

REACTIONS AND OVERREACTIONS TO TERRORISM

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By itself, sub-state terrorism rarely, if ever, has had a significant historical impact, except perhaps in a few cases of political assassination or where the tolerance of the terrorized for casualties is very low. Beyond this, any historically significant developments that emerge from terrorism generally derive not from the act itself, but from the reactions, or overreactions, of states and electorates to that act. Sometimes these reactions are self-defeating or even self-destructive, and very often they play into the hands of the terrorists. In many respects, then, the way to defeat terrorism is for states and peoples to exercise self-control, to restrain their reactions and, in particular, their desires to overreact. Moreover, although leaders have often felt differently, there may not really be a compelling political requirement to overreact.

Definitions

Pretty much by definition, sub-state terrorism is a fairly insignificant event--an incidental, isolated act of mayhem perpetrated by individuals or by small groups, violence that generally does a quite limited, and constrained, amount of damage. If such acts become common and sustained, we no longer call the process terrorism, but insurgency, guerrilla or unconventional warfare, or, simply, war.¹

The current situation in Iraq is a case in point. Although for sound political reasons, President George W. Bush continues to refer to the violence going on there as "terrorism," most observers prefer "insurgency." In fact, if the sustained warfare being committed by the insurgents in Iraq (or during the recent intifada in Israel or against occupying Israeli forces in Lebanon) is considered to be terrorism, a huge number of what have been called civil wars in the past would have to be reclassified as exercises in terrorism. Nonetheless, it remains reasonable to continue to consider the Irish Republican Army--whose activities, together with those of its opponents, resulted in the deaths of less than 100 people per year--to be a terrorist force. But by the same token the sustained and far more murderous activities of antigovernmental forces in Algeria in the 1990s and in Afghanistan in the 1980s continue to be best classified as warfare. Indeed, to do otherwise would require denominating almost all primitive warfare as terrorism because it overwhelmingly relies on hit-and-run raids, rampages, and occasional massacres, most of them directed at civilians.²

¹ On this issue, see Mueller 2004, 18-20.

² For an excellent consideration, see Keeley 1996.

Instances where terrorism may have an impact

I will argue that terrorism, by itself, rarely seems to have had notable historical consequences--though frequently the reaction, or overreaction, to it has. There are, however, two classes of events in which terrorism does seem sometimes to have had an impact: assassination and in situations where the terrorized have a very low tolerance for casualties.

Assassination

If terrorism is defined as mayhem directed at political innocents, assassination would be regarded as an entirely separate sort of event, not as a form of terrorism. But if assassination is considered to a special subset of terrorism, there do seem to be instances where it has had, or could have had, a notable historical impact.

For an assassination to be historically significant, the figure removed must also be historically significant, of course. That is, where individual people are of considerable, even decisive, historical consequence, assassination could be similarly decisive. The person of Adolf Hitler was probably a necessary cause of the World War that erupted in Europe in 1939.³ Consequently, had he been violently removed from the scene earlier, history would likely have been substantially altered.⁴ The deaths of Mao and especially of Stalin did seem to change history considerably (and for the better),⁵ and it seems reasonable to assume that their earlier removal by unnatural means would also have been significant.

Among assassinations that actually did happen, the murder of John F. Kennedy in 1963 violently removed from office a man who, some people argue, was less likely than his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, to enter and to sustain the catastrophe of the Vietnam War. There are historians skeptical of this speculation, but it is a plausible one. On the other side, one might also note that the political skills of Johnson, combined with the emotional reaction to the Kennedy assassination, were vital ingredients in getting historic civil right legislation passed in 1964.

The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1994 in Israel might have had some notable negative effect on the peace process (one of the goals of the assassin) because the leader who replaced him had less prestige and was less politically skillful. Significant consequences probably also flowed from the assassinations of Indira Gandhi in 1984 or of her son, Rajiv in 1991.

The assassination at Sarajevo in 1914 did remove a notable opponent to war from the governmental decision-making apparatus. However, as will be discussed below, that fact alone was unlikely, by itself, to lead to war.

Low tolerance by the terrorized for casualties

If the terrorized entity has a low tolerance for casualties, relatively small acts of terrorism can be important, even decisive, in changing its policy. American forces sent to Lebanon in 1982 and to Somalia in 1992 were engaging in peacekeeping, a venture few considered to be worth very many lives. Thus, when terrorist bombs in the first case, or a wild firefight in the second (possibly something that could be labeled terrorism), took the lives of a significant number of those forces, American policy shifted and the troops were withdrawn.

Before U.S. troops were committed to Bosnia in late 1995, some 67 percent of the American

³ For a discussion, see Mueller 2004, 54-65.

⁴ For one discussion along this line, see Turner 1996.

⁵ On this issue, see Valentino 2004.

public said it would favor sending the troops if none were killed, but this figure plunged to 31 if it was suggested 25 might die.⁶ This phenomenon seems to be general. By 1997, Spanish troops had suffered 17 deaths policing the deeply-troubled situation in postwar Mostar, and the government indicated that this was enough for them, withdrawing from further confrontation, something that greatly encouraged the Croat gangs in the city.⁷ Similarly, Belgium abruptly withdrew from Rwanda--and, to save face, urged others to do so as well--when ten of its policing troops were massacred and mutilated early in the genocide.⁸ I've been told that when Canada was planning to send peacekeeping troops to Congo in the wake of the Rwanda genocide--a venture that never reached fruition--officials anticipated that they would probably have to withdraw if around 30 Canadian troops were killed.

Zionist terrorism may have been influential in impelling the British to leave Palestine in 1947.⁹ But to the degree that it did so, an important element in the process was the British government's low tolerance for casualties in its onerous and ungrateful protectorate duties.

Impact from the reaction to terrorism

Beyond these rather limited cases, terrorism's historical impact seems to have derived much more from the reaction, or overreaction, it inspired than from anything the terrorists accomplished on their own.

Governmental overreaction as a political ploy

In some cases terrorist acts have had consequences because they are used as an excuse for--or seized upon to carry out--a policy desired for other reasons. The terrorist acts do not "trigger" or "cause" these historically-significant ventures, but rather facilitate them by shifting the emotional or political situation, potentially making a policy desired for other reasons by some political actors possible but no more necessary than it was before the terrorist act took place.

World War I, 1914. An important case in point is the reaction of Austria and Germany to the assassination in Sarajevo in June 1914. It is frequently suggested that that terrorist act "triggered" or even "caused" the cataclysm that soon came to be known as the Great War. It seems clear, however, that rather than causing the massive (and, in the end, spectacularly counterproductive) Austrian and German overreaction, the violence in Sarajevo more nearly gave some Austrian leaders an excuse to impose Serbia-punishing policies they were seeking to carry out anyway.

In an extensive discussion, Richard Ned Lebow concludes of the episode:

the Sarajevo assassinations changed the political and psychological environment in Vienna and Berlin in six important ways, *all of which* were probably necessary for the decisions that led to war. First, they constituted a political challenge to which Austrian leaders believed they had to respond forcefully; anything less was expected to encourage further challenges by domestic and foreign enemies. Second, they shocked and offended Franz Josef and Kaiser Wilhelm and made both emperors more receptive to calls for decisive measures. Third, they changed the policymaking context in Vienna by removing the principal spokesman for peace. Fourth, they may have been the catalyst for Bethmann-Hollweg's *gestalt* shift. Fifth, they made it possible for Bethmann-Hollweg to win the support of the socialists, without which he never would have risked

⁶ Mueller 2002, 212. See also Larson 1996, 2000.

⁷ Hedges 1997.

⁸ Des Forges 1999, 618-20. Gourevitch 114, 149-50. African Rights 1995, 1112.

⁹ For a discussion, see Simon 2001, 43-46.

war. Sixth, they created a psychological environment in which Wilhelm and Bethmann-Holweg could proceed in incremental steps toward war, convincing themselves at the outset that their actions were unlikely to provoke a European war, and at the end, that others were responsible for war.¹⁰

Except for the third, all these apparently necessary consequences deal with reactions, emotional or calculated, none of which were necessary results of the event itself. Because a terrorist gets lucky with a couple of shots in a distant province does not mean important decision-makers are required to shift beliefs or to give in to emotions to embrace risky (and, as it turned out, catastrophically foolish) policies they had previously rejected.

The War in Iraq, 2003. Similarly, many people in the Bush Administration had long been yearning for a war to depose Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and many of these immediately moved into operation after 9/11 in the belief, correct it now seems, that that dramatic event, even though it had nothing to do with Iraq, might well have cleared the air sufficiently to allow them to carry out the policy they had been longing for.

Russia, 2004. In like manner, in 2004 Vladimir Putin seized the political opportunity afforded by some Chechen terrorist acts (and by some incompetent policing measures taken by the Russian police). He abruptly enhanced his control over the Russian political system--something that had absolutely nothing at all to do with the acts themselves. To say that the acts of terrorism caused this power grab would be absurd. Rather, they simply facilitated it.

Allowing terrorists set the agenda. Regimes have frequently allowed their participation in peace talks to be importantly affected by terrorists. By stating that they will not negotiate as long as terrorist attacks continue, both the Israeli government and the British government (over Northern Ireland) effectively permitted individual terrorists to set their agendas. However, of course, if those governments actually didn't want to negotiate anyway, the terrorist acts simply supply a convenient excuse.

Governmental overreaction as an expression of rage or fear

Sometimes states react, or overreact, to terrorist events not so much to carry out a pre-existing agenda but simply out of rage, fear, or a desire to exact revenge. But once again, the historically consequential development derives from the reaction, not from the terrorist act itself, because the responder always could (and, as will be discussed later, sometimes does) simply ignore, or at least fail to give in to, the provocation.

It is common to lash out impetuously at the perceived threat without much in the way of careful analysis. In 1999, for example, responding to several vicious acts of terrorism apparently perpetrated by Chechens, the Russian government reinstated a war against the breakaway republic that has resulted in far more destruction of Russian (and, of course, Chechen) lives and property than the terrorists ever brought about.

When two American embassies in Africa were bombed in 1998, killing over 200 (including a few Americans), Bill Clinton retaliated by bombing a suspect pharmaceutical factory in Sudan, the loss of which may have led to the deaths of tens of thousands of Sudanese over time.¹¹ Also bombed were some of Osama bin Laden's terrorist training camps in Afghanistan which caused the Afghan government, the Taliban, to renege on pledges to extradite the troublesome and egoistic bin Laden to Saudi Arabia, made

¹⁰ Lebow 2003. Emphasis added.

¹¹ Daum 2001, 19.

him into an international celebrity, essentially created his al-Qaeda organization by turning it into a magnet for funds and recruits, and converted the Taliban from reluctant hosts to allies and partners.¹²

Eager to "do something" about terrorism in 1986, Ronald Reagan bombed Libya with planes launched from Britain after terrorists linked to Libya had blown up a Berlin discotheque killing two people, one of them American. After the bombing, in which one plane crashed and scores of people were killed (none of them Libya's leader, Muammar Qaddafi), Reagan triumphantly proclaimed, "no one can kill Americans and brag about it. No one. We bear the people of Libya no ill will, but if their Government continues its campaign of terror against Americans, we will act again."¹³ The bombing raid, notes Ray Takeyh, "only enhanced Qaddafi's domestic power and led to his lionization in the developing world."¹⁴ Moreover, although other countries did become more wary about cooperating with Qaddafi and although he reined in his rhetoric and ceased to "brag about it," he continued to *do* it. In rather short order Libyan agents had murdered an American and two Britons held hostage in another country and launched several other attacks including an attempted bombing of a U.S. officers' club in Turkey and the attempted assassination of an American diplomat in Sudan.¹⁵ And then, two years later, Libya participated in the bombing of a Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, that killed 270, 187 of them Americans, and toppled the airline company into bankruptcy.¹⁶

Outraged by a series of terrorist attacks and shellings perpetrated by Palestinian forces based in bordering Lebanon, the Israelis moved in with massive force in 1982.¹⁷ Many Arabs in southern Lebanon resented the Palestinian presence in their midst as much as the Israelis, and they welcomed the Israelis with flowers and smiles. But indiscriminate Israeli brutality and arrogance, in which Arab numerous villages were overrun and some 1900 civilians were killed in the first stages in the advance, quickly turned, as Sandra Mackey puts it, "a confederate against the Palestinians into a formidable adversary of the State of Israel."¹⁸ The invasion did succeed in forcing most Palestinian fighters to flee the country, but within a year over 5000 had filtered back.¹⁹ By the time Israeli forces were withdrawn in 2000, vastly more Israelis among the occupying forces had been killed by harassing Arab attacks than had been killed by terrorists before 1982.

Similarly, the Indian government massively overreacted to Sikh terrorism in 1984 by attacking the Sikh's holiest place, the Golden Temple, and engaged in other excessive military behavior. The result was a huge escalation in the conflict as large numbers of Sikhs were outraged. Among the consequences was the assassination of the Indian prime minister by two of her Sikh bodyguards and the explosion of an Air

¹² Burke 2003, 167-68; Cullison and Higgins, 2002; Coll 2004, 400-2, 414-15; Kepel 2002, 420n50; Byman 2005, 201-3. On this process more generally, see Lake 2002.

¹³ Simon 2001, 199.

¹⁴ Takeyh 2001, 64.

¹⁵ Simon 2001, 199. Wills 2003, 212.

¹⁶ Simon 2001, 197-200. Wills 2003, 225.

¹⁷ Simon 2001, 172-73.

¹⁸ Mackey 1989, 175, 204. Pape 2005, 131-33.

¹⁹ Mackey 1989, 250.

India plane in which 329 perished--the largest death total caused by a terrorist attack until 9/11.²⁰

Reactions to terrorism have also often led to massive and hugely unjustified persecution, some of it of considerable historic consequence. The Jewish pogroms in Russia at the end of the 19th century, for instance, were impelled in major part because Jews were notable in terrorist movements at the time.²¹

Terrorism and elections

Not only have governments overreacted, often foolishly and sometimes self-destructively, to acts of terrorism, but so have electorates. In Israel, Arab terrorists have apparently had the goal of sabotaging Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. In both 1996 and 2001, Israeli voters responded to Arab terrorism at the time by obligingly electing to office parties and prime ministers (Benjamin Netanyahu and Ariel Sharon) who were, like the terrorists, hostile to the negotiations.

Terrorism in Spain in 2004 is sometimes seen to have been consequential because it was almost immediately followed by the election of a party committed to withdrawing Spanish troops from the American war in Iraq. However, the election results are probably more nearly attributable to the incompetent way the ruling government reacted to the terrorist acts than to the acts themselves. In addition, the Spanish troops committed to Iraq were so small in number that their removal scarcely made much difference to the war effort--they were hardly of much strategic significance. Moreover, the new Spanish government actually increased its commitment to the effort in neighboring Afghanistan, an act which probably compensated for any negative military effects caused by its withdrawal from Iraq.

The economic and human costs of overreaction

Another common reaction to terrorism is to become overly-protective and to overspend on defenses. Sometimes, victim countries can become so fearful and self-protective (cutting off their borders or expelling a significant set of residents, for example) that significant consequences, particularly economic ones, ensue.

The costs of overreaction outweigh those imposed by the terrorists even for the attacks of September 11, 2001, which were by far the most destructive in history.

The direct economic losses of 9/11 amounted to tens of billions of dollars, but the economic costs in the United States of the much enhanced security runs several times that. The yearly budget for the Office of Homeland Security, for example, is approaching US\$50 billion per year while state and local governments spend additional billions.²² The costs to the tourism and airline industry have also been monumental: indeed, three years after September 2001, domestic airline flights in the United States were still 7 percent below their pre-9/11 levels,²³ and one estimate suggests that the economy lost 1.6 million jobs in 2001 alone, mostly in the tourism industry.²⁴ The United States now spends fully US\$4 billion a year

²⁰ Pape 2005, 156-60. Simon 2001, 186.

²¹ Rapoport 2004, 68; see also Ignatieff 2004b, 63. On the often deadly and indiscriminant overreaction to anarchist terrorism in the United States and elsewhere, see Jensen 2002.

²² Friedman 2004, 35; Gorman 2004; see also Pillar 2003, 25-27. And, not surprisingly, much of this hasty spending has been inefficient by any standards as porkbarrel and politics-as-usual formulas have been liberally applied: Peterson 2004, 116-17.

²³ Financial Times, 14 September 2004, 8.

²⁴ Calbreath 2002. Another study investigates Italian cities and towns, most of them small, that experienced a single terrorist event. Although most of these were minor and few caused any deaths, they appear to have had a measurable

on airline passenger screenings alone.²⁵ Moreover, safety measures carry additional consequences: economist Roger Congleton calculates that strictures effectively requiring people to spend an additional half-hour in airports cost the American economy US\$15 billion per year while, in comparison, total airline profits in the 1990s never exceeded US\$5.5 billion per year.²⁶ The reaction to the anthrax attacks will cost the United States Post Office alone some five billion dollars--that is, one billion for every fatality inflicted by the terrorist.²⁷ Various 9/11-induced restrictions on visas have constricted visits and residencies of scientists, engineers, and businesspeople so vital to the American economy, restrictions that, some predict, will dampen economic growth in a few years.²⁸

The reaction to 9/11 has even claimed more--far more--human lives than were lost in the terrorist attacks. Out of fear, many people canceled airline trips and consequently traveled more by automobile than by airline after the event, and one study has concluded that over 1000 people died in automobile accidents in 2001 alone between September 11 and December 31 because of this.²⁹ If a small percentage of the 100,000-plus road deaths subsequent to 2001 occurred to people who were driving because they feared to fly, the number of Americans who have perished in overreaction to 9/11 in automobile accidents alone could well surpass the number who were killed by the terrorists on that terrible day. Moreover, the reaction to 9/11 included two wars that are yet ongoing--one in Afghanistan, the other in Iraq--neither of which would have been politically possible without 9/11.³⁰ The number of Americans--civilian and military--who have died thus far in those ventures probably comes close to the number killed on September 11. Moreover, the best estimates are that the war in Iraq resulted in the deaths of 100,000 Iraqis during its first 18 months alone.³¹ This could represent more fatalities than were inflicted by all terrorism, domestic and international, over the last century.

In addition, there have been great opportunity costs: the enormous sums of money being spent to deal with this threat have in part been diverted from other, possibly more worthy, endeavors. Some of the money doubtless would have been spent on similar ventures under earlier budgets, and much of it likely has wider benefits than simply securing the country against a rather limited threat. But much of it, as well, has very likely been pulled away from programs that do much good. Thus, in an exercise in what one analyst has called "security theater," the American government after 2001 spent extravagantly and wastefully on a perishable anthrax vaccine while letting itself become undersupplied with influenza

short term impact on employment, chiefly because marginal firms went out of business earlier and because successful ones temporarily cut back on plans to expand. Greenbaum et al. 2004. The economic effect of the 2002 terrorist bombing in Bali was massive due to its huge negative impact on the tourist trade.

²⁵ Fallows 2005, 82-83.

²⁶ Congleton 2002, 62. See also Applebaum 2005.

²⁷ Rosen 2004, 68. On the US\$9 billion Los Angeles airport plan to (marginally) improve security from terrorist bombs, see Goo 2004.

²⁸ Rogoff 2004.

²⁹ Sivak and Flannagan 2004.

³⁰ Pillar 2003, xv.

³¹ See Economist, 6-12 November 2004, 81-82. The wars have also, of course, been very costly economically.

vaccine.³² And the country's obsessive focus on terrorism after 9/11 resulted in severe funding distortions: almost 75 percent of the appropriations for first responders went for terrorism rather than for natural disasters, and US\$2 billion was made available in grants to improve preparedness for terrorism but only US\$180 million for natural disasters.³³

As Clark Chapman and Alan Harris put it, "our nation's priorities remain radically torqued toward homeland defense and fighting terrorism at the expense of objectively greater societal needs."³⁴ Or, in the words of risk analyst David Banks, "If terrorists force us to redirect resources away from sensible programs and future growth, in order to pursue unachievable but politically popular levels of domestic security, then they have won an important victory that mortgages our future."³⁵

Overreaction and self-destruction

In fact, if one listens to the apocalyptic messages coming from notable members of the terrorism industry in the United States, the only reasonable reaction to substantial additional terrorism in the country would indeed have a historically strategic impact. They confidently predict that the government and people would respond by going on a rampage of self-destruction, thereby supplying the terrorists, or at least the most extreme ones, with what they most yearn for. It is not only the most-feared terrorists who are suicidal, then. Ultimately, the enemy, it appears, is us.

In an insightful discussion published in Skeptical Inquirer that sought to put the terrorist threat into context, Chapman and Harris suggested that terrorism deserves exceptional attention only "if we truly think that future attacks might destroy our society." But, they over-confidently continued, "who believes that?" The article triggered enormous response, and much of it, to their amazement, came from readers who overcame any natural skepticism to believe exactly that.³⁶ Those readers have a lot of company in the terrorism industry.

For example, Michael Ignatieff, who predicted terrorist events in connection with the 2004 elections with great assurance,³⁷ is at least equally certain that "inexorably, terrorism, like war itself, is moving beyond the conventional to the apocalyptic,"³⁸ and he patiently explains in some detail how Americans will destroy themselves in response. Although Americans did graciously allow their leaders one fatal mistake in September 2001, they simply "will not forgive another one." If there are several large-scale attacks, he confidently predicts, the trust that binds the people to its leadership and to each other will crumble, and the "cowed populace" will demand that tyranny be imposed upon it, and quite possibly break itself into a collection of rampaging lynch mobs devoted to killing "former neighbors" and "onetime friends." The solution, he thinks, is to crimp civil liberties now in a desperate effort to prevent the attacks he is so confident will necessarily impel the U.S. to commit societal, cultural, economic, and political

³² Siegel 2005, 177-78. Security theater: Schneier 2005, 249.

³³ Manjoo 2005.

³⁴ Chapman and Harris 2002, 30.

³⁵ Banks 2002, 10.

³⁶ Chapman and Harris 2002, 32; 2003.

³⁷ Ignatieff 2004a, 48.

³⁸ Ignatieff 2004b, 146.

self-immolation.³⁹

In like manner, General Richard Myers, then chairman of the American Joint Chiefs of Staff, calmly assured a television audience at the end of 2003 that if terrorists were able to engineer a catastrophic event which killed 10,000 people, they would successfully "do away with our way of life."⁴⁰ The sudden deaths of that many Americans--although representing less than four thousandths of one percent of the population--would indeed be horrifying and tragic, the greatest one-day disaster the country has suffered since its Civil War. But the only way it could "do away with our way of life" would be if Americans did that to themselves in reaction. The process would presumably involve repealing the bill of rights, boarding up all churches, closing down all newspapers and media outlets, burning all books, abandoning English for North Korean, and refusing evermore to consume hamburgers.

Similarly, some prominent commentators, like David Gergen, have argued that the United States has become "vulnerable," even "fragile."⁴¹ Others, like Indiana senator Richard Lugar are given to proclaiming that terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction present an "existential" threat to the United States, or even, in columnist Charles Krauthammer's view, to "civilization itself."⁴² Graham Allison, too, thinks that nuclear terrorists could "destroy civilization as we know it" while Joshua Goldstein is convinced they could "destroy our society" and that a single small nuclear detonation in Manhattan would "overwhelm the nation."⁴³ Not to be outdone, Ignatieff warns that "a group of only a few individuals equipped with lethal technologies" threaten "the ascendancy of the modern state."⁴⁴ Two counterterrorism officials from the Clinton administration contend that a small nuclear detonation "would necessitate the suspension of civil liberties," halt or even reverse "the process of globalization," and "could be the defeat that precipitates America's decline," while a single explosion of any sort of weapon of mass destruction would "trigger an existential crisis for the United States and its allies."⁴⁵ A recent best-selling book by a once-anonymous CIA official repeatedly assures us that our "survival" is at stake and that we are engaged in a "war to the death."⁴⁶ New Republic editor Peter Beinart is convinced that if any sort of "weapon of

³⁹ Ignatieff 2004a, 46-48.

⁴⁰ Kerr 2003.

⁴¹ Gergen 2002.

⁴² Lugar: Fox News Sunday, June 15, 2003. Krauthammer 2004a. The threat to Israel from terrorism and from its reaction (or overreaction) to the internal terrorist challenge, however, could conceivably be existential, and this is perhaps what Krauthammer means by "civilization." For a suggestion along this line, see Fukuyama 2004, 65. Krauthammer replies, however, by parsing "existential," arguing that what Israel faces is more nearly "Carthaginian extinction" (2004b, 18).

⁴³ Allison 2004, 191. Goldstein 2004, 145, 179.

⁴⁴ Ignatieff 2004b, 147.

⁴⁵ Benjamin and Simon 2002, 398-99, 418.

⁴⁶ Anonymous 2004, 160, 177, 226, 241, 242, 250, 252, 263. One of the book's many hysterical passages runs: "To secure as much of our way of life as possible, we will have to use military force in the way Americans used it on the fields of Virginia and Georgia, in France and on the Pacific islands, and from skies over Tokyo and Dresden. Progress will be measured by the pace of killing and, yes, by body counts. Not the fatuous body counts of Vietnam, but precise counts that will run to extremely large numbers. The piles of dead will include as many or more civilians as combatants because our enemies wear no uniforms. Killing in large number is not enough to defeat our Muslim foes.

mass destruction" were be set off in the United States, "the consequences for individual rights will be terrifying."⁴⁷

It could be argued that, although all societies are "vulnerable" to tiny bands of suicidal fanatics in the sense that it is impossible to prevent every terrorist act, the United States is hardly "vulnerable" in the sense that it can be toppled by dramatic acts of terrorist destruction, even extreme ones: after all, the country now readily, if grimly, "absorbs" some 40,000 deaths each year from automobile accidents. But the often hysterical alarmists of the terrorism industry essentially argue that if a sufficient quantity of terrorism is carried out, the country will have no choice but to destroy itself in response. This would be, to say the least, an enterprise of great historic significance, but it would be the reactors, not the terrorists, who would bring it about.

Overreaction as an aid to terrorism

Terrorists very often hope for, indeed rely upon, overreaction by their foes. Thus, the inspiration of overreaction seems central to bin Laden's strategy. As it put it mockingly in a videotaped message in 2004, it is "easy for us to provoke and bait....All that we have to do is to send two mujahidin...to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al-Qaeda in order to make the generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic, and political losses." His policy, he extravagantly believes, is one of "bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy," and it is one that depends on overreaction by the target: he triumphally points to the fact that the 9/11 terrorist attacks cost al-Qaeda US\$500,000 while the attack and its aftermath inflicted, he claims, a cost of more than US\$500 billion on the United States.⁴⁸

Is overreaction required politically?

The discussion thus far has stressed the hysteria and overreaction (some of it opportunistic) that has frequently been generated by terrorists acts. A reasonable policy recommendation, then, would be to suggest that terrorism can best be defeated by refraining from counterproductive overreaction. Indeed, as Benjamin Friedman aptly notes for the United States, "one way to disarm terrorists is to convince regular Americans to stop worrying about them."⁴⁹

It is often argued, however, that there is a political imperative that public officials "do something" (which usually means overreact) when a dramatic terrorist event takes place: "You just can't not do anything."

However, history clearly demonstrates that overreaction is not necessarily inevitable. Sometimes, in fact, leaders have been able to restrain their instinct to overreact. Even more important, restrained

With killing must come a Sherman-like razing of infrastructure. Roads and irrigation systems; bridges, power plants, and crops in the field; fertilizer plants and grain mills --all these and more will need to be destroyed to deny the enemy its support base. Land mines, moreover, will be massively reintroduced to seal borders and mountain passes too long, high, or numerous to close with U.S. soldiers. As noted, such actions will yield large civilian casualties, displaced populations, and refugee flows." In the acknowledgements, the author thanks Ms. Christina Davidson, his editor, "who labored mightily to delete from the text excess vitriol" (Anonymous 2004, xiii, 241-42). Perhaps Ms. Davidson should have labored just a bit more mightily.

⁴⁷ Beinart 2004. This is the journal that in 2002 had published an impressive, if almost completely ignored, essay by Gregg Easterbrook noting that chemical and biological weapons are incapable of inflicting mass destruction. Apparently, even Easterbrook's editor didn't notice.

⁴⁸ "Full transcript of bin Laden's speech," alazeera.net, 30 October 2004.

⁴⁹ Friedman 2004, 32.

reaction--or even capitulation to terrorist acts--has often proved to be entirely acceptable politically. That is, there are many instances where leaders did nothing after a terrorist attack (or at least refrained from overreacting) and did not suffer politically or otherwise.

Consider, for example, the two instances of terrorism that killed the most Americans before September 2001. Ronald Reagan's response to the first of these, the suicide bombing in Lebanon in 1983 that resulted in the deaths of 241 American Marines, was to make a few speeches and eventually to pull the troops out. The venture seems to have had no negative impact on his re-election a few months later. The other was the December 1988 bombing of a Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, in which 187 Americans perished. Perhaps in part because this dramatic and tragic event took place after the elections of that year, the official response, beyond seeking to obtain compensation for the victims, was simply to apply meticulous police work in an effort to tag the culprits, a process that bore fruit only three years later and then only because of an unlikely bit of luck.⁵⁰ But that cautious, even laid-back, response proved to be entirely acceptable politically.

Similarly, after an unacceptable loss of American lives in Somalia in 1993, Bill Clinton responded by withdrawing the troops without noticeable negative impact on his 1996 re-election bid. Although Clinton responded with (apparently counterproductive) military retaliations after the two U.S. embassies were bombed in Africa in 1998 as discussed earlier, his administration did not have a notable response to terrorist attacks on American targets in Saudi Arabia (Khobar Towers) in 1996 or to the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole in 2000, and these non-responses never caused it political pain. George W. Bush's response to the anthrax attacks of 2001 did include, as noted above, a costly and wasteful stocking-up of anthrax vaccine and enormous extra spending by the U.S. Post Office. However, beyond that, it was the same as Clinton's had been to the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center in 1993 and in Oklahoma City in 1995 and the same as the one applied in Spain when terrorist bombed trains there in 2004 or in Britain after attacks in 2005: the dedicated application of police work to try to apprehend the perpetrators. This approach was politically acceptable even though the culprit in the anthrax case (unlike the other ones) has yet to be found.

The demands for retaliation may be somewhat more problematic in the case of suicide terrorists since the direct perpetrators of the terrorist act are already dead, thus sometimes impelling a vengeful need to seek out other targets. Nonetheless, the attacks in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Great Britain, and against the Cole were all suicidal, yet no direct retaliatory action was taken.

Thus, despite short-term demands that some sort of action must be taken, experience suggests politicians can often successfully ride out this demand after the obligatory (and inexpensive) expressions of outrage are prominently issued.

There may be, in this regard, some advantage to a presidential system, where the leader cannot quickly be removed from office, over a parliamentary system--or for that matter a dictatorial one--where instant removal is possible and rather common. For example, in 1982 Argentina invaded Britain's Falkland Islands, a desolate, nearly-barren territory populated by less than 2000 souls, and one British response might have been: "Right. You can have the islands, but we get to keep the sheep." Objectively, given the low value of the stakes, this might have made some sense, but instead a war ensued, one characterized by an Argentine writer as "two bald men fighting over a comb."⁵¹ Although less than 1000 people died in the 10-week war, that cost, proportionate to the value of the stakes, made the war quite possibly the most brutal in history. Moreover, in the aftermath of that war, the British felt it necessary to send over to the

⁵⁰ Simon 2001, 227-34.

⁵¹ Quoted in Norpoth 1987, 957.

islands a protective force that was larger than the civilian population so protected, and the combined cost of the war and of the post-war defensive buildup through the 1980s alone came to over US\$3 million for every liberated Falklander (or US\$3 for every liberated sheep).⁵² But the British people were outraged by the invasion and had Margaret Thatcher's government simply surrendered--as the Portuguese did when India abruptly took over their colony of Goa in 1961--she would very likely have been abruptly removed from top office. She was, it must be said, never so tempted, but the parliamentary system, with its capacity to visit instant political defeat upon leaders in moments of emotional crisis, did not allow her to consider less costly alternatives, while the presidential system would afford that luxury.

Even in extreme cases like 9/11 (or like Pearl Harbor) it seems likely that a communicative leader could have pursued more patient and more gradual policies.⁵³ The requirement after 9/11 to "do something" would need to be fulfilled. However, a policy emphasizing agile coordination with other countries (almost all of them, including the crucial one, Pakistan, very eager to cooperate after the shock) and one stressing pressure on the Afghan regime and the application of policing and intelligence methods to shore up defenses and to go after al-Qaeda and its leadership could probably have been sold to the public. The war in Afghanistan was widely supported, and its remarkable success--at least in the period of active warfare--makes second guessing difficult. But it was not clearly required from a political standpoint—even less the war in Iraq--and lesser measures could have worked politically if they showed some tangible results.

⁵² Freedman 1988, 116. "Far from proving that aggression does not pay," observed one American official, "Britain has only proved that resisting it can be ridiculously expensive" (Hastings and Jenkins 1983, 339).

⁵³ On possible alternative policies after Pearl Harbor, see Mueller 1995, ch. 7.

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