Government Hype Helps Terrorists

The Department of Homeland Security makes terrorism more effective by exaggerating the threat it poses.

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John Kelly, the secretary of homeland security, seems to be moonlighting as a publicist for ISIS. How else to explain his fearmongering warnings about terrorism on Fox News last Friday?

"I was telling Steve on the way in here," Kelly said, referring to Fox & Friends co-host Steve Doocy, "if he knew what I know about terrorism, he'd never leave the house in the morning." Kelly's remarks, which seemed designed to put a damper on everyone's plans for Memorial Day weekend, complemented the efforts of terrorists, who aim to provoke an emotional response that grossly exaggerates the threat they pose.

"It's everywhere," Kelly said. "It's constant….It can happen almost here anytime." He probably meant it can happen here almost anytime, but you get the idea: The threat of terrorism is so severe and pervasive that it's foolhardy to venture past your front doorstep.

Contrary to Kelly's claims, terrorism is not everywhere, and it is not constant. It is a rare event that is much less likely to kill you than myriad hazards that somehow do not deter us from leaving our homes in the morning.

From 1970 through 2016, according to numbers from the Global Terrorism Database, terrorist attacks killed 3,662 people in the United States. Nearly 3,000 of those deaths, 82 percent of the total, resulted from the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Counting 9/11, the average is 78 deaths a year, which makes the annual risk of dying in a terrorist attack within the United States 1 in 4.2 million for a random American. The lifetime risk, based on a life expectancy of 78.8 years, is roughly 1 in 53,000.

Those risks pale beside many we face every day without being paralyzed by fear. If Steve Doocy is looking for reasons to stay home, he should worry less about a terrorist attack and more about a car crash, which according to the National Safety Council is about 465 times as likely to kill him. The odds that Doocy will be killed by assault with a firearm, drowning, or exposure to excessive natural heat are, respectively, 143, 45, and three times as high as the odds that he will be murdered by a terrorist.

Not that taking Kelly's advice by cowering in his home will necessarily save Doocy. He still might fall down the stairs, a kind of mishap that each year kills nearly 30 times as many Americans as terrorists do.

Some risks are smaller than the chance of dying in a terrorist attack. Based on terrorism deaths since 1970, you are less likely to be killed by lightning, a dog, or stinging insects.

But that is true only if we include the 9/11 attacks, which were highly unusual and are unlikely to be repeated, in the calculations. If we limit the analysis to the years 2002 through 2016, the annual risk of dying in a terrorist attack is about 1 in 25 million, while the lifetime risk is 1 in 317,000. By that measure, lightning is twice as dangerous as terrorists.

Why does Kelly seem determined to make us worry about terrorism far more than is rational? Perhaps because his budget depends on an inordinate fear of terrorism.

In a 2014 Cato Institute policy analysis, John Mueller and Mark Stewart estimated that annual counterterrorism spending by federal, state, and local governments had risen by $75 billion since 9/11. Applying the usual standards for assessing the cost-effectiveness of regulations, they found that the additional spending could be justified only if it saved something like 11,000 lives a year.

That is not remotely plausible, but Kelly is doing his best to convince us otherwise by magnifying the terrorist threat and alluding to secret knowledge of attacks averted. "The good news for us in America," he said on Fox News, "is we have amazing people protecting us every day." He mentioned several agencies, but his own got top billing.