

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Spellbound by Terrorism

By: Paul R. Pillar – April 21, 2013

The seemingly scripted national response [4] to the Boston Marathon bombing continues. Over the past few days that response has included expressions of patriotism and community spirit that have included ovations for law enforcement officers and special observances at baseball games. This is the lemonade-out-of-a-lemon positive side of responding to a lethal event. It is a reaching back to the larger but otherwise similar communal expressions after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, with Americans now attempting to revive and relive the positive side of what they remember from the aftermath of that earlier tragedy.

Defiance is one of the themes of the collective expressions. It was a theme of a rousing speech in which President Obama talked about how the Boston Marathon would be held next year with people running harder than ever and cheering louder than ever. The message is that Americans will not let terrorists disrupt their lives.

But Americans have been letting terrorists, including the latest two, disrupt their lives a lot. Just think about the week-long saturation news coverage of this one story, and of all the work that wasn't getting done and other matters not being tended to across the country as people followed the story. Then late last week was the extraordinary happening of a major American city and several of its suburbs being locked down for a day. This greatly lengthened the tally sheet of the costs and consequences of one terrorist act and, more to the point, the response to it. Possibly the lockdown offset some of the physical toll of the bombing in the form of fatal traffic accidents that did not occur and other violent crime that was not committed because the streets were empty. But the economic cost of shutting down a city-full of businesses, though impossible to calculate with exactitude, was certainly very large.

All of this was done ostensibly for the purpose of tracking down a single, bleeding, 19-year-old fugitive suspect. It was a prudent assumption that this person would have had little compunction about killing again if he could have and thought he needed to kill to stay at large. But there also was little or no reason to believe that at the time he was being chased he posed more of a threat to public safety than the average garden-variety armed robber whom the Boston police probably deal with every week.

One can understand and even sympathize with public officials who order something like the lockdown. Given the enormous public attention to the case, if the suspect had evaded the dragnet there would have been a chorus of recriminations about how this was Tora Bora all over again. But note that we are talking here not about terrorism, or even about fear of terrorism, but instead about the politics of the fear of terrorism.

All of this brings to mind the observations of John Mueller [5], who has written most extensively about how American reactions or overreactions to terrorism have entailed costs that greatly exceed the costs of terrorism itself. Mueller has made many comparisons between terrorism and other sources of death and destruction to make his point about terrorism being an especially overblown threat. It was if the fates wanted to punctuate that point that they also gave us last week an explosion at a Texas fertilizer plant that killed significantly more people than the marathon bombers but received much less attention in the news media.

Americans have inflicted on themselves, especially over the past eleven and a half years, costs from their responses to terrorism that go far beyond all that lost business in Boston. One of the biggest indirect costs came from Americans becoming so fearful and angry that they allowed themselves to be bamboozled into supporting a war against a country that had nothing to do with what had made them fearful and angry. There also have been severe, disgraceful departures from what otherwise would have been thought of as important legal and moral principles associated with the United States, involving especially the treatment and rights of detained persons.

It is as if once anyone utters the T-word, many American minds go haywire and suddenly forget legality, morality and longstanding American values and jurisprudence. And so we have Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Kelly Ayotte and Representative Peter King arguing that the suspect now recovering in a Massachusetts hospital should be handled as an “enemy combatant” rather than face justice in a criminal court. Why? Because of his Chechen ancestry? He is a U.S. citizen accused of committing a crime in the United States. Based on what we know at the moment, there is no more reason to treat the Boston Marathon bomber as an “enemy combatant” than to treat the Boston Strangler that way.

Americans do not have to respond like this; such behavior is not part of our DNA. We faced far more frequently perpetrated terrorism in the United States in the 1970s than we have ever since without responding this way. Perhaps some of the reasons for how the nation acted in the 1970s (including post-Watergate views of certain federal agencies) provided no more of a lasting basis for sound national policy than some of the reasons (including post-9/11 Islamophobia) for the responses we see today. But Americans have a long, long way to go before we can honestly say we are not letting terrorism disrupt our way of life.