

# FINANCIAL TIMES

## The real risks of keeping America safe

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Last year, the Cato Institute, a Washington DC-based libertarian think-tank, crunched some statistics on terrorist threats. The results, some of which have been widely circulated on social media over recent weeks, are thought-provoking.

Only three refugees have committed fatal terrorist attacks on US domestic soil since 1975 — and all three were Cubans, admitted before the Refugee Act of 1980 created a more rigorous screening process. In fact, if you look at the past four decades, the data suggest that the chance of dying in a terrorist attack by a refugee — of any religion — was just one in 3.64 billion in any given year. That is far lower than the risk of being struck by lightning or even being killed by a falling vending machine (yes, really). It is also minuscule compared with the risks posed by guns and car crashes, which kill about 13,000 and 38,000 Americans respectively each year.

What should we make of this? Opponents of Donald Trump view this as proof of how misguided — or malevolent — the White House has been with its recent travel ban. No one from the seven nations included in Donald Trump's executive order has killed any Americans in a terrorist attack on US soil since 1975. Yet after a judge blocked the immigration order, President Trump tweeted: "Just cannot believe a judge would put our country in such peril . . . People pouring in! Bad!"

If Trump really wanted to "keep America safe", he should be banning fast cars and guns (never mind vending machines).

However, there is another way of looking at this: the issue shows how bad humans are at assessing risk. Opponents may not wish to admit it, but there was significant approval for the idea behind Trump's executive order before it was announced.

A survey of American voters in early January found that 48 per cent supported suspending immigration from "terror-prone regions, even if it means turning away refugees", while only 42 per cent were opposed (interestingly, in the wake of Trump's actual order, the tide has turned: this week the pollsters asked the same question, and found voters were now opposed by 50 to 44 percent).

One explanation for our inability to analyse risks objectively can be found in the world of psychology: academics such as Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have highlighted all manner of biases and kinks in our brains that undermine our capacity to make rational

decisions (take a look at Michael Lewis's fascinating book *The Undoing Project* for one good account of this).

But there is another way to frame this debate: namely, we should look at bigger cultural patterns rather than individual psychological issues. After all, as Alex Golub writes on the anthropology blog *Savage Minds*: "People believe that Trump's order makes them safe not only because they lack a few key facts, but because of the coherent 'webs of belief' . . . that connect all of the facts together."

The work of the late British anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests that one reason strangers provoke such (seemingly irrational) terror in many cultures is that they appear to threaten the cultural order. Fear arises because of a perception that, as Golub writes, "the body politic might be polluted by external sources of danger". For many Trump supporters, Islamic immigrants seem to pose a "polluting" threat, while guns and cars do not — and so their risks tend to be minimised.

This has some important implications. Most notably, there is little point in countering people's "irrational" fear of immigrants by simply throwing statistics about or dismissing Trump's supporters as "racist". Islamic immigrants need to be presented by the media and politicians as human beings, not faceless strangers. Cultural boundaries need to be redrawn or, as Golub writes: "Changing minds requires engagement with real people and the entirety of their belief system, not scorn or derision or simple fact checking."

Can this happen? Not easily, for sure; and not while men such as White House strategist Steve Bannon keep whipping up these fears (nor, conversely, while Islamic extremists declare war on the west). But some groups are trying to promote a perception shift. Just look, for example, at Airbnb's imaginative Super Bowl ad celebrating multiculturalism, which ended with the statement that "the world is more beautiful the more you accept".

History offers some comfort. A century ago, some Americans feared that Chinese and Irish immigrants were "polluting" the cultural purity of the US, and, just two decades ago, the idea of gay weddings also provoked fear. But both of these prejudices changed and, in the case of gay marriage, far faster than anyone expected. Culture may be powerful but it can be malleable too — therein lies a reason for both fear and hope.