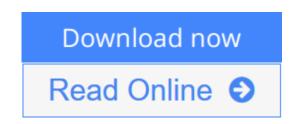# Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them

By John Mueller

Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them By John Mueller

Why have there been no terrorist attacks in the United States since 9/11? It is ridiculously easy for a single person with a bomb-filled backpack, or a single explosives-laden automobile, to launch an attack. So why hasn't it happened? The answer is surely not the Department of Homeland Security, which cannot stop terrorists from entering the country, legally or otherwise. It is surely not the Iraq war, which has stoked the hatred of Muslim extremists around the world and wasted many thousands of lives. Terrorist attacks have been regular events for many years -- usually killing handfuls of people, occasionally more than that.

Is it possible that there is a simple explanation for the peaceful American homefront? Is it possible that there are no al-Qaeda terrorists here? Is it possible that the war on terror has been a radical overreaction to a rare event? Consider: 80,000 Arab and Muslim immigrants have been subjected to fingerprinting and registration, and more than 5,000 foreign nationals have been imprisoned -- yet there has not been a single conviction for a terrorist crime in America. A handful of plots -- some deadly, some intercepted -- have plagued Europe and elsewhere, and even so, the death toll has been modest.

We have gone to war in two countries and killed tens of thousands of people. We have launched a massive domestic wiretapping program and created vast databases of information once considered private. Politicians and pundits have berated us about national security and patriotic duty, while encroaching our freedoms and sending thousands of young men off to die.

It is time to consider the hypothesis that dare not speak its name: we have wildly overreacted. Terrorism has been used by murderous groups for many decades, yet even including 9/11, the odds of an American being killed by international terrorism are microscopic. In general, international terrorism doesn't do much damage when considered in almost any reasonable context.

The capacity of al-Qaeda or of any similar group to do damage in the United States pales in comparison to the capacity other dedicated enemies, particularly

international Communism, have possessed in the past. Lashing out at the terrorist threat is frequently an exercise in self-flagellation because it is usually more expensive than the terrorist attack itself and because it gives the terrorists exactly what they are looking for. Much, probably most, of the money and effort expended on counterterrorism since 2001 (and before, for that matter) has been wasted.

The terrorism industry and its allies in the White House and Congress have preyed on our fears and caused enormous damage. It is time to rethink the entire enterprise and spend much smaller amounts on only those things that do matter: intelligence, law enforcement, and disruption of radical groups overseas. Above all, it is time to stop playing into the terrorists' hands, by fear-mongering and helping spread terror itself.

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Editorial Review

From **Booklist**
Among possible U.S. terrorist targets listed by the Department of Homeland Security are a petting zoo in Alabama and a roadside water park in Florida. By listing such unlikely targets, the administration has heightened fear and the cost of protecting citizens, according to Mueller, a political science professor and national security consultant. He examines how terrorism hypervigilance is threatening civil liberties, the economy, and lives. Mueller explores three themes: terrorist threats are overblown; we can learn from the lessons of previous international threats that they are often exaggerated; and by applying these lessons, we can create policy that reduces fear and the cost of overreaction. Among other observations, Mueller notes that despite fears of chemical attacks, most such weapons are "incapable of perpetrating mass destruction," and our counterterrorism tactics tend to be expensive "self-flagellation" that bolsters the image of the terrorists. If the objective is to keep Americans frightened and willing to spend money and relinquish freedom, then the terrorists are winning, Mueller maintains. Interesting reading on a subject that will continue to hold great political sway. *Vanessa Bush*

About the Author
John Mueller holds the Woody Hayes Chair of National Security Studies, Mershon Center, and is professor of Political Science at Ohio State University, where he teaches courses in international relations.

He is the author of several classic works of political science and many editorial page columns and articles in *The Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, The New Republic, Reason, The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*.

Mueller is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, has been a John Simon Guggenheim Fellow, and has received grants from the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He has also received several teaching prizes.

Introduction

Overblown

Upon discovering that Weeki Wachee Springs, his Florida roadside water park, had been included on the Department of Homeland Security's list of over 80,000 potential terrorist targets, its marketing and promotion manager, John Athanason, turned reflective. "I can't imagine bin Laden trying to blow up the mermaids," he mused, "but with terrorists, who knows what they're thinking. I don't want to think like a terrorist, but what if the terrorists try to poison the water at Weeki Wachee Springs?"

Whatever his imaginings, however, he went on to report that his enterprise had quickly and creatively risen to the occasion -- or seized the opportunity. They were working to get a chunk of the counterterrorism funds allocated to the region by the well-endowed, anxiety-provoking, ever-watchful Department of Homeland Security.

Which is the greater threat: terrorism, or our reaction against it? The Weeki Wachee experience illustrates

the problem. A threat that is real but likely to prove to be of limited scope has been massively, perhaps even fancifully, inflated to produce widespread and unjustified anxiety. This process has then led to wasteful, even self-parodic expenditures and policy overreactions, ones that not only very often do more harm and cost more money than anything the terrorists have accomplished, but play into their hands.

The way terrorism anxiety has come to envelop the nation is also illustrated by a casual exchange on television's *60 Minutes*. In an interview, filmmaker-provocateur Michael Moore happened to remark, "The chances of any of us dying in a terrorist incident is very, very, very small," and his interviewer, Bob Simon, promptly admonished, "But no one sees the world like that." Remarkably, both statements are true -- the first only a bit more so than the second. It is the thesis of this book that our reaction against terrorism has caused more harm than the threat warrants -- not just to civil liberties, not just to the economy, but even to human lives. And our reaction has often helped the terrorists more than it has hurt them. It is the reactive consequences stemming from Simon's perspective -- or from what journalist Mark Bowden has characterized as "housewives in Iowa . . . watching TV afraid that al-Qaeda's going to charge in their front door" -- that generate one of the chief problems presented by terrorism.

International terrorism generally kills a few hundred people a year worldwide -- not much more, usually, than the number who drown yearly in bathtubs in the United States. Americans worry intensely about "another 9/11," but if one of these were to occur every three months for the next five years, the chance of being killed in one of them is 0.02 percent. Astronomer Alan Harris has calculated that at present rates, the lifetime probability that a resident of the globe will die at the hands of international terrorists is 1 in 80,000, about the same likelihood that one would die over the same interval from the impact on the earth of an especially ill-directed asteroid or comet.

But such numbers are almost never discussed: Moore's outburst is exceedingly rare. Instead, most Americans seem to have developed a false sense of insecurity about terrorism. Thus, since 9/11, over a period in which there have been no international terror attacks whatever in the United States and in which an individual's chances of being killed by a terrorist have remained microscopic even if one -- or many -- did occur, nearly half of the population has continually expressed worry that they or a member of their family will become a victim of terrorism, as Figure 1 shows. Moreover, when asked if they consider another terrorist attack likely in the United States within the next several months, fewer than 10 percent of Americans usually respond with what has proven to be the correct answer: "Not at all likely." Yet, this group has not notably increased in size despite continual confirmation of its prescience.

That the costs of terrorism chiefly arise from fear and from overwrought responses holds even for the tragic events of September 11, 2001, which constituted by far the most destructive set of terrorist acts in history and resulted in the deaths of nearly 3,000 people. The economic costs of reaction have been much higher than those inflicted by the terrorists even in that record-shattering episode, and considerably more than 3,000 Americans have died since 9/11 because, out of fear, they drove in cars rather than flew in airplanes, or because they were swept into wars made politically possible by the terrorist events.

Moreover, as terrorist kingpin and devil du jour Osama bin Laden has gleefully noted, fear, alarmism, and overreaction suit the terrorists' agenda just fine because they create the damaging consequences the terrorists seek but are unable to perpetrate on their own. As he put it mockingly in a videotaped message in 2004, it is "easy for us to provoke and bait. . . . All that we have to do is to send two mujahidin . . . to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al-Qaeda in order to make the generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic, and political losses." His policy, he extravagantly believes, is one of "bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy," and it is one that depends on overreaction by the target: he triumphally points to the fact that the 9/11 terrorist attacks cost al-Qaeda $500,000, while the attack and its aftermath inflicted, he claims, a cost of more than $500 billion on the United States. Shortly after 9/11, he crowed, "America is full

of fear from its north to its south, from its west ot its east. Thank God for that."

PRESENTING AN UNCONVENTIONAL CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

In exploring these issues, this book develops three themes, in this order: (1) terrorism's threat, while real, has been much overblown, something that aids terrorist aims; (2) this process is a familiar one since, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that many international threats have been considerably inflated in the past; and (3) applying these lessons, policy toward terrorism should very substantially focus on reducing the damaging fears and overreactions terrorism so routinely fosters.

In the process, I present a considerable number of propositions that, it seems to me, should be -- but decidedly aren't -- the conventional wisdom on this subject. These propositions are certainly susceptible to debate and to reasoned criticism, but it seems to me that they, rather than their hysterical if attention-grabbing opposites, ought to be the base from which the discussion proceeds. At the very least, they should be part of the policy discussion mix, but they seem almost entirely to have been ignored.

Among these propositions are the following:

- In general, terrorism, particularly international terrorism, doesn't do much damage when considered in almost any reasonable context.
- Although airplanes can still be blown up, another attack like the one on 9/11 is virtually impossible. In 2001 the hijackers had the element of surprise working for them: previous hijackings (including one conducted by Muslim terrorists six months earlier) had mostly been fairly harmless as the perpetrators generally landed the planes somewhere and released, or were forced to release, the passengers. After the 9/11 experience, passengers and crew will fight to prevent a takeover, as was shown on the fourth plane on 9/11.
- The likelihood that any individual American will be killed in a terrorist event is microscopic.
- Just about any damage terrorists are likely to be able to perpetrate can be readily absorbed. To deem the threat an "existential" one is somewhere between extravagant and absurd.
- The capacity of al-Qaeda or of any similar group to do damage in the United States pales in comparison to the capacity other dedicated enemies, particularly international communism, have possessed in the past.
- Lashing out at the terrorist threat is frequently an exercise in self-flagellation because it is usually more expensive than the terrorist attack itself and because it gives the terrorists exactly what they are looking for.
- Chemical and radiological weapons, and most biological ones as well, are incapable of perpetrating mass destruction.
- The likelihood that a terrorist group will be able to master nuclear weapons any time soon is extremely, perhaps vanishingly, small.
- Although murderous and dedicated, al-Qaeda is a very small and very extreme group, and it is unlikely by itself to have the capacity for taking over any significant government.
- Al-Qaeda's terrorist efforts on 9/11 and in the years since have been substantially counterproductive.
- Although additional terrorist attacks in the United States certainly remain possible, an entirely plausible explanation for the fact that there have been none since 2001 is that there is no significant international terrorist presence within the country.
- Policies that continually, or even occasionally, focus entirely on worst-case scenarios (or worst-case fantasies) are unwise and can be exceedingly wasteful.
- In fact, much, probably most of the money and effort expended on counterterrorism since 2001 (and before, for that matter) has been wasted.
- Seeking to protect all potential targets against terrorist attack is impossible and foolish. In fact, just about anything is a potential target.

- Terrorism should be treated essentially as a criminal problem calling mainly for the application of policing methods, particularly in the international sphere, not military ones.
- Because terrorism probably presents only a rather limited threat, a viable policy approach might center around creating the potential to absorb its direct effects and to mitigate its longer range consequences while continuing to support international policing efforts...

Users Review

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