The Terrorism Delusion

America's Overwrought Response to September 11

John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart

On November 22, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald, a deluded little man with grandiose visions of his own importance, managed, largely because of luck, to assassinate President John F. Kennedy. Since then, many people have contended that such a monumental event could not have been accomplished by such a trivial person. Some of these disbelievers have undertaken elaborate efforts to uncover a bigger conspiracy behind the deed.

On September 11, 2001, a tiny group of deluded men—members of al-Qaida, a fringe group of a fringe group with grandiose visions of its own importance—managed, again largely because of luck, to pull off a risky, if clever and carefully planned, terrorist act that became by far the most destructive in history. As with the assassination of President Kennedy, there has been great reluctance to maintain that such a monumental event—however counterproductive to al-Qaida's purpose—could have been carried out by a fundamentally trivial group, and there has been a consequent tendency to inflate al-Qaida's importance and effectiveness. At the extreme, the remnants of this tiny group have even been held to present an "existential" threat to the very survival of the United States.[1]

In the wake of September 11, recalls Rudy Giuliani, mayor of New York at the time of the attacks, "[a]nybody, any one of these security experts, including myself, would have told you on September 11, 2001, we're looking at dozens

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1. For example, Bruce Riedel, an adviser in Barack Obama's administration, held the al-Qaida threat to the country to be "existential" in 2009. Riedel, interview by Margaret Warner, *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer,* October 16, 2009. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff had previously pushed the discussion to a new level when he designated the threat from terrorism to be "a significant existential" one. Quoted in Shane Harris and Stuart Taylor Jr., "Homeland Security Chief Looks Back, and Forward," *govexec.com,* March 17, 2008, http://www.govexec.com/defense/2008/03/homeland-security-chief-looks-back-and-forward/26507. For the "survival" concern, see, in particular, Michael Scheuer, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror* (Dulles, Va.: Brassey's, 2004), pp. 160, 177, 226, 241, 242, 250, 252, 263. On this issue, see also Glenn L. Carle, *The Interrogator: An Education* (New York: Nation Books, 2011), p. 293; and John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "Hardly Existential: Thinking Rationally about Terrorism," *foreignaffairs.com,* April 2, 2010, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66186/john-mueller-and-mark-g-stewart/hardly-existential/.

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and dozens and multiyears of attacks like this." Journalist Jane Mayer observes that "the only certainty shared by virtually the entire American intelligence community" in the months after September 11 "was that a second wave of even more devastating terrorist attacks on America was imminent."[2] Under the prevailing circumstances, this sort of alarm was understandable, but it does not excuse the experts from dismissing an alternative hypothesis—that the attacks that occurred on that day were an aberration.[3]

Finally, on May 1, 2012, nearly ten years after the September 2001 terrorist attacks, the most costly and determined manhunt in history culminated in Pakistan when a team of U.S. Navy Seals killed Osama bin Laden, a chief author of the attacks and one of history's most storied and cartooned villains. Taken away with bin Laden's bullet-shattered body were written documents and masses of information stored on five computers, ten hard drives, and one hundred or more thumb drives, DVDs, and CD-ROMs. This, it was promised, represented a "treasure trove" of information about al-Qaida—"the mother lode," said one U.S. official eagerly—that might contain plans for pending attacks.[4] Poring through the material with great dispatch, however, a task force soon discovered that al-Qaida's members were primarily occupied with dodging drone missile attacks, complaining about the lack of funds, and watching a lot of pornography.[5]

Although bin Laden has been exposed mostly as a thing of smoke and mirrors, and although there has been no terrorist destruction that remotely rivals that inflicted on September 11, the terrorism/counterterrorism saga persists determinedly, doggedly, and anticlimactically onward, and the initial alarmed perspective has been internalized. In the process, suggests Glenn Carle, a twenty-three-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency where he was deputy national intelligence officer for transnational threats, Americans have become "victims of delusion," displaying a quality defined as "a persistent false belief in the face of strong contradictory evidence."[6] This condition shows

2. Miles O'Brien and Carol Costello, interview with New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, "Giuliani: 'Have to Be Relentlessly Prepared,'" CNN, July 22, 2005; and Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story on How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p. 3.
3. On this issue, see John Mueller, "Harbinger or Aberration? A 9/11 Provocation," *National Interest,* Fall 2002, pp. 45–50.
4. Alison Gendar and Helen Kennedy, "U.S. Commandos Find 'Mother Lode' of Material on Al Qaeda inside Osama Bin Laden's Compound," *New York Daily News,* May 4, 2011.
5. Greg Miller, "Bin Laden Documents Reveal Strain, Struggle in al-Qaida," *Washington Post,* July 1, 2011; and Scott Shane, "Pornography Is Found in bin Laden Compound Files, U.S. Officials Say," *New York Times,* May 13, 2011. See also David Ignatius, "The bin Laden Plot to Kill President Obama," *Washington Post,* March 16, 2012.
6. Carle, *The Interrogator,* pp. 269, 293, 298–299.

no sign of abating as trillions of dollars have been expended and tens of thousands of lives have been snuffed out in distant wars in a frantic, ill-conceived effort to react to an event that, however tragic and dramatic in the first instance, should have been seen, at least after a few years had passed, to be of limited significance.

This article is a set of ruminations on the post–September 11 years of delusion. It reflects, first, on the exaggerations of the threat presented by terrorism and then on the distortions of perspective these exaggerations have inspired—distortions that have in turn inspired a determined and expensive quest to ferret out, and even to create, the nearly nonexistent. It also supplies a quantitative assessment of the costs of the terrorism delusion and concludes with a discussion of how anxieties about terrorism persist despite exceedingly limited evidence that much fear is justified.

Delusions about the Terrorist "Adversary"

People such as Giuliani and a whole raft of "security experts" have massively exaggerated the capacities and the dangers presented by what they have often called "the universal adversary" both in its domestic and in its international form.

THE DOMESTIC ADVERSARY

To assess the danger presented by terrorists seeking to attack the United States, we examined the fifty cases of Islamist extremist terrorism that have come to light since the September 11 attacks, whether based in the United States or abroad, in which the United States was, or apparently was, targeted. These cases make up (or generate) the chief terrorism fear for Americans. Table 1 presents a capsule summary of each case, and the case numbers given throughout this article refer to this table and to the free web book from which it derives.[7]

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a lengthy report on protecting the homeland. Key to achieving such an objective should be a careful assessment of the character, capacities, and desires of potential terrorists targeting that homeland. Although the report contains a section dealing with what its authors call "the nature of the terrorist adversary," the section devotes only two sentences to assessing that nature: "The number and high profile of international and domestic terrorist attacks and disrupted plots dur-

7. John Mueller, ed., *Terrorism since 9/11: The American Cases* (Columbus: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2012), http://polisci.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/since.html.

Table 1. The American Cases (by number, title, *type,* year of arrest, and description)

This table contains cases of Islamist extremist terrorism that have come to light since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, whether based in the United States or abroad, in which the United States was, or apparently was, targeted.

1 The shoe bomber *4* 2001 British man tries to blow up a U.S.-bound airliner with explosives in his shoes but is subdued by passengers and crew

2 Padilla *1* 2002 American connected to al-Qaida who had discussed a dirty bomb attack returns to the United States and is arrested

3 Mount Rushmore *3* 2002 Crucially aided by an informant, two men in Florida, one of them possibly connected to an al-Qaida operative, plot to bomb local targets as well as Mount Rushmore before September 11, and are arrested and tried the next year

4 El Al at LAX *4* 2002 His business and marriage failing dismally, a depressed anti-Israel Egyptian national shoots and kills two at the El Al ticket counter at Los Angeles airport before being killed himself in an act later considered to be one of terrorism

5 Lackawanna *1* 2002 Seven Americans in Lackawanna, New York, are induced to travel to an al-Qaida training camp, but six return disillusioned—all before the terrorist attacks of September 11—and are arrested the next year

6 Paracha *2* 2003 A young Pakistani seeks to help an al-Qaida operative enter the country to attack underground storage tanks and gas stations

7 Ali *2* 2003 A U.S. citizen joins a terrorist cell in Saudi Arabia and plots to hijack a plane in the United States and to assassinate President George W. Bush when he is arrested by the Saudis and extradited to the United States for trial

8 Columbus and the Brooklyn Bridge *2* 2003 American connected to al-Qaida discusses shooting up a shopping mall in Columbus, Ohio, with two friends, then scouts taking down the Brooklyn Bridge for al-Qaida but decides it is too difficult

9 Barot and the financial buildings *2* 2004 Group in London tied to al-Qaida scouts out financial buildings in the United States with an eye to bombing them, but never gets to the issue of explosives

10 Albany *3* 2004 Two men in Albany, New York, effectively help fund an informant's terror plot

11 Nettles *3* 2004 Under the nickname of "Ben Laden," an American with a long history of criminal and mental problems plots to blow up a federal courthouse in Chicago and reaches out for help to a Middle Eastern terrorist group, but gets the FBI

12 Herald Square *3* 2004 Loud-mouthed jihadist in New York and a schizophrenic friend attract informant who helps them lay plans to bomb Herald Square subway station

13 Grecula *3* 2005 An American with visions of being an modern-day Spartacus agrees to build a bomb to be exploded in the United States for undercover agents claiming to be al-Qaida

14 Lodi *1* 2005 American in Lodi, California, who may have attended a training camp in Pakistan but with no apparent plan to commit violence is arrested with the aid of an informant

15 JIS *2* 2005 American in jail masterminds a plot by three others to shoot up military recruitment centers, synagogues, and a nonexistent military base in the Los Angeles area but, although close to their first attack, the plot is disrupted when they leave a cellphone behind at a funds-raising robbery

16 The pipeline bomber and the terrorism hunter *3* 2005 An American offers on the internet to blow up pipelines in Canada as an aid to al-Qaida and attracts the attention of a freelance informant

Table 1. *(Continued)*

17 University of North Carolina *4* 2006 To punish the U.S. government for actions around the world, a former student, after failing to go abroad to fight or to join the air force so he could drop a nuclear bomb on Washington, D.C., drives a rented SUV onto campus to run over as many Americans as possible and manages to injure nine

18 Hudson River tunnels *2* 2006 Angered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, several men based in Lebanon plot to flood railway tunnels under the Hudson River, but are arrested overseas before acquiring bomb materials or setting foot in the United States

19 Sears Tower *3* 2006 Seven men in Miami plot with an informant, whom they claim they were trying to con, to take down the Sears Tower in Chicago, then focus on closer buildings

20 Transatlantic airliner bombings *2* 2006 Small group in London, under intense police surveillance from the beginning, plots to explode liquid bombs on U.S.-bound airliners

21 Rockford *3* 2006 Loud-mouthed jihadist attracts attention of an informant and together they plot to explode grenades at a shopping mall in Rockford, Illinois

22 Fort Dix *3* 2007 Small group target practices, buys guns, and plots to attack Fort Dix, New Jersey, with the aid of an informant who joins the group when the FBI is told they took a jihadist video into a shop to be duplicated

23 JFK airport *3* 2007 Small group, with informant, plots to blow up fuel lines serving John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York

24 Vinas *2* 2008 New York man travels to Pakistan, is accepted into al-Qaida, and plots to plant a bomb in the United States, but is being watched and talks after being arrested

25 Bronx synagogues *3* 2009 Four men, with crucial aid from an informant, plot to bomb synagogues in Bronx, New York, and shoot down a plane at a military base

26 Little Rock *4* 2009 American man travels to Middle East to get training, but fails, and on return, working as a lone wolf, eventually shoots and kills one soldier at a military recruitment center in Little Rock, Arkansas

27 Boyd and Quantico *2* 2009 Complicated conspiracy in North Carolina, including an informant, gathers weapons and may have targeted Quantico Marine Base

28 Zazi *2* 2009 Afghan-American and two friends travel to Pakistan to join the Taliban, but are recruited by al-Qaida to plant bombs on New York subways instead, and are under surveillance throughout

29 Springfield *3* 2009 Loud-mouthed jihadist plots, with informants, to set off a bomb in Springfield, Illinois

30 Dallas skyscraper *3* 2009 Jordanian on a student visa rouses interest from the FBI in internet postings and, together with three agents, tries to detonate a fake bomb in the basement of a Dallas skyscraper

31 Mehanna *2* 2009 Well-educated Muslim jihadist may have plotted briefly to shoot up a shopping center in the Boston area and tried to join insurgency in the Middle East, but is arrested for spreading jihadist propaganda

32 Fort Hood *4* 2009 Military psychiatrist, acting as a lone wolf, shoots up a military deployment center in Fort Hood, Texas, killing twelve soldiers and one civilian, shortly before he is supposed to be deployed to the war in Afghanistan

33 The underwear bomber *4* 2009 Nigerian man tries to blow up a U.S.-bound airliner with explosives in his underwear but is subdued by passengers and crew

Table 1. *(Continued)*

34 Times Square *4* 2010 Pakistani-American gets training in Pakistan and on his own tries, but fails, to set off a car bomb in Times Square in New York

35 Alaska *3* 2010 Muslim convert in a remote Alaskan town plots the assassination of twenty with the aid of an undercover agent

36 Parcel bombs on cargo planes *2* 2010 An effort by al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula to set off parcel bombs implanted in printer cartridges on cargo planes bound for the United States is disrupted

37 DC Metro bomb plot *3* 2010 Pakistani-American aids FBI operatives posing as al-Qaida in a plot to bomb the Metro in Washington, D.C.

38 Oregon *3* 2010 Teenaged Somali-American jihadist, unable to go abroad to fight, works with FBI operatives, who were apparently alerted by his father, to set off a van bomb at a Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Portland, Oregon

39 DC Metro–Facebook *2* 2010 Virginia man brags without substance to a female Facebook correspondent that he will soon bomb the Washington Metro and is quickly arrested for making interstate threats, receiving a light sentence

40 Baltimore *3* 2010 Baltimore man seeks allies on Facebook for violent jihad, and the FBI supplies him with an informant and a fake SUV bomb with which he tries to blow up a military recruitment center

41 Texas *2* 2011 Saudi student in Texas, flunking out and displaying intense new discontent on his blog and Facebook profile, is arrested after buying bomb-making materials and considering potential targets, including crowded streets in distant New York and a local residence of former President George W. Bush

42 Manhattan's pair of lone wolves *3* 2011 Upset with how the United States treats Muslims around the world, a mentally ill American citizen, with accomplice and undercover officer, purchases weapons as the first step in a plot to blow up synagogues, the Empire State Building, and other targets in New York and New Jersey

43 Pentagon shooter *2* 2011 A U.S. Marine reservist with jihadist literature shoots at military buildings in the Washington, D.C., area and is arrested as he seeks to desecrate the graves of veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

44 Seattle *3* 2011 Two financially destitute men, angry over U.S. foreign policy, are arrested in Seattle after they purchase an FBI-supplied machine gun that they plan to use to attack a military recruiting center after they save up enough money to purchase bullets and other material

45 Abdo *2* 2011 A U.S. Army private, unwilling to wage war on Muslims, is arrested after he buys ammunition and bomb materials to explode in a restaurant popular with soldiers

46 Model planes *3* 2011 Seeking to "decapitate" the U.S. "military center," a mentally ill hobbyist plots with police operatives to attack the Pentagon and Capitol with remote-controlled model planes bearing explosives and then to assault the buildings

47 Iran and Scarface *3* 2011 An Iranian-American used-car salesman from Texas, nicknamed "Scarface" from the results of an earlier street brawl, is arrested for engaging in a movie-like plot with another man (still at large), with members of the Iranian government, and with a police operative to hire a Mexican drug cartel to blow up Saudi Arabia's ambassador in a Washington restaurant for $1.5 million (wiring the operative $100,000 as a down payment) and to bomb the Israeli embassy in that city

48 Pimentel *3* 2011 A naturalized U.S. citizen and Muslim convert, hostile to U.S. military ventures in the Middle East, seeks to make pipe bombs using match heads to attack various targets

Table 1. *(Continued)*

49	Tampa *3* 2012 Under suspicion after he walked into a store seeking to purchase an al-Qaida flag, an Albanian-American loner in Tampa, Florida, plots with a police operative to detonate a car bomb, fire an assault rifle, wear an explosive belt, and take hostages, in addition to bombing nightclubs, a police center, a bridge, and a Starbuck's coffee shop, to avenge wrongs against Muslims and to bring terror into the hearts of his victims
50	Capitol bomber *3* 2012 A Moroccan man, who had overstayed his visa for years and had been thrown out of his apartment for nonpayment of rent, concludes that the war on terror is a war on Muslims, plots with FBI undercover operatives, and is arrested as he seeks to carry out a suicide bombing at the Capitol

Case Types

1	An Islamist extremist conspiracy or connection that, in the view of the authorities, might have eventually developed into a plot to commit violence in the United States
2	An Islamist extremist terrorist plot to commit violence in the United States, no matter how embryonic, that was disrupted
3	An Islamist extremist plot to commit violence in the United States that was essentially created or facilitated in a major way by the authorities and then rolled up with arrests when enough evidence was accumulated
4	An Islamist extremist terrorist or terrorist group that actually reached the stage of committing, or trying to commit, violence in the United States

SOURCE: Drawn from John Mueller, ed., *Terrorism since 9/11: The American Cases* (Columbus: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2012), http://www.polisci.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/since.html.

ing the last two decades underscore the determination and persistence of terrorist organizations. Terrorists have proven to be relentless, patient, opportunistic, and flexible, learning from experience and modifying tactics and targets to exploit perceived vulnerabilities and avoid observed strengths."[8]

This description may apply to some terrorists somewhere, including at least a few of those involved in the September 11 attacks. Yet, it scarcely describes the vast majority of those individuals picked up on terrorism charges in the United States since those attacks. The inability of the DHS to consider this fact

8. Department of Homeland Security, *National Infrastructure Protection Plan: Partnering to Enhance Protection and Resiliency* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Homeland Security, 2009), p. 11. This contrasts with the evaluation of Michael Sheehan, New York's deputy director for counterterrorism, who concluded in 2003 that "al-Qaeda was simply not very good. . . . [W]e underestimated al-Qaeda's capabilities before 9/11 and we overestimated them after." Sheehan, *Crush the Cell: How to Defeat Terrorism without Terrorizing Ourselves* (New York: Crown, 2008), p. 14. According to journalist Christopher Dickey, when Sheehan told his bosses Raymond Kelly and David Cohen of this conclusion, they "were taken aback." It was "not so much that they disagreed," but rather that they worried that support for counterterrorism might crumble if Sheehan's conclusion were made public. All agreed that "it would be better if Sheehan kept his estimate to himself for a while." Dickey, *Securing the City: Inside America's Best Counterterror Force—the NYPD* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), pp. 118–119.

even parenthetically in its fleeting discussion is not only amazing but perhaps delusional in its single-minded preoccupation with the extreme.

In sharp contrast, the authors of the case studies, with remarkably few exceptions, describe their subjects with such words as incompetent, ineffective, unintelligent, idiotic, ignorant, inadequate, unorganized, misguided, muddled, amateurish, dopey, unrealistic, moronic, irrational, and foolish.[9] And in nearly all of the cases where an operative from the police or from the Federal Bureau of Investigation was at work (almost half of the total), the most appropriate descriptor would be "gullible."

In all, as Shikha Dalmia has put it, would-be terrorists need to be "radicalized enough to die for their cause; Westernized enough to move around without raising red flags; ingenious enough to exploit loopholes in the security apparatus; meticulous enough to attend to the myriad logistical details that could torpedo the operation; self-sufficient enough to make all the preparations without enlisting outsiders who might give them away; disciplined enough to maintain complete secrecy; and—above all—psychologically tough enough to keep functioning at a high level without cracking in the face of their own impending death."[10] The case studies examined in this article certainly do not abound with people with such characteristics.

In the eleven years since the September 11 attacks, no terrorist has been able to detonate even a primitive bomb in the United States, and except for the four explosions in the London transportation system in 2005, neither has any in the United Kingdom. Indeed, the only method by which Islamist terrorists have managed to kill anyone in the United States since September 11 has been with gunfire—inflicting a total of perhaps sixteen deaths over the period (cases 4, 26, 32).[11] This limited capacity is impressive because, at one time, small-scale terrorists in the United States were quite successful in setting off bombs. Noting that the scale of the September 11 attacks has "tended to obliterate America's memory of pre-9/11 terrorism," Brian Jenkins reminds us (and we clearly do need reminding) that the 1970s witnessed sixty to seventy terrorist incidents, mostly bombings, on U.S. soil every year.[12]

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9. See also Bruce Schneier, "Portrait of the Modern Terrorist as an Idiot," *Schneier on Security* blog, June 14, 2007, http://www.schneier.com; and Daniel Byman and Christine Fair, "The Case for Calling Them Nitwits," *Atlantic,* July/August 2010.

10. Shikha Dalmia, "What Islamist Terrorist Threat? Al Qaeda Doesn't Have What It Takes to Hurt America," *reason.com,* February 15, 2011, http://www.reason.com/archives/2011/02/15/what-islamist-terrorist-threat/.

11. See also Risa A. Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States: How Serious Is the Threat?" *International Security,* Vol. 36, No. 2 (Fall 2011), p. 39.

12. Brian Michael Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadist Terrorist Radicalization in the United States since September 11, 2001* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2010), pp. 8–9.

The situation seems scarcely different in Europe and other Western locales. Michael Kenney, who has interviewed dozens of government officials and intelligence agents and analyzed court documents, has found that, in sharp contrast with the boilerplate characterizations favored by the DHS and with the imperatives listed by Dalmia, Islamist militants in those locations are operationally unsophisticated, short on know-how, prone to making mistakes, poor at planning, and limited in their capacity to learn.[13] Another study documents the difficulties of network coordination that continually threaten the terrorists' operational unity, trust, cohesion, and ability to act collectively.[14]

In addition, although some of the plotters in the cases targeting the United States harbored visions of toppling large buildings, destroying airports, setting off dirty bombs, or bringing down the Brooklyn Bridge (cases 2, 8, 12, 19, 23, 30, 42), all were nothing more than wild fantasies, far beyond the plotters' capacities however much they may have been encouraged in some instances by FBI operatives. Indeed, in many of the cases, target selection is effectively a random process, lacking guile and careful planning. Often, it seems, targets have been chosen almost capriciously and simply for their convenience. For example, a would-be bomber targeted a mall in Rockford, Illinois, because it was nearby (case 21). Terrorist plotters in Los Angeles in 2005 drew up a list of targets that were all within a 20-mile radius of their shared apartment, some of which did not even exist (case 15). In Norway, a neo-Nazi terrorist on his way to bomb a synagogue took a tram going the wrong way and dynamited a mosque instead.[15]

Although the efforts of would-be terrorists have often seemed pathetic, even comical or absurd, the comedy remains a dark one. Left to their own devices, at least a few of these often inept and almost always self-deluded individuals could eventually have committed some serious, if small-scale, damage.[16]

THE FOREIGN ADVERSARY

As noted, the September 11 terrorist attacks were by far the most destructive in history—no terrorist act before or since has killed more than a few hundred

13. Michael Kenney, "'Dumb' Yet Deadly: Local Knowledge and Poor Tradecraft among Islamist Militants in Britain and Spain," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism,* Vol. 33, No. 10 (October 2010), pp. 911–932.
14. Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Calvert Jones, "Assessing the Dangers of Illicit Networks: Why al-Qaida May Be Less Dangerous Than Many Think," *International Security,* Vol. 33, No. 2 (Fall 2008), pp. 7–44.
15. John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 44.
16. John J. Miller, "FBI Response to *Rolling Stone* Magazine Article," *Rolling Stone,* February 22, 2008.

people—and the tragic event seems increasingly to stand as an aberration, not as a harbinger. Accordingly, it is surely time to consider that, as Russell Seitz put it in 2004, "9/11 could join the Trojan Horse and Pearl Harbor among stratagems so uniquely surprising that their very success precludes their repetition," and, accordingly, that "al-Qaeda's best shot may have been exactly that."[17]

In fact, it is unclear whether al-Qaida central, now holed up in Pakistan and under sustained attack, has done much of anything since September 11 except issue videos filled with empty, self-infatuated, and essentially delusional threats. For example, it was in October 2002 that Osama bin Laden proclaimed, "Understand the lesson of New York and Washington raids, which came in response to some of your previous crimes. . . . God is my witness, the youth of Islam are preparing things that will fill your hearts with fear. They will target key sectors of your economy until you stop your injustice and aggression or until the more short-lived of us die." And in January 2006, he insisted that the "delay" in carrying out operations in the United States "was not due to failure to breach your security measures," and that "operations are under preparation, and you will see them on your own ground once they are finished, God willing."[18]

Bin Laden's tiny group of 100 or so followers does appear to have served as something of an inspiration to some Muslim extremists, may have done some training, has contributed a bit to the Taliban's far larger insurgency in Afghanistan, and may have participated in a few terrorist acts in Pakistan.[19] In his examination of the major terrorist plots against the West since September 11, Mitchell Silber finds only two (cases 1 and 20) that could be said to be under the "command and control" of al-Qaida central (as opposed to ones suggested, endorsed, or inspired by the organization), and there are questions about how full its control was even in these two instances.[20]

This highly limited record suggests that Carle was right in 2008 when he warned, "We must not take fright at the specter our leaders have exaggerated. In fact, we must see jihadists for the small, lethal, disjointed and miserable op-

17. Russell Seitz, "Weaker Than We Think," *American Conservative,* December 6, 2004. See also Gene Healy, "The Manufacture of Terror," *Liberty,* November 2002, pp. 59–60; and Mueller, "Harbinger or Aberration?"

18. For sources of these threats and of additional threats, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money: Balancing the Risks, Benefits, and Costs of Homeland Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 36.

19. See Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-first Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); and David Ignatius, "The Fading Jihadists," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2008.

20. Mitchell Silber, *The Al Qaeda Factor: Plots against the West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

ponents that they are." Al-Qaida "has only a handful of individuals capable of planning, organizing and leading a terrorist organization," and although it has threatened attacks, "its capabilities are far inferior to its desires."[21] Impressively, bin Laden appears to have remained in a state of self-delusion even to his brutal and abrupt end. He continued to cling to the belief that another attack such as September 11 might force the United States out of the Middle East, and he was unfazed that the first such effort had proven to be spectacularly counterproductive in this respect by triggering a deadly invasion of his base in Afghanistan and an equally deadly pursuit of his operatives.[22]

Other terrorist groups around the world affiliated or aligned or otherwise connected to al-Qaida may be able to do intermittent damage to people and infrastructure, but nothing that is very sustained or focused. In all, extremist Islamist terrorism—whether associated with al-Qaida or not—has claimed 200 to 400 lives yearly worldwide outside war zones. That is 200 to 400 too many, of course, but it is about the same number as bathtub drownings every year in the United States.[23]

In addition to its delusional tendencies, al-Qaida has, as Patrick Porter notes, a "talent at self-destruction."[24] With the September 11 attacks and subsequent activity, bin Laden and his followers mainly succeeded in uniting the world, including its huge Muslim population, against their violent global jihad.[25] These activities also turned many radical Islamists against them, including some of the most prominent and respected.[26]

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21. Glenn L. Carle, "Overstating Our Fears," *Washington Post,* July 13, 2008.
22. Michael Hirsh, "Bin Laden Journal Reveals Future Planning, Possible Targets," *National Journal,* May 11, 2011. On this belief in 2001, see Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 90–91; and Peter Bergen, "Al-Qaeda at 20: Dead or Alive?" *washingtonpost.com,* August 17, 2008. For other evidence of bin Laden's delusional ramblings, see Ignatius, "The bin Laden Plot to Kill President Obama"; and David Ignatius, "A Lion in Winter," *Washington Post,* March 18, 2012.
23. Anthony H. Cordesman tallies "major attacks by Islamists" outside Iraq: 830 fatalities from April 2002 through July 2005. Cordesman, *The Challenge of Biological Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2005), pp. 29–31. Brian Michael Jenkins tallies "major terrorist attacks worldwide" by "jihadist extremists" outside Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Algeria, Russia, and Kashmir: 1,129 fatalities from October 2001 through April 2006. Jenkins, *Unconquerable Nation: Knowing Our Enemy, Strengthening Ourselves* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2006), pp. 179–184. IntelCenter tallies "most significant attacks executed by core al-Qaeda, regional arms and affiliate groups excluding operations in insurgency theaters": 1,632 fatalities from January 2002 through July 2007. IntelCenter, "Jihadi Attack Kill Statistics," August 17, 2007, p. 11, http://www.intelcenter.com/JAKS-PUB-v1-8.pdf. On the yearly bathtub drownings in the United States, see Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money,* p. 52 and chap. 2.
24. Patrick Porter, "Long Wars and Long Telegrams: Containing Al-Qaeda," *International Affairs,* Vol. 85, No. 2 (March 2009), p. 300.
25. Joby Warrick, "U.S. Cites Big Gains against Al-Qaeda," *Washington Post,* May 30, 2008. See also Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chap. 5.
26. Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "The Unraveling: The Jihadist Revolt against bin Laden,"

No matter how much states around the world might disagree with the United States on other issues (most notably on its war in Iraq), there is a compelling incentive for them to cooperate to confront any international terrorist problem emanating from groups and individuals connected to, or sympathetic with, al-Qaida. Although these multilateral efforts, particularly by such Muslim states as Libya, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, and even Iran, may not have received sufficient publicity, these countries have felt directly threatened by the militant network, and their diligent and aggressive efforts have led to important breakthroughs against the group.[27] Thus a terrorist bombing in Bali in 2002 galvanized the Indonesian government into action and into making extensive arrests and obtaining convictions. When terrorists attacked Saudis in Saudi Arabia in 2003, the government became considerably more serious about dealing with internal terrorism, including a clampdown on radical clerics and preachers. The main result of al-Qaida-linked suicide terrorism in Jordan in 2005 was to outrage Jordanians and other Arabs against the perpetrators. In polls conducted in thirty-five predominantly Muslim countries by 2008, more than 90 percent condemned bin Laden's terrorism on religious grounds.[28]

In addition, the mindless brutalities of al-Qaida-affiliated combatants in Iraq—staging beheadings at mosques, bombing playgrounds, taking over hospitals, executing ordinary citizens, performing forced marriages—eventually turned the Iraqis against them, including many of those who had previously been fighting the U.S. occupation either on their own or in connection with the group.[29] In fact, they seem to have managed to alienate the entire population:

New Republic, June 11, 2008; Lawrence Wright, "The Rebellion Within," *New Yorker,* June 2, 2008; and Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda.*

27. Gerges, *The Far Enemy,* p. 232, and, for a tally of policing activity, pp. 318–319. See also Paul R. Pillar, *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), pp. xxviii–xxix; Marc Lynch, "Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies," *National Interest,* Spring 2006, pp. 54–55; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad,* p. 149; Juan Cole, *Engaging the Muslim World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 163; and Max Abrahms, "Does Terrorism Really Work? Evolution in the Conventional Wisdom since 9/11," *Defence and Peace Economics,* Vol. 22, No. 6 (2011), pp. 583–594.

28. For Indonesia, see Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 53, 142, 173. For Saudi Arabia, see Gerges, *The Far Enemy,* p. 249; and Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks,* pp. 53, 144. For Jordan, see Pew Global Attitudes Project, "The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other," June 22, 2006, Pew Research Center, http://www.pewglobal.org/2006/06/22/the-great-divide-how-westerners-and-muslims-view-each-other/; and Lynch, "Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies," pp. 54–55. For the 2008 polls, see Fawaz Gerges, "Word on the Street: What Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush Get Wrong about Muslims," *Democracy,* Summer 2008, p. 75, http://www.democracyjournal.org/pdf/9/Gerges.pdf. See also Pillar, *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy,* p. xxiv; and Fareed Zakaria, "Post-9/11, We're Safer Than We Think," *Washington Post,* September 13, 2010.

29. Bob Woodward, "Why Did Violence Plummet? It Wasn't Just the Surge," *Washington Post,* September 8, 2008; and Frederic Wehrey, "The Iraq War: Strategic Overreach by America—and also by

data from polls in Iraq in 2007 indicate that 97 percent of those surveyed opposed efforts to recruit foreigners to fight in Iraq; 98 percent opposed the militants' efforts to gain control of territory; and 100 percent considered attacks against Iraqi civilians "unacceptable."[30]

In Iraq as in other places, "al-Qaeda is its own worst enemy," notes Robert Grenier, a former top CIA counterterrorism official. "Where they have succeeded initially, they very quickly discredit themselves."[31] Grenier's improbable company in this observation is Osama bin Laden, who was so concerned about al-Qaida's alienation of most Muslims that he argued from his hideout that the organization should take on a new name.[32]

Al-Qaida has also had great difficulty recruiting Americans. The group's most important, and perhaps only, effort at this is the Lackawanna experience, when a smooth-talking operative returned to the upstate New York town in early 2000 and tried to convert young Yemini-American men to join the cause (case 5). In the summer of 2001, seven agreed to accompany him to an al-Qaida training camp, and several more were apparently planning to go later. Appalled at what they found there, however, six of the seven returned home and helped to dissuade those in the next contingent.

THE UNDISCLOSED ADVERSARY

The discussion thus far has dealt with an assessment of Islamist extremist terrorism since September 11 as disclosed in the public record. In general, any terrorist threat, whether domestic or foreign, appears limited. On occasion, however, intelligence officials claim to have thwarted additional terrorist plots but cannot disclose information about them for various reasons.

In working on an extensive report about how U.S. intelligence efforts (and budgets) were massively increased after September 11, the *Washington Post*'s Dana Priest says that she frequently heard this claim. In response, she "asked them to share with us anything they could, plots that were foiled that we could put in the paper because we didn't have many examples. We said give us things, just in generalities." But "we didn't receive anything back."[33]

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al Qaeda," in Brian Michael Jenkins and John Paul Godges, eds., *The Long Shadow of 9/11: America's Response to Terrorism* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2011), pp. 47–55.

30. Andrew Mack, "Dying to Lose: Explaining the Decline in Global Terrorism," in Mack, ed., *Human Security Brief 2007* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Human Security Report Project, School for International Studies, Simon Fraser University, 2008), pp. 15–17.

31. Quoted in Warrick, "U.S. Cites Big Gains against Al-Qaeda." See also Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "Al Qaeda: Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," *Mother Jones,* November/December 2007; Brian Michael Jenkins, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2008), p. 191; and Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda.*

32. Ignatius, "The bin Laden Plot to Kill President Obama." See also Ignatius, "Lion in Winter."

33. *Talk of the Nation,* NPR, July 19, 2010, transcript.

That such claims may be exaggerated is further suggested by the fact that when a terrorist plot has been uncovered, policing agencies have generally been anything but tight-lipped about their accomplishment, instead parading their deed and often exaggerating the direness of the threat presented by those detained.[34] Examples include two instances in 2011 in which the New York Police Department prominently announced terrorism arrests of people even the FBI did not think worth pursuing (cases 42 and 48). Relatedly, the huge dump of classified information released by WikiLeaks in 2010 contained no really significant new disclosures—almost all of the information was already essentially public, though in many cases less textured and nuanced.[35]

Arrests are made, of course, only when prosecutors think they have enough evidence to obtain a conviction. In addition, however, authorities may have encountered a number of loud-mouthed aspirational terrorists and, lacking enough evidence to convict on terrorism charges, have levied lesser ones, such as immigration violations, to put them away.[36] These untrumpeted plots, however, are probably even less likely than the disclosed ones to lead to notable violence.

Also, if undisclosed plotters have been so able and so determined to commit violence, and if there are so many of them, why have they committed so little of it before being waylaid? And why were there so few plots in the months and years following the September 11 attacks before "enhanced" security measures were effectively deployed? Given the massively increased policing efforts after September 11, any sensible terrorist would want to act as quickly as possible before being detected. (This same conclusion holds for the argument that there are many more would-be terrorists whom U.S. authorities have not yet discovered.)

It is also useful to consider an earlier example in which U.S. officials targeted a particular conspiratorial group. For decades, they exaggerated the degree to which domestic communists—"masters of deceit" and the "enemies from within"—presented a threat to the republic. In a 1958 book, for example, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover insisted that the American Communist Party was

34. As David Johnston and Scott Shane write, "Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 senior government officials have announced dozens of terrorism cases that on close examination seemed to diminish as legitimate threats." Johnston and Shane, "Terror Case Is Called One of the Most Serious in Years," *New York Times,* September 25, 2009. See also Erik J. Dahl, "The Plots That Failed: Intelligence Lessons Learned from Unsuccessful Terrorist Attacks against the United States," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism,* Vol. 34, No. 8 (August 2011), p. 624.

35. Bill Keller, executive editor of the *New York Times,* interview by John Mueller, Berkeley, California, April 9, 2011.

36. One FBI estimate is that only one terrorism case in four leads to terrorism charges. Simpler criminal charges are used to deal with other cases. Garrett M. Graff, *The Threat Matrix: The FBI at War in the Age of Terror* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011), p. 557.

working "day and night to further the communist plot in America" with "deadly seriousness"; that a "Bolshevik transmission" was in progress that was "virtually invisible to the non-communist eye, unhampered by time, distance, and legality"; that it was "creating communist puppets throughout the country"; and that it had for "its objective the ultimate seizure of power in America."[37] Thus impelled, his agency spent a prodigious amount of time and public money pursuing the harmless and the nearly so.[38]

Finally, the vast majority of even the craftiest terrorist conspirators fail to carry out their plots. Therefore, any policing effort that disrupts them is likely to waylay impotent scheming far more than it does consummated violence. Thus, in his book, *Mastermind,* about a central plotter of the September 11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Richard Miniter lists his subject's admitted (or claimed) involvement with other terrorist efforts. These include the 1993 World Trade Center and the 2002 Bali bombings; plots on Heathrow airport, Big Ben, the Empire State Building, the Panama Canal, and buildings in Los Angeles, Seattle, and Chicago; plans to assassinate President Bill Clinton, the Pope, and several Pakistani prime ministers; and two efforts to infiltrate agents into the United States. Whatever the validity of these claims, many of which may be inflated, all of the ventures (except for the Bali bombings), either failed or did not even begin to approach fruition. In addition, the role of the "mastermind" in the Bali case, according to Miniter, was simply to supply some money.[39]

The Delusions of Counterterrorism

It seems increasingly likely that the official and popular reaction to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has been substantially deluded—massively disproportionate to the threat that al-Qaida has ever actually presented either as an international menace or as an inspiration or model to homegrown amateurs.

Applying the extensive datasets on terrorism that have been generated over the last decades, we conclude that the chances of an American perishing at the

37. J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1958), p. 81. See also Joseph McCarthy, "Enemies from Within," speech to the Women's Club, Wheeling, West Virginia, February 9, 1950. On the parallels between domestic terrorism and domestic communism, see Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money,* pp. 185–188.
38. On this issue, see, in particular, Alexander Stephan, *"Communazis": FBI Surveillance of German Émigré Writers* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000).
39. Richard Miniter, *Mastermind: The Many Faces of the 9/11 Architect, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), pp. 2, 157.

hands of a terrorist at present rates is one in 3.5 million per year—well within the range of what risk analysts hold to be "acceptable risk."[40] Yet, despite the importance of responsibly communicating risk and despite the costs of irresponsible fearmongering, just about the only official who has ever openly put the threat presented by terrorism in some sort of context is New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who in 2007 pointed out that people should "get a life" and that they have a greater chance of being hit by lightning than of being a victim of terrorism—an observation that may be a bit off the mark but is roughly accurate.[41] (It might be noted that, despite this unorthodox outburst, Bloomberg still managed to be re-elected two years later.)

Indeed, much of the reaction to the September 11 attacks calls to mind Hans Christian Andersen's fable of delusion, "The Emperor's New Clothes," in which con artists convince the emperor's court that they can weave stuffs of the most beautiful colors and elaborate patterns from the delicate silk and purest gold thread they are given. These stuffs, they further convincingly explain, have the property of remaining invisible to anyone who is unusually stupid or unfit for office. The emperor finds this quite appealing because not only will he have splendid new clothes, but he will be able to discover which of his officials are unfit for their posts—or in today's terms, have lost their effectiveness. His courtiers, then, have great professional incentive to proclaim the stuffs on the loom to be absolutely magnificent even while mentally justifying this conclusion with the equivalent of "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

Unlike the emperor's new clothes, terrorism does of course exist. Much of the reaction to the threat, however, has a distinctly delusionary quality. In Carle's view, for example, the CIA has been "spinning in self-referential circles" in which "our premises were flawed, our facts used to fit our premises, our premises determined, and our fears justified our operational actions, in a self-contained process that arrived at a conclusion dramatically at odds with the facts." The process "projected evil actions where there was, more often, muddled indirect and unavoidable complicity, or not much at all." These "delusional ratiocinations," he further observes, "were all sincerely, ardently held to have constituted a rigorous, rational process to identify terrorist threats" in which "the avalanche of reporting confirms its validity by its quantity," in

40. Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money,* chap. 2 and, especially, p. 52. To put this number in context, an American's yearly chance of becoming a victim of homicide is 1 in 22,000; of being killed in an automobile accident, 1 in 8,000; of dying from cancer, 1 in 500.
41. Sewell Chan, "Buzz over Mayor's 'Get a Life' Remark," *Empire Zone Blog, New York Times,* June 6, 2007, http://empirezone.blogs.nytimes.com/. On this issue, see also John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats* (New York: Free Press, 2006), pp. 151–152.

which there is a tendency to "reject incongruous or contradictory facts as erroneous, because they do not conform to accepted reality," and in which potential dissenters are not-so-subtly reminded of career dangers: "Say what you want at meetings. It's your decision. But you are doing yourself no favors."[42]

Consider in this context the alarming and profoundly imaginary estimates of U.S. intelligence agencies in the year after the September 11 attacks that the number of trained al-Qaida operatives in the United States was between 2,000 and 5,000.[43] Terrorist cells, they told reporters, were "embedded in most U.S. cities with sizable Islamic communities," usually in the "run-down sections," and were "up and active" because electronic intercepts had found some of them to be "talking to each other."[44] Another account relayed the view of "experts" that Osama bin Laden was ready to unleash an "11,000 strong terrorist army" operating in more than sixty countries "controlled by a Mr. Big who is based in Europe," but that intelligence had "no idea where thousands of these men are."[45] Similarly, FBI Director Robert Mueller assured the Senate Intelligence Committee on February 11, 2003, that, although his agency had yet to identify even one al-Qaida cell in the United States, "I remain very concerned about what we are not seeing," a sentence rendered in bold lettering in his prepared text. Moreover, he claimed that such unidentified entities presented "the greatest threat," had "developed a support infrastructure" in the country, and had achieved both the "ability" and the "intent" to inflict "significant casualties in the US with little warning."[46]

Over the course of time, such essentially delusionary thinking has been internalized and institutionalized in a great many ways. For example, an extrapolation of delusionary proportions is evident in the common observation that, because terrorists were able, mostly by thuggish means, to crash airplanes into buildings, they might therefore be able to construct a nuclear bomb. Brian

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42. Carle, *The Interrogator,* pp. 249, 274, 275, 288. See also Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 23–24, 49, 51–52, 191–192.

43. Bill Gertz, "5,000 in U.S. Suspected of Ties to al Qaeda; Groups Nationwide Under Surveillance," *Washington Times,* July 11, 2002; and Richard Sale, "US al Qaida Cells Attacked," UPI, October 31, 2002.

44. Sale, "US al Qaida Cells Attacked."

45. Andy Lines, "War on Terror: Bin Laden Army: 11,000 Terror Agents Set to Strike," *Mirror* (London), September 24, 2001.

46. Director Mueller's testimony can be found at http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress.htm. In 2005 an FBI report found that, despite years of well-funded sleuthing, the Bureau had yet to uncover a single true al-Qaida sleeper cell in the United States. The report was secret but managed to be leaked. Brian Ross, "Secret FBI Report Questions Al Qaeda Capabilities: No 'True' Al Qaeda Sleeper Agents Have Been Found in U.S.," *ABC News,* March 9, 2005. Fox News reported that the FBI, however, observed that "just because there's no concrete evidence of sleeper cells now, doesn't mean they don't exist." "FBI Can't Find Sleeper Cells," Fox News, March 10, 2005.

Jenkins has run an internet search to discover how often variants of the term "al-Qaida" appeared within ten words of "nuclear." There were only seven hits in 1999 and eleven in 2000, but the number soared to 1,742 in 2001 and to 2,931 in 2002.[47] By 2008, Defense Secretary Robert Gates was assuring a congressional committee that what keeps every senior government leader awake at night is "the thought of a terrorist ending up with a weapon of mass destruction, especially nuclear."[48]

Few of the sleepless, it seems, found much solace in the fact that an al-Qaida computer seized in Afghanistan in 2001 indicated that the group's budget for research on weapons of mass destruction (almost all of it focused on primitive chemical weapons work) was $2,000 to $4,000.[49] In the wake of the killing of Osama bin Laden, officials now have many more al-Qaida computers, and nothing in their content appears to suggest that the group had the time or inclination, let alone the money, to set up and staff a uranium-seizing operation, as well as a fancy, super-high-technology facility to fabricate a bomb. This is a process that requires trusting corrupted foreign collaborators and other criminals, obtaining and transporting highly guarded material, setting up a machine shop staffed with top scientists and technicians, and rolling the heavy, cumbersome, and untested finished product into position to be detonated by a skilled crew—all while attracting no attention from outsiders.[50]

If the miscreants in the American cases have been unable to create and set off even the simplest conventional bombs, it stands to reason that none of them were very close to creating, or having anything to do with, nuclear weapons—or for that matter biological, radiological, or chemical ones. In fact, with perhaps one exception, none seems to have even dreamed of the prospect; and the exception is José Padilla (case 2), who apparently mused at one point about creating a dirty bomb—a device that would disperse radiation—or even possibly an atomic one. His idea about isotope separation was to put uranium into a pail and then to make himself into a human centrifuge by swinging the pail around in great arcs.[51]

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47. Jenkins, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* pp. 250–251.
48. Quoted in Bob Graham, *World at Risk: The Report of the Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism* (New York: Vintage, 2008), p. 43.
49. Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida's Quest for Weapons of Mass Destruction: The History behind the Hype* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008), pp. 35–36.
50. For the extended argument that the likelihood of atomic terrorism is vanishingly small, see John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), chaps. 12–15. See also John Mueller, "The Truth about al Qaeda: Bin Laden's Files Revealed the Terrorists in Dramatic Decline," *foreignaffairs.com,* August 2, 2011, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68012/john-mueller/the-truth-about-al-qaeda/; and Jenkins, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?*
51. Graff, *The Threat Matrix,* p. 366.

Even if a weapon were made abroad and then brought into the United States, its detonation would require individuals in-country with the capacity to receive and handle the complicated weapons and then to set them off. Thus far, the talent pool appears, to put mildly, very thin.

There is delusion, as well, in the legal expansion of the concept of "weapons of mass destruction." The concept had once been taken as a synonym for nuclear weapons or was meant to include nuclear weapons as well as weapons yet to be developed that might have similar destructive capacity. After the Cold War, it was expanded to embrace chemical, biological, and radiological weapons even though those weapons for the most part are incapable of committing destruction that could reasonably be considered "massive," particularly in comparison with nuclear ones.[52] And as explicitly rendered into U.S. law, the term was extended even further to include bombs of any kind, grenades, and mines; rockets having a propellant charge of more than four ounces; missiles having an explosive or incendiary charge of more than one-quarter ounce; and projectile-spewing weapons that have a barrel with a bore more than a half inch in diameter.[53] It turns out then that the "shot heard round the world" by revolutionary war muskets was the firing of a WMD, that Francis Scott Key was exultantly, if innocently, witnessing a WMD attack in 1814; and that Iraq was full of WMD when the United States invaded in 2003—and still is, just like virtually every other country in the world.

After September 11, the delusional—or at least preposterous—expanded definition of WMD has been routinely applied in the United States. Many of those arrested for terrorism have been charged with planning to use "weapons of mass destruction" even though they were working, at most, on small explosives or contemplating planting a hand grenade in a trash bin.

Delusion is also present in the commonly held belief that terrorists target the United States because they oppose its values. Almost none of the actual or would-be terrorists in the cases in table 1, however, had any problem with American society even though many (but certainly not all) were misfits, suffered from personal identity crises, were friendless, came from broken

52. On this issue, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession,* pp. 11–13.
53. On the history of WMD and for data on use of the term, see W. Seth Carus, "Defining 'Weapons of Mass Destruction,'" Occasional Paper, No. 42006 (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction, 2006). See also John Mueller and Karl Mueller, "The Rockets' Red Glare: Just What Are 'Weapons of Mass Destruction,' Anyway?" *foreignpolicy.com,* July 7, 2009, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/07/07/the_rockets_red_glare/; David C. Rapoport, "Terrorists and Weapons of the Apocalypse," *National Security Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 5, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 49–67; Peter Bergen, "WMD Terrorism Fears Are Overblown," CNN, December 5, 2008, http://articles.cnn.com/2008-12-05/politics/Bergen.wmd_1_nuclear-weapons-chemical-weapons-mass-destruction?_S=PM:Politics/; and Mueller, *Atomic Obsession,* pp. 11–15.

homes, were often desperate for money, had difficulty holding jobs, were on drugs, were petty criminals, experienced various forms of discrimination, and were, to use a word that pops up in quite a few of the case studies and fits even more of them, "losers."

A common feature in the literature is to assess the process by which potential terrorists become "radicalized." This may not be a particularly good way to look at the phenomenon, however, because the concept tends to imply an ideological motivation to the violence.[54] In almost all of the cases in table 1, the overwhelming driving force did not stem particularly from ideology, but rather from a simmering, and more commonly boiling, outrage at U.S. foreign policy—the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in particular, and the country's support for Israel in the Palestinian conflict. Religion was a key part of the consideration for most, but not because they wished to spread sharia law or to establish caliphates. Rather they wanted to protect their religion against what was commonly seen to be a concentrated war upon it in the Middle East by the U.S. government and military.[55] (None seems to remember, or perhaps in many cases ever knew, that the United States strongly favored the Muslim side in Bosnia and in Kosovo in the 1990s, as well as, of course, in the Afghan war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s.) As a result, military installations within the United States were fairly common targets—though not very good ones if one is seeking to do maximum damage and inflict maximum shock. It is at military bases and recruitment centers that 14 of the 16 deaths caused by Islamist extremists since September 11 were inflicted—and only one of the victims was a civilian (cases 26 and 32).[56]

In addition to the would-be terrorists in table 1 who focused on targets

54. See also Mark Sedgwick, "The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2010), pp. 479–494; and Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States," pp. 12–14.

55. See also Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 76–79; Stephen M. Walt, "Why They Hate Us (II): How Many Muslims Has the U.S. Killed in the Past 30 Years?" *Stephen M. Walt: A Realist in an Ideological Age*, *Foreign Policy*, blog, November 30, 2009, http://walt.foreignpolicy.com; Peter Bergen, "Five Myths about Osama bin Laden," *Washington Post*, May 6, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/five-myths-about-osama-bin-laden/2011/05/05/AFkG1rAG_story.html; James Fallows, *Blind into Baghdad: America's War in Iraq* (New York: Vintage, 2006), p. 142; Daniel L. Byman, "Al-Qaeda as an Adversary: Do We Understand Our Enemy?" *World Politics*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (October 2003), pp. 143–148; and John J. Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," *National Interest*, January/February 2011, p. 24. Although the tiny number of people plotting terrorist attacks in the United States display passionate hostility to U.S. foreign policy, there is, of course, a far greater number of people who share much of the same hostility, but are in no sense inspired to commit terrorism to express their deeply held views. On this issue, see also Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States," p. 14. Marc Sageman has provided an arresting comparison with Jewish youths who felt called upon to go abroad to fight for besieged Israel in wars in 1948, 1967, and 1973. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, pp. 74–75.

56. See Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States," p. 38.

within the United States, others have sought to fight against U.S. interests abroad—to join the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan or to defend Somalia against Ethiopian invaders. Hostility to U.S. foreign policy is obviously the primary motivator for these individuals.

Although the thousands upon thousands of al-Qaida operatives once thought to be flourishing in the United States were never found, there have been efforts to make that delusion more fully fit reality. The quest has impelled an expansion of the policing and domestic intelligence apparatus so massive that no one really has a full grasp of its extent.[57] As part of the process, the public has been asked to send in terrorism tips to the point where, within a few years after 2001, the New York Police Department was receiving tens of thousands each year on its trademarked "If You See Something, Say Something" hotline. None, however, had led to terrorism arrest.[58] This experience could be taken to suggest that the tipster campaign has been something of a failure. Or it could suggest that there might not be all that much to be found. By definition, however, delusion cannot be undermined by repeated inadequacy or disconfirmation. Thus, although the government receives more than 5,000 "threats" a day, the admonition from FBI Director Mueller has remained: "No counterterrorism lead goes uncovered." Under that strict order, huge amounts of money are being expended on what some in the FBI call "ghost chasing."[59] Meanwhile, New York continues to spend $2 million to $3 million annually (much of it coming from grants from the federal government) to publicize its hotline.[60] And, in one of her early public announcements after becoming secretary of homeland security in 2009, Janet Napolitano indicated that she wanted to inspire even more participation by the public in the quest to ferret out terrorists.[61]

Another approach to the problem of the near dearth of domestic terrorists is to create them—to make, in a sense, the invisible visible—and the police seem increasingly to be getting better at this enterprise.[62] In the last few years, police operatives embedded in terrorist plots in the United States have considerably

57. See, in particular, Dana Priest and William M. Arkin, *Top Secret America: The Rise of the New American Security State* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011).
58. William Neuman, "In Response to M.T.A.'s 'Say Something' Ads, a Glimpse of Modern Fears," *New York Times,* January 7, 2008.
59. Graff, *The Threat Matrix,* 398–399, 579.
60. Manny Fernandez, "A Phrase for Safety after 9/11 Goes Global," *New York Times,* May 10, 2010. See also John Mueller, "Terror Tipsters," *Skeptics* blog, *National Interest,* January 24, 2012, http://www.nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/.
61. Spencer S. Hsu, "Security Chief Urges 'Collective Fight' against Terrorism," *Washington Post,* July 29, 2009.
62. See also Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States," pp. 18–20; Schneier, "Portrait of the Modern Terrorist as an Idiot"; and Trevor Aaronson, "The Informants," *Mother Jones,* October 2011, pp. 30–43.

outnumbered actual would-be terrorists, and, at least in some cases, there seems to be a condition of dueling delusions: a Muslim hothead has delusions about changing the world by blowing something up, and the authorities have delusions that he might actually be able to overcome his patent inadequacies to do so.

The process involves linking the hothead up with a police or an FBI operative who stokes delusions and eventually supplies the hothead with bogus weapons. When the hothead takes possession of weaponry he would never have been able to put together on his own, or, more commonly of late, plants it near his target and then presses a phony detonator button, he is arrested (see, in particular, cases 21, 22, 25, 29, 30, 38, 40, 42, 44, 46, 49, 50).

The self-interested efforts of the police operatives clearly have had a seductive effect in some cases, and often the process seems to be one in which an able con man is set among the gullible—not unlike the situation in the emperor's court.[63] Interestingly, the operative often seems to have been considerably older than the informed-upon, and there is frequently a pattern in which a police operative becomes something of a father-like figure to young, insecure men, many of whom grew up mostly without one.[64] Operatives and informants have been crucial to the development and detection of twenty-four of the fifty plots—those identified as case type 3 in table 1.

Left to their own devices, some of the gulled would-be terrorists—often hate-filled but generally pretty lost and incompetent—might eventually have done something violent on their own. It seems likely, however, that most (as in cases 3, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23, 25, 29, 30, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 46, 48, 49, 50) would never have become operationally engaged in plotting terrorist attcks without the creative, elaborate, and costly sting efforts of the police.[65] And, given their natural incapacities, even those who did attempt to inflict violence on their own were likely either to fail in their efforts or to commit destruction of quite limited scope.

Calculating the Costs of the Counterterrorism Delusion

Delusion is a quality that is difficult to quantify. Nevertheless, there may be a way to get a sense of its dimensions—or at least of its cost consequences.

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63. On the easing of restrictions on domestic intelligence-gathering that occurred in late 2008 and made such operations easier and more frequent, see Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States," p. 17; and Charlie Savage, "F.B.I. Casts Wide Net under Relaxed Rules for Terror Inquiries, Data Show," *New York Times,* March 26, 2011.

64. On this process in a different context, see Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad,* p. 79.

65. In imposing the minimum sentence allowed by law (twenty-five years) on those convicted in the Bronx synagogues plot (case 25), the judge, while acknowledging that the men were "prepared

We have argued that terrorism is a limited problem with limited consequences and that the reaction to it has been excessive, and even delusional. Some degree of effort to deal with the terrorism hazard is, however, certainly appropriate—and is decidedly not delusional. The issue then is a quantitative one: At what point does a reaction to a threat that is real become excessive or even delusional?

At present rates, as noted earlier, an American's chance of being killed by terrorism is one in 3.5 million in a given year. This calculation is based on history (but one that includes the September 11 attacks in the count), and things could, of course, become worse in the future. The analysis here, however, suggests that terrorists are not really all that capable, that terrorism tends to be a counterproductive exercise, and that September 11 is increasingly standing out as an aberration, not a harbinger. Moreover, it has essentially become officially accepted that the likelihood of a large-scale organized attack such as September 11 has declined and that the terrorist attacks to fear most are ones that are small scale and disorganized.[66] Attacks such as these can inflict painful losses, of course, but they are quite limited in their effect and, even if they do occur, they would not change the fatality risk for the American population very much.

The key question, then, is not "Are we safer?" but rather one posed shortly after September 11 by risk analyst Howard Kunreuther, "How much should we be willing to pay for a small reduction in probabilities that are already extremely low?"[67] That such questions are not asked, and that standard considerations of acceptable risk are never broached, suggests denial at best and delusion at worst.

Since September 11, expenditures in the United States on domestic homeland security alone—that is, excluding overseas expenditures such as those on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—have expanded by more than $1 trillion.[68] According to a careful assessment by a committee of the National Academy of

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to do real violence," also noted that they were "utterly inept" and on a "fantasy terror operation" and that "only the government could have made a 'terrorist'" out of the plot's leader, "whose buffoonery is positively Shakespearean in its scope." Quoted in Benjamin Weiser, "3 Men Draw 25-Year Terms in Synagogue Bomb Plot," *New York Times,* June 29, 2011. She also said, "I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that there would have been no crime here except the government instigated it, planned it and brought it to fruition," adding, however, "that does not mean there is no crime." Quoted in Peter Finn, "Documents Provide Rare Insight into FBI's Terrorism Stings," *Washington Post,* April 13, 2012.

66. Richard A. Serrano, "U.S. Faces 'Heightened' Threat Level," *Los Angeles Times,* February 10, 2011.

67. Howard Kunreuther, "Risk Analysis and Risk Management in an Uncertain World," *Risk Analysis,* Vol. 22, No. 4 (August 2002), pp. 662–663. See also John Mueller, "Some Reflections on What, If Anything, 'Are We Safer?' Might Mean," *Cato Unbound,* September 11, 2006, http://www.cato-unbound.org; and Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States," p. 43.

68. Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money,* pp. 1–3.

Sciences in a 2010 report, these massive funds have been expended without any serious analysis of the sort routinely carried out by DHS for natural hazards such as floods and hurricanes. The committee could not find "any DHS risk analysis capabilities and methods" adequate for supporting the decisions made, noted that "little effective attention" was paid to "fundamental" issues, was (with one exception) never shown "any document" that could explain "exactly how the risk analyses are conducted," and looked over reports in which it was not clear "what problem is being addressed."[69]

Similar conclusions emerged from a study focusing on intelligence spending by Dana Priest and William Arkin. They calculate that it has increased by 250 percent since September 11 "without anyone in government seriously trying to figure out where the overlaps and waste were"—an apt description of a delusionary process. After receiving a "steady diet of vague but terrifying information from national security officials," they continue, American taxpayers "have shelled out hundreds of billions of dollars to turn the machine of government over to defeating terrorism without ever really questioning what they were getting for their money. And even if they did want an answer to that question, they would not be given one, both because those same officials have decided it would gravely harm national security to share such classified information—and because the officials themselves don't actually know."[70]

The extent of the overspending on domestic homeland security can be assessed, and the cost consequences of the counterterrorism delusion can be measured, by applying standard cost-benefit and risk-analytic procedures of the sort called for by the National Academy of Sciences committee, procedures that have been codified in international conventions.[71] Under this approach, the benefit of a security measure tallies the gains—the improvement in the security situation—generated by a security measure. It is a function of three elements:

$$\text{(probability of a successful attack)} \times \text{(losses sustained in the successful attack)} \times \text{(reduction in risk generated by the security measure)}.$$

69. National Research Council of the National Academies, *Review of the Department of Homeland Security's Approach to Risk Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2010). The report also notes that DHS risk assessment for natural hazards is "near state of the art," is "based on extensive data," has been "validated empirically," and appears "well suited to near-term decision needs." As far as we can determine, this report received no media attention whatever when it was released.

70. Priest and Arkin, *Top Secret America*, pp. xviii–xix, 103.

71. For a much more extensive application and discussion of this approach, see Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money.*

The probability of a successful attack is the likelihood that a successful terrorist attack will take place if the security measure were not in place. The losses sustained in the successful attack include the fatalities and other damage—both direct and indirect—that will accrue as a result of a successful terrorist attack, taking into account the value and vulnerability of potential targets, as well as any psychological and political effects. The reduction in risk generated by the security measure is the degree to which the security measure foils, deters, disrupts, or protects against the attack.

This benefit, a multiplicative composite of three considerations, is then compared to the costs of providing the risk-reducing security necessary to attain the benefit. If the benefit of a security measure outweighs its costs, it is deemed to be cost effective.

The interaction of these variables can be seen in an example. Suppose there is a dangerous curve on a road that results in an accident once every five years, as cars occasionally overshoot the curve and plummet down a hill. The probability of an accident each year under present conditions would be 20 percent (or 0.20). Suppose further that the accident results in one death, several injuries, and the totaling of a car, as well as some property damage. If the value of the life is taken to be, say, $4.5 million, the total losses from the accident might sum to $5 million.

Measures are then taken to reduce this risk. These could be ones that lower the probability of an accident by, for example, erecting warning signs, or they could be ones that reduce the losses sustained in the accident by, for example, installing a barrier so that cars that overshoot the curve are prevented from toppling down the hill. Suppose further that such measures result in a yearly reduction of risk of 50 percent (or 0.50). The benefit of the safety measures, applying the previous equation to this example, would then be

$$0.20 \times \$5 \text{ million} \times 0.50, \text{ or } \$500{,}000.$$

One would then need to compare this with the cost of the risk reduction measures. If their cost, all things considered, is less than $500,000 per year, the benefits would outweigh the costs, and the measures would be deemed cost effective.

This same approach can be used in a "break-even analysis" to calculate, in the case of terrorism, how many otherwise successful attacks would have to take place to justify the increase since September 11 in domestic expenditures on risk-reducing security measures. To do this, we think of the "benefit" as the cost of the security measure. The equation then becomes

(cost of the security measure) = (probability of a successful attack) ×
(losses sustained in the successful attack) ×
(reduction in risk generated by the security measures),

which is then manipulated for break-even purposes to be

(probability of a successful attack) = (cost of the security measure) /
[(losses sustained in the successful attack) ×
(reduction in risk generated by the security measures)].

We apply several estimates and assumptions. First, we include in our cost measure only enhanced local, state, and federal security expenditures and enhanced intelligence costs since September 11 (totaling $75 billion per year), leaving out many other expenditures including those incurred by the private sector, opportunity costs, and costs abroad such as those attending the terror-related wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Second, we deal with the consequences of a rather large attack something similar to, or probably somewhat larger than, the car bomb attempt in Times Square in 2010, one exacting $500 million in damage (the vast majority of terrorist attacks inflict far less damage). Third, we assume that security measures in place before September 11 continue and that these, combined with the extra public vigilance induced by September 11, reduce the likelihood of a successful terrorist attack or reduce the losses sustained in such an attack by 50 percent.[72] And fourth, we assume that the enhanced security expenditures since September 11 have successfully reduced the likelihood of a successful terrorist attack or have reduced the losses sustained in such an attack by a further 45 percent, leading to an overall risk reduction of 95 percent.

For an enhanced security cost of $75 billion, losses sustained set at $500 million, with a reduction in risk of 0.45, the yearly probability of a successful attack for the enhanced expenditures to justify their cost would need to be at least

$75 billion / [$500 million × 0.45] = 333.

72. This may substantially understate the risk reduction by pre–September 11 measures. Notes Michael Sheehan, "The most important work in protecting our country since 9/11 has been accomplished with the capacity that was in place when the event happened, not with any of the new capability bought since 9/11. I firmly believe that those huge budget increases have not significantly contributed to our post-9/11 security. . . . The big wins had little to do with the new programs." Sheehan, *Crush the Cell,* p. 263.

That is, for enhanced U.S. domestic expenditures on homeland security to be deemed cost effective under a set of assumptions that substantially biases the consideration toward finding them cost effective, they would have had to deter, prevent, foil, or protect against 333 very large attacks that would otherwise have been successful every year. That would be about one a day. This calculation offers something of an illustrative estimate of the cost consequences of the counterterrorism delusion.[73]

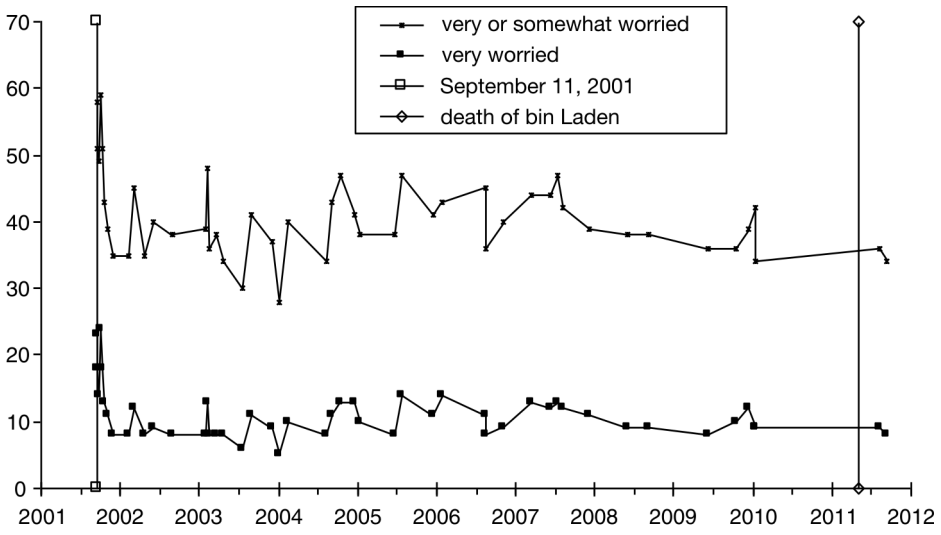
Perpetual Anxiety

If September 11 is an aberration, as it increasingly seems to be, then the experience should gradually be considered a tragic irrelevance, not one that fundamentally determines consequent activities, perceptions, planning, and expenditures. Therefore, anxieties about terrorism should be receding. Yet, as documented in figure 1, 35 to 40 percent of the American people continue since late 2001 to profess worry—even in the aftermath of the death of Osama bin Laden—that they or a family member might become a victim of terrorism. This is a startling phenomenon, and one that has a distinctly delusionary quality, given that no terrorist since 2001 has been able to detonate even the simplest of bombs in the United States, there has been no really sizable terrorist attack in the country (and the largest one that has occurred, the killing of thirteen at Fort Hood in 2009, scarcely stoked wide alarm), and an American's chance of being killed by a terrorist is, as noted earlier, about one in 3.5 million per year.

The American public has come to pay less attention to terrorism, as other concerns—the wars in the Middle East and, more lately, the economy—have dominated its responses to questions about the most important problem facing the country. However, polling trends on questions specifically about terrorism generally conform to the pattern found in figure 1. Worries about flying because of the risk of terrorism registered at the same level in 2010 as in 2002. If anything, respondents felt that the country was less safe from terrorism in 2010 than it was in 2003 or 2004. Confidence that the government could protect them from terrorism was the same in 2012 as in 2002. Moreover, estimates of the likelihood of "another terrorist attack causing large numbers of

73. These considerations focus, as noted, on the costs of domestic homeland security spending, not on those abroad. The costs may sometimes intersect, however. Because of the vagueness of the concept of "material support for terrorism," many Somali-Americans were reluctant to aid in the catastrophic famine taking place in their home country in areas partly occupied by a people officially designated as a terrorist group, resulting in a considerable human toll. Mary Beth Sheridan, "U.S. May Ease Anti-Terror Rules to Help Starving Somalis," *Washington Post*, August 2, 2011.

Figure 1. Worry about Becoming a Victim of Terrorism since the September 11 Attacks



How worried are you that you or someone in your family will become a victim of terrorism? Very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried, or not worried at all?

SOURCES: "Terrorism in the United States," *gallup.com,* May 5, 2012; and *pollingreport.com.*

Americans to be lost" stood a few months after bin Laden's death in 2011 at essentially the same level as in 2001, with more than 70 percent of respondents deeming such a dire event to be very or somewhat likely, and the same held for a question about which side was winning the war against terrorism.[74]

These persistent anxieties stem in part from the peculiar trauma of the September 11 attacks themselves and, similar to those generated by Pearl Harbor, they have proven to have had a lasting impact on perceptions.[75] Reinforcing the unease may be the anthrax letter attacks that followed shortly after September 11and perhaps also an airliner crash (unrelated to terrorism) in New York on November 12 and the failed effort of the shoe bomber (case 1) on December 22. Anxiety may also derive from the perception that, unlike terrorists who seem mainly out to draw attention to their cause (in Brian Jenkins's

74. Poll trends are posted at http://polisci.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/terrorpolls.pdf.
75. There may also be parallels with Pearl Harbor in that the attack proved to be an aberration. As H.P. Willmott notes, "[N]ot a single operation planned after the start of the war [by the Japanese] met with success." Willmott, *Empires in the Balance: Japanese and Pacific Allied Strategies to April 1942* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1982), p. 91. See also John Mueller, "Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster," *International Security,* Vol. 16, No. 3 (Winter 1991/92), pp. 172–203.

assessments, only 72 people perished in the hundreds of bombings of the 1970s, Muslim extremist terrorists seem to be out to kill as many people as possible. Fear has been notably maintained as well by the popularity and the often knee-jerk acceptance of the highly questionable, if not precisely delusional, notion that terrorists will eventually (or even soon) acquire weapons that can kill in massive numbers and then detonate them in an American city.

In addition, U.S. government officials have maintained their ability to stoke fear. Even as it was announced by counterterrorism officials in 2010 that the "likelihood of a large-scale organized attack" has been reduced, DHS Secretary Napolitano was explaining that this means that al-Qaida franchises are now able "to innovate on their own" (presumably developing small-scale disorganized attacks), with the result that the threat "in some ways" is now the highest it has been since September 11. A senior Obama administration analyst implies that the situation is as bad as ever: "[Al-Qaida] lacks the ability to plan, organize and execute complex, catastrophic attacks, but the threat persists."[76] In addition, officials have also shifted their focus to "homegrown" terrorism with some success, even though this reflects not so much the rise of local would-be terrorists as the abandonment, or the discrediting, of the notion that large numbers of non-homegrown terrorists are abroad in the land.

Moreover, foiled plots can seem, or be made to seem, scarier than successful ones because the emphasis is on what the terrorist plotters hoped to do or might have been able to do, not with what they were likely to do.[77] Thus, when terrorists in 2009 were foiled in their plot to detonate four suicide bombs on the New York subway, various experts (including the attorney general of the United States) opined that the attack, if successful, might have killed between 200 and 500 people (case 28).[78] This ignored the experience in July 2005 when two sets of terrorists each attempted to set off four bombs on the crowded transit system in London. The first set killed 52, while the second killed none because the bombs were ill constructed. Presumably, the London bombers could have killed more if, in the first case, the bombs had been placed differently or, in the second, if they had been constructed properly. But because the number

76. On Napolitano, see Serrano, "U.S. Faces 'Heightened' Threat Level"; on the senior official, see Ignatius, "The bin Laden Plot to Kill President Obama." See also Mitchell D. Silber, "The Mutating al Qaeda Threat: Terrorists Are Adapting and Expending," *Washington Times,* December 30, 2011. For commentary on the phenomenon, see Heather Mac Donald, "The Ever-Renewing Terror Threat," *Secular Right,* February 13, 2011, http://secularright.org; Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States," pp. 43–44; and John Mueller, "Why al Qaeda May Never Die," *Skeptics* blog, May 1, 2012, http://nationalinterest.org.
77. See Schneier, "Portrait of the Modern Terrorist as an Idiot."
78. Tom Hays, "Feds: Terror Suspects' Mingling Fed NYC threat," *KIDK.com,* September 26, 2009; and "Justice Department Oversight—Part 1—Newsflash," Associated Press, April 14, 2010.

of dead is known, it is that number, not an imagined one, that ought to be the basis of comparison.[79] There were also extravagant death tallies imagined for the foiled transatlantic airliner plot of 2006 (case 20) and for the amazingly inept would-be Times Square bomber of 2010 (case 34).[80]

Official alarmism has actually tapered off in recent years, however, and predictions that the country must brace itself for a large imminent attack, so common in the first several years after September 11, are rarely heard.[81] Anxiety about terrorism, then, seems substantially to be a bottom-up phenomenon rather than one inspired by policymakers, risk entrepreneurs, politicians, and members of the media, who seem more nearly to be responding to the fears (and exacerbating them) than creating them.

Whatever the genesis, Americans seem to have internalized their anxiety about terrorism, and politicians and policymakers have come to believe that they can defy it only at their own peril. Concern about appearing to be soft on terrorism has replaced concern about seeming to be soft on communism, a phenomenon that lasted far longer than the dramatic episodes that generated it.[82] In his assessment of the reaction to the September 11 attacks, anthropologist Scott Atran muses, "Perhaps never in the history of human conflict have so few people with so few actual means and capabilities frightened so many."[83] Figure 1 suggests that this extraordinarily exaggerated and essentially delusional response may prove to be perpetual.

79. The train bombings in Madrid in 2004 killed 191, but were accomplished by detonating ten bombs, not four. Even this death toll is lower than the attorney general's lowest estimate for the New York subway case.

80. Interestingly, however, the plot dreamed up since September 11 that could potentially have caused the most damage was the one that aspired to topple the Sears Tower in Chicago (case 19). Even if the toppling failed to create the planners' hoped-for tsunami, thousands would have died—perhaps even tens of thousands—and the damage to the neighborhood would have been as monumental as that to the building. The plotters, however, had no capacity to carry out this colossal deed, so their expressed desire is not taken seriously even though the case is generally known as the Sears Tower plot. Analysts should apply this kind of reasonable reticence more broadly for aborted or foiled plots.

81. For an array of such predictions, see http://polisci.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/PREDICT.PDF.

82. Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money,* pp. 185–188.

83. Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un)making of Terrorists* (New York: Ecco, 2010), p. xiv.