

DAILY NEWS

Trump's terrorism fearmongering vs. the facts

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When President Trump rails against the news media and decries reports as “fake news,” he is beating a dead horse. American trust in the news media is already at a historic low point, with a September 2016 Gallup poll finding that just 32% of the public (and just 14% of Republicans) have a “fair amount” or a “great deal” of trust in the mass media.

What’s more disturbing is how loose with the facts Trump has been when it comes to talking about terrorism. In recent weeks, as his immigration, refugee, and travel ban foundered in the courts, Trump turned to Twitter to proclaim that “THE SECURITY OF OUR NATION IS AT STAKE!” Speaking at a law enforcement conference, he stated that terrorism is “a far greater threat than people in our country understand. Believe me.”

Trump’s claims, however, are unsubstantiated, strongly refuted by the data, and even contradicted by his own administration.

The Department of Homeland Security, for instance, presents a far less ominous assessment. The most recent advisory, published three months ago, says their “basic assessment of the global threat environment has not changed” since a bulletin published nearly a year prior in December 2015. None of the bulletins on their website, active or expired, mention any the seven countries in Trump’s proposed ban.

Additionally, that the Department of Homeland Security has not published any “alerts” for more than a year also points to a much lower terror threat than the one communicated by Trump.

The department’s National Terrorism Advisory System consists of bulletins (the lowest level), elevated alerts and imminent alerts. Driven by assessments from the U.S. intelligence community, DHS has issued no alerts in at least the past 14 months, indicating there is neither a “credible” terror threat against the U.S., nor a more concerning “credible, specific and impending” threat. Instead, the department issues bulletins that describe “current developments or general trends regarding threats of terrorism.”

For the past 20 years, terrorist attacks — 9/11 included — have accounted for less than 1% of all murders in the United States. According to a recent study by the Cato Institute, the chances of an

American being killed in a terrorist attack between 1975 and 2015, including 9/11, was just 1 in 3.6 million per year.

The chances over the same period of an American being killed by a terrorist attack carried out by an immigrant — the threat most recently the focus of Trump's proposed ban — was a vanishing 1 in 3.64 billion per year. However, the chance that an American will be killed by a fellow citizen is a more concerning 1 in 14,219 per year, and statistics indicate that more than half of all murder victims knew their killer.

Though Islamist-inspired terrorists pose an ongoing threat, they simply do not lurk behind every corner and, in fact, homeland security efforts have been quite successful in mitigating that threat. The substantially reduced frequency of terror attacks when compared to the historic average testifies to the capabilities of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

More pointedly, there appears to be little connection between the nations identified in Trump's travel ban and the actual threat of terrorism they pose. Migrants from those countries have killed exactly zero Americans on U.S. soil (though there have been a few foiled attempts). Nor does the Department of Homeland Security website indicate that citizens of those countries pose a threat, and history supports their absence from the threat advisories.

None of the attackers responsible for the 10 worst terror attacks in U.S. history came from any of those seven countries. The 19 terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks were from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Lebanon. Of the nine remaining attackers, almost all were U.S. born citizens, except for one of the San Bernardino shooters, who came from Pakistan.

Unfortunately Trump's rhetoric will have real consequences, with the potential to fuel terrorist recruiting efforts abroad and to incite hate crimes here at home.

Even before Trump took office, polls indicated over half of all Americans were already somewhat or very worried that they or their families would become victims of terrorism. Terrorism and immigration are too important for policy to be based on emotion and fake news. But with Trump so busy peddling fear, Americans face a choice: They can either buy into Trump's false narratives — seeing religions, ethnicities and races as existential threats — or they can go where the facts take them and demand policies grounded in reality.

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