Ridge: Terror threats changing

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Get used to it. The threat of terrorism isn't going away, warned former Gov. Tom Ridge – reflecting on the 15th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks.

"I'm bullish on our ability to deal with these risks," said Ridge, who was governor when terrorists linked to al-Qaida hijacked four commercial flights and steered them toward targets in New York City and Washington, D.C.

"Are we safer? Sure we are," he said in comments to reporters Thursday. But safer doesn't mean the United States will ever rid itself of the threat of new attacks, he said.

"It's impossible to prevent all lone-wolf attacks," he said.

The reminder comes from a voice of experience. Ridge personally saw the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks at the Flight 93 crash site in Shanksville.

Less than two years later, he became the country's first secretary of Homeland Security under President George W. Bush. He held the post until 2005.

Ridge, 71, is now chairman of Ridge Global, a cyber-security firm based in Washington, D.C.

Fifteen years ago, Ridge was in his hometown of Erie, visiting his mom, as the terrorist attacks unfolded. Because flights were grounded, it took him hours to get permission to fly back to Harrisburg.

Later in the day, he took another flight, this time aboard a military helicopter, to visit the Shanksville site.

There he found a massive, "smoldering hole," he said, surrounded by first-responders who'd arrived to discover there was little they could do. The firefighters and others remained for hours, anyway, watching the site in "sympathy, wonder and anger," he said.

First-responders were soon followed by media crews.

"It seemed like the whole world was in Shanksville," he said.

In a conference call last week, Ridge said Sept. 11 has "left a permanent scar" on the country.

"It healed, but the scar remains," he said.

Threats to the United States have evolved since 2,902 people were killed in the attacks that collapsed the World Trade Center towers in New York City; smashed a hole in the Pentagon; and ended in a field in Shanksville, he said.

But the threat is real.

Strategic operations of Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda have given way to ISIS, a terrorist group that "takes anyone that walks in the door," he said.

The Islamic State has embraced social media to recruit sympathizers and inspire lone-wolf terrorists, creating daunting challenges for national security officials.

The country also faces an increasingly complex job of confronting the cyber threats, and the possibility that a terrorist may disrupt critical infrastructure without getting anywhere near it.

Ridge said the nature of terrorism and shock value of attacks shouldn't lead to outsized reactions. Attacks on the United States, he added, should be taken with context.

Between Sept. 11, 2001, and the end of 2015, 97 Americans were killed in terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, according to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland.

That includes the workplace shooting in San Bernardino, California, in December 2015, when 14 people were killed, and the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013 that killed three and wounded 264.

In June, a shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, claimed another 49 lives.

In the meantime, more than 35,000 Americans are killed in car crashes every year. Ridge said more people likely will die in auto accidents over the Labor Day weekend than have been killed in terrorist attacks in America since 9/11.

Trevor Thrall, senior fellow in the Cato Institute's Defense and Foreign Policy Department, said Ridge is spot-on about both the difficulty of preventing lone-wolf attacks and holding fears of terrorism in context.

Terrorist attacks are becoming more common overseas but are still "remarkably rare" in the United States, he said.

While terrorist groups may take credit for lone-wolf strikes, their links with attackers within the United States may be tenuous, he said. A killer here may cite connections to terrorists, he added, simply to justify a crime.

Thrall said any free society gives terrorists opportunities to exploit. "That's just a fact," he said.

He suggested the United States make itself less of a target by dialing back its military involvement overseas.

"If we keep trying to use military means to play whack-a-mole" with terrorist groups, he said, "we're just contributing to the anger."