'America the brittle?'

Posted By *Stephen M. Walt* ▪ ***Monday, September 10, 2012***

According to yesterday's ***New York Times****,* assorted "senior American officials" are upset that adversaries like al Qaeda, the Taliban, or the Somali pirates are not simply rolling over and dying. Instead, these foes are proving to be "resilient," "adaptable," and "flexible." These same U.S. officials are also worried that the United States isn't demonstrating the same grit, as supposedly revealed by high military suicide rates, increased reports of PTSD, etc. According to *Times* reporters Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, these developments

> "raise concerns that the United States is losing ground in the New Darwinism of security threats, in which an agile enemy evolves in new ways to blunt America's vast technological prowess with clever homemade bombs and anti-American propaganda that helps supply a steady stream of fighters."

Or as Shanker and Schmitt put it (cue the scary music): "Have we become America the brittle?"

This sort of pop sociology is not very illuminating, especially when there's no evidence presented to support the various officials' gloomy pronouncements. In fact, the glass looks more than half-full. Let's start by remembering that the Somali pirates and al Qaeda have been doing pretty badly of late. Piracy in the Gulf of Aden is **down sharply**, Osama bin Laden is dead, and his movement's popularity is lower than ever.

Whatever silly dreams he might have had about restoring the caliphate have proven to be just hollow fantasies. And as John Mueller and Mark Stewart showed in **an article** I **linked** to a few weeks ago, the actual record of post-9/11 plots against the United States suggests that these supposedly "agile" and "resilient" conspirators are mostly bumbling incompetents. In fact, Lehman Bros. might be the only major world organization that had a *worse* decade than al Qaeda did.

Second, and more importantly, the degree of battle fatigue that the United States might be experiencing has less to do with the "war on terror" per se and more to do with our decision to take our eye off the ball and do a lot of other things instead. The single most costly thing the United States has done since 9/11 -- in terms of both lives and money and strain on our forces -- was invading Iraq, but Saddam Hussein *had nothing to do with 9/11.* (Repeat after me: *Nothing.*) Similarly, the United States invaded Afghanistan to catch bin Laden and oust the Taliban, but that mission eventually morphed into a much more ambitious and ill-defined campaign of nation-building that has not -- ahem -- gone very well. If U.S. military forces are stretched thin, tired, or showing signs of strain, it is because U.S. leaders made bad strategic choices. Even so, I'd argue that U.S. forces have held up remarkably well over a long and inherently difficult campaign.

As for the rest of the country, I'm not even sure how one would measure national "resiliency," but I don't see many signs that the country as a whole is curling into the fetal position. Americans are tired of fighting losing wars, especially when they don't believe there are vital interests at stake. But that's not a sign that we've lost our collective determination; it's actually a sign that the American people are pretty good at cost-benefit analysis and know a bad bet when they see one.

In fact, I think there's something quite different going on. The United States is very secure by almost any standard, and most countries in the world

would be delighted to be as safe as we are. For this reason, most Americans don't worry very much about foreign policy, and the only way you can motivate them to support the sort of activist foreign policy that we've become accustomed to since 1945 is to constantly exaggerate external threats. Americans have to be convinced that their personal safety and well-being are going to be directly affected by what happens in Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, or some other far-flung region, or they won't be willing to pay the costs of mucking about in these various places. Threat-mongering also depends on constantly overstating our adversaries' capabilities and denigrating our own. So senior officials tell sympathetic journalists that our foes are "resilient" and clever and resourceful, etc., while bemoaning our alleged lack of fortitude. The good news is that it's not true; if anything, Americans have been too willing to "pay any price and bear any burden" for quite some time.

One more thing: To the extent some of our adversaries do seem more willing to fight us than we are to fight them, that has a lot to do with where these wars are being waged. If somebody ever invaded the United States, I'm confident Americans would fight like tigers to throw them out. I'll bet it would be child's play to organize tough, well-armed, and resilient insurgencies against any foreign occupier of American soil. Nationalism and other forms of local identity are very powerful forces in the modern world, which is why groups like the Taliban or the Haqqani network or al Qaeda's various local copycats are able to attract local recruits and are hard for foreign occupiers to eradicate. You don't have to agree with anything these groups do or stand for to recognize that we're on their home turf, and it is hardly surprising that they care more about what happens there than we do.

Lastly, Shanker and Schmitt conclude their piece by saying that "the best weapon against terror is refusing to be terrorized. That starts with giving Americans timely, accurate information about potential threats." I agree,

but assuming I'm reading them correctly, I'd draw a somewhat different conclusion. The best way to keep Americans from being "terrorized" is to remind them that the risk is extremely low -- though not zero -- and to explain further that most anti-American terrorism in the world today is largely a reaction to things the United States has been doing overseas. The Pew Global Attitudes Survey noted in 2002 that "antipathy toward the United States is shaped more by what it *does* in the international arena than by what it *stands for* politically and economically." Similarly, a 1997 study by Defense Science Board found "a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and increased terrorist attacks on the United States."

Nothing has changed much since then. The connection between U.S. foreign policy and anti-American terrorism does not necessarily mean that U.S. foreign policy is wrong or misguided; perhaps terrorism is just part of the price we must pay to keep doing all these things. That's a separate issue, about which reasonable people can disagree (and do). But let's at least be realistic enough to acknowledge the connection.