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## Balancing Terror and Reality in State of the Union Address

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When President Obama speaks to the nation in his final State of the Union address on Tuesday night, he will offer a familiar reassurance that the country is expending enormous effort to protect Americans against international terrorism.

Here is what he probably will not say, at least not this bluntly: Americans are more likely to die in a car crash, drown in a bathtub or be struck by lightning than be killed by a terrorist. The news media is complicit in inflating the sense of danger. The Islamic State does not pose an existential threat to the United States.

He will presumably not say this, either: Given how hard it is for intelligence and law enforcement agencies to detect people who have become radicalized, like those who opened fire at a holiday party in San Bernardino, Calif., a certain number of relatively low-level terrorist attacks may be inevitable, and Americans may have to learn to adapt the way Israel has.

By all accounts, Mr. Obama is sympathetic to this view, which is shared by a number of counterterrorism veterans who contend that anxiety has warped the American public's perspective. But it is also a politically untenable argument at a time when polls show greater fears about terrorism than at any point since the weeks after Sept. 11, 2001. As it is, critics contend that Mr. Obama does not take the threat seriously enough and has not done enough to guard the nation against attack.

"Do we overemphasize terror? Yes," said Juliette Kayyem, who served as an assistant Homeland Security secretary under Mr. Obama. "But there's not much government can do about that. It's a different kind of violence. It's meant to elicit fear. So the fact that it does elicit fear is hard to refute."

The effect on the public psyche is inherently more powerful than other dangers Americans accept every day. "Comparing it to shark attacks is apples and oranges," she said, "and that's the challenge for anyone trying to communicate risk."

That dynamic frustrates Mr. Obama as he struggles to explain his approach to the threat. In a recent off-the-record meeting with columnists, he emphasized that the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, did not threaten the United States in a fundamental way, according to people who were in the room.

As a result, he said, the danger does not merit an all-out military response involving American ground troops. He would send significant numbers of those forces to the Middle East, he added, only in the event of a terrorist attack in the United States so catastrophic that it all but paralyzed the country with fear.

The president is more careful about expressing such an analysis in public, acutely aware that his past comments have made him look as if he was underestimating the threat. When Mr. Obama at first called emerging groups like the Islamic State the “J.V. team” of terrorism, he looked as though he did not grasp its lethal reach after it seized parts of Iraq and Syria. When he more recently said the group had been “contained,” he looked as if he was out of touch, given the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino that followed.

His initial measured — some said passive — public response to those attacks further undermined public confidence, and even Democrats complained his strategy was inadequate. Polls afterward showed that most Americans disapproved of his handling of terrorism, once a political asset.

“While there are many things I disagree about the president’s approach, I understand that balance he’s trying to find,” said Frances Fragos Townsend, a counterterrorism adviser to President George W. Bush, “I just think he’s tilted too far in that direction.”

She continued: “He condescended about the fears — ‘you shouldn’t be afraid, you just don’t understand the strategy.’ That doesn’t work.”

Mr. Obama acknowledged to the columnists that he was slow to respond to public fears after the Paris and San Bernardino attacks. He said he might not have fully recognized the anxiety because he was overseas at first and in general does not watch much cable television — as much a jab at the news media as an admission on his part.

He later tried to modify his public response with tougher language and more events to demonstrate resolve. He has tried to make a nuanced argument, but it has drawn scorn on the campaign trail among Republicans who portray him as woefully weak. While Republicans vowed to destroy the enemy, Mr. Obama argued against overreaction, as with Donald J. Trump’s proposal to temporarily bar the entry of foreign Muslims.

In an interview last month with NPR, Mr. Obama urged Americans “to keep things in perspective” about the Islamic State.

“This is not an organization that can destroy the United States,” he said. “This is not a huge industrial power that can pose great risks to us institutionally or in a systematic way. But they can hurt us, and they can hurt our people and our families. And so I understand why people are worried.”

In a New York Times-CBS News poll last month, 44 percent of respondents said they thought it was very likely that the United States would suffer a terrorist attack in the next few months, the highest figure since the weeks after Sept. 11. An additional 35 percent said it was somewhat likely. In the latest Gallup poll, 51 percent said they were worried that they or someone in their family would be a victim of terrorism, the highest proportion since just after Sept. 11.

Never mind that only a relative handful of people have been killed in terrorist attacks in the United States since Sept. 11. The annual risk of dying in a terrorist attack in the United States between 1970 and 2007 was one in 3.5 million, according to data presented by John Mueller, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute who has written extensively on what he considers the exaggeration of the terrorist threat.

“He’s afraid if he pushes this very far it’s going to possibly blow up in his face,” Mr. Mueller said of Mr. Obama. “And it doesn’t seem to work. He has tried to say it’s not an existential threat, which is so banal it’s a no-brainer, and he can’t even get that to go down.”

Juan Carlos Zarate, another of Mr. Bush’s counterterrorism advisers, said that in some ways Mr. Obama “is right to not overplay the sense of threat” to avoid playing into the hands of the terrorists. But he added that Mr. Obama seemed to have retreated to a pre-Sept. 11 mind-set, and that waiting until a more devastating attack to make a more serious effort would be too late.

“We run the risk for ourselves and our allies that we’re not dealing aggressively enough from the outset with the adaptation of this group, which could become catastrophic,” Mr. Zarate said.

Ms. Kayyem has taken on this subject in a memoir, “Security Mom,” to be published in April. “As a society we’re irrational about it, but government has to accept that irrationality rather than fight it,” she said. “You’re not going to fight it.”

She noted that in military campaigns, Americans historically had accepted some losses. Terrorism, she said, does not work the same way. “When you’re talking about my three children, there’s no acceptable losses,” she said. “We don’t want to hear that you view it that way. That’s the challenge for the government.”