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Alan Bock: Terrorizing ourselves with overreactions

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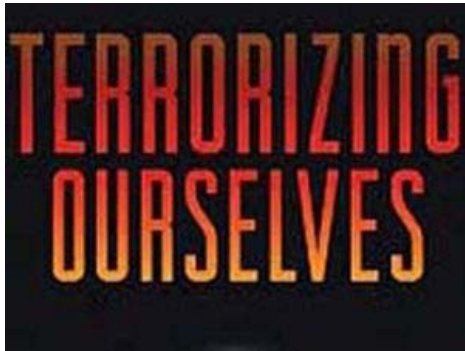
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Although the United States has not suffered another major terrorist attack since 9/11, the energy of worldwide Islamist terrorism – some directed by al-Qaida, much probably not – has hardly dissipated. Al-Qaida spokesmen, including Osama bin Laden, continue to issue statements and calls to action, and London, Madrid, Bali and other places have suffered major attacks. Terrorism is a daily reality in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan where the U.S. has committed military forces. Airline passengers and other travelers are subjected to daily indignities.

Obviously, the U.S. has not figured out how to cope effectively with today's brand of terrorism.

The main reason, as this book – composed of contributions from a wide array of experts in counterterrorism – argues in great detail, is that government policies have imposed greater costs on our society than the terrorist attacks themselves. "Overreaction does the work of terrorism. Ignorance of this cardinal fact is why U.S. counterterrorism policy is failing."

The book begins with a couple of chapters on the goals of today's terrorists and the kinds of people who are drawn into terrorist activities. Terrorism is the tactic of the weak, of those who oppose a given state or culture but know they do not have the power to face it openly on the field of battle or even in a guerrilla insurrection. So they strive to turn the power of the state against itself. There is evidence, for example, that bin Laden thought the 9/11 attacks would cripple the U.S. economy and bring down the government. An argument can be made – is made tentatively in this book – that an inordinate focus on terrorism in the wake of 9/11 contributed to the financial crisis that crippled us beginning in 2008, but so far our economy at least has proven more resilient might have been expected.

The same cannot be said for our institutions of justice and our respect for individual rights. The Patriot Act was passed in a flurry of panic, and the privacy of every American was compromised, with little or no impact on terrorist activities. It was recently renewed with little notice by a Congress peopled with politicians who had previously criticized it but found it acceptable now that a man with a D after his name occupies the Oval Office. Americans have become accustomed to removing their shoes

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and not putting shampoo in their carry-on bags and waiting in long lines to travel. Many Americans justify torture and indefinite detention without trial of people simply accused of cooperation with terrorists.

Several chapters dissect the threat posed by bioterrorism and find it minuscule, yet the government has spent $64 billion on it since 9/11, which has probably made us less rather than more safe. John Mueller of Ohio State goes through all the technological steps required to make and/or steal atomic weapons and concludes that only a state is likely to have the necessary resources.

Perhaps the most useful chapter is "Don't You Know There's a War on?" by former CIA veteran and Georgetown professor Paul Pillar and Cato analyst Chris Preble. It argues that terrorism is *sui generis*, and the American habit of treating it as an either/or proposition, "either as warfare or as a criminal justice problem," is singularly unhelpful. Military action can be useful at times, but the Bush administration's devotion to the "global war on terror" metaphor has not only wasted resources and lives but has probably assisted terrorist recruiting efforts.

Terrorist acts inspire genuine fear in the primitive sectors of our brains, as two chapters perceptively explain, and various actors – politicians, bureaucratic empire-builders, much of the media – have incentives to stoke further fear. Because of this, it may be unlikely that we will ever approach terrorism through a sensible cost/benefit lens, but this book provides plenty of tools to do so.

The U.S. suffered 2,978 deaths to terrorism in 2001, almost all on 9/11. That same year about 15,000 people were murdered, 44,000 died in auto accidents and 156,000 died from lung cancer. Since then 200-300 people were killed by terrorists worldwide each year. Terrorism is uniquely frightening, but it is not the biggest risk we face. Protecting chemical and nuclear plants, key infrastructure nodes, major ports, and symbolic targets, along with more effective intelligence, are appropriate, but much of what we have done has been ineffective and even counterproductive.

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skippingdog wrote:

Alan -

Excellent analysis and comments. We have done more harm to our republic with our response to 9-11 and "terrorists" than they have with their attacks. If the purpose of political terrorism is to make people fearful enough to curtail their own freedoms, the OBL and his coherts have been stunningly successful.

It's going to take a long time to walk this back to an appropriate place, and arguments suggesting that we reduce our reliance on the law or remove protections because of religious faith undermine our system of government more than any terrorist could ever hope to do.

3/18/2010 10:22 AM PDT

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