



Terrorists suck

By [Cory Doctorow](#) at 4:06 pm Monday, Sep 17

"The Terrorism Delusion," a paper by John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart in this summer's issue of *International Security*, argues that terrorists basically suck at their jobs. They report that the best US intelligence puts the whole al Qaeda weapons of mass destruction R&D budget at US\$4,000; that Americans who are "radicalized" and brought to terrorism training camps return disgusted and disillusioned and determined to put future recruits off (and then get arrested anyway); that Iraqis were so alienated from loony al Qaeda fighters that bin Laden proposed renaming the group; and that terrorists who are busted are basically dolts, fools, bumblers and delusional loonies.

But, as Mueller and Stewart write, the counter-terror forced continue to present terrorism as a grave risk brought about by super-criminal masterminds who threaten the safety of all of us, every day.

Terrorists have proven to be relentless, patient, opportunistic, and flexible, learning from experience and modifying tactics and targets to exploit perceived vulnerabilities and avoid observed strengths.”⁸

This description may apply to some terrorists somewhere, including at least a few of those involved in the September 11 attacks. Yet, it scarcely describes the vast majority of those individuals picked up on terrorism charges in the United States since those attacks. The inability of the DHS to consider this fact even parenthetically in its fleeting discussion is not only amazing but perhaps delusional in its single-minded preoccupation with the extreme.

In sharp contrast, the authors of the case studies, with remarkably few exceptions, describe their subjects with such words as incompetent, ineffective, unintelligent, idiotic, ignorant, inadequate, unorganized, misguided, muddled, amateurish, dopey, unrealistic, moronic, irrational, and foolish.⁹ And in nearly all of the cases where an operative from the police or from the Federal Bureau of Investigation was at work (almost half of the total), the most appropriate descriptor would be “gullible.”

In all, as Shikha Dalmia has put it, would-be terrorists need to be “radical- ized enough to die for their cause; Westernized enough to move around with- out raising red flags; ingenious enough to exploit loopholes in the security apparatus; meticulous enough to attend to the myriad logistical details that could torpedo the operation; self-sufficient enough to make all the preparations without enlisting outsiders who might give them away; disciplined enough to maintain complete secrecy; and—above all—psychologically tough enough to keep functioning at a high level without cracking in the face of their own impending death.”