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Terrorism threat is overplayed, experts say

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You might die in a car crash. You could draw your last breath with a misguided bite of meat or drown in a bathtub. Or you might avoid all of that and die some other way.

But you probably still won't meet your end in a terror attack in the U.S.

John Mueller wants you to know this. He wants everyone to know this. The Ohio State University political-science professor has devoted much of his career over the past decade to spreading the word that American fear of terrorism is overblown and our government is spending vast amounts of money on counterterrorism efforts that, in some cases, accomplish nothing.

Consider this: Your odds of dying in a terror attack are 1 in 40 million, Mueller says. Take out the 9/11 attack, and the odds are 1 in 110 million.

Meanwhile, 1 in about 8,200 Americans will die driving a car this year.

"It's bad statistics," Mueller said. Being afraid of dying in a terror attack "doesn't make a whole lot of sense."

But tell that to the folks panicking over TV images of bodies being dragged from a building in San Bernardino, Calif.

Critics of death-odds comparisons say they don't take into account how strongly a terror attack shakes society. People don't get so worked up when someone chokes on a piece of steak.

According to a recent Gallup poll, 1 in 6 Americans identified terrorism as the country's most-important problem, greater than the government, the economy and guns. And a June poll found that nearly half were somewhat or very afraid that they or a family member would become a victim of terrorism.

"Americans have always felt immune. Violence is something that happens overseas," said Lawrence Pintak, the founding dean of the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University and a former CBS News Middle East correspondent.

“This idea of this insidious, it-can-happen-anywhere terrorism, it can throw anyone off.”

Another factor driving the fear is the country’s “deep-seated antipathy for Islam,” which over the years has been supplanted by the boogeymen of the moment, including the Nazis and the Russians, said Pintak, who writes and lectures about the U.S. relationship with the Muslim world. “We’re now back to them being the bad guys.”

Of course, this blooming fear also comes at a time when a bunch of people are vying for presidential votes with tough talk that some crowds are devouring. Experts say the added attention likely is contributing to worry.

“This really is the perfect storm of Donald Trump and ISIS both rearing their heads at the same time,” Pintak said, using an acronym for Islamic State. “Right now, you have people who hold fairly extreme views holding the bully pulpit.”

Politicians, though, are merely responding to the glut of terrorism news coverage, said Larry Sabato, founder and director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics. They’re pandering. They don’t have much choice. Those who haven’t spoken of banning Muslims from the country or bombing the enemy until the sand glows haven’t done so well in the polls.

“They want to talk about what everyday Americans are talking about,” Sabato said. “You’ve got to focus on what people care about at the time, whether you agree (with) it or not.”

Sabato likes to say that there are only four emotions that matter in politics — love, hate, hope and fear — and “on the whole, hate and fear will get you a lot further than love and hope.”

“It’s just human nature. It’s in the genome,” he said. “If people are afraid of something, they look to their leaders for solutions.”

But what about reality? Why doesn’t CNN include your chance of being killed by a terrorist in its scrolling headlines? Mueller wonders these things, sometimes aloud. He doesn’t get many answers.

He finds that most government leaders don’t want to make grand statements about safety. President Barack Obama caught grief for what Mueller thought was a tepid recent declaration, that ISIS didn’t pose an “existential threat” to the country. The toughest statement Mueller could find came from former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who said in 2007: “You can’t sit there and worry about everything. Get a life.”

Mueller compares the fear of dying in a terror attack with the optimism in buying a lottery ticket. The odds are almost completely against you, but it has to happen to someone — so why not you?

But that kind of thinking leads to stress that can strip years from a person’s life. It leads to violent gut reactions. It leads to initiatives such as the \$1 billion-a-year federal air marshal program, which, he said, “increased security almost not at all.”

Many of those making counterterrorism decisions, he said, “really care. If they were fools or monsters, it would be so much easier. But they’re also spending a lot of other people’s money to make them safe.”

And while some might argue that the massive spending is worth it — that every single life is precious — those same people likely would laugh off a simple change that could save 30,000 of their loved ones each year, Mueller said.

Dropping the speed limit to 13 mph.