



Monsters of Our Own Imaginings

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The pattern has become all too familiar. A terrorist attack occurs far from active war zones, someplace extreme violence is rare and unexpected. It might be Paris, California, London, Oslo, Boston, Madrid, Jakarta, or Ankara. The world recoils in horror and sympathy, even though the number of victims is small compared to the casualties suffered in wars, highway accidents, natural disasters, pandemics, or even preventable diseases. Media outlets offer up an orgy of overheated coverage, and the same talking heads argue about what to do. Opportunistic politicians chime in on cue, insisting that this latest tragedy confirms whatever they have been saying all along, often by issuing various proclamations that are just flat out wrong.

It has been like this ever since 9/11, and at this point there's hardly anything new for me (or anyone else) to say. But if you've been paying attention, a few truths should be obvious by now, and perhaps they bear repeating *one more time*. To wit:

1. 100 percent security is not possible.

Not even for people living in rigid, authoritarian, highly regulated societies. For this reason, abandoning our traditional values and liberties will not make us significantly safer. I made this point a couple of years ago, but we still haven't fully internalized it. Terrorist attacks have occurred in Europe, America, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and many other places, and no level of surveillance, police presence, border controls, drone strikes, targeted killings, or

enhanced interrogation is going to prevent every one of them. Even if we could provide absolutely air-tight protection around one type of target, others targets would remain exposed.

This obvious point is not an argument against making attacks more difficult or to slow or eliminate efforts to detect and disrupt plotters and to discredit extremism itself. But the belief that we could eliminate the danger entirely is no more realistic than thinking better health care will grant you eternal life. For this reason, condemning politicians for failing to prevent every *single* attack is counterproductive — and possibly dangerous — because it encourages leaders to go overboard in the pursuit of perfect security and to waste time and money that could be better spent on other things. Even worse, the fear of being blamed for “not doing enough” will lead some leaders to take steps that make the problem worse — like bombing distant countries — merely to look and sound tough and resolute.

Get used to it, folks: Globalization enables otherwise weak and marginal actors to conduct individual acts of violence far from their own homelands. During the 19th century heyday of European imperialism, angry Kenyans or Vietnamese or Indians could not easily reach out and strike civilians in London or Paris. Today, angry Chechens can blow up a subway in Moscow, and angry Muslims can attack nightclubs in Paris or an airport in Brussels. Their xenophobic right-wing counterparts can commit similar acts in Oklahoma City or Oslo. The ability of small groups to carry out dramatic acts of terrorism in many places is not an existential threat (see below), but it is a distinct and enduring feature of the modern world.

2. Contemporary terrorism has more than one cause.

People have been looking for a magic bullet against terrorist violence for a long time, but this goal is a fool’s errand. Terrorism is a tactic that many groups have used in the past and that others will employ in the future, typically when they are too weak to achieve their aims any other way. Equally important, there is no magic key to stopping terrorism because the motivations for it are so varied. Sometimes it stems from anger and opposition to foreign occupation or perceived foreign interference — as with the Tamil Tigers, Irish Republican Army, al Qaeda, Hezbollah, or Hamas.

In other cases, it arises from opposition to a corrupt and despised ruling elite. Or it could be both: Osama bin Laden was equally angry at “crusader” nations for interfering in the Muslim world and at the Arab governments he believed were in cahoots with them. In the West, homegrown terrorists such as Anders Breivik or Timothy McVeigh are driven to mass murder by misguided anger at political systems they (falsely) believe are betraying their nation’s core values. Sometimes terrorism arises from perverted religious beliefs; at other times the motivating ideology is wholly secular. Because so many different grievances can lead individuals or groups to employ terrorist methods, there is no single policy response that could make the problem disappear forever.

3. The problem is serious but not — repeat, *not* — an existential threat.

Compared with other risks to human life and well-being, contemporary international terrorism remains a minor problem. The individuals killed or wounded in a terrorist attack are unquestionably tragic victims, and our hearts should go out to them, their friends, and their families. But as experts have pointed out over and over again, the actual danger from terrorist violence remains astronomically low (i.e., for most of us, the risk of being killed by a terrorist each year is much less than one chance in a million). Or to put it differently: The Islamic State killed 31 people in Brussels on Tuesday, but more than half a billion people in Europe were just fine on that day. So when the British government raised the “threat level” and told its citizens to avoid “all but essential travel” to Belgium following Tuesday’s attacks, it is demonstrating a decidedly non-Churchillian panic. Needless to say, that is precisely what groups like the Islamic State want to provoke.

Ditto the U.S. State Department’s recent advisory warning Americans about travel to Europe between now and June 20, 2016: I’ll bet it caused a few high-fives around the cook stoves in Raqqa.

Unfortunately, the same toxic blend of media and politics that brought us Donald Trump’s candidacy makes it nearly impossible to have a rational assessment of terrorism. The big banner headline in Wednesday’s *Boston Globe* (“GRIP OF TERROR”) is typical, thereby implying that the Islamic State is in control in Brussels and that everyone in Belgium is quaking in their shoes. Newspapers, radio, cable news channels, and assorted websites all live for events like this, and they know that hyping the danger will keep people reading, listening, and watching. The Islamic State and its partners really couldn’t ask for a better ally, because overheated media coverage makes weak groups seem more powerful than they really are and helps convince the public they are at greater risk than is in fact the case. As long as media coverage continues to provide the Islamic State et al. with such free and effective publicity, why should these groups ever abandon such tactics?

4. Terrorists cannot defeat us; we can only defeat ourselves.

This last point is nearly a truism, but that doesn’t make it any less valid or important. The Islamic State wouldn’t have to use terrorism if it were strong enough to advance its cause through normal means or if its message were attractive enough to command the loyalty of more than a miniscule fraction of the world’s population (or the world’s Muslims, for that matter). Because it lacks abundant resources and its message is toxic to most people, the Islamic State has to rely on suicide attacks, beheadings, and violent videos to try to scare us into doing something stupid. The Islamic State cannot conquer Europe and impose its weird version of Islam on the more than 500 million people who live there; the most it can hope for is to get European countries to do self-destructive things to themselves in response. Similarly, neither al Qaeda, the Islamic State, nor other extremists could destroy the U.S. economy, undermine the U.S. military, or weaken American resolve directly; but they did achieve some of their goals when they provoked us into

invading Iraq and when they convinced two presidents to pour hundreds of billions of dollars into the bottomless pit in Afghanistan.

The bottom line: Terrorism is not really the problem; the problem is how we respond to it. My first thought when I heard the news from Brussels, I'm sorry to say, was "Brexit," meaning my worry that this act of violence might irrationally bolster support for the United Kingdom leaving the EU, thereby dealing that already-struggling experiment another body blow. It might also boost the political fortunes of xenophobes in other Western countries, further poisoning the political climate in Europe. It is also worth noting that presidential candidates Donald Trump and Ted Cruz have already offered up idiotic proposals of their own (such as Cruz's call for stepped-up police patrols in Muslim neighborhoods in the United States), steps that would give the Islamic State a new propaganda victory. But these developments would be entirely our own doing, and we have no one to blame but ourselves if we try to fight extremism by abandoning our own values and becoming more like them.

When Western societies faced grave challenges in the past, they brought to the fore leaders like Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, George C. Marshall, or Charles de Gaulle. These leaders were not without flaws, but none of them was prone to panic, and each understood the value of calm resolution in the face of danger or adversity. At the moment, the challenge of contemporary terrorism seems to be bringing out not the best in the West — but the worst. Instead of resolution and grit, we get bluster and hyperbole. Instead of measured threat assessments, patient and careful strategizing, and a realistic sense of what can and cannot be achieved, we get symbolic gestures, the abandonment of our own principles, and political posturing.

So what would Churchill say? Looking back on World War II, he once recalled that it was fortunate "that when these great trials came upon [the world], there was a generation that terror could not conquer and brutal violence could not enslave." That is precisely the attitude we must cultivate today, and the good news is that dealing with the Islamic State or other violent extremists will not require the same sacrifices that earlier generations had to make.

Or how would a grown-up like Marshall or Dwight D. Eisenhower respond to this danger? No doubt they'd see it as a serious problem, but anyone who had witnessed the carnage of a world war would not be cowed by intermittent acts of extremist violence, no matter how shocking they are to our sensibilities. They'd use the bully pulpit to shame the fearmongers on Fox and CNN, and they'd never miss an opportunity to remind us that the danger is not, in fact, that great and that we should not, and cannot, live our lives in fear of every shadow and in thrall to monsters of our own imaginings. They would encourage us to live our daily lives as we always have, confident that our societies possess a strength and resilience that will easily outlast the weak and timorous groups that are trying to disrupt us. And then, this summer, they'd take a European vacation.