

AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION ON TERRORISM SINCE 9/11: TRENDS AND PUZZLES

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ABSTRACT: Even though other issues—particularly economic ones—have crowded out terrorism as a topic of daily concern, 9/11 clearly has achieved perpetual resonance in the American mind. This has resulted in a longterm, routinized, mass anxiety—or at least a sense of concern—that has shown little sign of waning over the years since 2001 despite many reasons (13 in our count) to expect otherwise. All this, even before the threatening and attention-arresting rise of the vicious Islamic State group, or ISIS, in 2014.

Beside the traumatic memory of 9/11, the seemingly constant, if pointillistic, 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. Special fear and anxiety may also be stoked by the fact that Islamist terrorism seems to be part of a large and hostile conspiracy and network that is international in scope and rather spooky in nature.

It is difficult to explain which events and threats will be embraced, and even more so to explain how long they will linger in the public consciousness. Terrorism, like murder, has always existed in some form or other and always will. And, because of the special formlessness, even spookiness, of 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 is no longer particularly significant.

It is probably best 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.

Assessing the public reaction to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, anthropologist Scott Atran muses, “Perhaps never in the history of human conflict have so few people with so few actual means and capabilities frightened so many” (2010, xiv). Although there are multiple reasons to have expected an erosion of concern about terrorism since 2001, poll data suggest that much of that fright continues to linger a decade and a half later. At the time of the attacks, the common comment was: “everything has changed.” That change, it appears, has been permanent or at least perpetual: the public has chosen to persist to engage in what philosopher Leif Wenar has labeled a false sense of insecurity.

This paper evaluates that puzzle and assesses the long-term response of the American public to terrorism.¹ Even though other issues—particularly economic ones—crowded out terrorism as a topic of daily concern, the 9/11 event clearly has achieved perpetual resonance in the American mind. And as part of this, it appears to have resulted in a longterm, routinized, mass anxiety—or at least a sense of concern—that showed little sign of waning over the years since 2001 even before the threatening and attention-arresting rise of the vicious Islamic State group, or ISIS, in the Middle East in 2014.²

Public opinion trends on terrorism: the absence of much change

As Figure 1 demonstrates, although there have been some upward spikes at the time of the terrorist attacks in London in 2005, the attempted attack by the underwear bomber in 2009, and the rise of ISIS in the last couple of years, the American public has come to pay less attention to terrorism. Other concerns—the wars in the Middle East and, more lately, the economy—have dominated its responses to questions about the most important problem facing the country.³ Moreover, after a bit of time after 9/11, much behavior returned to normal: people again boarded airliners, and property values in the targeted cities of New York and Washington continued upward.⁴

However, poll questions specifically focused on terrorism generally find little decline since 2001 in the degree to which Americans voice concern about that hazard although there have been various temporary ups and downs in these trends in response to specific events.

There are two patterns. On some questions, concerns soared at the time of the 9/11 attacks, dropped to lower levels in the subsequent few months, but then afterward failed to decline much further. On other questions, levels tapped at the time of the attacks simply continued to remain at much the same level in subsequent years.⁵

The first pattern is shown in the response to the vivid, clear, and personal question as displayed in Figure 2. 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 35 to 40 percent by the end of 2001, a level that has held ever since.

¹ The data derive 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 the University of Connecticut. This paper revises, extends, and updates chapter 2 in Mueller and Stewart 2016a. See also Mueller and Stewart 2016b.

² On this issue, see Stouffer 1955, ch 3.

³ On the behavior of this question over time more broadly, see Mueller 2011a, ch. 8.

⁴ On this issue, see Betts 2005; Mueller 2005; Lewis 2000.

⁵ See also Nacos et al. 2011, ch. 3; Brooks and Manza 2013, chs. 3, 6.

Interestingly, however, when terrorism is not mentioned in the question, 9/11 did not cause Americans to fear for their personal safety more generally (Figure 3). Nor was there any change in the way Americans evaluated their overall quality of life—although this did decline in later years in response, presumably, to the economic recession that began in 2008, and then rose again when the recession waned (Figure 4). Studies in Europe suggest that terrorism can impact life satisfaction or self-reported subjective well-being scores with economic consequences that could be substantial (Frey et al. 2007, 2008). However, these effects do not show up in the American data perhaps because the European studies concentrate on places like Northern Ireland where terrorist violence was more continuous and thus presumably affected daily existence more.

The second pattern is displayed in Figure 5 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.

The same pattern holds for a question about which side was winning the war against terrorism (Figure 6). Although that percentage has bounced around quite a bit particularly in response to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a decade later, even after the killing of Osama bin Laden, it stood at almost exactly the same level as in October 2001—even though people obviously would like to believe things are getting progressively better. After the rise of ISIS and the terrorist attacks in Paris attacks in 2015, the question moved sharply in a pessimistic direction, though that may prove to be temporary.

The percentage maintaining that terrorists remain capable of launching “another major attack” was, if anything, higher in 2013 and 2014 than it was in 2002 (Figure 7). The portion concerned that their community will be attacked in the next several weeks, although relatively small, was also, if anything, a bit higher in 2011 than it had been in early 2002 (Figure 8). In another poll, reported worries about flying because of the risk of terrorism registered at about the same level in 2010 as in 2002 (Figure 9).

The increase in spending on domestic homeland security since 9/11 has totaled well over \$1 trillion while efforts to chase down and eliminate terrorists abroad have cost trillions more (Mueller and Stewart 2011; Stiglitz and Bilmes 2008). However, these extraordinary efforts and expenditures have utterly failed to make people feel safer. The percentage of the people who profess to have confidence in the government’s ability to prevent further terrorist attacks remained in 2013 at about the same level as in 2002 (Figure 10). And the percentage confident the government could protect them from such attacks has, if anything, waned over the decade and a half since 9/11—when something of a “rally round the flag” effect had taken place (Figure 11).⁶ In addition, in 2013 and 2014 more Americans considered the country to be less safe than before 9/11 than had said so a decade or so earlier, and they then became even more alarmed with the rise of ISIS in 2014 (Figures 12 and 13).

These figures also demonstrate, as do others, the spike-like impact some major events have. For example, a very substantial boost in confidence in government counter-terrorism efforts was registered in the Figure 10 rating at the time of the killing of bin Laden in May 2011

⁶ On this phenomenon, see Mueller 1973; Mueller 2003; Brooks and Manza 2003, 52-53.

and to a somewhat lesser degree in Figure 13 and perhaps in Figure 12. However, that boost soon evaporated. The data in Figure 11 suggest that had happened within a few months by August.⁷

Another opinion change that proved to be temporary concerns the civil liberties issue. The startling revelations in June 2013 by Edward Snowden about the massive data collection efforts of the National Security Agency did seem to have some effect on concerns about invasions of privacy by the country's counterterrorism enterprise. Figure 14 plots two relevant questions. For reference, the Snowden revelations came shortly after the Boston bombings. In the aftermath of the revelations, both poll questions moved decidedly in the direction of suggesting that the government had gone too far in restricting civil liberties and in intruding on privacy.⁸ Data are limited, but the top line in the Figure, in particular, suggests this was no passing issue: opinion moved considerably over the next year in the privacy/civil liberties direction. However, that development was dashed in the latter half of 2014 with rise of ISIS. When last asked, these questions found that opinion on the issue was back to levels that had been maintained during the decade previous to the Snowden disclosures.⁹

Overall, these results in these poll trend lines suggest that the impact of 9/11 has been internalized. However, that does not mean people are simply giving out with unthinking, routinized responses—ones they deem to be socially required. As noted, over time the numbers on many questions have notably fluctuated in reaction to events. Thus, the beginning of the war in Iraq in 2003 (when many were fearful Saddam Hussein would retaliate by unleashing worldwide terrorism) and the capture of Saddam Hussein in that war (which was taken for a while to reduce the danger of terrorism) had an effect as did the terrorist bombings in Madrid in 2004, in London in 2005, and in Paris in 2015. The killing of bin Laden also had a temporary impact as pointed out earlier, and the failed underwear bomber attempt had one as well as can be seen quite clearly, if variously, in Figures 1, 2, 5, and 7. And the impact of the rise of ISIS is quite notable on several trend lines in the Figures.

Here and there are glimmers—but only that—of what might be a bit of change. The percentage professing to worry about becoming a victim of terrorism stood in 2013 nearly at a historic low for the post-9/11 period, although it rose again in 2014 after the beheadings of American captives by ISIS in Syria (Figure 2). A similar question about worry in Figure 15 does show something of a decline during the pre-ISIS years—but not all that much since early 2005. Another glimmer can be seen in Figure 5. The percentage holding it to be very or somewhat likely that another attack causing large number of American lives to be lost in the near future has not really changed since 9/11. However, the percentage within that sum may have shifted somewhat in the pre-ISIS period from the “very likely” to the “somewhat likely” category. However, this change can be looked at differently. By late 2013, the tallies for the two middle lines had returned to where they were in the 2002-2003 period after something of a shift toward the “very likely” category between 2006 and 2008. Meanwhile, the tiny percentage of perhaps heroic Americans who deem another large terrorist attack to be “not at all likely” in the near future moved scarcely at all during the decade and more since 9/11. The rise of ISIS, together with attacks in Paris, put everything back to 2001 levels by the end of 2015.

⁷ See also issue, see also Mueller 2011d.

⁸ On this issue, see also Greenwald 2014, 197-99.

⁹ On the correlation between willingness to restrict civil liberties and perceptions of fear and threat, see Huddy et al. 2005; Sullivan and Hendricks 2009; Merolla 2012, 286-95.

A few of the questions on terrorism were asked before 9/11, stimulated by the vehicle bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995 that resulted in the death of 168—at the time far the most damaging terrorist attack in the United States and one of most destructive in history. In the aftermath of that bombing, as can be seen in Figure 2, over 40 percent of the public said it worried about becoming a victim of terrorism. However this percentage declined considerably in the next few years. The 9/11 events caused it to spike up to 60 percent after which it declined again to around 35 or 40 percent. However, there has been little further decline in this percentage in subsequent years. The same pattern is suggested in Figure 16. The decline in concern about terrorism between 1995 to 1997 it documents would likely have continued over the next few years. Then, as in Figure 2, concern soared to new highs at the time of 9/11, sharply dropping in the next weeks to levels from which it has subsequently failed to experience further decline.

Reasons to have expected a decline in concerns about terrorism

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” with Americans exhibiting “counterterrorism fatigue” about the “evolving,” “grave,” and “undiminished” danger that, they insisted, terrorism continued to present—that there had been a “waning sense of urgency” (Kean and Hamilton 2014, 8, 13, 37).

There is little evidence from the polls to support such a conclusion. 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, unless the rise of ISIS in 2014 changes this, public opinion seems to be poised to accept debacle in the Middle East if there are no direct attacks on Americans (Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 57-66). But there has been little or no decline in the public's concern about the threat presented by international terrorism to the United States. As Figure 17 suggests, although those holding it to be a “critical threat” rise notably at the time of, and in the immediate aftermath of, 9/11, it has been very high ever since pollsters started asking about it in 1994, and it remained high over the years after 9/11, even before the rise of ISIS.¹⁰ And at no time has more than four percent of the public deemed international terrorism to be “not an important threat at all.”

This is rather surprising because there are quite a few reasons (we count 13) to have expected that, however traumatic the initial experience of 9/11, concerns and anxieties about terrorism would have begun to wear off over time.

1. Low objective likelihood of harm from terrorism

The objective probability that an American will be killed by a terrorist in the United States, with the events of 2001 very much included in the count, stands at about one in 4 million per year. If one only concentrates on the period since 2001, it is about one in 90 million each year. By comparison, an American's chance of being killed in an automobile crash is about one in 8 thousand a year, while the chance of become a victim of homicide is about one in 22,000, the chance of drowning in a bathtub is one in a million, and the chance of being killed by a deer

¹⁰ Figure 17 is developed from responses to the question as deposited at the Roper Public Opinion Research Center. For a somewhat different array, see Smeltz and Daalder 2014, 20.

is one in two million.¹¹ Yet, as shown earlier, some 40 percent of the public continues to maintain on polls that they worry that they or a family member will become a terrorist victim, a number that has scarcely changed since late 2001. And the percentage holding that the country is less safe than before 9/11 did not really move much at all in the decade after the Commission issued its report in 2004.

It was on television's "60 Minutes" on February 16, 2003, that 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 interviewer, Bob Simon, promptly admonished, "But no one sees the world like that." Remarkably, both statements were true then, and continue to be so today.

2. Absence of large attacks in US

Reflecting back four years after the event, New York Mayor Rudy Guiliani 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" (CNN, July 22, 2005). And Jane Mayer observes that "The only certainty shared by virtually the entire American intelligence community in the months after September 11 was that a second wave of even more devastating terrorist attacks on America was imminent (2008, 3; see also Brooks and Manza 2003, 28-29).

That anticipation has, of course, fortunately failed to be realized: there has been no really sizable terrorist attack in the country, and 9/11 stands out as an aberration: before or after that event, there has sacredly ever been a terrorist act, in a war zone or outside, that inflicted even one-tenth the damage.

3. Absence of al-Qaeda attacks on the United States

Al-Qaeda has failed entirely to consummate any attack of any magnitude whatever on American soil—or, for that matter, in the air around it. This, despite the overwhelming early fears about that "second wave" (Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 13-16). And despite as well the threats to do so repeatedly spun out by Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda operatives: it was in October 2002, for example, that bin Laden raved, "Understand the lesson of New York and Washington raids, which came in response to some of your previous crimes God is my witness, the youth of Islam are preparing things that will fill your hearts with fear. They will target key sectors of your economy until you stop your injustice and aggression or until the more short-lived of us die."¹²

4. Absence of al-Qaeda cells in the United States

In 2002, intelligence sources were soon telling rapt and uncritical reporters that the number of trained al-Qaeda operatives in the United States was between 2,000 and 5,000 (Gertz 2002, Sale 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." Tenet goes on to assert that "getting people

¹¹ For an array of data on the issue, see Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 138. These data are also posted at politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/ChasingGhosts138.pdf

¹² BBC News, "The New Threats from 'Bin Laden'," October 6, 2002. For an array of other such threats (or posturings), see Mueller and Stewart 2011, 36.

into this country—legally or illegally—was no challenge before 9/11,” and he proclaims that “nothing I had learned in the ensuing three years ever let me to believe that our initial working assumption that al-Qa’ida had cells here was wrong” (2007, 239). But by the time he wrote his book, the FBI, after exhaustive and frantic investigation, had been unable to find a single true cell in the country (Ross 2006), and 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 (McDermott and Meyer 2012, 141).

Despite such extensive fears, then, no true al-Qaeda cell (nor scarcely anybody who might even be deemed to have a “connection” to the diabolical group) has been unearthed in the country.

5. Near-absence of terrorist attacks from any source in the United States

Since 9/11, Islamist extremist terrorists (none of them linked to al-Qaeda central) have managed to kill a few dozen in the United States, something like three people a year (Mueller and Stewart 2016a), and a roughly similar number have been killed by right wing terrorists (Bergen 2016, 270). Considerably more people have been killed by deranged non-terrorists in various individual shootings at schools and theaters.¹³ Indeed, virtually all terrorist violence within the United States has taken place in television dramas.¹⁴

6. Modest interest in the attacks that have taken place

With the possible exception of the Boston Marathon case in 2013, none of the often rather interesting and colorful plots that have been uncovered have inspired much lasting interest. For the most part, media coverage has lasted only two or three days, and only three of the often quite colorful cases have thus far inspired books (Temple-Raston 2007; Welsh-Huggins 2011; Helman and Russell 2014).

7. Incompetence of the plotters apprehended in the United States

The homegrown “plotters” who have been apprehended, while perhaps potentially somewhat dangerous at least in a few cases, have mostly been amateurish and almost absurdly incompetent (Mueller and Stewart 2012, 2016a; Mueller 2016).

8. Absence of sizable attacks anywhere in the developed world during the decade after 2005

Sizeable terrorist attacks were visited upon domestic transportation systems in Madrid in 2004, killing 191, and in London in 2005, killing 52. As noted earlier, the London attack seems to have caused an upward spike in concerns about terrorism on some of the public opinion trend lines in the United States (Figures 1, 2, 5, 12, 13). However, there were no attacks of that magnitude anywhere in the developed world until a set of shooting attacks in Paris in November

¹³ It might be added that the number of homicides committed by Muslim extremists within the United States represents one fiftieth of one percent of the total. Schanzer, Kurzman, and Mooza 2010.

¹⁴ 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 Communist violence or planned violence. Nevertheless, violence became a central focus when his story was transmuted into a popular television series.

2015, more than a decade later, that killed 130. One might well expect that concerns about terrorism might have waned over the long interval between those attacks.

9. The damage committed worldwide by al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda types outside war zones has been rather limited

Al-Qaeda central has done little of consequence since 9/11 anywhere in the world, and the total number of people killed worldwide by al-Qaeda types, maybes, and wannabes outside of war zones for most of the period since 9/11 stands at some 300 or so a year—smaller than the yearly number of bathtub drownings in the United States alone.¹⁵

10. Decline of official and media alarmism on the issue

U.S. government officials have maintained their willingness and ability to stoke fear. Even as 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 explained that this meant that al-Qaeda franchises were now able “to innovate on their own” (presumably developing small-scale disorganized attacks), with the result that the threat “in some ways” was now the highest it had been since September 11 (Serrano 2011). A senior Obama administration analyst implied in 2012 that the situation remained as bad as ever: al-Qaeda “lacks the ability to plan, organize and execute complex, catastrophic attacks, but the threat persists” (Ignatius 2012).¹⁶

As part of this process, officials have also 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 notion, noted above, that large numbers of non-homegrown terrorists are abroad in the land.¹⁷ Moreover, foiled plots can seem, or be made to seem, scarier than successful ones because the emphasis is on what the terrorist plotters hoped to do or might have been able to do, not with what they were likely to do.¹⁸

¹⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman, tallies “major attacks by Islamists” outside of Iraq: 830 fatalities for the period April 2002 through July 2005 (2005, 29-31). We have corrected the total for the 2005 London bombings, given as 100 in this source, to 52. Brian Michael Jenkins tallies “major terrorist attacks worldwide” by “jihadist extremists” outside Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Algeria, Russia, and Kashmir: 1,129 fatalities for the period October 2001 through April 2006 (2006, 179-84). And IntelCenter tallies the “most significant attacks executed by core al-Qaeda, regional arms and affiliate groups excluding operations in insurgency theaters”: 1,632 fatalities for the period January 2002 through July 2007. “Jihadi Attack Kill Statistics,” www.intelcenter.com, August 17, 2007, 11. For later years, the results would likely be comparable although “war zones” or “insurgency theaters” in, say, 2013 would include Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Nigeria. The rise of ISIS and associated groups in the next years raised these deadly tallies in places like Lebanon and the Sinai. See also Mueller and Stewart 2011, 42.

¹⁶ See also Silber 2011. For commentary on the phenomenon, see Mac Donald 2011; Brooks 2011; and Mueller 2012.

¹⁷ See also Bergen 2016, 54.

¹⁸ Thus, when terrorists in 2009 were foiled in their plot to detonate four suicide bombs on the New York subway, various experts (including the attorney general of the United States) opined

However, official alarmism has actually tapered off in recent years, and explicit predictions that the country must brace itself for a large imminent attack, so common in the years after September 11, are rarely heard.¹⁹ As part of this, extravagant assertions that terrorism presents a threat that is “existential,” though still heard, have declined. It seems possible—though it is difficult to be certain—that there has also been something of a decline in concern that terrorists will get weapons of mass destruction, or at least nuclear ones, a major preoccupation for several years after 9/11.

Although somewhat jiggered back into action by the dramatic and attention-arresting rise of ISIS in 2014, media attention to terrorism has declined over most of the period since 9/11. This suggested in the data in the Figures: polling agencies substantially reduced the frequency with which they have polled on the terrorism issue over the years after 9/11. In addition, although there has been something of a continuous dribble of terrorism arrests or episodes in the United States (Mueller 2016; Bergen 2016), few have inspired much lasting media attention and, if anything, the media seems to have decided that the newsworthiness of such episodes is, for the most part, limited and declining.

Yet, public anxiety about terrorism as tapped by the polls has not similarly waned, rather suggesting that poll respondents are not simply responding to leadership cues. The phenomenon seems, then, substantially to be a bottom-up one rather than one inspired by policymakers, risk entrepreneurs, politicians, and members of the media, who seem more nearly to be responding to the fears (and exacerbating them) than creating them.²⁰ Since it appears that official alarmist hype was not necessary for the alarm, a decline in the official and media hype has not led to much of a decline in alarm.

More generally, this suggests that people, contrary to a large literature, are not readily manipulable by opinion elites.²¹ That is, they, although they are willing to consider elite cues, they often think for themselves. As Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza put it, people are fully capable of being “implicitly unwilling to question their prior beliefs,” and they often let “those beliefs shape their processing of information” (2003, 154). This conclusion is based in part on a series of experiments the two researchers carried out in which people responded favorably to elite cues on

that the attack, if successful, might have killed between 200 and 500 people (Hays 2009; “Justice Department Oversight—Part 1—Newsflash,” Associated Press, April 14, 2010). This estimate ignored the experience in July 2005 when two sets of terrorists each attempted to set off four bombs on the crowded transit system in London. The first set killed 52, while the second killed none because the bombs were ill-constructed. Presumably, the London bombers could have killed more if, in the first case, the bombs had been placed differently or, in the second, if they had been constructed properly. But because the number of dead is known, it is that number, not an imagined one, that ought to be the initial basis of comparison. There were also extravagant death tallies imagined for the foiled transatlantic airliner plot of 2006 and for the amazingly inept would-be Times Square bomber of 2010. See also Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 32-35.

¹⁹ On those alarms, see Mueller 2006, Nacos et al. 2011. For an array of such predictions, see Mueller and Schricker 2012.

²⁰ On the terrorism industry, see Mueller 2006, ch. 2. On more recent media hype, see Mueller 2015.

²¹ Compare Berensky 2009.

one policy, were unmoved on another, and moved in the opposite direction on a third (2013, ch. 6).

The process can be seen in the rather bizarre rise of Donald Trump in 2015-16 in which Republican voters seem to have been entirely capable of rejecting elite cues whether promulgated by their party or by the media. It could also be seen in 2013 when the Obama administration dramatically proposed military action in response to chemical weapons use in Syria and when leaders of both parties in Congress rather quickly fell into line. Although these bipartisan “leadership cues” were accompanied by disturbing photographs of the corpses of Syrian children apparently killed in the attack, the American public was decidedly unwilling to support even the limited punitive bombing of Syria as politicians found when they went home (Mueller 2013). Later, news about the beheadings of Americans by Islamic State in 2014 did stir a pronounced popular reaction. It was inspired by the events themselves however, not by elite cues.

Also relevant is a comparison of the run-ups to two wars: the Gulf War of 1991 and the Iraq War of 2003. In each, Democrats elites were less likely to support the prospective wars than were Republicans who were very actively promoting it. However, what is surprising is that the partisan gap among the public was *far* wider in the 2003 case than in the 1991 one even though the behavior of leading Democrats in Congress would suggest that the relationship should be the reverse. In the earlier war, Democratic leaders stood in strong opposition to going to war, and it was reasonable to expect that many ordinary Democrats would follow their lead. In the later war, in distinct contrast, the leaders mostly remained silent or were even generally supportive of the impending effort. Yet ordinary Democrats departed far more fully from ordinary Republicans on this 2003 war (Mueller 2011a, 197). Overall, incidentally, the concerted efforts of Republican presidents and administrations to increase public support for going to wars failed utterly in both cases (Mueller 2011a, 194-96; Mueller 1994).

If the public often neglects elite and partisan cues, it is also remarkably capricious about which events it will be moved by. Support for the Iraq War, for example, temporarily dipped in 2005 in apparent response to government action, or inaction, over Hurricane Katrina, a memorable event that took place thousands of miles away from Iraq. On the other hand, 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 (Mueller 2011a, 216; 2011b, 680-81.).

Leaders may propose, but that doesn't mean public opinion will move in concert—that 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 (Western 2005, especially 5, 20–21, 179, 229; Mueller 2011a, 216-17). Another way to put this is to suggest that the message has “activated latent beliefs and dispositions” (Brooks and Manza 2013, 157n3).

Ideas are like commercial products. Some become embraced by the customers while most, no matter how well packaged or promoted, fail to ignite acceptance or even passing interest. It is a process that is extremely difficult to predict and even more difficult to manipulate. This issue, or phenomenon, is discussed further below.

11. Huge increases in counterterrorism efforts and spending

One might have expected that the trillions spent on protecting Americans from terrorists since 9/11 might have comfortingly reduced anxieties about the hazard. That certainly was the goal: 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” (Harris 2010, 137). America does seem to have remained free, but polls strongly suggest it is not because Americans have come to feel safe.

12. Death of bin Laden

In May 2011, Osama bin Laden, the much-storied prime author of the 9/11 attacks and one of history’s most vilified and cartooned villains, was found and killed by American commandoes. It might have been anticipated that such a dramatic and memorable event would form something of a closure moment, allowing the public to relax a bit on the terrorism issue. However, little, if any, of that has taken place. As noted, Figure 10 shows that there was an abrupt increase in the percentage having confidence in the government’s ability to prevent further terrorist attack at the time of bin Laden’s killing. But that had evaporated by the time the question was next asked.

13. Ease of registering change in the polling instrument

Most of the questions give those polled a response range with gradations that should make it fairly easy to register a degree of 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.

Assessing the absence of decline in concern about terrorism

The war in Iraq and then economic woes pushed terrorism down on the list of immediate concerns, and some anxieties about the threat presented by terrorism did decline in the few weeks after the 9/11 attack on some poll questions (while others have shown no decline whatever). However, people clearly continue overwhelmingly to deem international terrorism to be a threat—even, as documented in Figure 17, a “critical” one—and the substantial absence of further decline in the subsequent years, and now decades, as registered by poll data is quite impressive given the multitude of reasons just arrayed to expect decline.

Whatever the genesis and however low the objective likelihood of being killed by a terrorist, Americans seem to have internalized their anxiety, or concern, about terrorism, and politicians and policymakers have come to believe that they can defy it only at their own peril. Anxiety about terrorism may prove, then, to be perpetual, and the public will likely remain broadly supportive of official counterterrorism efforts even as it says it feels no safer from the efforts and even as it sours on the use of ground troops abroad as a tactic to deal with the problem.

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

1. The impact of 9/11

The persistence of anxieties about terrorism among Americans doubtless stems importantly from the peculiar, out-sized trauma induced by the September 11 attacks themselves:

in the words of Fawaz Gerges, it “instilled disproportionate fear in their psyche” (2011, 194). And it is possible that initial alarm was importantly reinforced or reified by the (unrelated) anthrax attacks that followed shortly after: fears about being harmed by terrorists as tallied in Figure 2 began to decline in the days after 9/11 and then were pushed to their highest levels ever when the anthrax story came out.²² Two other events that took place in late 2001 may also have reinforced alarm. One was an airliner crash in New York on November 12 that was at first commonly taken to be due to terrorism, a conclusion that turned out not to be true. The other was the bungled effort of the shoe bomber on a flight from Paris to Miami on December 22.²³

If, however, September 11 is an aberration, as it increasingly appears, it would seem to follow that the experience could be taken to be a tragic irrelevance, not one that fundamentally determines consequent activities, perceptions, planning, and expenditures. But that has not happened.

At any rate, it appears that, not only did 9/11 “change everything,” but that time has been slow to mellow the effect. As Figure 18 indicates, more people said in 2005 that 9/11 had permanently changed life than had done so in 2002. Perhaps that has continued.

2. The mastermind extrapolation

Also relevant might be the continued resonance of the extrapolation holding that, because the 9/11 terrorists were successful with box-cutters, they might soon be able to turn out weapons of mass destruction and then detonate them in an American city.²⁴ In fact, none has been able to fabricate much in the way of chemical weapons, much less of nuclear ones, even in wartorn Iraq.²⁵

3. The seeming randomness of the terrorist violence and the effort to kill as many as possible

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. As Cass Sunstein notes,

Those who operate gambling casinos and lotteries...play on people's emotions in the particular sense that they conjure up palpable pictures of victory and easy living, thus

²² On the important impact the anthrax attacks had in the White House, see Baker 2013, 162-63, 170.

²³ On the impact of the shoe bomber episode on President Bush, see Bush 2010, 164-65.

²⁴ On the special and persistent fear that has traditionally been evoked by nuclear and other “weapons of mass destruction,” see Mueller 2010. On the “myth of the mastermind,” see Mueller and Stewart 2016a, ch. 4.

²⁵ For a study concluding that the likelihood a terrorist group will be able to steal or fabricate an atomic weapon and then detonate it is vanishingly small, see Mueller 2010, chs. 12-15. See also Lieber and Press 2013. For a decidedly different perspective, see Allison 2004.

encouraging people to neglect the question of probability. With respect to risks, insurance companies, extreme environmental groups, and terrorists do exactly the same.²⁶

Also impressive is that Muslim terrorists seem to want to kill as many people as possible.

However, the effective randomness and the effort to kill as many people as possible does not distinguish Islamist terrorists from others.

Many other terrorists, it is true, are mainly out to draw attention to their cause and focus on specific targets and have no desire to create mass casualties. In his assessment of the scarcely-remembered hundreds of bombing incidents in the United States that took place during the decade of the 1970s, Brian Jenkins, notes that only 72 people perished (2010, 8). In that era, he recalls, he concluded that “terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead” (2008).

By contrast, Muslim terrorism in the United States both before and after 9/11 (as for example in the 1993 failed attempt on the World Trade Center) has been committed to killing as many people as possible and effectively in a random manner. And in the handful of successful attacks that such terrorists have pulled off in the United States in the 15 years since 9/11, they have managed to kill about two-thirds as many people as perished in all the hundreds of attacks of the 1970s.

Yet, 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 165 deaths, was clearly out to kill substantial numbers of people and to so essentially randomly. Although he was determined to blow up a government building and scouted in five states before settling on one in Oklahoma City, he attacked during business hours and had no concern about who might happen to be in the building at the time. Yet, as documented in the poll data, his case did not lead to perpetual fears in the way Muslim terrorism has.

4. Continuous reminders

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. These include terrorist plots, or proto-plots, in which Islamists, whether based in the U.S. or abroad, have planned, or appear to have planned, to attack targets in the United States (Mueller 2016). And they also include an equal or somewhat larger number of cases in which individuals have been apprehended in the process of seeking to go abroad to fight against America or American interests there, particularly in Iraq or Afghanistan and later in Syria (Bergen 2016). Although few of these cases have generated much in the way of lasting media interest, the fairly relentless drum beat of these small-time cases may have had its effect in continually reminding people that there are still terrorists out there.

The stress, noted earlier, on what these failed (and mostly bone-headed) plotters hoped to do (destroy the Brooklyn Bridge, the Sears Tower, the Capitol Building), rather than on what they were actually likely to be able to do, may also have contributed.²⁷ Foiled plots can seem, or be made to seem, scarier than successful ones because the emphasis is on what the terrorist plotters hoped to do or might have been able to do, not with what they were likely to do.

²⁶ Sunstein 2003, 128. See also Mueller and Stewart 2011, 96-97.

²⁷ See also Schneier 2007.

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.²⁸ Conceivably, even seeing Muslim women in headscarves contributes as a continuing semi-conscious reminder.

The phenomenon is suggested as well by some experiments conducted by Brooks and Manza. “Getting people to think about the specter of terrorism,” they conclude, “tends to bolster anew their willingness to support coercive new measures” and generates “a nearly automatic response and demand for coercive policies,” a process that is most pronounced among those “who come into the survey worried about terrorism” (2013, 104-5, 138). Other studies find that reminders of 9/11 tended to boost support across the political spectrum for President George W. Bush, “a leader who promotes security and the vanquishing of evil.”²⁹

Of course, it is also possible that the continuous reminders could have inspired a calming Cry Wolf effect. But this does not appear to have happened.

5. The spookiness of the international adversary

Special fear and anxiety may also be stirred by the fact that Islamist terrorism seems to be part of a large and hostile conspiracy and network that is international in scope and rather spooky.³⁰ In the words of Brooks and 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” (2003, 40).

Noting that the scale of the September 11, 2001, attacks has “tended to obliterate America’s memory of pre-9/11 terrorism,” Brian Jenkins reminds us (and we clearly do need reminding) that

measured by the number of terrorist attacks, the volume of domestic terrorist activity was much greater in the 1970s. That tumultuous decade saw 60 to 70 terrorist incidents, mostly bombings, on U.S. soil every year—a level of terrorist activity 15 to 20 times that seen in the years since 9/11...[terrorists] hijacked airliners; held hostages in Washington, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco; bombed embassies, corporate headquarters, and government buildings; robbed banks; murdered diplomats; and blew up power transformers, causing widespread blackouts (2010).

However, unlike attacks by Muslim extremists, these attacks not only inflicted very few deaths per attack as noted earlier, but they were mainly domestic in apparent origin and scope: for the most part they did not have a significant foreign or external referent. And that latter quality holds as well for the 1995 Oklahoma City attack.

Public opinion as the primary driver

The impact of 9/11 on the collective American consciousness was enormous, and it appears that the fears and anxieties about terrorism established in 2001 have scarcely faded despite many reasons to expect otherwise. Our survey of the phenomenon suggests that it is

²⁸ Grosskopf 2006. See also Mueller 2006, 159.

²⁹ Landau et al. 2004. See also Solomon et al. 2015.

³⁰ On this issue, see also Brooks 2011, 44, 45-46; German 2007, ix.

probably best to see public opinion as the primary driver in the excessive and somewhat bizarre counterterrorism process that took place after 9/11. Or, as Brooks and Manza put it, “far from being irrelevant to understanding the dynamics and consequences of the war on terror, what Americans think and believe looks to be critical” (2003, 8).

Although elites have been substantially united in expressing aversion to terrorism, public concerns have not been caused or manipulated by this unity. Rather, the elites are unified on the terrorism issue because they see potential political value in that pose and because they fear that to appear to be dismissive of the threat terrorism presents is exceedingly bad politics.

Of course, although opinion elites did not create the fears, they do continue to be quite willing to exacerbate them when called upon. The process is suggested vividly in an episode discussed in a recent book by journalist Charlie Savage (2015). The failed attempt of the underwear bomber to blow up an airliner over Detroit at the end of 2009 very substantially caught the attention of the public and increased concerns about terrorism (Figures 1, 2, 5, and 7). Political elites, however, were not certain about how important this was. Then, a few weeks after the event, a Republican surprisingly won an open seat in the Senate from Massachusetts. When Republican officials looked into this remarkable event, they found that their candidate’s harsh stand on terrorism was instrumental in the result. They quickly reasoned that if the terrorism argument could “sell” so productively in a normally Democratic state, it would “sell” everywhere.

Public fears are not only self-generated, but they are often 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” (2005, 521). Eventually, officials did sternly forbid the feeding of sharks (Rosen 2004, 79). But the absurd ban arose from the popular fear; it did not cause it. The essential momentum, then is substantially bottom-up. Elite consensus has frequently preceded shifts of opinion (Berinsky 2009, 217). But, as officials found when they tried to dampen fears of sharks, the public has at least as frequently failed to follow.³¹

Barack Obama had such an experience in early 2015 when he tried to promulgate the notion that terrorism generally, and ISIS in particular, did not present a threat to the United States that was “existential.” It all began with a speech at Harvard University in October 2014 by Vice President Joseph Biden who offered the thought that “we face no existential threat—none—to our way of life or our ultimate security” (McMahon 2014). After a decent interval of three months, Obama reiterated this point at a press conference, and then expanded it in an interview a few weeks later, adding that the United States should not “provide a victory to these terrorist networks by over-inflating their importance and suggesting in some fashion that they are an existential threat to the United States or the world order.”³²

³¹ On this issue, see Mueller 2011b, 675-89; Mueller 2011a, chs. 8, 9.

³² Office of the Press Secretary, White House, Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron, January 16, 2015; Barack Obama, interview by Fareed Zakaria, *CNN*, February 1, 2015. Later, his national security adviser, Susan Rice, echoed the point in a formal speech. Office of the Press Secretary, White House. Remarks by National Security Advisor Susan Rice on the 2015 National Security Strategy, February 6, 2015.

It is astounding that these utterances—“blindingly obvious” as security specialist Bruce Schneier (2015) puts it—appear to mark the first time officials in the United States have actually clearly made the point in public. That this should come off as an apparent act of political courage suggests the depth of the problem—and, essentially, of the ongoing irresponsibility of officials. Five years after 9/11, journalist James Fallows suggested that Americans have “lacked leaders to help keep the danger in perspective.”³³ Despite Obama’s almost embarrassingly modest effort, Fallows’ observation remains valid today.

However, whether Obama’s minimalist effort, at once remarkable and absurdly belated, will have some consequence, or even continue, remains to be seen. It certainly hasn’t had an impact visible in reducing fears of terrorism as registered in polls. And shortly after Obama’s exhortations, General Michael Flynn, who had recently retired as head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, extravagantly insisted that the terrorist enemy is “committed to the destruction of freedom and the American way of life” while seeking “world domination, achieved through violence and bloodshed.” It was reported that his remarks, to an audience of “special operators and intelligence officers,” evoked “many nods of approval,” “occasional cheers,” and “ultimately a standing ovation” (Dozier 2015).

Thus even the most modest imaginable effort to rein in the War on Terror hyperbole may fail to gel. Indeed, the experience seems to conform to some experimental evidence put forward by Brooks and Manza: while information about the enactment of new, more restrictive counterterrorism measures tends to boost opinion toward more support, information about rolling back counterterrorism measures does not move opinion at all (2003, 127-28).

James Risen is certainly correct to observe that “fear sells” (2014, 203). However, not all fear-mongering finds 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 fear, 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.

That is, 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, as we would prefer to put it, people who seek responsibly to put that threat in sensible and rational context) have generally not found one.³⁴ And accordingly many of those so tempted have been dissuaded by that fact from coming out of their closet—particularly those who deem their office or position to be at stake.

Why people are more impressed by some fears and threats than others is not easily explained. Research on which hazards will inspire anxiety has come up with a laundry list of suggestions that is anything but tidy. On it are such qualities as recent experience and the uncontrollability of the risks; the dread (or fear) they inspire; their involuntary nature or catastrophic potential; whether they can be preventively controlled, are certain to be fatal, can

³³ Fallows 2006. See also Cordesman 2015a.

³⁴ However, see Mueller 2006, 197-98. Some debunking efforts: Furedi 2002; Schneier 2003; Rosen 2004; Lustick 2006; Fallows 2006; Mueller 2006; Thrall and Cramer 2009; Friedman et al, 2010. See also Johnson 1997. For more recent efforts, see Brooks 2015; Johnston 2015; McManus 2015; Cordesman 2015a; Cordesman 2015b; Winter 2015; Preble 2016.

easily be reduced, result in an inequitable distribution of risk, threaten future generations, 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 (Slovic, Fischhoff, and Lichtenstein 1980; Stewart and Melchers 1997, 208-16).

Applying these can be tricky. Thus, Daniel Gilbert (2006) concludes 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. 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 deaths whatever. And it is true that some people say they don't like flying because they have no control over the aircraft. Nevertheless they seem to have little difficulty boarding trains, buses, taxicabs, and ocean liners.

Although politicians, officials, and the media have routinely and irresponsibly played to and exacerbated these anxieties out of a sense of duty and self-interest, the process is more nearly bottom-up than top-down.

Can it ever end?

If it is difficult to explain which events 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. As discussed, there are a number of reasons to expect that the fear of terrorism in the United States should show substantial signs of decline over the decade and a half after 9/11. But, for the most part, that hasn't happened.

Sometimes opinion on policy issues does change. For decades the "war on drugs" continued to be supported even though it could objectively be said to have failed miserably (Scherlen 2012). But then, only quite recently, popular support seems to have significantly waned. There has been a similar experience with gay rights. There was very little increase of popular support over several decades (Sherrill 1996, Yang 1997). But then what appears to be a very substantial change of opinion on the issue took place in just the last few years.

Perhaps, then, anxieties about terrorism will eventually wane.

A potentially instructive comparison is with concerns about domestic Communists during the Cold War.

In the few years after World War II, alarm about the threat presented by such "enemies from within" grew with two spectacular espionage cases. First, a respected former State Department official, Alger Hiss, was accused of having sent huge quantities of classified documents to the Soviets before World War II. Then a former Communist, British physicist Klaus Fuchs, admitted that he had sent atomic secrets to the Soviets, and the trail from Fuchs soon led to the arrests of various co-conspirators and ultimately to the celebrated trial of two Americans, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were convicted, and then executed, as atomic spies. This experience was set into high relief with the invasion of South Korea by forces from Communist North Korea in 1950, bolstered later in the year by hordes of troops from Communist China. The war was a limited, opportunistic, and quite cautious military probe at a point of perceived vulnerability in a peripheral area. However, almost everyone simply assumed that the war was being directed from Moscow and was part of a broad, militarized quest for "world domination" (Mueller 2011c, 124).

Like Islamist terrorists within our midst, domestic Communists were seen to be 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. Thus, J. Edgar Hoover, the highly respected, even revered, director of the FBI, divulged 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” (1958, 81).

Press and political concern about the Communist enemy within probably peaked in 1954, when some 40 percent of the public deemed domestic Communists to present a great or very great danger. Although the attention of the press and the public turned to other matters (as with 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 declined almost not at all in the ensuing 10 years even though media interest fell greatly (Figure 19). When last tapped, in the mid-1970s, some 20 years after its probable peak, concern about the Communist danger had declined only to 30 percent at a time when press attention to that internal enemy, as Figure 19 shows, had fallen literally to zero.³⁵ During the Cold War, there apparently was no audience for the proposition that the threat presented by domestic Communists was overblown—at any rate, no one seems ever to have tried to say so in public.

This pattern might be extrapolated to anxieties and concerns about domestic terrorism. It would suggest that, although one shouldn’t expect there to be much decline during the first decade after 9/11, there might be a notable, if still fairly modest, erosion in alarm during the second.

However, fears about the danger presented by domestic Communists (whose machinations had once been “virtually invisible to the non-communist eye”) could be alleviated by the collapse of the perceived grand international Communism conspiracy. Moreover, 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.

Another comparison would be with Pearl Harbor. Both Pearl Harbor and 9/11 have had a perpetual and long-lasting impact on perceptions and perspectives.³⁶ Thus, careful policy

³⁵ See also Mueller 1988.

³⁶ Mueller and Stewart 2016a, 73-75. However, one likely public opinion difference is in the response to the poll question asking respondents to name the most important problem facing the country today. As seen in Figure 1, terrorism was soon topped by other problems—though the war in Iraq, which soon came to dominate the poll response, was hardly unrelated to terrorism concerns. The most important problem question had been asked before Pearl Harbor, but it was posed only two times during the war, both times introduced by the phrase, “Aside from winning the war...” Obviously, pollsters expected people overwhelmingly to mention the war if the

analysis has been, and perhaps always will be, impeded, or even persuasively undercut, by metaphorical, or even irrelevant, assertions that we can't have "another Pearl Harbor" or "another 9/11." However, the post-Pearl Harbor war against Japan could, like the Cold War, definitively be ended, and the former enemy could convincingly be converted to a friend. As part of this, concerns about the loyalty of Japanese within the United States could vanish.

The ultimate spooky, foreign adversary, we can all agree, is presented by Satan, a powerful and vaporous entity who, it has been often believed, is routinely engaged in fomenting tragedy and nefarious deeds. In early modern Europe, most people became convinced that such diabolical work was being carried out, or at least facilitated, by witches—people who looked like other people (just like terrorists and Communists), but who were deemed to be in league with the devil. To deal with this problem, over the course of a couple of centuries tens of thousands of people—the vast majority of them women—were executed in Europe as witches, very often by being burned at the stake. Accused witches routinely confessed, generally (but not always) under torture, 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). However, suggests historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, the campaign against the witches failed to reduce their actual (or at least their perceived) number: "The more fiercely they were prosecuted, the more numerous they seemed to become" (1969, 97).

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 their argument took place at what Trevor-Roper calls the "periphery" of the justification for the executions. That is, the critics went after the consequences of the system, not its premise, as they railed "against the cruelty of torture, against the implausibility of confessions, against the identification of witches" (1969, 172).

The problem is that this approach left intact the central doctrine of the witch-craze holding that Satan was waging war on humanity with the assistance of corporal associates: witches. In consequence, the witch craze, with its tremendous human, societal, and material costs, only died out, argues Trevor-Roper when theologians eventually were able to sell (that is, found a responsive audience for) 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, people eventually became willing to accept the notion that, although the devil was indeed out there, he didn't actually need corporal assistants to carry out his nefarious handiwork (Thurston 2007).

Eventually, any perceived menace from witches dwindled considerably. Modern polls—ones usually published around Halloween time—do find that 24 percent of American adults still continue to profess a belief in witches (an additional 7 percent say they are "unsure" about their beliefs on the matter).³⁷ But even those who believe in witches do not appear to hold that, in

question was put in its standard form while the war was still being waged. Mueller 2011a, 166-67.

³⁷ FOX News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, conducted September 23-24, 2003.

league with the devil, those entities are a central cause of dismal happenings and therefore need to be rooted out and expunged.

Whether a similar process will eventually take place with respect to terrorism remains to be seen. As the poll data suggest, there is as yet no light at the end of the tunnel, and this one might have no end at all. Terrorism, unlike witchcraft, is real. Moreover, like murder, it has always existed in some form or other and always will. And, because of the special formlessness, even spookiness, of 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.³⁸ Thus, public fear was stoked anew in 2014 by some of beheadings of Americans in the Middle East by ISIS, a hostile and vicious group that had scarcely even been known a year earlier.

To the degree that the public remains terrorized, it seems likely to continue to demand that its leaders pay due deference to its insecurities. In the process it will likely uncritically approve extravagant counterterrorism expenditures including incessant security checks, civil liberties intrusions, and expanded police powers, as well as militarized forays overseas, if not full-scale ground assaults, if they can convincingly be associated with the quest to stamp out terrorists who might have America in their sights. Support for such policies, as Brooks and Manza put it, “may become relatively enduring, persisting beyond the initial context in which political leaders offered their original justifications” (2013, 146, also 42).

It is true that Europeans did eventually cease to fear witches, the most spooky of adversaries. But the process took 200 years.

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³⁸ See also Mac Donald 2011.

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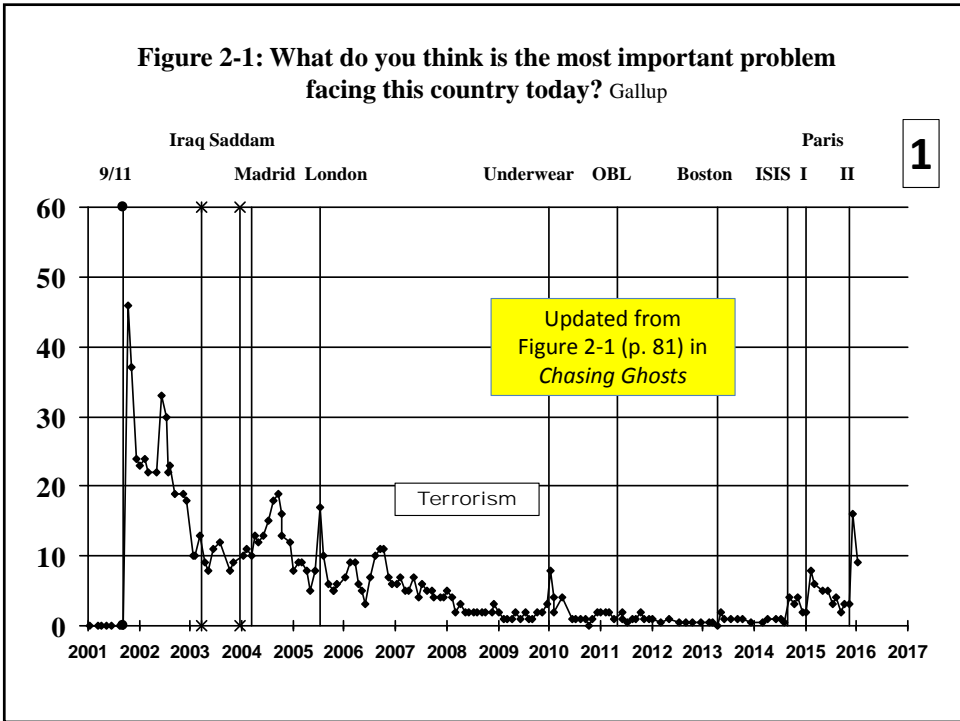
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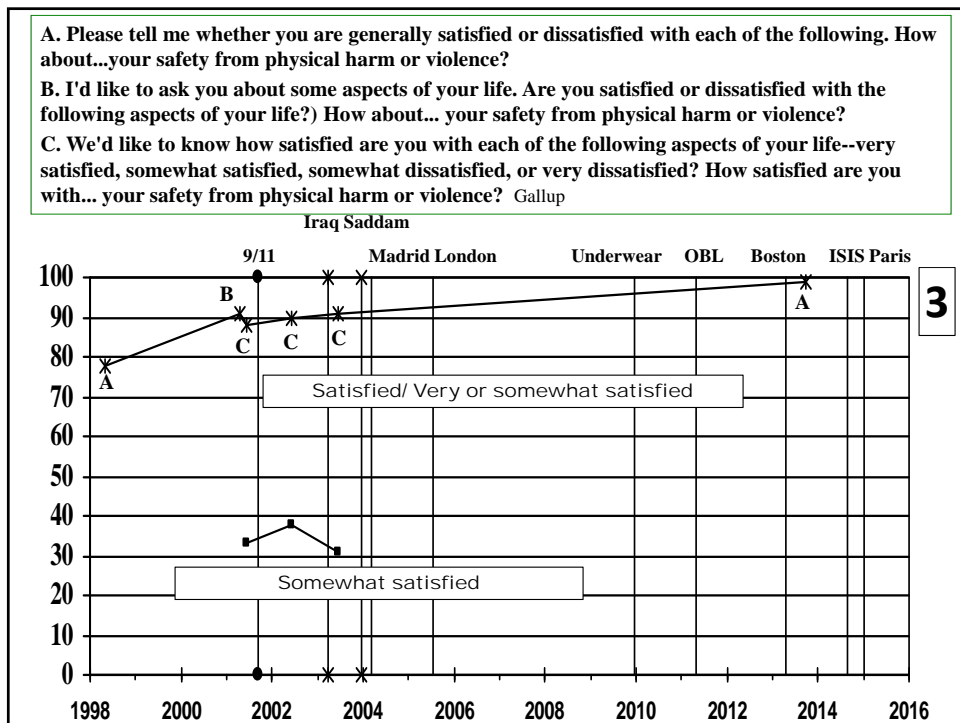
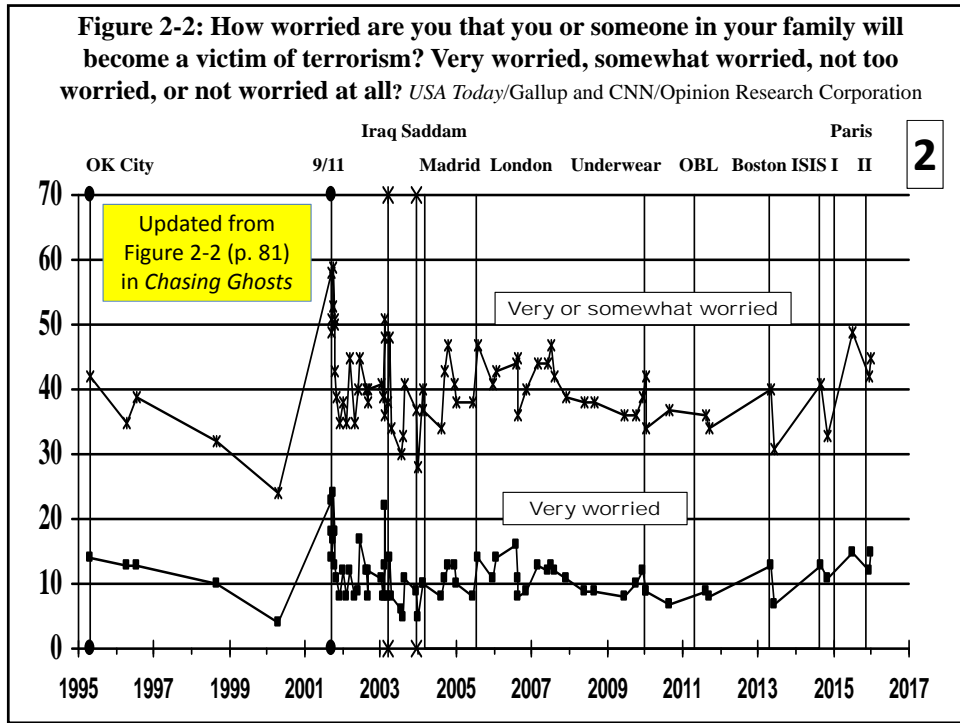
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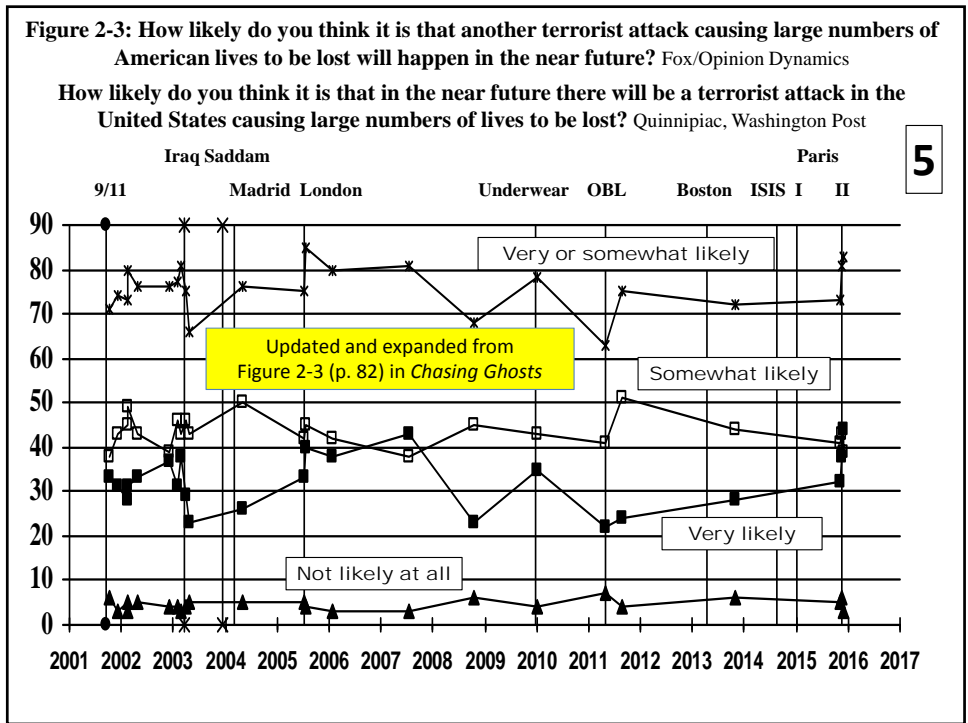
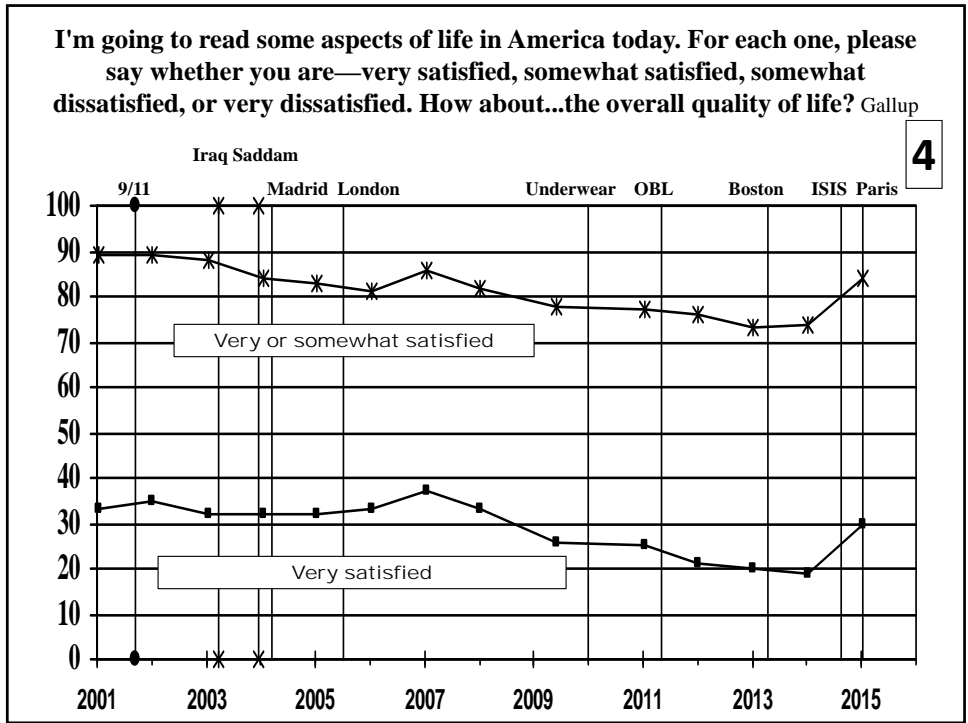
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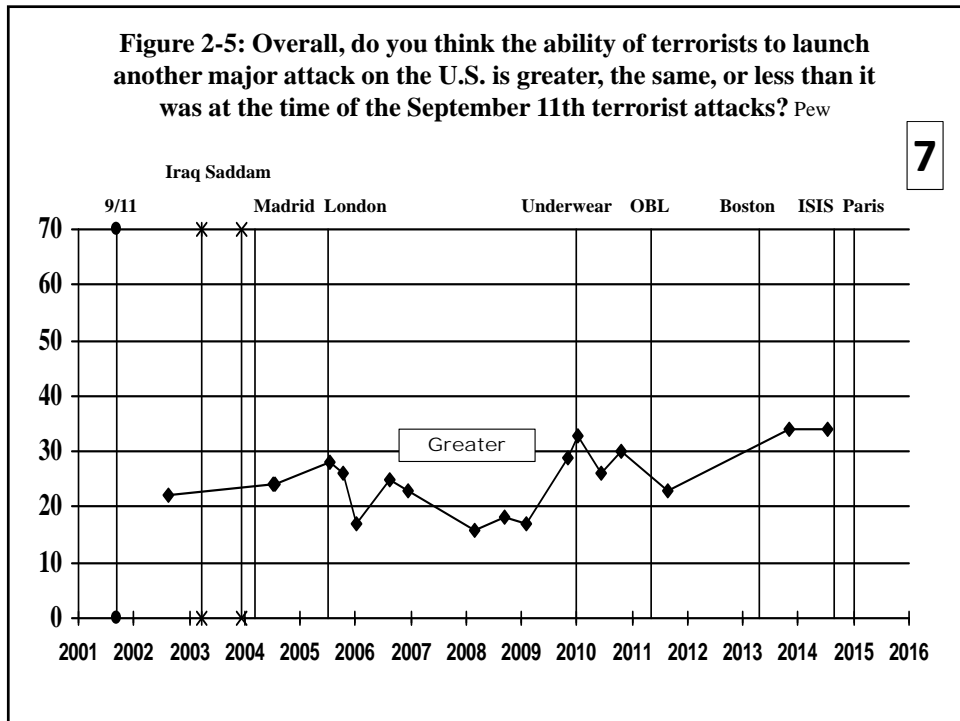
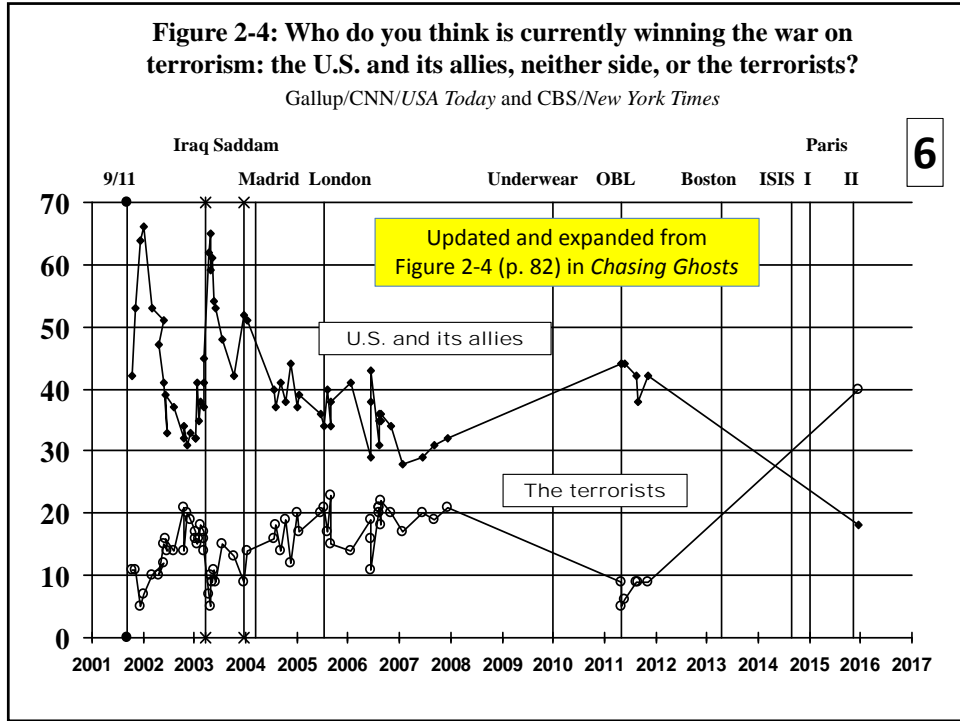
OK City: Terrorist bombing in Oklahoma City
 9/11: Terrorist attacks of September 11
 Iraq: Beginning of the Iraq War
 Saddam: Capture of Saddam Hussein
 Madrid: Terrorist bombings in Madrid
 London: Terrorist bombings in London
 Underwear: Underwear bomber
 OBL: Killing of Osama bin Laden
 Boston: Terrorist bombings at the Boston Marathon
 ISIS: First beheadings of Americans by ISIS
 Paris I: Charlie Hebdo shootings, January 2015
 Paris II: Multiple shootings, November 13, 2015,
 followed by Santa Barbara shootings
 20 days later

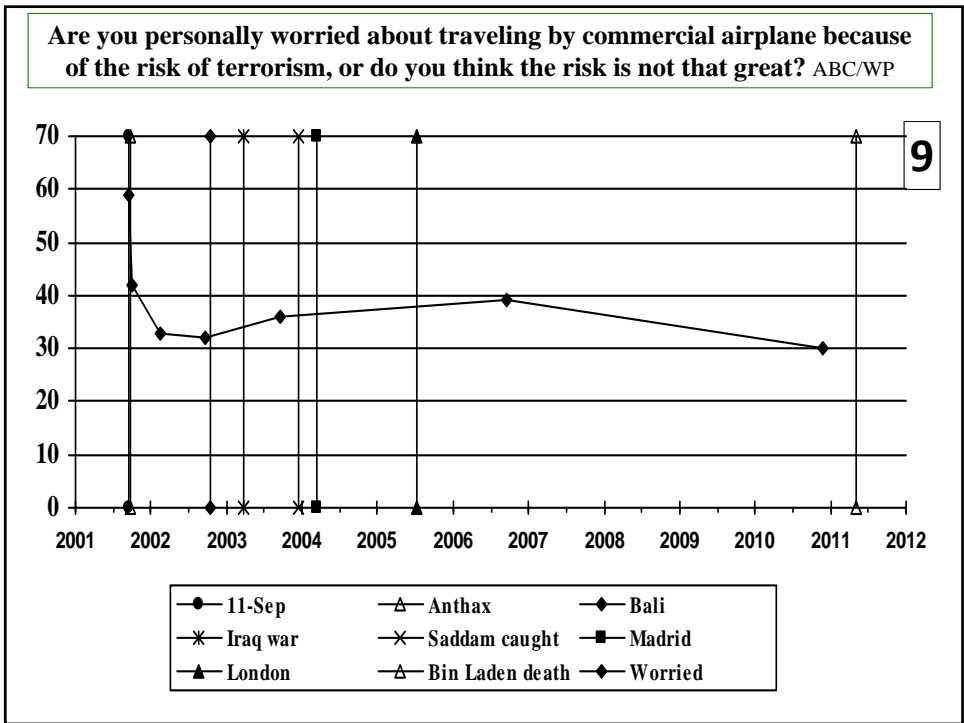
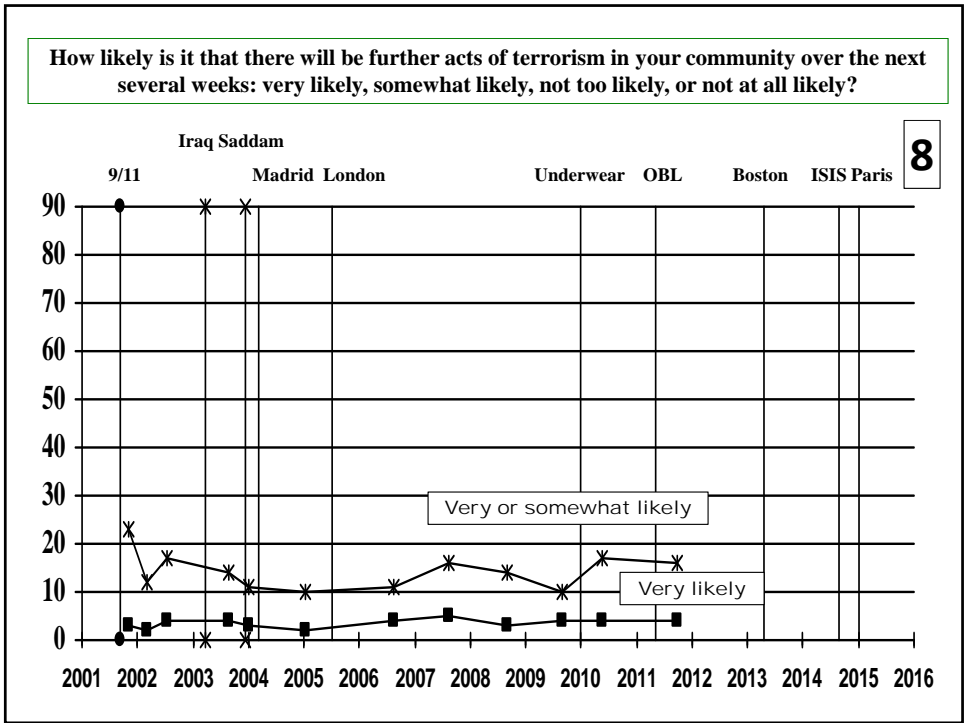
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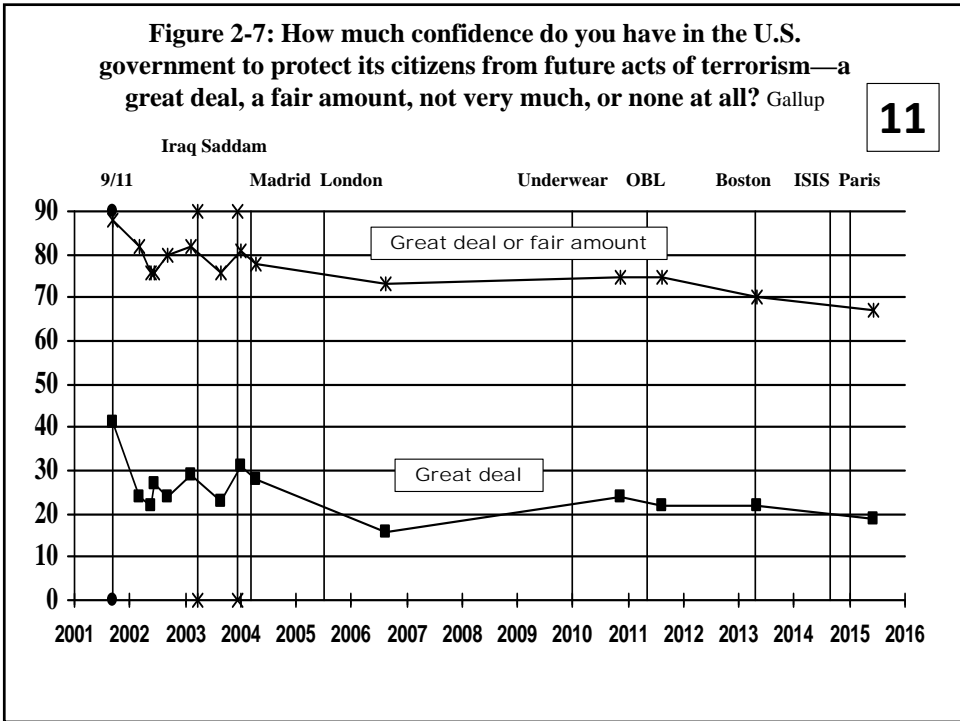
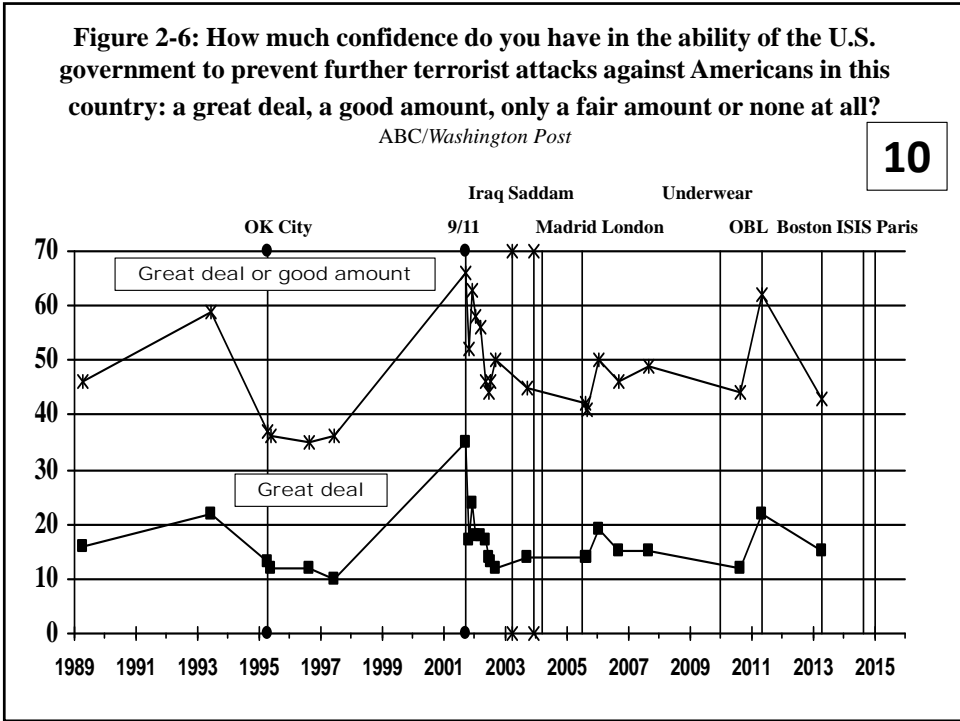


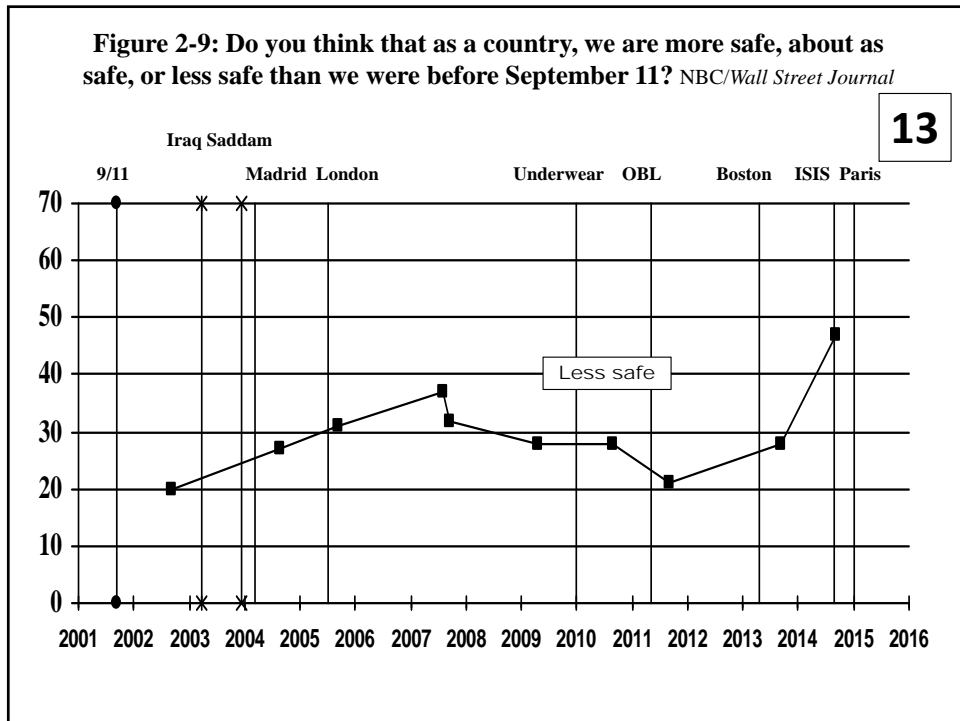
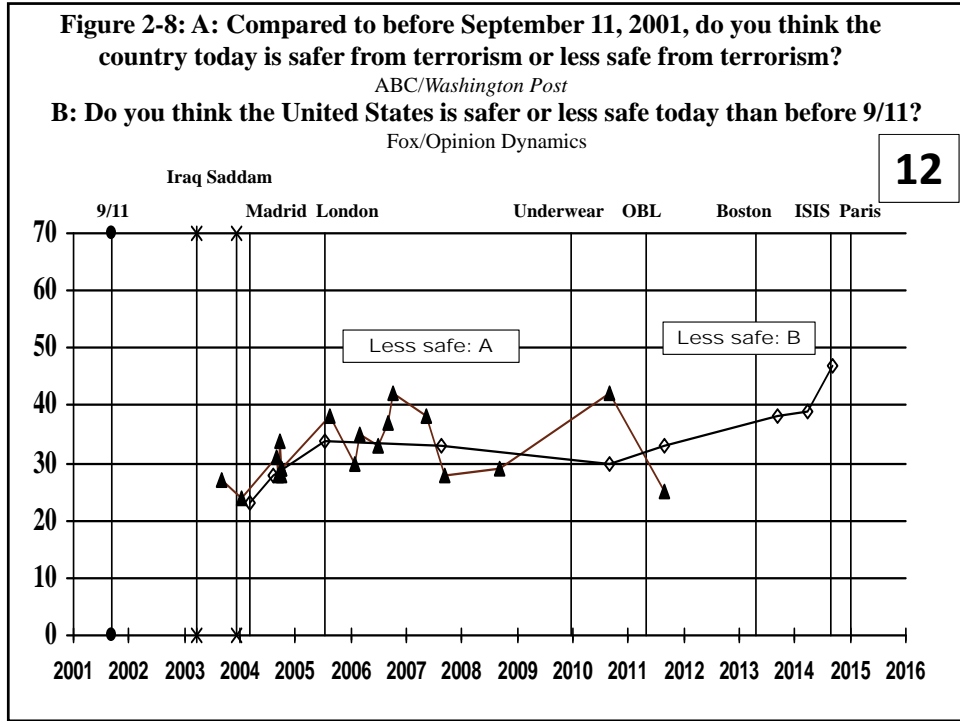


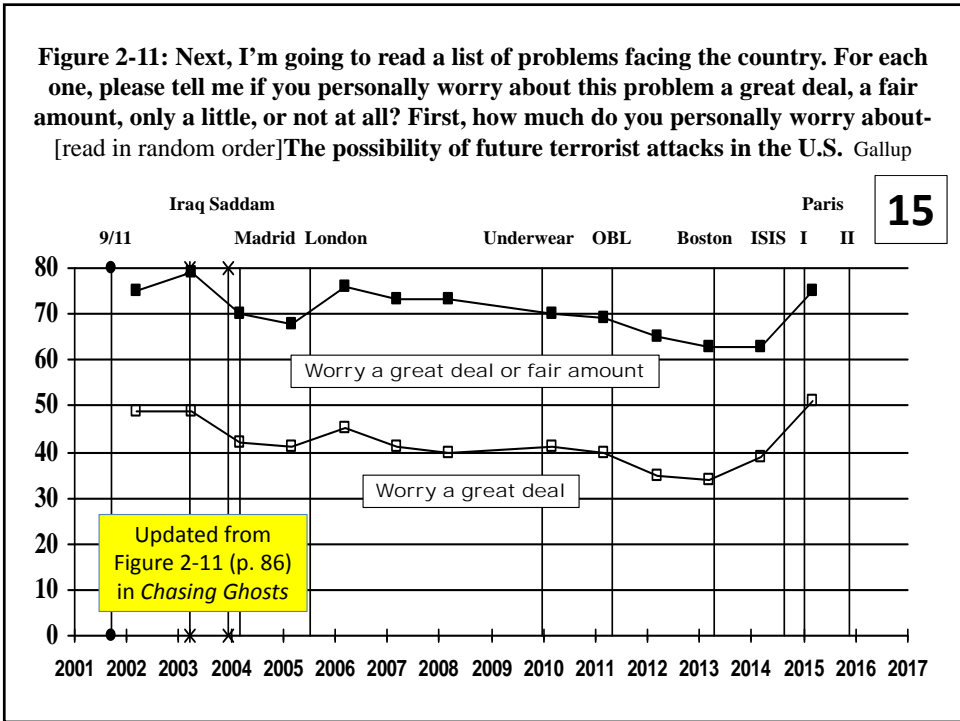
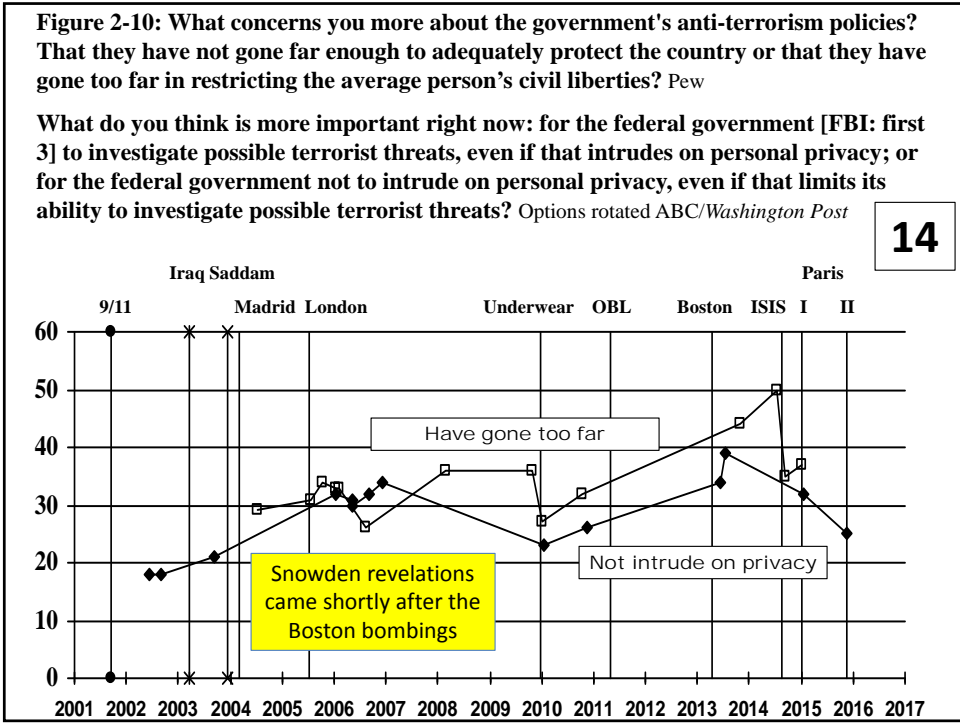


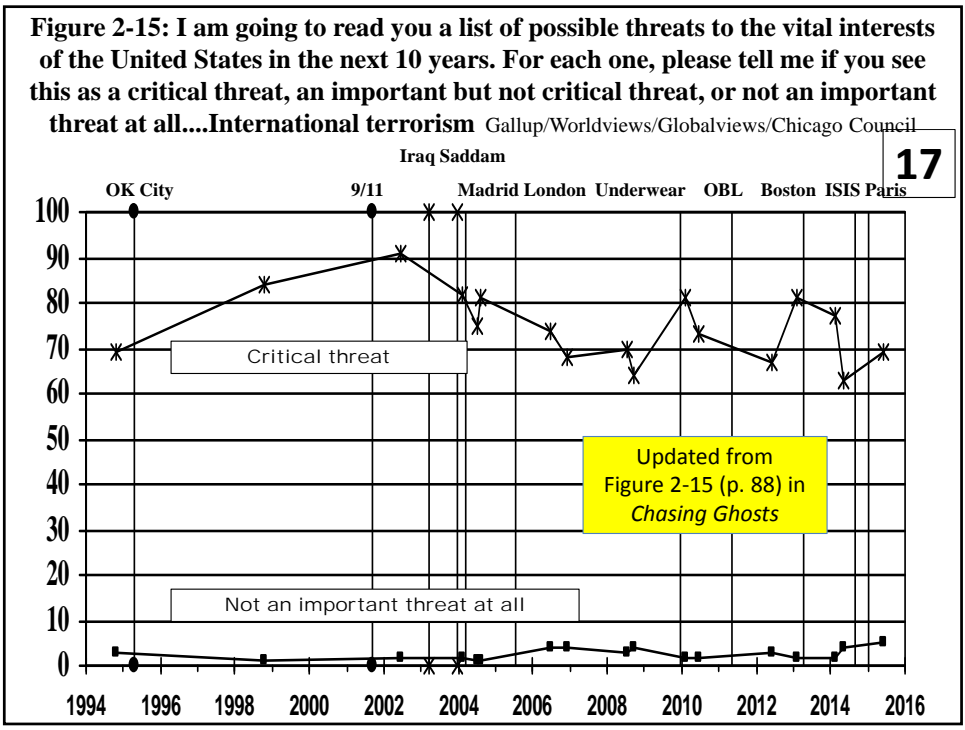
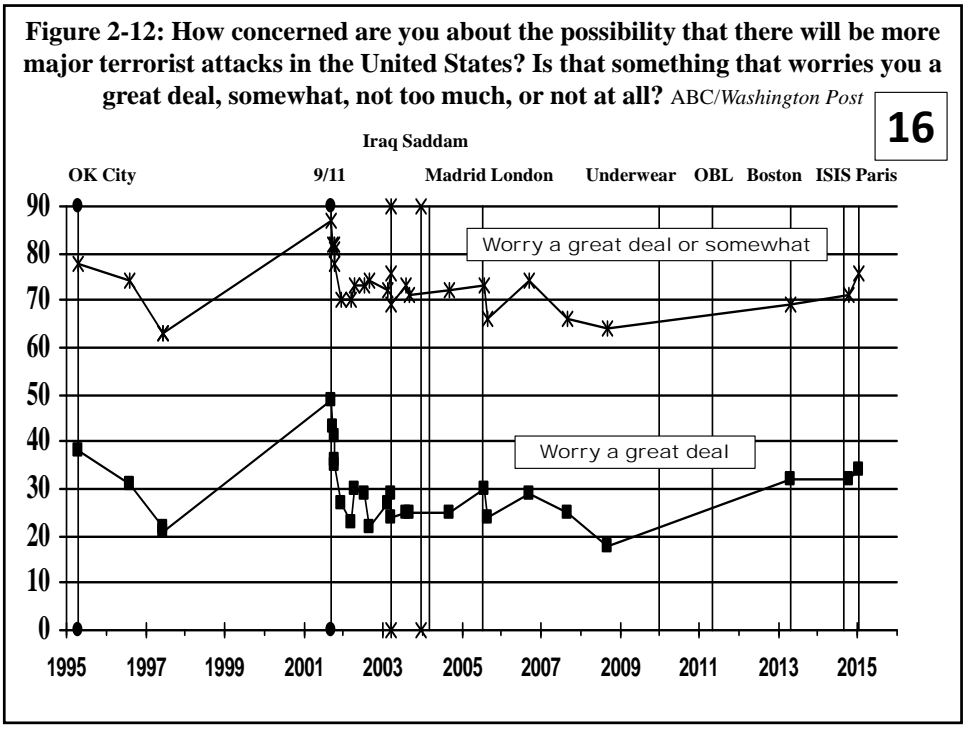












	8/2002	8/2005
Life did not change on 9/11	31	24
Life changed on 9/11, but now completely back to normal	11	13
Life changed on 9/11, but will completely return to normal	24	19
Life changed on 9/11, and will never completely return to normal	32	42

—Gallup

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