessarily needs public support in advance to pull off a military venture.⁸⁵ The public generally seems to be willing to go along (not that it has much choice), but it reserves the right to object if the cost of the war comes to outweigh its perceived value (see Table 1). Sometimes the public has apparently been quite supportive of going to war as troops are sent it as in World War II, Korea (1950), Vietnam (1965), Panama (1989), Somalia (1992), and Afghanistan (2001). At other times, the public has been at best divided as in Lebanon (1958), Grenada (1983), Lebanon (1983), the Gulf War (1991), Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999), and the Iraq War (2003). In some cases, the ventures have been accomplished at acceptable cost as in World War II, Panama, Lebanon 1958, Grenada, the Gulf War, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. In others, support dropped as costs grew, as in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. And in others, the public's dismay at rising costs was

⁸³ Matthew A. Baum and Philip P. K. Potter, *War and Democratic Constraint: How the Public Influences Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁸⁴ John Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), ch. 2.

⁸⁵ See also John Mueller, "Public Support for Military Ventures Abroad," in *The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War: Reflections Twenty-Five Years After the Fall of Saigon*, ed. John Norton Moore and Robert F. Turner (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), 187-9.

met by abrupt early withdrawal as in Lebanon in 1983 and in Somalia in 1993.⁸⁶ And, of course, if public support declines, the opposition party is likely to see this as advantage to be exploited.

The hope in all this for the president would be that if the venture appears to be worth the cost, the public will accept, even laud, it despite any prewar misgivings. This happened quite clearly in the case of the controversial Gulf War of 1991. Before the war, polls found the public split about 50/50 on a question asking whether they preferred continued sanctions or military action. After the successful war, however, the percentage recalling that they had supported war over sanctions registered at 76 percent.⁸⁷

Patterns for war support generally followed a familiar pattern: as casualties mount there is a rather strong erosion at first, and then a more gradual (sometimes a *much* more gradual) decline.⁸⁸ Thus, in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, support decreased as casualties—whether, variously, of draftees, volunteers, or reservists—were suffered. Although this suggests that Americans have a sense of, and react to, the war's increasing cost, it does not mean the wars were equally supported as the costs accrued. Specifically, it is clear the public placed a far lower value on the stakes in Iraq than it did in the earlier anti-Communist wars: for example, in 2005 the percentage finding Iraq to have been a mistake, when around 1,500 Americans had been killed, was about the same as in Vietnam at the time of the 1968 Tet Offensive, when about 20,000 had perished.⁸⁹ Casualty for casualty, support dropped off far more quickly in the Iraq War than in either of the earlier two wars. A more extreme case is Somalia where support dropped off quickly after less than two dozen battle deaths.⁹⁰

It is difficult to see why, or how, media effects or elite cues could account for this key phenomenon. Nor is it likely explained by changes in cost tolerance: Americans expressed great willingness to expend lives to go after al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attack.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Mueller, *War and Ideas*, 180-83; see also Larson and Savych, *American Public Support*.

⁸⁷ Mueller, *Policy and Opinion*, 87, 229.

⁸⁸ John Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973); John Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome," *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2005, 44-54. There are no poll data to confirm the conclusion, but it seems likely that the support of the Soviet people for their government's war in Afghanistan in the 1980s declined as Soviet casualties mounted, even though information about what was actually going on there came to them primarily through word of mouth, not through the controlled media or from official pronouncement.

⁸⁹ Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome," 45.

⁹⁰ Mueller, *War and Ideas*, 177.

⁹¹ Some scholars have argued that support for war is determined by the prospects for success rather than by casualties—that Americans are "defeat phobic" rather than "casualty phobic" and therefore that "persuading the public that a military operation will be successful" is "the linchpin of public support." Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 236-37. Essentially, the argument seems to hold that Americans, or at least a substantial portion of them, don't really care how many casualties they suffer so long as their side comes out the winner. This perspective led, in part, to an effort by President George W. Bush to push the idea of "victory" in a set of speeches at the end of 2005. Scott Shane, "Bush's Speech on Iraq Echoes Analyst's Voice," *New York Times*, December 4, 2005, 1. As with his very considerable efforts to sell his Social Security plan earlier that year

There were blip-like ups and downs in the descent of support for the Iraq War, but they were often peculiar (Figure 7). Support for the war in Iraq dropped at the time of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 as Americans were led to wonder about the nation's priorities, a decline that was more than reversed, it appears, by the successful Iraq elections of November 15. Within days of that event, however, war support dropped again to a level slightly lower than was registered before either event took place. Similarly, a decline in support in 2004 at the time of the Abu Ghraib prison disclosures was eventually mostly reversed.⁹²

In addition, support for the war temporarily rose after terrorist attacks in London in July 2005 and also at the time of the fifth anniversary of 9/11 in 2006, an event and non-event respectively that apparently reminded Americans of what the war was purportedly all about. However, other anniversaries or other notable terrorist events—such as those in Madrid in 2004 or Bali in 2003—do not seem to have had an effect.⁹³

There are other peculiarities. In September 2007 General David Petraeus issued a report which garnered great attention suggesting that the war had started to go well for the United States and that it was reasonable, though not guaranteed, that further progress would ensue. The report, as might have been anticipated, caused war support to rise, but this actually happened *before* Petraeus reported, presumably in anticipation of what he was going to say—about which there was considerable informed advance speculation. Immediately after the report was issued,

(Jacobson, *A Divider*, 206-18), the campaign proved futile, as can be seen in Figure 7. However, things *did* actually improve in Iraq at the time of the Surge to the point where, by 2009, some could claim that victory had been achieved. The public clearly got the message: between 2007 and 2008, the percentage of people who thought US efforts were making things better rose from 30 to 46 while those believing they were having no impact dropped from 51 to 32. And the percentage holding that the US was making significant progress rose from 36 to 46 while the percentage concluding that it was winning the war rose from 21 to 37. Despite this change, however, as Figure 7 suggests, support for the war did not increase—nor did it do so on measures tapping those who favored the war, those who felt it had been worth the effort or the right decision, or those who favored staying as long as it takes. For data, see Mueller and Stewart, *Trends in Public Opinion on Terrorism*, 21. Successful prosecution of a war, it appears, is unlikely to convert people who have already decided it was not worth the costs. Mueller, “The Iraq Syndrome,” 49. American casualty rates also declined after 2007, but this, too, had no effect on support for the war, although there had been studies predicting that decreased casualty rates would cause support to increase. Scott Sigmund Gartner, “The Multiple Effects of Casualties on Public Support for War: An Experimental Approach,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 102, No. 1 (February 2008), 105.

⁹² There was also a notable upward shift in support for the war on many polls when Saddam Hussein was captured in mid-December 2003 (Mueller, *War and Ideas*, 198, 203). However, the specific poll question tallied in Figure 7 fails to register that effect because the question was not asked until a month after the capture, by which time the upward boost had evaporated.

⁹³ Mueller, *War and Ideas*, 216; John Mueller, “Public Opinion, the Media, and War,” in Robert Y. Shapiro and Lawrence R. Jacobs eds., *Oxford Handbook on American Public Opinion and the Media* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 680-81, available at politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/ShapiroOHAPOMfin.pdf.

support for the war actually dropped to about where it had registered previously. And, as noted earlier, support for the Iraq war (as well as the one in Afghanistan) increased some after the rise of ISIS.

It should be stressed that the labels supplied for the upward and downward bumps in Figure 7 are decidedly ad hoc. After the fact, an effort was made to consider what could plausibly have triggered each rise or fall—although some of these phenomena, of course, might simply be caused by sampling or other errors in polling procedures. However, taking the rises and falls at face value, it certainly seems that the events the public happened to consider significant were less than fully predictable—a special dilemma for media editors trying to deliver the news the public wants to hear.

Partisan division

The most significant public opinion development in the Iraq War seems to owe virtually nothing *either* to the media *or* to opinion leadership: the creation of a massive partisan division on the war. The public, or much of it, has frequently viewed war through partisan lenses.⁹⁴ However, as Gary Jacobson has documented, the partisan split for the Iraq War of 2003 was considerably greater than for any military action over the last half century.⁹⁵

An interesting comparison can be made with the 1991 Gulf War. In the run-up to each war, Democrats were predictably less likely to support the prospective wars than were Republicans, but what is surprising is that the partisan gap was *far* wider in the 2003 case than in the 1991 one.⁹⁶ This is remarkable because Democratic leaders in Congress stood in strong opposition to going to the earlier war, while in the later one they mostly remained silent or were even generally supportive of the effort. That is, partisan elites disagreed far more in the run-up to the earlier war, but partisan public opinion differences were far greater in the later one.⁹⁷

The bottom-up phenomenon can be seen as well in the organized opposition to the Iraq War that grew within the Democratic Party among activists and ordinary voters. Rather than being led by party elites, the Democratic base jerked a reluctant party leadership toward an anti-war stance. It was instrumental in engineering the party's 2004 nomination for the presidency of the most credible anti-war candidate, John Kerry. Then, in the 2006 and 2008 elections they fielded successful anti-war candidates for House and Senate, many of them Iraq War veterans, substantially increasing in each case the number of Democratic seats. And, in 2008, Iraq war opponents were the cornerstone of the success of the only major presidential candidate to have opposed the Iraq War, Barack Obama. He later proved to be something of a disappointment to them on the issue however.

⁹⁴ Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, 116-22; Zaller, *Nature and Origins*, ch. 6.

⁹⁵ Jacobson, *A Divider*, 131-38.

⁹⁶ Jacobson, *A Divider*, 133, 136.

⁹⁷ Mueller, *War and Ideas*, 197. See also Feldman et al., *Going to War in Iraq*, 19-21, 152. Compare Adam Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 102.

Public opinion as primary driver

It has been argued that official and elite cue-givers had little to do with the fears and threats envisioned by the public to be presented after al-Qaeda's 9/11 attack and after the beheadings in 2014 by ISIS. In addition, official and elite cue-givers were unable to generate increased support for military action to take out Iraq in the run-up to the war and they were unable to keep support for that war from eroding once it was started. Nor were elites responsible for the partisan division that developed during the Iraq War.

In his book, *Selling Intervention and War*, Jon Western has looked not only at instances in which the people attempting to do such selling succeeded, but also ones in which they failed. He repeatedly finds that the public has often "resisted persuasion," and that sales pitches work when the arguments made were ones "the public was willing to accept," when they "strike a chord" or "resonate" with the public.⁹⁸ Another way to put this is to suggest that the message has "activated latent beliefs and dispositions."⁹⁹ Or, as Ronald Krebs puts it, politicians have sometimes "found an eager audience," or have taken a "rhetorical route" that is "politically safe."¹⁰⁰

This conclusion is also seen in a series of experiments carried out by Brooks and Manza in which people were found to respond favorably to elite cues on one policy, were unmoved on another, and moved in the opposite direction on a third.¹⁰¹ The phenomenon can be seen as well in the rise of Donald Trump in 2015-16 in which Republican voters seem to have been entirely capable of rejecting elite cues whether promulgated by leaders of their own party or by the media. And it could also be seen in 2013 when the Obama administration dramatically proposed military action in response to chemical weapons use in the Syrian civil war. Leaders of both parties in Congress quickly fell into line on the issue: there was thus bipartisan consensus. Although these bipartisan leadership cues were accompanied by disturbing photographs of the corpses of Syrian children apparently killed in the attack, however, politicians found that most Americans, concerned that the bombings would lead to greater involvement in yet another war in the Middle East, were decidedly unwilling to support even the limited punitive bombing of Syria.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Jon Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, the Media, and the American Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 5, 20-21, 179, 229. See also Mueller, *War and Ideas*, 216-17. Steven Casey documents the methods used by government leaders to shore up support for the Korean War, but he supplies little evidence to suggest the selling efforts worked with the public, concluding only that they may have prevented support from collapsing entirely and from "totally overwhelmingly Truman's Cold War policy." *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion 1950-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 367. For the argument that the public in the Vietnam War came not so much to reject Cold War policy, but rather the tactic of warfare to implement it, see Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, ch. 2. Something similar may have been at work in the Korean War.

⁹⁹ Brooks and Manza, *Whose Rights?* 157n3.

¹⁰⁰ Krebs, "The Rise, Persistence, and Decline of the War on Terror," 62, 71.

¹⁰¹ Brooks and Manza, *Whose Rights?* ch. 6.

¹⁰² John Mueller, "Syria: It Wasn't Isolationism," nationalinterest.org, October 14, 2013. "Public Opinion Runs Against Syrian Airstrikes (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People

That is, to the extent that the public accepts elite, media, and partisan cues, it is probably better to see the cue-givers not as opinion leaders, but as entities that put ideas on the shelf for the public to embrace, reject, or ignore as it chooses.¹⁰³ In an important sense, the essential dynamic is bottom-up.

In a study that looks at US national security policy in quite a different manner, Ronald Krebs compares narratives on the war on terror. He points out that the narrative that proved to carry the day declared that on 9/11 “evil terrorists attacked a blameless America because they hate the values Americans hold dear and which America epitomizes.” In contrast, there was an alternative narrative holding that “the United States was hardly blameless, due to its heavy-handed behavior abroad, or that the attacks, though horrible, did not mark a rupture in the fabric of world politics.” Insofar as the alternative narrative generated any attention at all, it did not, to say the least, strike a responsive chord. Instead of inspiring “reasoned argument,” it generated “deep hostility and charges of disloyalty.”¹⁰⁴

Similarly, people who downplay the threat presented by global warming have found (but not created) a responsive, and therefore encouraging, audience. On the other hand, people who downplay the threat presented by terrorism (or who seek responsibly to put that threat in sensible and rational context) have generally not found one.¹⁰⁵ In the marketplace of ideas, as in the material one, there is no guarantee the best product will prevail.

& the Press, September 3, 2013). In 2017 and 2018, Donald Trump got away with similar bombings by doing these abruptly and then by not further escalating.

¹⁰³ See also Mueller, “Public Opinion, the Media, and War.”

¹⁰⁴ Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, 145-47. Thus comedian Bill Maher lost his job when he suggested, shortly after the event, that the 9/11 hijackers were not cowards. Interestingly, James Fallows could not find supporters of the dominant public narrative in the foreign and defense establishment at the time: “There may be people who have studied, fought against, or tried to infiltrate al-Qaeda and who agree with Bush’s statement. But I have never met any. The soldiers, spies, academics, and diplomats I have interviewed are unanimous in saying that ‘They hate us for what we are’ is dangerous claptrap.” *Blind into Baghdad: America’s War in Iraq* (New York: Vintage, 2006, 142). On this issue, see also Mark Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence: The Emergence of Terrorism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), ch. 1.

¹⁰⁵ However, see Mueller, *Overblown*, 197-98. Some efforts: Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectations*, revised ed. (London: Continuum, 2002); Bruce Schneier, *Beyond Fear: Thinking Sensibly about Security in an Uncertain World* (New York: Copernicus, 2003); Jeffrey Rosen, *The Naked Crowd* (New York: Random House, 2004); Benjamin H. Friedman, “Leap Before You Look: The Failure of Homeland Security,” *Breakthroughs* 13(1), Spring 2004; Ian S. Lustick, *Trapped in the War on Terror* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); James Fallows, “Declaring Victory,” *Atlantic*, September 2006; Mueller *Overblown*; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*; A. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer (eds.), *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation since 9/11* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); Benjamin H. Friedman, Jim Harper, and Christopher A. Preble (eds.), *Terrorizing Ourselves* (Washington: Cato Institute, 2010). See also Robert H. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997). For more recent efforts: Gene Healy, “Al Qaeda: Never an

Some researchers have concluded that opinion leaders are important not so much because of the way they influence opinion one way or the other, but because of the important independent role they play in gate-keeping, in framing issues, and in setting or priming the agenda for public discussion. “Americans’ views of their society and nation are powerfully shaped by the stories that appear on the evening news,” they argue, and they find that “people who were shown network broadcasts edited to draw attention to a particular problem...cared more about it, believed that government should do more about it, reported stronger feelings about it, and were much more likely to identify it as one of the country’s most important problems.”¹⁰⁶

The process definitely works sometimes. It could be seen in action immediately after Saddam Hussein’s Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990. There appears to have been a certain wariness and confusion on the part of the public as to how to interpret the event. This evaporated a few days later, however, when President George H. W. Bush announced troops would be sent to Saudi Arabia. At that point, the contest in the Gulf soared to the top of the political agenda—the public bought it as an important item.

But, while the president may sometimes lead and set the public agenda, his experience in the war’s aftermath suggests that he is far from all-powerful in this respect. Immediately after the war ended in early March 1991, the public’s interest shifted—without being led or primed or manipulated by much of anyone—to the troubling state of the economy. It was clearly to Bush’s political advantage to keep the war and foreign policy as lively political issues during his reelection campaign of 1991-2, and he certainly tried to do that. But despite the advantage of his enormous post-war popularity,¹⁰⁷ he found himself unable to divert attention to topics more

‘Existential Threat’,” *cato-at-liberty*, September 13, 2011; Christopher A. Preble and John Mueller (eds.), *A Dangerous World? Threat Perception and U.S. National Security* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2014); Doyle McManus, “After Paris, we must keep unreasonable fears in check,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 2015; Rosa Brooks, “The United States of Spinelessness,” *foreignpolicy.com*, December 15, 2015; David Cay Johnston, “America: Home of the Wimps?” *america.aljazeera.com*, December 17, 2015; Eyal Winter, “How not to treat terror anxiety,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 2015; Anthony H. Cordesman, “Commentary: Fear versus Fact”; Anthony H. Cordesman, “Commentary: New Year’s Resolutions on Terrorism: Panic, Politics, and the Prospects for Honesty in 2016,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, *csis.org*, December 28, 2015; Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*; Christopher A. Preble, “We Are Terrorized: Why U.S. Counterterrorism Policy Is Failing, and Why It Can’t Be Easily Fixed,” *warontherocks.com*, January 8, 2016; Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 170; Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*.

¹⁰⁶ Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 112; see also Richard A. Brody, *Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion, and Public Support* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 111; Bruce Russett, *Controlling the Sword: The Democratic Governance of National Security* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), ch. 4; Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in American Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 339-48; Zaller *Nature and Origins*, ch. 12.

¹⁰⁷ Page and Shapiro, *The Rational Public*, 348-50.

congenial to him. The public wanted now to focus on the sagging economy something very much to the benefit of his challenger, Bill Clinton. Only occasionally did Clinton bring up foreign affairs issues. It was “the economy, stupid.”¹⁰⁸

The public not only often substantially sets its own agenda, but it can be quite selective, and often rather unpredictably so, not only about which facts about to embrace (as seen in Figure 7) but which issues it wishes to pay attention to. For example, about the only time the public chose to pay much attention to the war in Bosnia, a venture much publicized and much agonized over by elites and by the media in the 1990s, was when an American airman was shot down behind enemy lines and when American troops were dispatched to the area to police the situation.¹⁰⁹

In his important book, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, John Zaller supplies as an epigram to a chapter examining “the question of elite domination of public opinion,” a quote from a book by V.O. Key, Jr.:

The voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input. As candidates and parties clamor for attention and vie for popular support, the people verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from the alternatives and outlooks presented to them.¹¹⁰

But surely Key’s metaphor is misplaced. Echoes are mechanical reflections. If I am in a suitably configured cave and yell out “Life is a fountain” and “Life is not a fountain,” the echo will obligingly and uncritically send back both contentions. But, unlike an echo, the public is, to use Key’s word, “selective.”¹¹¹ And it reacts selectively not only to the pronouncements of elites clamoring for attention and support, but to events and objective information as well. A famine in the mid-1980s in Africa is worthy of its alarmed attention, but not a civil war in Bosnia in the early-1990s. So it is with emotion-generating events: the hostage-taking in Iran in 1979 resonates in its memory for decades, but the Gulf War of 1991 is soon forgotten.

¹⁰⁸ See Mueller, *Policy and Opinion*, 131-33. A contrast can be made here with an observation by Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon. Noting that, whereas 70 percent of the American public picked illegal drugs as the country’s most important problem in 1989 but only 5 percent did so in February 1991 during the Gulf War, they suggest that the “most plausible explanation” for this change was that news coverage had shifted, not that the public was capable of shifting its attention on its own. “News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion,” in W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz, eds., *Taken By Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 168.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Sobel, “The Polls—Trends: United States Intervention in Bosnia,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Summer 1998), 258-59; see also Western, *Selling Intervention and War*, 264-65.

¹¹⁰ Zaller, *Nature and Origins*, 310. V.O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting 1936-1960* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 2.

¹¹¹ An example of such selectivity can be found in a study of how a precinct in California voted on a set of nine “non-controversial” propositions on the ballot—ones involving technical matters placed on the ballot by overwhelming bi-partisan majorities of the state legislature. Only one percent voted exactly as recommended by the *Los Angeles Times*. John Mueller, “Voting on the Propositions: Ballot Patterns and Historical Trends in California,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (December 1969), 1205.

Of course, although opinion elites do not necessarily create public fears, they are quite willing to take advantage of them—to see their market potential—when the opportunity presents itself.¹¹² Consider journalist Charlie Savage’s account of the underwear bomber’s failed attempt to blow up an airliner over Detroit at the end of 2009. This incident caught the attention of the public and increased concerns about terrorism for a while (Figures 1 and 2). Political elites, however, remained uncertain about the incident’s longer-range importance. Then, a few weeks after the event, Republican Scott Brown won an open seat in Massachusetts, and when GOP officials looked into this remarkable phenomenon, they concluded that their candidate’s harsh stand on terrorism was instrumental to the result. They quickly and gleefully reasoned that if the terrorism argument could “sell” so productively in a normally Democratic state, it would “sell” everywhere.¹¹³

Deflating fear

It is not easy to explain why people are more impressed by some fears and threats than others. Research on which hazards will inspire anxiety has produced a laundry list of suggestions including : recent experience and the uncontrollability of the risks; the dread (or fear) they inspire; their involuntary nature or catastrophic potential; whether the dangers can be preventively controlled, are certain to be fatal, can easily be reduced, result in an inequitable distribution of risk (i.e. seem random or “unfair” and affect seemingly defenseless populations), threaten future generations, are produced by malign actors, or affect one personally; whether they are increasing or not observable, unknown to those exposed, new or unfamiliar, and unknown to science; and whether they have immediate effect or affect a large number of people.¹¹⁴

Weighing such disparate considerations can be tricky. Thus, Daniel Gilbert argues that people are less afraid of global warming than terrorism because climate change is unintentional, doesn’t violate moral sensibilities, looms in the unseen future, and happens gradually.¹¹⁵ But much the same could be said for nuclear reactor accidents, and the one that took place at Fukushima in 2011 has had a huge impact around the world even though the accident, caused by a rare tsunami, has thus far resulted in no direct deaths whatever. And, although some people say they don’t like flying because they have no control over the aircraft, they seem to have much less apprehension about boarding trains, buses, taxicabs, and ocean liners. It should also be pointed

¹¹² On the terrorism industry, see Mueller, *Overblown*, ch. 2.

¹¹³ Charlie Savage, *Power Wars: Inside Obama’s Post-9/11 Presidency* (New York: Little, Brown, 2015), 82-88.

¹¹⁴ Paul Slovic, Baruch Fischhoff, and Sarah Lichtenstein, “Facts and Fears: Understanding Perceived Risk,” in R. C. Schwing and W. A. Albers, eds., *Societal Risk Assessment: How Safe is Safe Enough?* (New York: Plenum, 1980), 181-216. Mark G. Stewart and Robert E. Melchers, *Probabilistic Risk Assessment of Engineering Systems* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1997), 208-16. Jeffrey A. Friedman, “Explaining Americans’ Divergent Reactions to 100 Public Risks,” paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA, August 30, 2018.

¹¹⁵ Daniel Gilbert, “If only gay sex caused global warming,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 2006. For related musings, see Nicholas Kristof, “Overreacting to Terrorism?” *nytimes.com*, March 24, 2016.

out that, as seen above, reaction to terrorism stemming from a domestic source is not as extreme (or long-lasting) as reaction to terrorism that seems to be connected to a hostile foreign group like al-Qaeda or ISIS.

Public fears are not only substantially self-generated, but they can often be difficult to dampen. In the months before 9/11, public anxiety about shark attacks unaccountably rose. This came about despite the fact that, as Daniel Byman puts out, “There was no ‘shark attack’ industry in the summer of 2001.” Indeed, he continues, “officials desperately tried to calm Americans down.” Yet, “panic ensued nonetheless.”¹¹⁶ Eventually, officials did sternly forbid the feeding of sharks.¹¹⁷ But the absurd ban arose from the popular fear; it did not cause it. The momentum was substantially bottom-up. Elite consensus has frequently preceded shifts of opinion.¹¹⁸ But, as officials found when they tried to dampen fears of sharks (or wanted to bomb Syria in 2003), the public often fails to follow.¹¹⁹

In this light, it appears that official and elite cue-givers are unlikely to be able to persuade people to stop being afraid of international terrorism. Because of the persistent public fear and alarm about al-Qaeda and ISIS, leaders seem incapable of pointing out that an American’s chance of being killed by a terrorist is one in 4 million per year even with 9/11 included in the count, and that Islamist terrorists have managed to kill but six people per year since 2001.¹²⁰ And to suggest that, at that rate, terrorism might pose an acceptable risk (or even to discuss the issue) appears to be utterly impossible.¹²¹ That is, at least on issues that have become salient, elites are governed by, and manipulated by, the anticipated public response.

Thus, it took until 2015, nearly a decade and a half after 9/11, before public officials, including in this case Barack Obama, the president of the United States, were willing to suggest that terrorism, even that presented by ISIS, did not, as it happens, present a threat to the country that was existential in nature, an observation that is “blindingly obvious” as security specialist Bruce Schneier puts it.¹²²

¹¹⁶ Daniel L. Byman, “A Corrective That Goes Too Far?” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Autumn 2005), 521.

¹¹⁷ Rosen, *The Naked Crowd*, 79.

¹¹⁸ Berinsky, *In Time of War*, 217.

¹¹⁹ On this issue, see Mueller, *War and Ideas*, chs. 8, 9; Mueller, “Public Opinion, the Media, and War.”

¹²⁰ John Mueller and Mark Stewart, “How Safe Are We? Asking the Right Questions About Terrorism,” foreignaffairs.com, August 15, 2016.

¹²¹ On such issues, see Mueller and Stewart *Terror, Security, and Money and Chasing Ghosts*, 251-57. See also Bergen, *The United States of Jihad*, 270-72; Friedman et al., *Terrorizing Ourselves*; Stephen M. Walt, “Monsters of Our Own Imaginings,” foreignpolicy.com, March 24, 2016; Shapiro, “Why we think terrorism is scarier that it really is;” Byman, “Trump and Counterterrorism,” 66-67.

¹²² Bruce Schneier, “Obama Says Terrorism Is Not an Existential Threat,” schneier.com, February 3, 2015. On this issue, see also Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, 24-25, 254; Healy, “Al-Qaeda;” Robert Diab, *The Harbinger Theory: How the Post-9/11 Emergency Became Permanent and the Case for Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). For rare journalistic commentary in support of aspects of Obama’s position, see Mark Mazzetti, Eric

Interestingly, however, although Obama seems to have been ready to go further—to attempt to alter the accepted narrative even more—he never summoned the political courage to do so during his presidency. When his closest adviser told him people were worried that ISIS would soon take its beheading campaign to the United States, he reportedly replied “They’re not coming here to chop our heads off.” And he frequently reminded his staff that terrorism takes far fewer lives in America than handguns, car accidents, and falls in bathtubs do. However, out of concern that Obama would seem insensitive to the fears of the American people, his advisers fought a constant rearguard action to keep him from placing terrorism in what he considered to be its “proper” perspective.¹²³ Thus *Washington Post* reporter Greg Jaffe’s suggestion in 2015 that Obama no longer felt compelled to shade his beliefs to the demands of public opinion seems well off the mark. More impelling is that the administration took to heart a lesson put forward by analyst Stephen Sestanovich as quoted by Jaffe: “It’s not good politics to display your irritation with the American people.”¹²⁴

Instead, the incentives were (and are) to play to the galleries and to exaggerate the threat: if 77 percent of the people appear to be convinced that ISIS presented a serious threat to the existence or survival of the US (Figure 6), there is likely to be considerably more purchase in servicing the notion than in seeking to counter it.

It is probably best, then, to see public opinion as the primary driver in the excessive and somewhat bizarre counterterrorism process that took place after 9/11. And, to the degree that the public remains terrorized, it seems likely to continue to demand that its leaders pay due deference to its insecurities. Donald Trump has certainly grasped and exploited this reality.

In the process, the simple expression, “we can’t have another 9/11,” has repeatedly proven to be a conversation- (or thought-) stopper. In 2017, when Trump said at a meeting, “You guys want me to send troops everywhere. What’s the justification?” The response from his Secretary of State was, “Sir, we’re doing it to prevent a bomb from going off in Times Square.”¹²⁵

Schmitt and Mark Landler, “Struggling to Gauge ISIS Threat, Even as U.S. Prepares to Act,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2014.

¹²³ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine: The U.S. president talks through his hardest decisions about America’s role in the world,” *Atlantic*, April 2016. Goldberg himself apparently does not share Obama’s perspective: Jeffrey Goldberg, “What Conor Friedersdorf Misunderstands About Terrorism,” *atlantic.com*, June 12, 2013. On the bathtub comparison, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, “Terrorism and Bathtubs: Comparing and Assessing the Risks,” paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA, August 30, 2018.

¹²⁴ Greg Jaffe, “What’s actually driving Obama’s ‘keep calm and carry on’ ISIS strategy?” *washingtonpost.com*, November 19, 2015. Something similar happened to President Dwight Eisenhower on the notion of whether the Soviet Union really threatened to launch a major war. See John Mueller, “Why Obama Won’t Tell the Truth about Terrorism,” *nationalinterest.org*, December 12, 2016.

¹²⁵ Greg Jaffe and Missy Ryan, “Trump’s favorite general: Can Mattis check an impulsive president and still retain his trust?” *washingtonpost.com*, February 7, 2018. See also Robert Malley and Jon Finer, “The Long Shadow of 9/11: How Counterterrorism Warps U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018; Jon Finer and Robert Malley, “How Our Strategy

Five years after 9/11, journalist James Fallows suggested that Americans then lacked leaders to help keep the terrorism danger in perspective.¹²⁶ Despite Obama's almost embarrassingly modest effort, Fallows' observation remains valid today. In 2015, Fred Kaplan urged Obama to take command of the narrative.¹²⁷ However, even Obama's modest effort to rein in the War on Terror hyperbole failed to gel. Instead, when General Michael Flynn, who had recently retired as head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, insisted at the time that the terrorist enemy was "committed to the destruction of freedom and the American way of life" while seeking "world domination, achieved through violence and bloodshed," his remarks to an audience of "special operators and intelligence officers," reportedly evoked "many nods of approval," "occasional cheers," and "ultimately a standing ovation."¹²⁸ Such experiences, notes Jaffe, are "a stark reminder that the post-9/11 'season of fear,' which he had hoped to move the country past, hasn't yet ended."¹²⁹

As part of this process, the misoverestimation of terrorism will continue apace.¹³⁰ In 2010, anthropologist Scott Atran mused, "Perhaps never in the history of human conflict have so few people with so few actual means and capabilities frightened so many."¹³¹ That continues to be true today. If people want to be afraid, nothing will stop them.

against Terrorism Gave Us Trump," *nytimes.com*, March 4, 2017; Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*.

¹²⁶ Fallows, "Declaring Victory," 47.

¹²⁷ Fred Kaplan, "The State of Obama's World: Why the president's policy legacy is hanging in the balance," *slate.com*, December 22, 2015.

¹²⁸ Kimberly Dozier, "Spy General Unloads on Obama's ISIS War Plan," *thedailybeast.com*, January 27, 2015.

¹²⁹ Jaffe, "What's actually driving." See also Shapiro, "Why we think terrorism is scarier that it really is."

¹³⁰ John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "Misoverestimating Terrorism," in Michael S. Stohl, Richard Burchill, and Scott Englund (eds.), *Constructions of Terrorism: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Research and Policy* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 21-37.

¹³¹ Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un)making of Terrorists* (New York: Ecco, 2010), xiv.

Table 1: Cases in which American troops have been sent on a non-advisory basis into a military environment that is actually or potentially hostile

	Year of initial decision	Value of stakes to the public		Anticipated battle deaths	Actual battle deaths	Potential for political opposition to exploit excessive deaths
World War II	1941	very high	10+	100,000s	292,131	modest
Korea	1950	high, but declining	8	1000s-10,000s	33,870	substantial
Lebanon	1958	fairly low	4	10s-100s	1	substantial
Dominican Republic	1965	fairly low	4	10s-100s	27	substantial
Vietnam	1965	high, but declining	8	10,000s	47,072	substantial
Lebanon	1983	low	3	near 0	266	high
Grenada	1983	low	3	low 100s	14	high
Panama	1989	low	3	10s	26	very high
Gulf War	1991	fairly high	6	low 1000s	148	very high
Gulf area	1991	fairly high	6	near 0	near 0	high
Macedonia	1992	very low	2	near 0	0	very high
Somalia	1992	minimal	1	near 0	29	very high
Haiti	1994	low	3	near 0	1	very high
Bosnia	1995	very low	2	near 0	near 0	very high
Kosovo	1999	very low	2	near 0	4	very high
Afghanistan	2001	high	9	thousands	1833	modest
Iraq	2003	high, but declining	8	hundreds	3836	high
Libya	2011	very low	2	10s	low	very high
Syrian civil war	2011?	very low	2	10s	low	very high
Iraq and Syria (ISIS)	2014	high	8	10s	10s	substantial
terrorist chase: Pakistan, Somalia, Mali, Libya etc. but not Nigeria	Various	low	5	10s	low	substantial

Battle deaths through Gulf War: Michael Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Reference* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1992).

For Figures 1-3:

- OK City: Terrorist bombing in Oklahoma City, April 19, 1995
- 9/11: Terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001
- Iraq: Beginning of the Iraq War, March 20, 2003
- Saddam: Capture of Saddam Hussein, December 13, 2003
- Madrid: Terrorist bombings in Madrid, March 11, 2004
- London: Terrorist bombings in London, July 7, 2005
- Underwear: Underwear bomber, December 25, 2009
- OBL: Killing of Osama bin Laden, May 2, 2011
- Boston: Terrorist bombings at Boston Marathon, April 15, 2013
- ISIS: First beheading of an Americans by ISIS, August 19, 2014
- Paris I: Charlie Hebdo shootings, January 15, 2015
- Paris II: Multiple shootings, November 13, 2015, followed by the San Bernardino shootings 20 days later

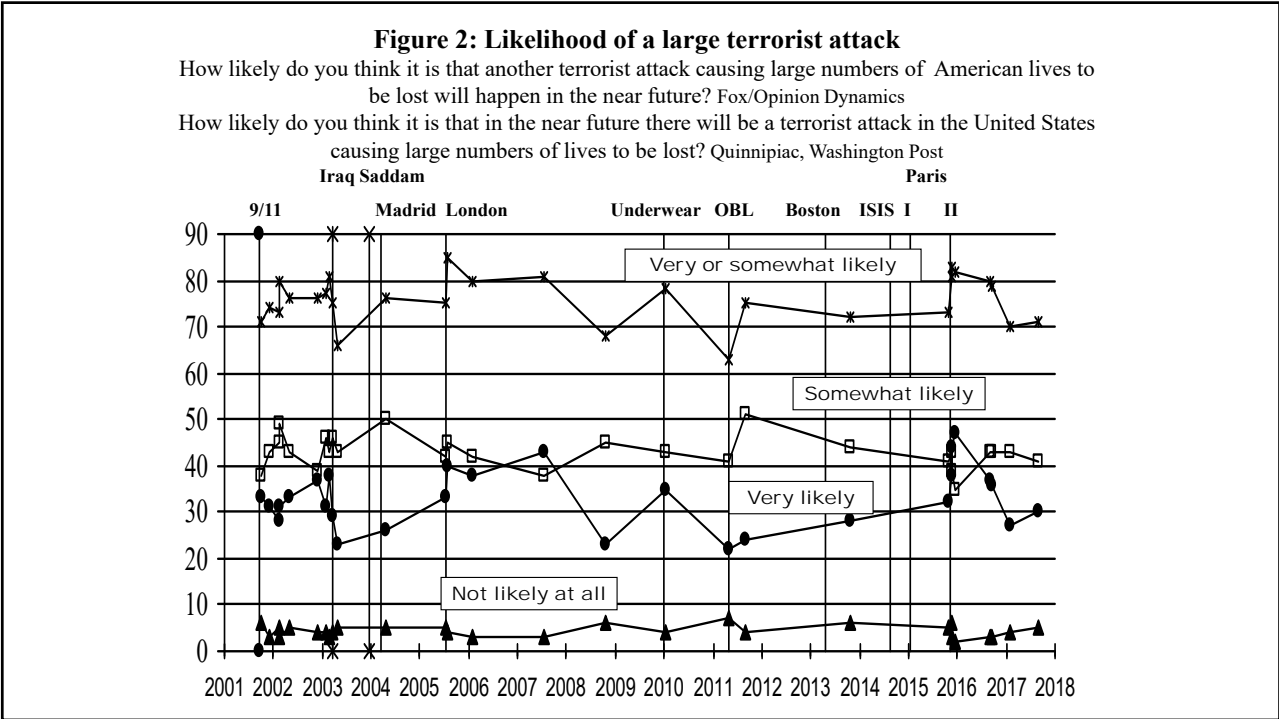
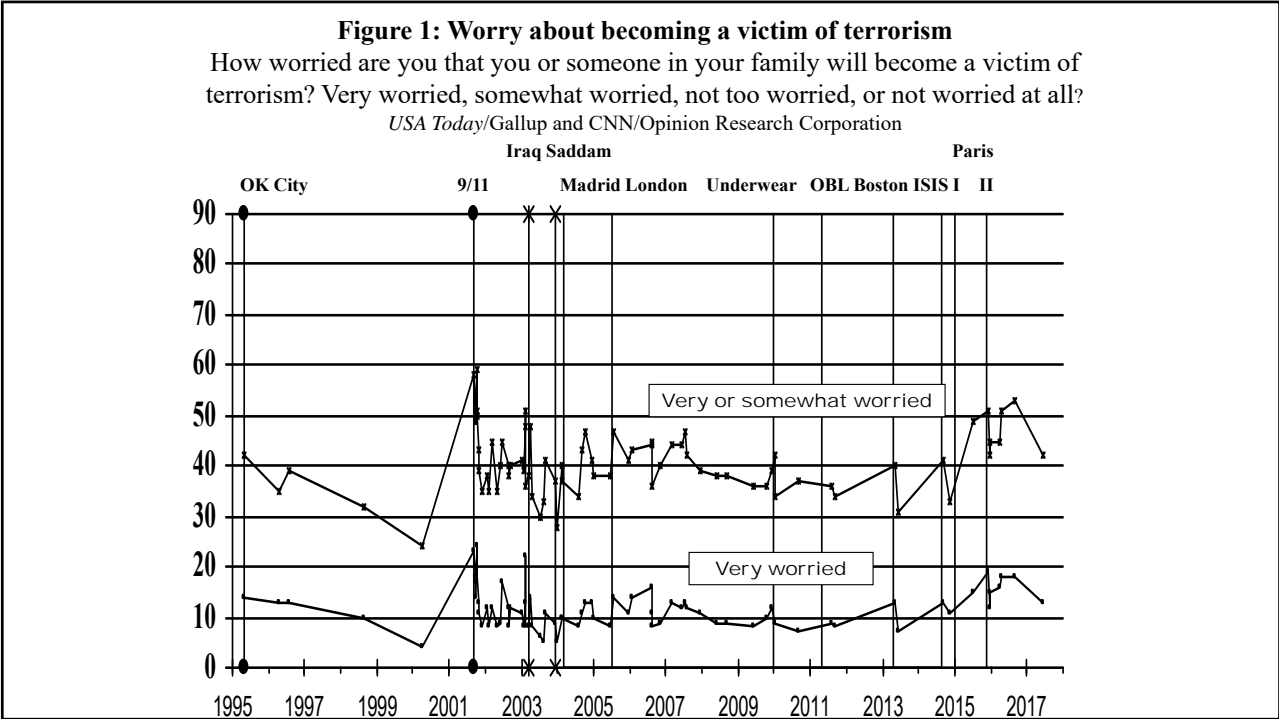


Figure 3: International terrorism as a critical threat to US vital interests

I am going to read you a list of possible threats to the vital interests of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please tell me if you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all....International terrorism Gallup/Worldviews/Globalviews/Chicago Council

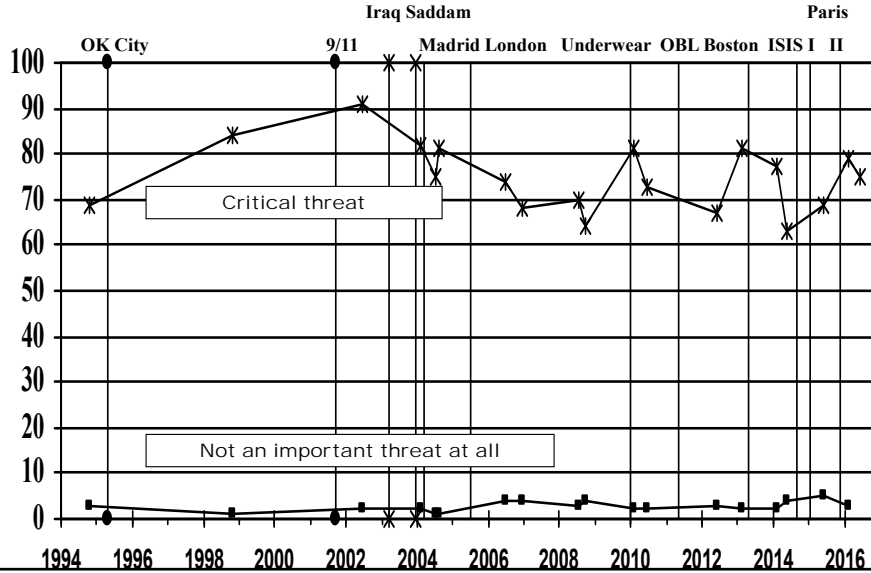
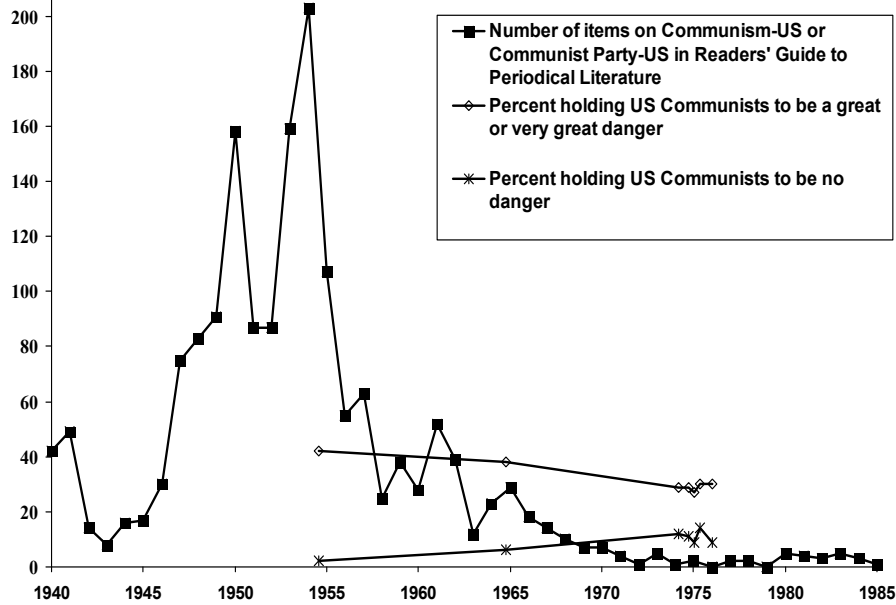
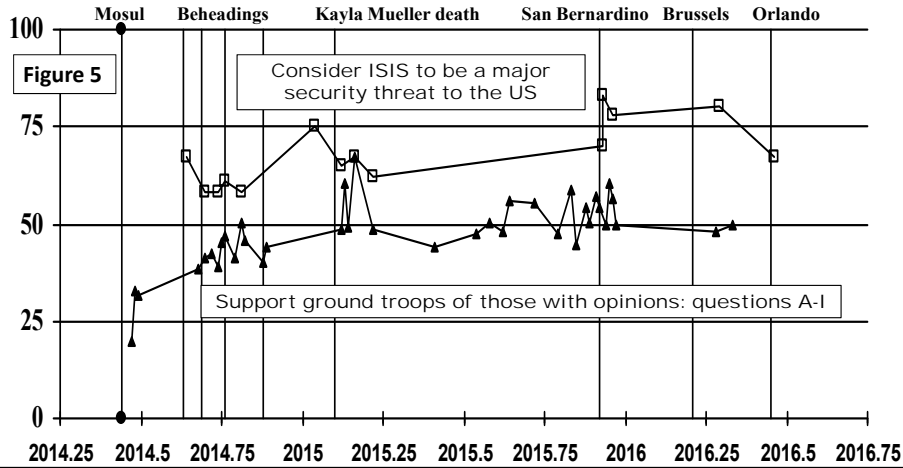


Figure 4: Domestic Communism: press coverage and public fears, 1940-1985



- A. In response to the recent violence in Iraq, do you favor or oppose the United States sending ground troops into Iraq? CBS/NYT
- B. Do you favor or oppose the United States sending ground troops into combat operations against ISIS forces in Iraq or Syria? CNN/ORC
- C. Do you favor or oppose the US sending ground troops into Iraq or Syria to fight ISIS (Islamic) militants? CBS/NYT
- D. Would you favor/support or oppose the United States sending ground troops to fight ISIS (Islamic militants) in Iraq and Syria? Reason-Rupe, Pew, Quinnipiac
- E. Do you think the United States military should have combat troops on the ground in Iraq or not? Quinnipiac
- F. Please tell me if you approve or disapprove of the United States taking that action in Iraq in response to the current situation...Putting US troops back on the ground. Fox
- G. Do you support or oppose the US sending ground troops back into Iraq to help the Iraqi government defeat Islamic militants? Quinnipiac
- H. Please tell me whether you favor or oppose each of the following...Sending US ground troops to Iraq or Syria. CNN/ORC
- I. Would you favor or oppose the United States sending ground troops to Iraq and Syria in order to assist groups in those countries that are fighting the Islamic militants (commonly known as ISIS)? Gallup



**Figure 6: Please tell me the extent to which you agree or disagree with this statement:
 ISIS (Islamic militants operating in Syria and Iraq) is a serious threat to the existence or survival of the US.**

- 52% Agree strongly**
- 25 Agree somewhat**
- 13 Disagree somewhat**
- 9 Disagree strongly**
- 1 Not sure**

**TIPP/Investor's Business Daily Poll, March 28-April 2, 2016
 Asked of those who are following news stories about ISIS
 very or somewhat closely (83% of the sample)**

Figure 7: In view of the developments since we first sent our troops to Iraq, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq, or not? (percent supporting of those with opinion)

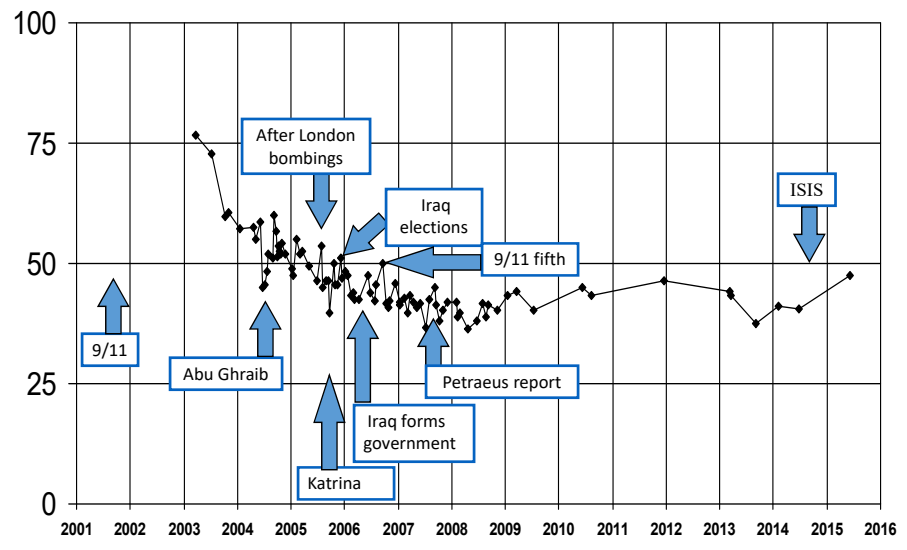


Figure 8: Would you favor or oppose invading Iraq with U.S. ground troops in an attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power? --Gallup

