The High Price of Security Theater

The $4 trillion war on terror: Where did the money go?

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That fact that the war on terror has been expensive will surprise no one. Since 2001, the U.S. government has laid out mind-boggling sums to keep the homeland safe from violent extremists.

There was the $30 billion raise for the FBI that didn't see 9/11 coming and $70 billion for the bureaucrats who have consistently failed to keep our airports safe. Add in more than $200 billion for a new Cabinet-level department to coordinate all of this activity and half a trillion for mass surveillance, plus the incredible costs of a decade and a half of military action abroad, and the total comes to a whopping $4 trillion. Where did all that money go?

FBI: $30+ Billion
Despite the FBI's failure to predict what was coming on 9/11, that agency's budget has more than tripled since 2001. Has all the extra spending at least reaped positive returns in the form of stopping future violent incidents? Much to the contrary, there is evidence that the bureau has manufactured more terrorists via its entrapment operations than any foreign entity could have hoped to recruit inside the United States.

The FBI, which pockets $5 billion a year for its counterterrorism programs, has profited mightily from ginning up bogus plots that generate lurid headlines. For instance, a September 28, 2011, FBI press release trumpeted the arrest of Rezwan Ferdaus, a U.S. citizen, on charges that he planned to use "large remote controlled aircraft filled with C-4 plastic explosives" to "destroy the Pentagon and U.S. Capitol." The culprit, a 26-year-old Bangladeshi American suffering from seizures and being treated for severe depression, had been bankrolled and enticed to embrace a scheme he almost certainly wouldn't have considered on his own.

As a 2014 report by Human Rights Watch and Columbia University Law School's Human Rights Institute noted, "Multiple studies have found that nearly 50 percent of the federal counterterrorism convictions since September 11, 2001, resulted from informant-based cases." That doesn't sound so bad until you realize the informants' job in many of these instances was to trick otherwise innocent people into signing on to illegal plots of the government's own invention. In one case, a judge concluded that the government "came up with the crime, provided

the means, and removed all relevant obstacles" in order to make a "terrorist" out of a man "whose buffoonery is positively Shakespearean in scope."

Trevor Aaronson, author of *The Terror Factory: Inside the FBI's Manufactured War on Terrorism*, estimates that only about 1 percent of the 500 people charged with international terrorism offenses in the decade after 9/11 were bona fide threats. Thirty times as many were induced by the FBI to behave in ways that prompted their arrest. A 2011 report by the New York University School of Law Center for Human Rights and Global Justice examined several high-profile cases and found that "the government's informants introduced and aggressively pushed ideas about violent jihad and, moreover, actually encouraged the defendants to believe it was their duty to take action against the United States."

Ohio State University professor John Mueller, co-author of *Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism*, observes that no terrorist entity within the U.S. was able "to detonate even a simple bomb" in the decade after 9/11. Aspiring terrorists even "have difficulty putting together bombs," he says. "At the [2013] Boston marathon, two bombs went off and killed three people in a crowded area. So they finally actually got a bomb to go off but it wasn't exactly terribly lethal." Almost all the bombs involved in terrorist plots in the U.S. have been FBI-built duds—like most of the prospective terrorists. Security expert Bruce Schneier captured that genre in his classic 2007 essay, "Portrait of the Modern Terrorist as an Idiot."

The last 15 years have seen the U.S. pour more than $30 billion into the bureau's anti-terrorism efforts even though there's no evidence of widespread domestic terror threats not created by the FBI. As **reason** contributor Sheldon Richman pithily summed up: "Most would-be terrorists appear to be misfits who couldn't bomb their way out of a paper bag and wouldn't even try without goading by an FBI informant."

Transportation Security Administration: $70 Billion
President Barack Obama in 2013 offered up the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) as an example of a federal agency that posed no threat to Americans' rights. "I don't think anybody says we're no longer free because we have checkpoints at airports," he said.

But the most visible symbol of the domestic war on terrorism is the "whole body scanner" you have to pass through at more than 400 domestic airports. After spending more than $70 billion on the TSA and its army of 45,000 screeners, airport security continues to be a farce.

The TSA has hardly helped its own case. By boasting about its "see-all" scanners, the agency riled up those who, shockingly, objected to having photos of their birthday suits added to their federal dossiers. The machines were widely denounced as "virtual strip searches" that reveal in humiliatingly granular detail everything from whether a male is circumcised to whether a female wears nipple rings. Many travelers also expressed apprehension about the health implications of stepping into scanners that rely on radiation to penetrate people's clothing—perhaps with good cause. An investigation by ProPublica and PBS *NewsHour* revealed that the machines could cause up to 100 cancer cases per year among travelers.

When people understandably began requesting to be screened instead by the magnetometers that the agency had relied on since 2002, the TSA began inflicting "enhanced patdowns" on anyone

who "opted out." As *USA Today* explained, "The new searches…require screeners to touch passengers' breasts and genitals," thus leading some travelers to quip that TSA actually stands for "Total Sexual Assault."

Adding insult to injury, the agency failed to adequately test the whole body scanner machines to ensure they were effective before installing them throughout the country. Last June, a leaked secret report revealed that TSA agents failed to detect 96 percent of the weapons and mock bombs smuggled past them by inspector general testers.

Worse still, those scanners can do nothing to protect Americans from TSA employees themselves. Some 70,000 passengers have filed complaints against the agency regarding theft or destruction of their property, and more than 500 TSA agents have been fired for stealing travelers' property, including one Orlando screener who confessed to taking 80 laptops. An agent at the Fort Lauderdale, Florida, airport filched $50,000 from travelers in a six-month span and was arrested only after he was caught with a passenger's iPad in his pants.

TSA Behavior Detection Officers: $1 Billion
Besides subjecting passengers to invasive electronic searches, the TSA relies on a secret list of 94 "behavioral indicators" to suss out who it believes has treacherous intentions. Among the agency's catalog of suspicious activities are giveaways like avoiding eye contact and appearing nervous while traveling. In 2011 CNN revealed that the TSA sees "very arrogant and expresses contempt against airport passenger procedures" as one telltale warning sign. It seems the TSA is the only security agency in the world to believe that would-be terrorists precede their attacks by taunting guards.

More than $1 billion has gone toward paying to have thousands of TSA "Behavior Detection Officers," or BDOs, roam America's airport terminals. They peer into travelers' faces to detect "micro expressions" signaling trouble, do "chat downs," and select lucky travelers to receive the "third degree." More than 100,000 people have been referred for additional interrogation or arrest since Obama took office, and yet the program has not caught a single terrorist.

 In one of the least surprising developments of recent years, minority groups have received the brunt of BDO attention. More than 30 TSA agents complained in 2012 that the behavior detection program at Boston's Logan Airport had become "a magnet for racial profiling." Among the "terrorist" profiles that the officers used were "Hispanics traveling to Miami or blacks wearing baseball caps backward." The Newark *Star-Ledger* reported in 2011 that Mexican and Dominican travelers were being scrutinized, searched, patted down, questioned, and often referred up the chain of command, "with bogus behaviors invented by the screeners to cover up the real reason the passengers were singled out"—namely, for being the wrong color.

TSA agents told *The New York Times* in 2012 that the profiling occurred "in response to pressure from managers to meet certain threshold numbers for referrals to the State Police" and other authorities. "The managers wanted to generate arrests so they could justify the program.…Officers who made arrests were more likely to be promoted," they said. In June 2013, the DHS inspector general revealed that the TSA's BDO training program was abysmal: Even though the program had been running for six years, the agency "had not developed performance

measures," could not "accurately assess" its effectiveness, could not "show that the program is cost-effective," and could not provide any justification for expanding the corps of officers.

TSA Time Wasting: $8 Billion
More than 600 million passengers travel through U.S. airports each year. Assuming each one shows up just 30 minutes before he would have in the pre–9/11 era, people are collectively spending 300 million extra hours per year at airports. If we conservatively assume that a person's time is worth $15 an hour, that amounts to an extra $4.5 billion in hidden costs from TSA-imposed delays. Reason Foundation transportation analyst Robert Poole has estimated that the real number is more than $8 billion a year.

The U.S. Travel Association believes the TSA has also cost the U.S. economy almost 1 million jobs between 2001 and 2010 by pushing people to avoid flying. "Reducing hassle without compromising security will encourage more Americans to fly—as many as two to three additional trips a year—leading to an additional $85 billion in spending that would support 900,000 American jobs," said Roger Dow, the association's president in a press release.

But there's at least one profession that has benefitted from TSA interference: morticians. A Cornell University study estimated that the agency's invasive search procedures cost not just time and money but actual human lives. By swaying people to drive instead of fly—and make no mistake about it, the latter is a *far* safer means of transport—we're boosting traffic fatalities by more than 500 a year. As a *Bloomberg Business* analysis noted, "To make flying as dangerous as using a car, a four-plane disaster on the scale of 9/11 would have to occur every month, according to an analysis published in the *American Scientist*.…People switching from air to road transportation in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks led to an increase of 242 driving fatalities per month—which means that a lot more people died on the roads as an indirect result of 9/11 than died from being on the planes that terrible day." Yet somehow the federal government's elaborate analyses never seem to account for these risks.

Department of Homeland Security: $200+ Billion
One year after the 9/11 attacks, with the American public still reeling, Congress created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), bringing together several of the most notoriously inept agencies in the federal government, including the Secret Service and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). In theory, centralizing them under the watch of a single Cabinet secretary was supposed to enhance efficiency and competence. In practice, the DHS has been blundering ever since.

Homeland Security's budget has swollen over the past 13 years to its current annual level of $41 billion. Its 240,000 employees consistently report the lowest morale of any agency, according to the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey conducted by the federal Office of Personnel Management, with the disgruntlement stemming in part from the lack of a "sense of purpose." DHS programs have shoveled out more than $50 billion to local and state governments in the name of anti-terrorism, and much of the money has gone toward purchases that could most charitably be described as tangentially related to stated goals.

Louisiana grant recipients spent $2,400 for a lapel microphone and $2,700 for a teleprompter. Fort Worth, Texas, spent $24,000 on a latrine-on-wheels. A Michigan police department spent

$6,200 on 13 sno-cone machines. A subsequent Senate report noted that local officials "defended the sno-cone purchases saying the machines were needed to treat heat-related emergencies." DHS asserted that they were "dual purpose" because they "could be used to fill ice packs in an emergency."

The Jacksonville Urban Area Security Initiative used a DHS grant to produce an 8-minute film entitled "Domestic Terrorism: The First Line of Defense." Its purpose: to urge viewers to report any suspicious activity and to be especially wary of people who are "alone or nervous," or people "of average or above average intelligence" (unlike, apparently, the ones who made the film).

Many DHS grant recipients paid to send their employees to a conference at the lavish Paradise Point Resort on San Diego's Mission Bay, where a tactical training firm put on a "zombie apocalypse" show featuring "40 actors dressed as zombies getting gunned down by a military tactical unit," a Senate investigation found. "Conference attendees were invited to watch the shows as part of their education in emergency response training."

DHS handouts don't just run up spending unnecessarily; they result in state and local law enforcement agencies that are more intrusive and punitive than they otherwise would be. One California urban area spent $6 million on radar devices to detect vehicles with "excessive traffic violations," though what that has to do with terrorism went unexplained. Grants have also been used to purchase license plate readers for police patrol cars, and two years ago, the DHS solicited proposals for private companies to create a national database of license plate information that could be used to track exactly when and where individual citizens drive. The subsequent firestorm caused the agency to temporarily back off from the idea, but it rolled out the proposal again last year.

After the heavy-handed local police response to protests over the law enforcement killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, President Obama publicly fretted about whether America's police forces had—just maybe—become a bit too militarized. But many of the worst abuses by over-armed local cops have been enabled by the DHS, a department the White House oversees.

Grants allow departments to purchase things like drones and military-style armored personnel carriers. The most popular model is the BearCat—an acronym for Ballistic Engineered Armored Response Counter Attack Truck. The Keene, New Hampshire, police justified using federal funds to purchase one of these beasts because of rowdiness at a local pumpkin festival. A Washington state police department has deployed its BearCat to pull over drunk drivers, while authorities in Clovis, California, displayed theirs at a local Easter egg hunt. A Senate report noted, "Police departments rave about the vehicles' 'shock and awe' effect saying the vehicles' menacing presence can be enough of a deterrent for would-be criminals."

Some DHS grants spawn nothing but harassment. The Washington, D.C., subway system has recently been plagued by a few high-profile violent attacks (alongside service that itself occasionally kills passengers). The feds' solution? Grants of $10 million per year to bankroll Metro police accosting travelers to search their purses, briefcases, and backpacks. Officials insist the searches are no big deal because they don't take long—unless, of course, the cops find a

reason to arrest or detain you for questioning. Search teams are not deployed in response to any credible threat; instead, they're sent out merely to establish a police presence. But news that authorities are conducting warrantless searches of passengers spreads quickly on social media. If someone wants to avoid the hassle, they need only go to a different station a mile or two away.

DHS Fusion Centers: $1 Billion
When it comes to mindless excess in the war on terror, it's difficult to compete with the more than 70 "fusion centers" that the DHS began setting up shortly after 9/11 to be hubs for federal-state-local cooperation in tracking threats.

A key element of the fusion center strategy is to populate shared databases with Suspicious Activity Reports. But what exactly rises to the level of suspicious activity? The Los Angeles Police Department encourages citizens to snitch on "individuals who stay at bus or train stops for extended periods while buses and trains come and go," "individuals who carry on long conversations on pay or cellular telephones," and "joggers who stand and stretch for an inordinate amount of time." The Kentucky Office of Homeland Security recommends the reporting of "people avoiding eye contact," "people in places they don't belong," or homes or apartments that have numerous visitors "arriving and leaving at unusual hours," PBS' *Frontline* reported.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Colorado's fusion center "produced a fear-mongering public service announcement asking the public to report innocuous behaviors such as photography, note-taking, drawing and collecting money for charity as 'warning signs' of terrorism." Various other fusion centers have attached warning labels to gun-rights activists, anti-immigration zealots, and individuals and groups "rejecting federal authority in favor of state or local authority"—a creed, one might point out, shared by many of the country's Founding Fathers. A 2012 DHS report stated that being "reverent of individual liberty" is one of the traits of a potential right-wing extremist. Such absurd standards help explain why the federal terrorist watch list now contains more than 1 million names.

Not even the feds know how much they're spending for fusion centers; a 2012 Senate report on "Federal Support for and Involvement in State and Local Fusion Centers" found that outlay estimates varied by more than 400 percent, ranging from $289 million to $1.4 billion. A 2010 DHS internal report found that four of the centers did not actually exist.

The Washington Post summarized some of the centers' wayward spending thusly: "More than $2 million was spent on a center for Philadelphia that never opened. In Ohio, officials used the money to buy rugged laptop computers and then gave them to a local morgue. San Diego officials bought 55 flat-screen televisions to help them collect 'open-source intelligence'—better known as cable television news."

How long does it take to become a fusion center intelligence analyst? According to the DHS, five days' training is sufficient. But a 2012 Senate investigation found no evidence the centers had provided *any* assistance in detecting or disrupting *any* terrorist plots, in part because the centers' reports were "oftentimes shoddy, rarely timely, sometimes endangering citizens' civil liberties and Privacy Act protections, occasionally taken from already-published public sources, and more often than not unrelated to terrorism."

Alas, the Senate's exposé of fusion center follies seems to have done nothing to deter other agencies from casting an even wider net for terrorist suspects. The National Counterterrorism Center, a branch of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, issued a report in 2014 titled "Countering Violent Extremism: A Guide for Practitioners and Analysts." As *The Intercept* summarized, the report "suggests that police, social workers and educators rate individuals on a scale of one to five in categories such as 'Expressions of Hopelessness, Futility'…and 'Connection to Group Identity (Race, Nationality, Religion, Ethnicity).'" The system is meant "to alert government officials to individuals at risk of turning to radical violence, and to families or communities at risk of incubating extremist ideologies." It recommends that authorities judge families by their level of "Parent-Child Bonding" and rate localities based in part on the "presence of ideologues or recruiters."

Surveillance: $500 Billion
After the 9/11 attacks, U.S. government spending on surveillance skyrocketed. How high has it gotten? If we told you, we would have to kill you.

The budgets of the intelligence agencies are treated as a state secret, though Edward Snowden leaked information in 2013 showing the National Security Agency (NSA) received $10.8 billion that year—up 53 percent since 2004. The NSA cashed in after 9/11 even though it, like the FBI, failed to interpret the many warning signs that terrorists were plotting to hijack airliners and crash them into buildings. Snowden also disclosed that the total "black budget" for intelligence agencies was $52.6 billion that year (though much of that is not directly devoted to terrorism threats). You might think the cat was largely out of the bag after those revelations, but the Obama administration has refused to publish subsequent budgets and continues to cite security concerns as justification for keeping taxpayers in the dark.

NSA operations aren't just wasteful. The agency's snooping also results in massive civil rights violations that undermine the privacy of hundreds of millions of people while obliterating the Fourth Amendment's prohibition on unreasonable warrantless searches.

The NSA's top-secret "XKeyscore" system (reported on by *The Intercept*'s Glenn Greenwald) specified the "standards" that NSA employees can use to vacuum up the emails and other Internet data of unsuspecting targets. And it isn't just foreigners or those who've given the government probable cause who are being spied on: The NSA's definition of "terrorist suspect" in XKeyscore includes such nebulous markers as "someone searching the web for suspicious stuff." Aside from watching people online, the agency has also used Facebook and Google apps to spread malware to those they're tracking. This nicely complements the FBI's terrifying ability, revealed by *The Washington Post* in 2013, to covertly turn on a computer's camera "without triggering the light that lets users know it is recording."

The NSA has profoundly undermined Internet security, a 2015 Open Technology Institute report noted, "through its weakening of key encryption standards, insertion of surveillance backdoors into widely-used hardware and software products, stockpiling rather than responsibly disclosing information about software security vulnerabilities, and a variety of offensive hacking operations undermining the overall security of the global Internet." It's impossible to put a price tag on the destruction of Americans' privacy. But revelations of the agency's illicit "vacuum cleaners"—

according to Snowden, the NSA filched almost 200 million records from Web accounts in a single month—have ravaged American tech companies.

The Information Technology and Innovation Foundation says American cloud computing businesses could suffer $35 billion in losses between 2014 and 2016, writing that the NSA scandal "will likely have an immediate and lasting impact on the competitiveness of the U.S. cloud computing industry if foreign customers decide the risks of storing data with a U.S. company outweigh the benefits." The tech market research firm Forrester Research estimated that privacy fears could reduce the size of the cloud computing, web hosting, and outsourcing markets by up to 25 percent, totaling nearly $200 billion in lost revenues. And that same Open Technology Institute report noted that "American companies have reported declining sales overseas and lost business opportunities, especially as foreign companies turn claims of products that can protect users from NSA spying into a competitive advantage."

War Spending: $3+ Trillion
The biggest costs in the war on terror come from foreign wars. Between late 2001 and 2014, the U.S. government spent roughly $2.6 trillion in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq—not just for warfare but also for reconstruction, foreign aid, and health care for veterans, according to the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University.

The Pentagon spent an additional roughly $100 billion to thwart terrorism overseas in 2015, according to the National Priorities Project, a nonprofit budget watchdog group. And it will likely spend a similar amount this year.

What's more, most estimates of ongoing spending sharply understate the full cost. Why? Because they fail to account for the debts we owe to service members after their return. Almost half the veterans of the Iraq and Afghan wars—more than 700,000—have already sought compensation for injuries incurred, and that percentage will likely rise in the coming years. The Watson Institute estimates that the wars will require an additional $1 trillion for medical and disability payments, and the administrative burdens that come with them, through 2054.

The Death Toll
There are no budgetary figures to reflect the Americans who have been killed, maimed, or otherwise wounded. "While we know how many U.S. soldiers have died in the wars (over 6,800), what is startling is what we don't know about the levels of injury and illness in those who have returned from the wars," the Watson Institute reported. Additionally, "many deaths and injuries among U.S. contractors have not been reported as required by law." Counting those civilian contractors, the number of Americans killed may be more than twice as high as if you look at fallen military alone.

But the biggest invisible cost is the death and displacement of foreigners. The Watson Institute found that 370,000 people have died due to direct war violence, including armed forces on all sides, contractors, journalists, humanitarian workers, and civilians. This is greater than the number of auto accident fatalities in the U.S. for the past decade. It's also higher than the fatalities in any U.S. war except World War II and the Civil War.

The American media also routinely fails to capture anything approaching the vast human disruption spawned by our overseas conflicts. "The number of Afghan, Iraqi, and Pakistani war refugees and internally displaced persons—7.6 million—is equivalent to all of the people of Massachusetts and Delaware fleeing their homes," the Watson Institute reported.

The Price of Fear
Since 2002, people in the United States have been 100 times more likely to be gunned down by local, state, and federal law enforcement agents than to be killed by Muslim terrorists.

Ohio State's Mueller has been wielding the weapon of cost-benefit analyses for more than a decade in his own personal war on the war on terror. He points out that the feds spend roughly $150 billion annually on terrorism, compared to just $2 billion on the most frequent cause of death in the U.S., heart disease, and $300 million on strokes, the third most common killer. "We spend $500 million for every death from terrorism and only $2,000 for every death resulting from strokes," Mueller laments. "That means we spend 250,000 times more per death on terrorism." Though federal authorities have poured more than $4 trillion into fighting terrorism since 9/11, "these extraordinary expenditures have utterly failed to make people feel safer," he says. The percentage of Americans who expected another major attack was as high or higher in 2014 as it was in 2002, immediately following the worst terrorism incident in American history.

What does the U.S. have to show for its astonishing levels of anti-terror spending? "I firmly believe that those huge budget increases have not significantly contributed to our post-9/11 security," says Michael Sheehan, a former New York City deputy commissioner for counterterrorism. What these activities have been is an unmitigated victory for America's politicians, who take advantage of pervasive fear to engorge their own powers.

Americans are being asked to pay for the privilege of having their rights and liberties shredded by Washington. And with just a few months until the 2016 presidential election, there's little sign they've even noticed.