

Dick Meyer: Is the terrorism threat exaggerated?

Dick Meyer
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Unless we snap out of it soon, the legacy of 9/11 in America will be a chronic, irrational fear of terrorism that will continue to sanction wasteful spending, tragically futile military adventures and growing compromises of our civil liberties and international principles.

Fourteen years after 9/11, America's terrorism policy resembles a history museum crammed with dusty old assumptions, antiquated objectives, unexamined ledgers all shrouded in a cloak of secrecy and imminent, invisible danger that vanquishes skeptical inquisition.

As taxpayers, we are being scammed. As citizens, our constitutional values are being compromised. As human beings, we are being needlessly frightened.

One might say this shows the terrorists have won. They haven't. It's that our common sense has surrendered.

We're not much bothered, though. We are too paranoid to seriously question the basics of counterterrorism policy. The fundamental assumptions of the War on Terror have gone unexamined for a decade and a half.

The core premise is this: Global terrorism is the most serious, dangerous threat to the United States and its citizens.

It is heresy to challenge that orthodoxy.

But by any objective measure, it isn't true.

Just ask John Mueller. A political scientist at Ohio State University and a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, Mueller is the opposite of Chicken Little in the counterterrorism world; he is the guy who year after year points out that the sky is not falling.

The threat of terror, he told me, "is massively exaggerated in both the public and official mind."

The facts are indisputable. The risk of death by terrorist act is infinitesimal. The risk, in the lexicon of statistics, is trivial. We are spending billions hoping to marginally reduce the risk of a real but very remote danger.

No politician or official will say this out loud. They are desperate to avoid blame if something, some day, somewhere goes wrong.

Nothing big has gone wrong since 9/11, of course. It could, of course. And the sun could explode, or a giant asteroid could send us back to the ice age or China could invade California.

After 9/11, we were told and told again that the world changed forever. It hasn't.

In 2004, Vice President Dick Cheney said, "I think 9/11 will turn out to be not nearly as bad as the next mass casualty on the United States which I think if and when it comes will be far more deadly." He still repeats that in most every interview. He is the ultimate Chicken Little and his fear-mongering predictions have yet to materialize.

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism based at the University of Maryland is an authoritative source of data on terror.

Since 1970, 3,305 American citizens have been killed by terrorism in the U.S. If you eliminate the 9/11 fatalities, the figure drops to 397.

Since 9/11, the odds of being killed by terrorism are 1 in 110,000,000.

Consider: In 2010, 32,999 people died in car accidents; 3,841 from drowning; 38,369 from suicide; 2,791 from malnutrition; 29 from lightning.

There were four fatalities from acts of terror.

How much do we spend to prevent these rare fatalities?

Estimates hover around \$16 billion annually on domestic counterterrorism. Mueller says when intelligence operations and state and local programs are included, it's closer to \$75 billion, not including foreign wars.

The risk-reward ratio is out of whack. Yes, terrorism is a unique type of threat; it is an evil. Of course, we have to reduce the threat $i\frac{1}{2}$ but rationally.

Yet we act as if a death by terrorism is the moral equivalent of thousands of deaths from malnutrition, car wrecks or firearms. Counterterrorism programs are exempt from risk assessment and cost-benefit analysis applied to national security and public safety spending.

Mueller is particularly galled by the conventional wisdom that terrorism is an "existential threat" to the U.S. - a plausible threat to the survival of the U.S., its power and population. The Civil War was an existential threat. Soviet nukes were, too. The Axis powers may have been. The Islamic State and al-Qaida are not.

President Obama said this, though not until this year. "This phenomenon of violent extremism, the ideology, the networks, the capacity to recruit young people, this has metastasized and it is widespread and it has penetrated communities around the world," he said in January. But "I do not consider it an existential threat."

This obvious truth didn't resonate.

The post-9/11 doomsdays never dawned. But the Terror Hawks hype ever-new existential threats: The Islamic State is an imminent threat to the homeland, Iran is teetering on nuking the non-Muslim planet, and wily hackers can paralyze America with a few strokes. And we can't even tell you about the disasters we secretly thwarted.

Proof and perspective are scarce. Collective phobia is immune to evidence. Fear trumps facts, especially when the people in charge warn about phantom enemies and exaggerate the strength of the real ones.

Mueller's new book is called "Chasing Ghosts." It's a fitting title. But 14 years after 9/11, we shouldn't be scared by ghost stories.