Public opinion as a driver of the national security state

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It's not good politics to display your irritation with the American people.—Stephen Sestanovich

Abstract: An institutional cause of the rise of a national security state, one that often gets insufficient attention, is public opinion. It plays an important role in supporting and inspiring—and even requiring at times—elements in the development of extensive and excessive policing and surveillance. Comparisons can be made with quests to chase other such "enemies within," especially ones seen to be linked to foreign entities like domestic communists in the McCarthy era and witches in days past. Officials come to believe that they can defy such strong public sentiment only at their own peril while exacerbating such fears is congenial and goes unpunished. Thus, officials and elites are more nearly responding to public fear than creating it. A very few have been inclined to judge the fears to be exaggerated or the policies designed to deal with them misguided. But they have been able to do little, if anything, to reduce them—if people want to be afraid, nothing will stop them. Moreover, officials have been unwilling to take the political risks required—though they probably exaggerate the extent of the risk. Public fears also led to support for the 9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but the fears seem more nearly to facilitate such foreign adventures than to cause them: Americans are not, in general, set on questing abroad for monsters to destroy. And even if fears about international terrorism decline, this does not mean that the national security state established to deal with the problem will also necessarily decline.

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James Risen (2014: 203) is certainly correct to observe that "fear sells," while H. L. Mencken (1949: 29) suggests that "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." However, not all efforts to sell fear, threats, or ideas more generally find a receptive audience. People are regularly bombarded with ideas, and as they sort through them, they pick and choose which to embrace and which to fear.[1] For example, Americans believe that international terrorism is a threat but don't fear genetically modified food, and a great many remain substantially unmoved by warnings about climate change—even in the face of warnings that sometimes reach apocalyptic proportions.

This paper assesses three cases in which fear did sell well with the public, something that impelled, or at any rate facilitated, massive expansions in the domestic national security state: international terrorism after 9/11, domestic communism during the Cold War, and, more distantly, witches in Europe. In all three cases, public opinion against such "enemies within" was a driver of the national security state—the manipulator, more than the manipulated. As well, in all three cases, the fears about threats that were substantially foreign, not domestic, in essential origin.

It certainly appears that, rather than creating these public fears, elites have been governed (or manipulated) by them. Thus, in the case of terrorism, leaders seem incapable of pointing out that an American's chance of being killed by a terrorist is 1 in 4 million per year, and to suggest that the risk posed by terrorism might be at an acceptable level (or even to discuss the issue) appears to be close to impossible. In contrast, the incentives for the media and other "opinion leaders" were (and are) to play to the consensus galleries and to stoke the fears: if the public remains terrified, there is likely to be considerably more purchase in servicing those fears than in seeking to counter them.[2] If people want to be afraid, nothing will stop them. This problem can be seen in all three cases.

The paper also examines four other issues. One concerns the political difficulties of trying to reduce public fears and thus the attendant national security state. Another suggests, however, that officials probably exaggerate these political risks. The third discusses the impact of the fears on foreign wars and interventions, arguing that public fears may more nearly facilitate foreign adventures than cause them and that Americans are not, in general, set on questing abroad for monsters to destroy. And the fourth considers the decline of fears in the three cases and speculates about whether that will or will not lead, in the terrorism case, to a decline in the national security state.

9/11 and the terrorism national security state

In the decade after the Cold War, anxieties about international terrorism substantially increased, and they were set into highest relief by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Mueller 2011: 152). Extrapolating wildly from 9/11, terrorism of that sort has repeatedly been taken to present a direct, even existential, threat to the United States or to the West—or even to the world system or to civilization as we know it (Mueller 2006).

[1] For a more extended examination of this proposition, see Mueller 2021a. See also Mercier 2020.

[2] For this process in action on bashing China in Donald Trump's 2016 campaign for President, see Hass 2021: 13-14.

Impelled by such extravagant perceptions of threat, there have been great—even preposterous—increases in spending on policing and intelligence to chase terrorists in the United States. As Dana Priest and William Arkin (2011) have documented in their remarkable book, *Top Secret America*, by 2009 there were something like 1,074 federal government organizations and almost 2,000 private companies devoted to counterterrorism. One particular comparison might be useful. At least 263 of the agencies devoted to counterterrorism were created or reorganized after 9/11. Thus, the United States created or reorganized *more than two entire counterterrorism organizations* for every terrorist arrest or apprehension it made of people plotting to do damage within the country.

Wild extrapolations have precipitated costly antiterrorism and antiproliferation wars as well. In these ventures, trillions of dollars have been squandered and well over two hundred thousand people have perished, including more than twice as many Americans as were killed on 9/11.

In the process of creating this national security state, there has been a tendency to inflate al-Qaeda's importance and effectiveness. However, the 9/11 attack did not prove to be a harbinger—no terrorist attack before or after, in a war zone or out of one, has inflicted even one-tenth as much total destruction. Indeed, since the 9/11 attacks, Islamist terrorists have managed to kill a total of about 100 people in the United States (49 in a single shooting episode), or about five per year. And al-Qaeda central, while inspiring some wannabes abroad and creating many videos, has done almost nothing of consequence in 20 years. Even under siege, it is difficult to see why it could not have infiltrated a few operatives into the United States legally or illegally or carried out local attacks like the shooting rampage in Mumbai in 2008. Overall, the organization has instead come to resemble Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin of John Kennedy: a fundamentally trivial entity that got horribly lucky once (Mueller and Stewart 2016: ch. 4).

It is possible to argue, of course, that the damage committed by jihadists in the United States since 9/11 is so low because "American defensive measures are working," as Peter Bergen asserts (2016: 218). However, although security measures should be given some credit, it is not at all clear that they have reduced the amount of terrorism significantly (Mueller and Stewart 2021: 5-7; Stewart and Mueller 2018: 10-13; Mueller and Stewart forthcoming).There have been over 100 terrorist plots rolled up in the US by authorities but, looked at carefully, the culprits left on their own do not seem to have had the capacity to increase the death toll very much (Mueller 2020). As Brian Jenkins notes, "Their numbers remain small, their determination limp, and their competence poor" (2011: 1). Nor can security measures have deterred much terrorism. Some targets, such as airliners, may have been taken off the list, but potential terrorist targets remain legion. To a considerable degree, Islamist terrorism has been rare since 2001 because, as security specialist Bruce Schneier (2015b) puts it bluntly, "there isn't much of a threat of terrorism to defend against."

Public opinion as driver

Public anxiety over 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 the attacks and 46 percent on the day after (Mueller and Stewart 2018: 2). This abrupt change, obviously, was created by the event itself, not by elite cues, peer pressure, media coverage, or authoritative narratives.

Poll questions specifically focused on terrorism during the decade and a half after that event generally find little decline: the public remained alarmed.[3] On some questions, concerns about terrorism soared at the time of the 9/11 attacks, dropped in subsequent months, but then failed to decline much further in the years thereafter. On other questions, the rates of concern expressed at the time of the attacks never declined, remaining at much the same level over the subsequent decade and a half.

The first pattern can be seen in Figure 1, which tallies the number who say they are very or somewhat worried that they or a family member might become a victim of terrorism. It spiked to around 60 percent and then declined to around 40 percent by the end of 2001, a level that was still roughly being held through 2021 when the question was last asked. The second pattern is displayed in Figure 2, which reflects concerns over the likelihood of another large attack. Over 70 percent found it to be very or somewhat likely in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, and it was still at that level when the question was last asked in 2017. Even the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 did not prove to be a moment of closure.

These findings are rather surprising because there is reason to have expected that concerns and anxieties about terrorism would erode over time. To begin with, objectively speaking, there is little reason for Americans to fear Islamist terrorism. Not only have there been rather few terrorist killings in the United States, but there were remarkably few major Islamist terror attacks in other countries in the developed world, particularly during the decade after 2005. In addition, as noted, nothing remotely comparable to 9/11 has occurred anywhere in the world: the 9/11 attack stands out as an aberration. And international terrorist groups have failed since to consummate any attack of any magnitude on American soil (or, for that matter, in the air around it), while, as noted, the homegrown terrorist "plotters" who have been apprehended have mostly proved—while perhaps somewhat dangerous at least in a few cases—to be amateurish and almost absurdly incompetent.

Of direct import to this paper's purpose, terror-related alarmism from public officials and media organizations has actually declined over the years. In particular, explicit predictions that the United States will need to brace itself for a large imminent attack, so common in the few years after September 11, 2001, became rare.[4] And it certainly appears that there has been a notable reduction in experts voicing concern that terrorists will acquire weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear ones, a major preoccupation for several years after the 9/11 attacks (Mueller 2010: 161-63). Media attention to terrorism also generally declined over the years following 2001—as suggested in the decline over time in polling on the issue as in Figures 1 and 2.

It might be expected that the huge increases in counterterrorism efforts and spending—totaling well over $1 trillion—would have something of a reassuring effect on public consciousness. Indeed, Michael Hayden recalls a dictum he issued as the director of the National Security Agency two days after 9/11: "We were going to keep America free by making Americans feel safe" (Harris 2010: 137). America has remained free, but the polls strongly suggest that it is not because Americans came to feel safe (Figure 3).

At the same time, the public has not been nearly as moved by terrorism that does not have an external referent. There were hundreds of terrorist attacks in the United States in the 1970s (Jenkins 2020: 8-9). However, these were mainly domestic in origin and scope: for the most part,

[3] For an extended discussion with extensive documentation, see Mueller and Stewart 2018. For updated data, see Mueller and Stewart 2020.

[4] For an array of such predictions, see Mueller and Schricker 2012.

they did not have a significant foreign or external referent and are little remembered. That holds even for the highly destructive Oklahoma City attack by a domestic terrorist that killed 168 people in 1995. In the aftermath of that bombing, as shown in Figure 1, over 40 percent of the public reported being worried about becoming a victim of terrorism. However, unlike the post-2001 dynamic, this percentage declined considerably in the years following the Oklahoma City bombing.

The official response: Perpetuating the terrorism national security state

Because people often evaluate risk differently from what an objective analysis would dictate, politicians and bureaucrats face, or believe they face, considerable political pressure on the terrorism issue. Their dilemma is nicely parsed by James Fallows (2010). He points out that "the political incentives here work only one way." A politician who supports more extravagant counterterrorism measures "can never be proven 'wrong,'" because an absence of attacks shows that the "measures have 'worked,'" whereas a new attack shows that we "must go further still." Conversely, a politician seeking to limit expenditure "can never be proven 'right,'" while "any future attack will always and forever be that politician's 'fault.'"

Far overdue, clearly, are extensive efforts to evaluate the reaction to 9/11. However, impelled in part by this perspective on public opinion, virtually none of this has been done by the administrators in charge. Interesting in this respect is a 2010 report by a committee of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. After spending the better part of two years investigating the issue, the committee could not find "any DHS risk analysis capabilities and methods" adequate for supporting the decisions made about spending on terrorism and noted that "little effective attention" was paid to "fundamental" issues. The committee looked over reports in which it was not clear "what problem is being addressed." That situation is particularly strange because, as the committee also notes, the risk models used in the department for *natural* hazards are "near state of the art." The report, which essentially suggests that DHS had spent hundreds of billions of dollars without knowing what it was doing, seems to have generated no coverage in the media whatsoever.

As declared in the first sentence of the American Constitution and throughout the work of Thomas Hobbes, a key reason for founding governments is to "insure domestic Tranquility." Accordingly, officials serving the public are tasked at the most fundamental level to spend funds in a manner that most effectively and efficiently keeps people safe—indeed, they are *required* to do so in executive orders going back at least to the 1980s (Sunstein 2018: ch. 1; Mueller and Stewart forthcoming).

Instead, initial, if clearly alarmist, perspectives have essentially been maintained in the case of terrorism, and the vast and hasty increases in spending on homeland security have been perpetuated. Indeed, when it comes to terrorism, the Department of Homeland Security appears to be exceptionally risk averse: its decisions cannot be supported even with the most risk-averse utility functions possible, and its level of risk aversion is exhibited by few, if any, government agencies (Stewart et al. 2011; Mueller and Stewart forthcoming).

The massive apparatus to deal with terrorism within the United States has cost well over $2 trillion. For this to be justified, it would have had to deter, disrupt, or protect against about three 9/11 attacks every four years. If DHS decisionmakers were to follow robust risk assessment methodology, low-cost solutions that are easily deployed and effective would be the first to be implemented, and, to say the least, that has not been standard. Thus, they might find that the protection of a standard office-type building against a terrorist attack is highly questionable: under most circumstances, and would be cost-effective only if the likelihood of a sizable terrorist

attack on the building is a thousand times greater than it is at present. Something similar holds for the protection of bridges (Mueller and Stewart 2011, 2016).

As it happens, hardening cockpit doors and training flight crews about how to resist flight deck invasions on aircraft appear to be cost-effective. However, the provision for air marshals on the planes decidedly is not, and the cost-effectiveness of full-body scanners is questionable at best. Sizable reductions in those two programs could easily result in saving hundreds of millions of dollar per year both for the taxpayer and for the airlines, with no negative consequences for safety—particularly if a bit of the saved money is spent on less expensive security measures (Stewart and Mueller 2018).

The Cold War and the communism national security state

An instructive comparison is with concerns about domestic communists during the Cold War. As with Islamist terrorists after 9/11, many Americans after World War II believed that domestic communists were connected to, and agents of, a vast, foreign-based conspiracy to topple America. Though communism was long considered by many to be a potential danger, fears about domestic communists were greatly enhanced after two spectacular trials: that of Alger Hiss, who was convicted in 1950 of perjury in denying that he had supplied the Soviet Union with classified State Department documents a decade earlier; and that of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were convicted in 1951 of being at the center of a ring of domestic communists who supplied secrets about the atomic bomb to the country's then-ally, the Soviet Union, during the Second World War.[5]

Extravagant alarmist proclamations about the degree to which domestic communists—"masters of deceit" and "enemies from within"—presented a threat to the republic found a receptive audience. Thus, J. Edgar Hoover, the highly respected, even revered, director of the FBI, dramatically asserted in a 1958 book that the American Communist Party was working "day and night to further the communist plot in America" with "deadly seriousness"; that a "Bolshevik transmission" was in progress that was "virtually invisible to the non-communist eye, unhampered by time, distance, and legality"; that it was "creating communist puppets throughout the country"; and that it had for "its objective the ultimate seizure of power in America." And that's all from just one page (1958: 81).

The fear of domestic communism much impelled a hasty expansion of a costly anti-communist surveillance and policing system that persisted for decades. For example, in 1972, the FBI in full perpetual motion mode opened 65,000 new files as part of its quest to ferret out communists in the United States (O'Connor 2007: 278-79).

There seem to have been few, if any, instances in which domestic communists actively engaged in anything that could be considered espionage after World War II, and at no time did domestic communists commit much of anything that could be considered violence in support of the cause. Most terrorist violence within the United States has taken place in television dramas, and the same was true about domestic communist violence during the Cold War. FBI informant Herbert Philbrick's confessional book, *I Led Three Lives*, published in 1952, at no point documents a single instance of violence or planned violence by domestic communists. Nevertheless, violence became a central element when his story was transmuted into a popular television series.

In all, it appears that no one during the Cold War attacked the premise of the system: that domestic communists posed a threat severe enough to require an elaborate and expensive policing effort. Substantially, it seems, Hoover's dire exaggerations were accepted. A plausible

[5] The purloined secrets seem to have been of only marginal help to the Soviet program: Mueller 2010: 49-50.

argument at the time would have been: "Many domestic communists adhere to a foreign ideology that ultimately has as its goal the destruction of capitalism and democracy and by violence if necessary; however, they do not present much of a danger, are actually quite a pathetic bunch, and couldn't subvert their way out of a wet paper bag. Why are we expending so much time, effort, and treasure on this issue?" It is astounding that this plausible, if arguable, point of view seems never to have been publicly expressed by anyone during the lengthy Cold War, whether by politician, pundit, professor, or editorialist.

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 (Figure 4). The central attention of the press (and of the public) turned to other matters—as it essentially did after the 9/11 attacks (Mueller and Stewart 2020: 2). However, concerns about externally linked domestic communists, like concerns about externally linked domestic terrorists after 2001, lingered: the percentage considering these threats a danger barely declined in the ensuing 10 years even though media interest fell greatly. When last tapped in the mid-1970s—a full 20 years after its probable peak—concern about the domestic communist danger was still at 30 percent even while press attention to that internal enemy had fallen to zero for the simple reason that there was not much of anything to report about its antics.

This phenomenon also suggests that continuous reminders about a threat are not needed to sustain public alarm.

Witches by comparison

Between about the years 1480 and 1680, a massive security state was erected and maintained in Europe. In this, tens of thousands of people—the vast majority of them women—were executed, very often by being burned at the stake. Accused witches routinely confessed to such crimes as, in Steven Pinker's enumeration, "eating babies, wrecking ships, destroying crops, flying on broomsticks on the Sabbath, copulating with devils, transforming their demon lovers into cats and dogs, and making ordinary men impotent by convincing them that they had lost their penises" (2011: 137-38).

In Scotland, officials discovered and executed fifty witches each year on average, whereas the number in England was only five (Trevor-Roper 1969: 162n2). The difference derives from the fact that torture was used to induce confession in Scotland and not in England. Nonetheless, it is impressive that in England, without using torture at all, authorities were able to get people to confess, at the known consequent loss of their own lives, to the standard litany of impossible crimes.[6]

Efforts to reduce the national security state

In all three of these cases, some officials were inclined to judge the fears to be exaggerated. But they were able to do little, if anything, to reduce them. In considerable part this was because they were inclined to attack the excesses of the national security state, but not its premises.

Thus, concerns were raised about prosecutorial misconduct, harassing innocents, potential entrapment or misidentification of suspects, and the legality of some detentions. These are entirely legitimate concerns of course, but ones likely to be ineffective in front of judges anxious to set deterring sentences and juries composed of frightened citizens. No defense of civil liberties is likely to be terribly effective as long as people believe the threat is massive, even existential. Accordingly, when Vice President Dick Cheney proclaimed that "thousands" and

[6] The most successful torture, they found, was *tormentum insomniae*, or sleep deprivation (Trevor-Roper 1969: 120-21).

later "perhaps hundreds of thousands" of lives had been saved by the anti-terrorism security measures, it was not adequate to point out that some civil liberties had been besmirched in the process (Miller 2009).

Terrorism

In 2015, nearly a decade and a half after the 9/11 attacks, President Barack Obama decided that he wanted to place terrorism in what he considered to be its "proper" perspective and ventured to suggest that the threat of terrorism, even that presented at the time by ISIS or Islamic State, was not "existential" in nature—an observation that is "blindingly obvious," as Schneier put it at the time (2015a).

Obama was ready to go further and is said to have "frequently" reminded his staff that terrorism takes far fewer lives in America than do handguns, car accidents, and falls in bathtubs. But Obama never summoned the political courage to mount an extended effort toward combating public fears of terrorism. Indeed, out of concern that Obama would seem insensitive to the anxieties of the American people, his advisers reportedly fought to keep him from doing so (Goldberg 2016).

As Greg Jaffe of the *Washington Post* noted in 2015, the experience was "a stark reminder for [Obama] that the post-9/11 'season of fear,' which [Obama] had hoped to move the country past, hasn't yet ended." That is, Obama and others were haunted by a lesson put forward by an analyst, Stephen Sestanovich, quoted by Jaffe: "It's not good politics to display your irritation with the American people." Any "manipulation" in this case came from the public.[7]

Domestic communism

Something somewhat similar happened to President Dwight Eisenhower during the Cold War (Mueller 2021b: 39-40). He seems, almost uniquely, to have grasped the fundamental reality that the Soviets had no interest whatever in a direct military confrontation and therefore that an ever-enlarged military was scarcely required to deter them. As his press secretary recorded in 1954, although Eisenhower was concerned about what he called "a sort of peaceful infiltration," he insisted, "after many long, long years of study on this problem," that "everything points to the fact that Russia is not seeking a general war and will not for a long, long time, if ever." He may have been particularly impressed by the destruction he saw when he flew to Moscow in 1945 to meet with Stalin, recalling in his memoirs, "From the region of the Volga westward almost everything was destroyed." He also recalled conversations with his Soviet counterpart, Nikita Khrushchev, concluding it improbable that the Soviets would gamble everything on a surprise attack.

But Eisenhower never really summoned the political courage to present his position openly and forcefully. McGeorge Bundy reports on an incident in 1959 when, after hearing a report presenting "a gloomy assessment of the growing threat from the USSR," Eisenhower "stopped his usual doodling, raised a hand, and said, 'Please enter a minority report of one'." Concludes Bundy: "I find it a large missed opportunity for leadership that the man with the rank, the record, and the personal understanding to make this argument fully and persuasively appears to have made it, as far as the record now shows, only to himself."

Instead, in public Eisenhower chose to rail against what he called the "military-industrial complex." In this, he attacked the lobbying movement for its successful machinations, but he did

[7] Obama was reportedly preparing to deliver a number of "truth-telling" speeches, including one on terrorism, to take place after the 2016 election when he would be safely out of office. However, this was planned on the assumption that Hillary Clinton would win the election. The results changed his priorities.

not confront the faulty and underexamined premise about dire Soviet intentions that gave that movement its effectiveness, its political potency. And he did that only as he was leaving office.

Witches

Something similar also happened during the witch craze. At various times, a few people tried to debunk the process. But their attacks were ineffectual, not only because they were sometimes tortured and executed themselves for such heresy, but also because they went after the consequences of the system, not its premise. This approach left intact the central doctrine holding that Satan was waging war on humanity with the assistance of corporal associates: witches. Notes historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, "If the witch-craze were to be attacked at its centre, not merely doubted at its periphery, it was necessary to challenge the whole conception of the kingdom of Satan." But "To the last, the most radical argument against the witch-craze was not that witches do not exist…but simply that the judges err in their identification" (1969: 148-49, 172).

Are officials' fears of the public reaction justified?

It is possible that politicians and bureaucrats are overly fearful about the political consequences of reacting moderately. For example, leaders have sometimes actually been able to restrain their instinct to overreact to international terrorism, and this can be entirely acceptable politically. Thus, the United States did not massively overreact to terrorist bombings against its soldiers in Lebanon in 1983 or to its citizens over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988.

One might, in that respect, compare the reaction to 9/11 with that to the worst terrorist event in the developed world before then, the downing of an Air India airliner departing Canada in 1985 in which 329 people, 280 of them Canadian citizens, perished. Journalist Gwynne Dyer (2006) points out that, proportionate to population, the losses were almost exactly the same as 9/11. But, continues Dyer, "here's what Canada didn't do: it didn't send troops into India to 'stamp out the roots of the terrorism' and it didn't declare a 'global war on terror.' Partly because it lacked the resources for that sort of adventure, of course, but also because it would have been stupid." A similar conclusion was presumably reached by the Indian government after the dramatic and costly Pakistan-based terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008.

Moreover, although political pressures may force actions and expenditures that are unwise, they usually do not precisely dictate the level of expenditure. Thus, although there are public demands to "do something" about terrorism, nothing in those demands specifically requires American officials to mandate removing shoes in airport security lines, to require passports to enter Canada, to spread bollards like dandelions, or to make a huge number of buildings into forbidding fortresses. The United Kingdom, which faces an internal threat from terrorism that may well be greater than that for the United States, nonetheless spends proportionately much less than half as much on homeland security, and the same holds for Canada and Australia (Mueller and Stewart 2011: 11). Yet politicians and bureaucrats in those countries do not seem to suffer threats to their positions or other political problems because of it.

Which officials have been damaged by terrorist attacks, and when? Certainly not George W. Bush—when 9/11 occurred on his watch, his job approval ratings went sky high and then declined only quite slowly thereafter (Mueller 2011: 192-93). Officials in the United States seem to have survived large attacks like the ones on Fort Hood in 2009, San Bernardino in 2015, and Orlando in 2016, as have those abroad after attacks in London, Paris, Brussels, Barcelona, and Berlin. Who has been sacked?

To be irrational with your own money may be foolhardy, to give in to guilty pleasure, or to wallow in caprice. But to be irrational with other people's money, particularly where public

safety is concerned, is irresponsible. In the end, it becomes a dereliction of duty that cannot be justified by political pressure, bureaucratic constraints, or emotional drives. If officials in charge of providing for public safety are incapable of carrying out their jobs in a manner that provides the most safety for the money expended, they should frankly admit that they are being irresponsible—that they consider retaining their position to be more important than providing for public safety—or they should refuse to take the job in the first place (Mueller and Stewart 2014).

Public fear and support for international intervention

Impelled by an overwhelming desire to hunt down those responsible for the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States, fully backed by public opinion, not only established and fortified a national security state stressing surveillance and policing. It also launched military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq where it toppled regimes that had little or nothing to do with 9/11. Initially successful at that task and eventually accompanied by rhetoric about spreading democracy and stability in the Middle East, the wars soon devolved into extended counterinsurgency (or counteroccupation) exercises that have resulted in the deaths of more than 100 times as many people as perished on 9/11.

Fear about international terrorism impelled these military ventures: without 9/11, it is unlikely that either would have taken place. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan was deemed to be at blame by having "harbored" al-Qaeda, and the central argument impelling and then perpetuating the multi-decade war there was that, if the US withdrew, al-Qaeda would move move from its apparently inadequate hideout in Pakistan to again set up shop in the country to plot and carry out further attacks against the United States.[8] As Carter Malkasian observes, US decision-makers viewed "the political fallout to another attack…as fatal" (2021: 459). And the Iraq War was substantially impelled by the argument that, left in office, its leader, the reviled Saddam Hussein, would develop nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and hand them off to terrorist groups, particularly al-Qaeda.[9]

There has been a tendency to see these exercises as misguided elements of a coherent plan to establish a "liberal world order" or to apply "liberal hegemony." However, both the wars and the national security state resulted from the same mentality.

Moreover, although American public opinion was an important driver for the wars and for the terrorism national security state, it is not messianic or in constant search to find monsters abroad to destroy. That is, the militarization of the post-9/11 period was a glaring, extended, and highly consequential aberration. During the quarter century before that, the United States pursued a foreign policy that was far more restrained militarily, and it seems ready now to resume, or perhaps even expand upon, that tradition after its exhausting and costly 9/11-induced military ventures that so thoroughly failed to deliver satisfactory results at an acceptable cost (Mueller forthcoming).

In the wake of its withdrawal from the Vietnam War in 1973, the United States fell into something that has been dubbed the "Vietnam syndrome." Although it still pursued the Cold War with the Soviet Union, it substantially avoided the active, or at any rate extensive, use of U.S. military force to do so.

Even when American military force was applied during the last quarter of the twentieth century, it was done rather sparingly, not crusadingly. Its most assertive Cold War actions during that period were a military invasion of the small Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983 and an operation to support anti-Soviet rebels in Afghanistan. Outside of the Cold War, the United

[8] On this "safe haven myth," see Glaser and Mueller 2019: 6-9.
[9] On the unlikelihood of such a transfer, see Mueller 2023.

States also bombed Libya for a day in 1986 in retaliation for the Libyan government's sponsorship of terrorist activities; invaded Panama in 1989 to depose an offending regime; and led an international coalition in 1991 to reverse Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. In all these cases, its opponents were scarcely formidable. For example, although the Iraqi army may have looked impressive on paper in 1991, it lacked strategy, tactics, defenses, leadership, and morale, and it responded to confrontation with the U.S.-led offensive mostly by fleeing or by surrendering (Mueller 1995).

Other military ventures Washington pursued between the Vietnam War and 9/11 were even more limited and were mostly carried out for humanitarian purposes such as interventions in Lebanon in 1983 and in Somalia in 1992, some handwringing and a bit of bombing in Bosnia in 1995, and a bombing campaign in Kosovo in 1999.Overall, this record does not suggest a country looking for a fight, questing after monsters to destroy, or seeking to act like a hegemon. Indeed, when given a list of foreign-policy goals, the American public has rather consistently ranked such goals as the promotion of democracy lower—often *much* lower—than combating international terrorism, protecting American jobs, and strengthening the United Nations (Mueller 2011: 152).

It is true, however, that American rhetoric during the period did not match its military restraint. Nonetheless, despite all the hyperbolic and self-important rhetoric, between the end of the Vietnam War and the end of the century, the United States averaged only about 20 combat deaths per year. And in the presidential election campaign of 2000, no one seems to have opposed George W. Bush's explicit support in the October 11 debate for a "humble" foreign policy. Indeed, his Democratic opponent, Vice President Al Gore, deemed the idea to be "an important one." To a considerable degree, both candidates were in tune with the times.

Any commitment to humility disappeared when al-Qaeda attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. After the attacks, Bush abruptly abandoned humility to proclaim that the country's "responsibility to history" was now to "rid the world of evil," seeking, it would appear, to outdo God who had tried and failed with that flood of His.[10] With this bizarre goal in mind, the United States established a national security state, launched wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and began to hunt down terrorist suspects across the globe as part of its Global War on Terror. Without 9/11, however, the comparative military restraint of the last quarter of the twentieth century would likely have continued. And as it became clear just how costly and counterproductive the main conflicts of the "Global War on Terror" had become, Washington began to shift back to a far more limited military approach that resembles, or is even more so, than the one pursed in the decades after Vietnam. Thus, in a major statement in January 2012, the Defense Department stressed that "U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct largescale, prolonged stability operations" (Martinez 2012). This suggests that the military and its leaders had concluded that they simply didn't know how to successfully execute such missions, and, in that sense, it expressed a degree of restraint, even humility.Evidence of an emerging "Iraq Syndrome" could be found at least as early as 2005 (Mueller 2005). It currently seems to be expressed in the response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Following the approach applied when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan a few years after the Vietnam debacle, there has been support for locals opposing the invasion, but not for direct intervention. That could also be seen in the successful response to the rise of the terrorist group, ISIS, in the Middle East after

[10] A search finds that perhaps the only newspaper to comment on Bush's absurdly extravagant pronouncement was the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* which noted that Bush "perhaps overpromised."

2014. In four years of combat, only 20 America service personnel were killed (Gordon 2022: 390).

Thus, after the extended, tragically costly, and fundamentally absurd aberration caused by the overreaction to 9/11, American military restraint appears to be back. And as the country limps from its 9/11-induced failure in Afghanistan, it even seems possible that official rhetoric will mellow. Self-infatuated proclamations about American superpowerdom, exceptionalism, and indispensable nationhood, seen by many to be arrogant, may subside, at least for now.[11]

Dismantling the national security state

Does this signal the demise of the national security state that was fashioned to confront the much-inflated threat presented by international terrorism?

It was possible for international communism to become extinguished, and it seems that the communism-craze pretty much died out when international communism obligingly collapsed at the end of the Cold War. At that point, any machinations by domestic communists no longer had a threatening foreign referent: there no longer existed a hostile foreign power to whom domestic communists could relay secrets, nor was there a prominent, threatening ideology stressing subversion and violent revolution for them to serve.

The witch craze, with its tremendous human, societal, and material costs, also eventually died out. This happened, Trevor-Roper argues, when theologians were able to sell a re-evaluation of the premise that formed the engine for the craze. In this, the notion of "the duel in Nature between a Hebrew God and a medieval Devil was replaced by the benevolent despotism of a modern, scientific 'Deity'" (1969: 182). In addition, it appears, they were able to convince people that, although the devil was indeed out there, he was so powerful that he didn't actually need corporal assistants to carry out his nefarious handiwork (Thurston 2007).

Whether this experience will prove to be relevant to the terrorism national security state has yet to be seen. Because of the special formlessness, even spookiness, of terrorism's hostile foreign referent, it may prove difficult to get people to believe that the threat of international terrorism has really been extinguished or at least that it is no longer particularly significant.

Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the two 9/11 wars are fading into memory, and concerns about international terrorism may finally have declined in the last few years.[12] However, intense fear was raised when ISIS webcast its vicious assassination of an American journalist overseas in 2014 (Mueller and Stewart 2020: 16, 25). Perhaps something like that could happen again. But even if it doesn't happen, the terrorism national security state, already a self-licking ice cream cone, might well continue to linger simply out of inertia. Thus, air travel remains extremely safe from terrorist damage (Stewart and Mueller 2018). Yet our fear-mongering guardians at the Transportation Security Administration are testing out the addition of facial recognition technology to their passenger screening process. Predictably, concerns about privacy have been raised, but not questions about whether the technology reduces the very small residual risk enough to justify its considerable cost.

[11] On superpower arrogance, see Fettweis 2018.

[12] In 2016, 53 percent said terrorism was a very big national problem in the country, and this declined to about 40 percent from 2017 to 2019 and to about 25 percent in 2020 (Pew 2021; my thanks to Ron Krebs for pointing me to this study). However, as Figures 1, 2, and 3 indicate, alarm about terrorism in 2016 was exceptionally high due to concerns about ISIS which seemed to be riding high at the time. Thus the decline, while doubtless real, is not quite as severe as it may seem. In addition, while Figure 1 shows a decline in worry from the ISIS peak, the drop is substantially back to the range it had occupied earlier.

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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

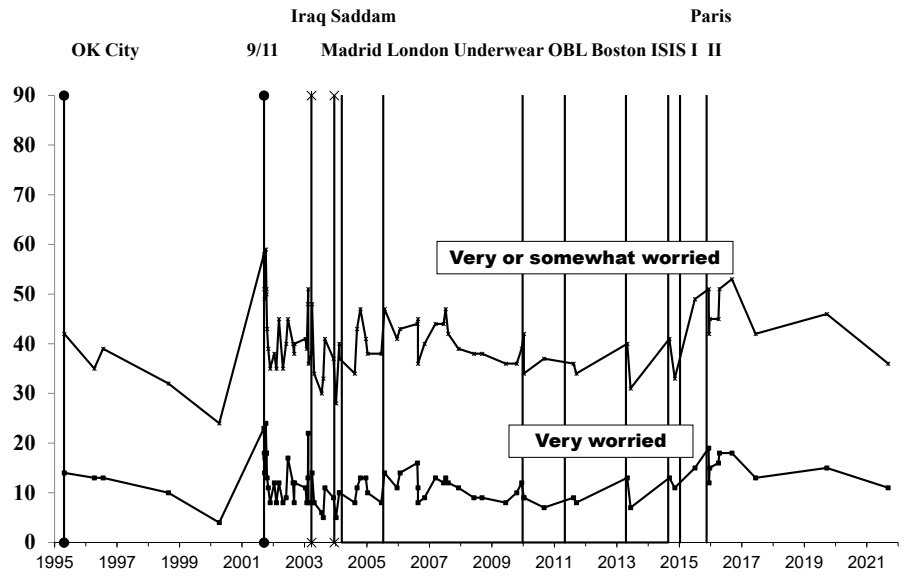
1

Figure 1

Worry about becoming a victim of terrorism

How worried are you that you or someone in your family will become a victim of terrorism? Very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried, or not worried at all?

USA Today/Gallup and CNN/Opinion Research Corporation



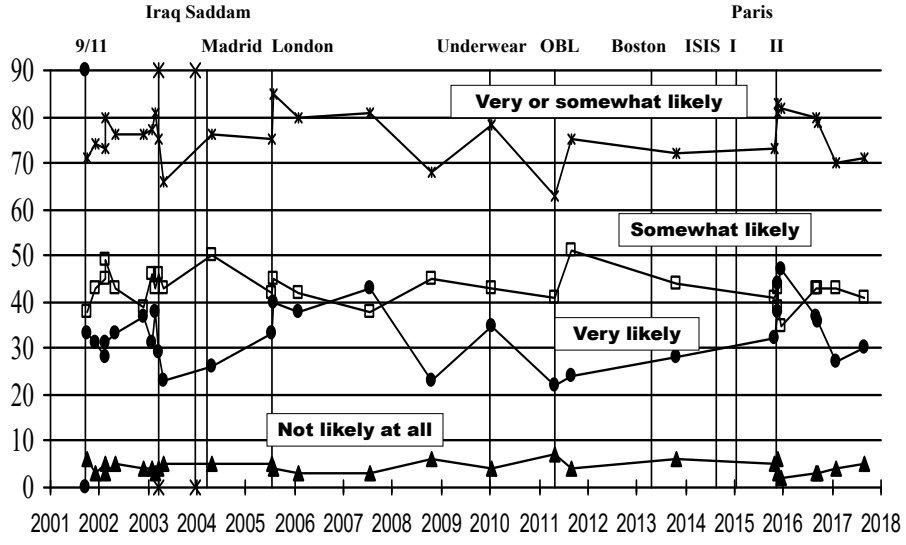
2

Figure 2

Likelihood of a large terrorist attack

How likely do you think it is that another terrorist attack causing large numbers of American lives to be lost will happen in the near future? Fox/Opinion Dynamics

How likely do you think it is that in the near future there will be a terrorist attack in the United States causing large numbers of lives to be lost? Quinnipiac, Washington Post



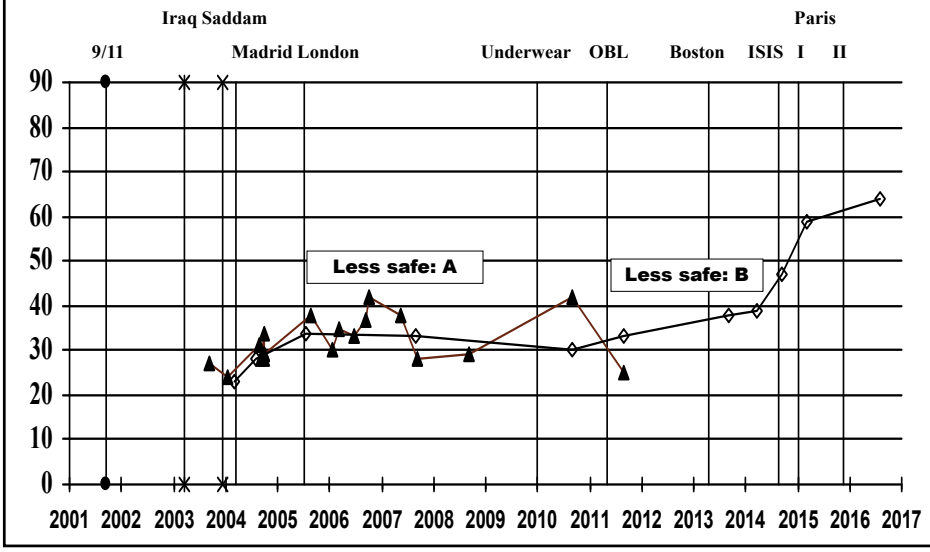
3

Figure 3

Country less safe than before 9/11

A: Compared to before September 11, 2001, do you think the country today is safer from terrorism or less safe from terrorism? ABC/*Washington Post*

B: Do you think the United States is safer or less safe today than before 9/11? Fox/Opinion Dynamics



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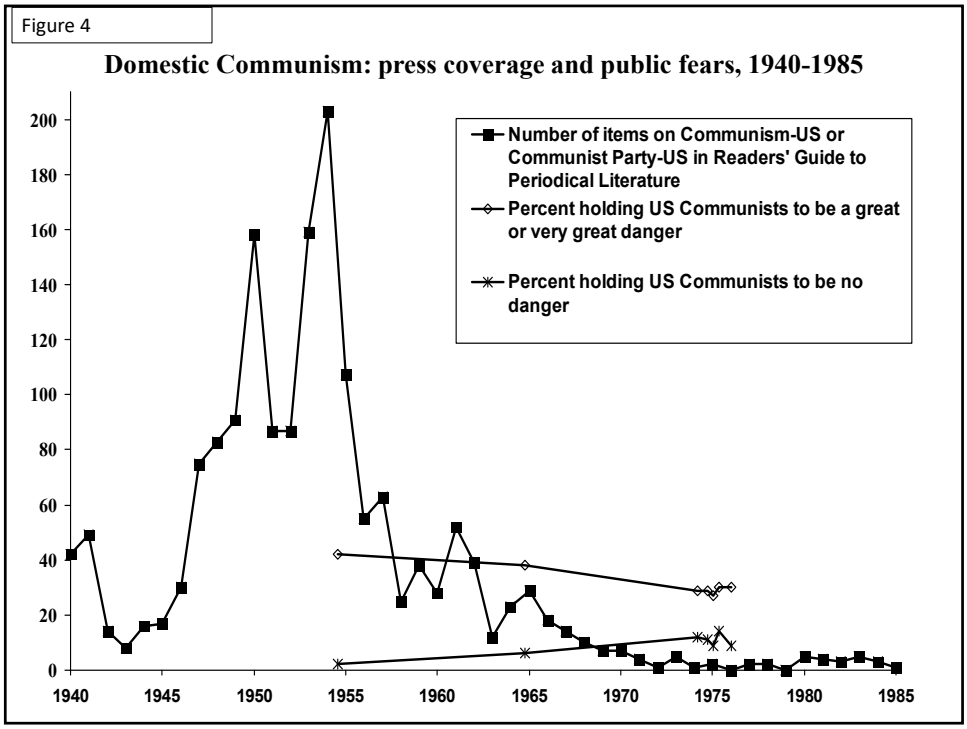
Figure 4
Domestic Communism: press coverage and public fears, 1940-1985
Number of items on Communism-US or Communist Party-US in Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature
Percent holding US Communists to be a great or very great danger
Percent holding US Communists to be no danger
200
180
160
140
120
100
80
60
40
20
0
1940
1945
1950
1955
1960
1965
1970
1975
1980
1985

5