



## What terrorist threat?

Stephen M. Walt | Monday, August 13, 2012

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Remember how the London Olympics were supposedly left vulnerable to terrorists after the security firm hired for the games admitted that it couldn't supply enough manpower? This **"humiliating shambles"** forced the British government to call in 3,500 security personnel of its own, and led GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney to utter some **tactless remarks** about Britain's alleged mismanagement during his official "Foot-in-Mouth" foreign tour last month.

Well, surprise, surprise. Not only was there no terrorist attack, the Games themselves came off rather well. There were the inevitable minor glitches, of course, but no disasters and some quite impressive organizational achievements. And of course, athletes from around the world delivered inspiring, impressive, heroic, and sometimes disappointing performances, which is what the Games are all about.

Two lessons might be drawn from this event. The first is that the head-long rush to privatize everything -- including the provision of security -- has some obvious downsides. When markets and private firms fail, it is the state that has to come to the rescue. It was true after the 2007-08 financial crisis, it's true in the ongoing euro-mess, and it was true in the Olympics. Bear that in mind when Romney and new VP nominee Paul Ryan tout the virtues of shrinking government, especially the need to privatize Social Security and Medicare.

The second lesson is that we continue to over-react to the "terrorist threat." Here I recommend you read John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart's ***The Terrorism Delusion: America's Overwrought Response to September 11***, in the latest issue of *International Security*. Mueller and Stewart analyze 50 cases of supposed "Islamic terrorist plots" against the United States, and show how virtually all of the perpetrators were (in their words)

"incompetent, ineffective, unintelligent, idiotic, ignorant, unorganized, misguided, muddled, amateurish, dopey, unrealistic, moronic, irrational and foolish." They quote former Glenn Carle, former deputy national intelligence officer for transnational threats saying "we must see jihadists for the small, lethal, disjointed and miserable opponents that they are," noting further that al Qaeda's "capabilities are far inferior to its desires."

Further, Mueller and Stewart estimate that expenditures on domestic homeland security (i.e., not counting the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan) have increased by more than \$1 trillion since 9/11, even though the annual risk of dying in a domestic terrorist attack is about 1 in 3.5 million. Using conservative assumptions and conventional risk-assessment methodology, they estimate that for these expenditures to be cost-effective "they would have had to deter, prevent, foil or protect against 333 very large attacks that would otherwise have been successful every year." Finally, they worry that this exaggerated sense of danger has now been "internalized": even when politicians and "terrorism experts" aren't hyping the danger, the public still sees the threat as large and imminent. As they conclude:

... Americans seems to have internalized their anxiety about terrorism, and politicians and policymakers have come to believe that they can defy it only at their own peril. Concern about appearing to be soft on terrorism has replaced concern about seeming to be soft on communism, a phenomenon that lasted far longer than the dramatic that generated it ... This extraordinarily exaggerated and essentially delusional response may prove to be perpetual."

Which is another way of saying that you should be prepared to keep standing in those pleasant and efficient TSA lines for the rest of your life, and to keep paying for far-flung foreign interventions designed to "root out" those nasty jihadis.