



Awkward timing: After Paris, academics call terror threat overblown

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When it comes to terrorism, sometimes "the best counter-terrorism measure is not to overreact." The warning came from political scientist John Mueller at a presentation in Washington, D.C., Monday, a few days after Paris was roiled by terror attacks.

Mueller called many real and would-be American domestic terrorists bozos and likened them to the Three Stooges. He said that the post-9/11 crop was "not a very impressive list of diabolical cleverness" whose damage, even if they were not preempted by the FBI, was likely to be "on an extremely small scale."

For instance, the cops who happened on an explosive device in a car in New York's Times Square in 2010 thought it was really "a caricature of a bomb" initially. Perhaps a toy or a particularly ill-thought performance art piece.

Mueller also took shots at more effective terrorists, saying 9/11 plotter Khalid Sheikh Mohammed really didn't understand that al Qaeda wouldn't be able to do more airline hijackings after the 9/11 plot had given the whole world a heads-up. Of Trade Center bomber and self-proclaimed "mastermind" Ramzi Yousef's jailtime conversion to Christianity, Mueller joked, "He may become more humble."

"Chasing Ghosts" is the title of Mueller's latest book, along with Australian political scientist Mark Stewart, who also spoke at the Cato Institute Monday.

The book blares a provocative thesis. After 9/11, newspapers carried countless reports about more terrorists in the woodworks, cells, sleepers, etc., but little of that panned out. Mueller and Stewart argue that domestic terrorists were never very organized or thick on the ground in America and that many of the measures used to counter terrorism have not been good value for public dollars.

The FBI's current annual budget for terrorism comes to about \$3 billion. Mueller and Stewart argue about \$1.8 billion of that sum — well over half — is likely unnecessary.

The authors see almost zero benefit to the air marshals program. They haven't figured out exactly how much of the \$115 billion that America spends domestically fighting terrorism every year is unnecessary, but the answer is not a small number.

Mueller even went so far as to say, in response to one provocatively phrased question, "It's possible that doing nothing would be more cost effective" than America's dramatic expansion of anti-terror apparatus.

Stewart quickly interjected that they were not objecting to all anti-terror efforts but only to "business as usual" in the war on terrorism.

With his cost-benefit PowerPoint in the background, Stewart said that at terrorism conferences, "John and I are the only speakers who give numbers like this — or actually give any numbers at all."

Mueller and Stewart argue that terrorism, not just in the U.S. but worldwide, is an awful but limited phenomenon, claiming the lives of 200 to 400 people a year. Folks have about a one-in-4-million chance of dying from terrorism vs. a one-in-a-million chance of being zapped by lightning.

"The question is, 'Will this really change?'" Mueller said of the recent ISIS-inspired violence in France. He answered without much hesitation, "I suspect not."