

**BREAKING NEWS:** Jan-Feb Issue of The National Interest Out Now

## *New Year Brings Good News on Terrorism: Experts Wrong Again*

THE SKEPTICS

John Mueller | January 3, 2012



This new year may be a bit happier because top foreign-policy experts—the “very people who have run America’s national-security apparatus over the past half century”—have yet again proved to be wrong.

Some 116 of these Very People were [surveyed](#) in 2006 by *Foreign Policy* magazine in a joint project with the [Center for America Progress](#). The magazine [stressed](#) that its survey drew from the “highest echelons of America’s foreign policy establishment” and included the occasional secretary of state and national security adviser, as well as top military commanders, seasoned members of the intelligence community, and academics and journalists of the most “distinguished” nature. Over three-quarters of them had been in government service, 41 percent for over ten years. The musings of this group, it was proposed, could provide “definitive conclusions” about the global war on terror.

The Very People were asked to put forward their considered opinions about how likely it was that “a terrorist attack on the scale of 9/11” would again occur in the United States by the end of 2011—that is, by last Saturday.

Fully 70 percent found it likely and another 9 percent proclaimed it to be certain. Only 21 percent, correctly as we now know, considered it unlikely. It looks like [Dan Gardner](#) might have [some grist](#) for a sequel to his brilliant and lively 2011 book on expert prediction pointedly entitled, *Future Babble*.

The Very People’s 79 percent error rate is especially impressive because, although there had been quite a bit of terrorist activity in Iraq and elsewhere during the four-and-a-half years between 9/11 and when the survey was conducted, none of these attacks even *remotely* approached the destruction of the one on September 11. Nor, for that matter,

had any terrorist attack during the four-and-a-half millennia previous to that date. In addition, although terrorist plots have been rolled up within the United States, none of the plotters threatened to wreak destruction on anything like the scale of 9/11, except perhaps in a few moments of movieland-fantasy musings.

Considered in reasonable historical perspective, then, it was not unreasonable to suggest, even a year or two after the event on the pages of this [magazine and elsewhere](#), that 9/11 might just prove to be an aberration rather than a harbinger. In 2004, Russell Seitz plausibly [proposed](#) that “9/11 could join the Trojan Horse and Pearl Harbor among stratagems so uniquely surprising that their very success precludes their repetition,” that “al-Qaeda’s best shot may have been exactly that” and that, as its forces wane, the shadow the terrorist group casts looks “ever less caliphal and more quixotic.”

But such unconventional, if plausible, interpretations of 9/11 were not only rare, but decidedly, even determinedly, dismissed or simply unconsidered. The vast bulk of the Very People were then—and mostly seem still to be—operating under the sway of the 9/11 attack, a dramatic and horrible event that created the impression (or delusion) that such events would now become the norm.

As Jane Mayer notes in her book *The Dark Side*, in the wake of 9/11, “the only certainty shared by virtually the entire intelligence community” was that “a second wave of even more devastating terrorist attacks on America was imminent.” Concern was certainly justified, but certainty about an imminent repetition constitutes a massive extrapolation that is at best preposterous and at worst scary—particularly if it was so universally and uncritically embraced by the Very People who in the meantime are running our “security apparatus.”

Many more terrorism experts have been equally swayed and equally wrong. In late 2003, David Rothkopf [conveyed](#) the views of “more than 200 senior business and government executives, many of whom are specialists in security and terrorism related issues.” They were, he assured us, “serious people, not prone to hysteria or panic—military officers, policymakers, scientists, researchers and others who have studied such issues for a long time.”

Almost three-quarters of this group found it “likely the United States would see a major terrorist strike before the end of 2004,” and a “similar number predicted that the assault would be greater than those of 9/11 and might well involve weapons of mass destruction.”

After nothing happened in that election year, reporter Siobhan Gorman [interviewed](#) various terrorism experts about the non-phenomenon. Some of them had quickly retooled by that time and assured her that “the months after the election may turn out to be more threatening than the months that preceded it.” Osama bin Laden would “be marshalling his resources to make good on his promise that Americans will not be able to avoid a new 9/11,” noted terrorism specialist Bruce Hoffman. “It’ll be a race against time.”

One of the problems with expert prediction, as Gardner notes, is that it is always safe to predict disaster because if it happens, you look like a seer, and if it doesn't, nobody remembers. As Michael Sheehan, New York City's former deputy director for counterterrorism, [puts it forcefully](#), "No terrorism expert or government leader wants to appear soft on terrorism. It's always safer to predict the worst; if nothing happens, the exaggerators are rarely held accountable for their nightmare scenarios."

This, it seems to me, is not the way things should be. Experts, particularly if they are the "very people who have run America's national-security apparatus over the past half century," should be held accountable for their predictions, so often flawed, flip, foolish or fatuous. There may be some rather unpleasant lessons in such an exercise as we look forward to the next half.

*Mueller is in the process of putting together a web site with predictions about terrorism from the last decade (and counting) on the issue. A very preliminary version is posted [here](#). If you have suggestions for additions, let him know at [bbbb@osu.edu](mailto:bbbb@osu.edu).*