

Maybe I'll Stop Driving

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There he goes again! John Mueller has made a career of debunking conventional wisdom on a variety of topics with arguments that strike most people at first as ridiculous. For example, he has expounded on why major war is virtually as obsolete as dueling and slavery, Pearl Harbor was not a military disaster, nuclear weapons were irrelevant to the cold war, and there is no such thing as “ethnic war.”¹ He gets away with this, even when he fails to shake the hold of conventional wisdom on the public imagination, because he makes serious empirical arguments and relentlessly compares material costs and benefits shorn of emotional baggage. There is always far more than a kernel of truth behind Mueller’s iconoclastic forays, even when he cannot resist the temptation to take them too far.

You won’t get me to ridicule the argument Mueller makes here because it is in large part persuasive. He points out clear irrationalities in how the risks of some lethal events are judged and in what people choose to fear. Ironically, in doing so he implies that this very journal in which the argument appears should close shop. That is, Mueller tells us more or less that a cold material calculus shows terrorism to be a minor and easily manageable problem. So why should we spill so much ink over it?

Mueller’s advice to downplay anxiety and to put damage from terrorism in perspective is sensible. But is it really still true that “many people” have a “false sense of insecurity”? As I write this in April 2005 it is going on four years without any terrorism to speak of within the United States and the public is hardly hysterical anymore. Anyone who flies regularly has noticed regression toward routine nonchalance in security procedures. Who but a handful of professionals really worries about chemical or biological attack? There is no audible demand for fixing the problems with anthrax vaccine or for home stockage of atropine or Cipro. Mueller sees unreasonable anxiety resulting from the October 2002 anthrax incident, but I sense the reverse. Because the toll was so low, nonexperts tend mistakenly to see the anthrax letters as a fizzle—“Anthrax: is that all there is?”—ignoring the indications that whoever chose the mail as the delivery system was obviously not trying to inflict

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mass casualties. Of course everyone remains focused on terrorism as the highest national security priority, but that is by default, because we happily face few other threats of any consequence.

If real fear of low-probability disasters was widespread, Manhattan real estate prices would be in the toilet instead of the stratosphere. The prospect of a radiological “dirty” bomb—much easier to make than a fission weapon—detonated on Wall Street or Park Avenue every several years, and the resulting incentives to relocate residences and businesses, would make investment in such property a roll of the dice rather than the sure thing that the market suggests. (The fact that contamination might be mild would hardly reassure buyers contemplating multimillion dollar mortgages.)

Mueller’s main points are that events like September 11 are extreme and rare; that more destructive attacks by weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are even more improbable; and that even if September 11–scale disasters occur periodically, their material costs will remain lower than the casualty rates from other activities such as driving that we blithely accept as the cost of doing business. He emphasizes that “September 11 was an extreme event.” Is it alarmist to worry about substantially more extreme events? Are technically demanding instruments of mass killing beyond Al Qaeda’s capacity? Perhaps, but who really knows? Mueller deprecates the September 11 attacks as “remarkably low tech,” but this is profoundly wrong. Wide-body jet aircraft are decidedly hi-tech weapons when used as kamikazes, and Al Qaeda’s ability to organize, train, and deploy personnel capable of capturing, flying, and controlling four of them in a coordinated operation was no minor achievement.

The best argument Mueller offers for relaxing in the face of an occasional September 11 is the now well-worn statistic of tens of thousands of traffic fatalities regularly absorbed by American society with scarcely a thought. In objective terms, even large doses of typical terrorism would not inflict severe damage. It is harder to bank on this calculation, however, if Al Qaeda or its ilk obtains efficiently usable WMD with the capacity to kill hundreds, rather than tens, of thousands.

Yes, it is certainly true that terrorists would face “great difficulties . . . in acquiring and developing devices with the capacity to cause mass casualties.” That is the main reason that it hasn’t happened yet. Worst case scenarios usually do not become real, but occasionally they do. Improbable events never happen until they do, as on September 11. Mueller reassures us that “no state has ever given another state (much less a terrorist group) a nuclear weapon that the recipient could use independently.” But before it was discovered, A. Q. Khan’s promiscuous selling of technology for production of nuclear explosive material would have been considered a worst case scenario, just short of the nightmare that Mueller debunks.

In deriding concern about terrorist use of WMD Mueller is in peculiarly good company. Some of the best terrorism experts, such as David C. Rapoport, Paul Pillar, and Bruce Hoffman have adamantly opposed focusing on this threat. Standard arguments are that it would be very hard for terrorists to obtain really destructive WMD (nuclear or biological); even if they got chemical or biological agents they would not be able to deploy or disseminate them effectively; most terrorists we know are uninterested in WMD, preferring high explosives; and focusing on low-probability WMD threats distracts attention from terrorists’ normal stock in trade.

All these points are true, but they miss the main point. Low-probability threats with extreme consequences warrant more concern than high-probability threats with minor consequences. Defense strategists generally spend most of their time worrying about unlikely events that would be catastrophic if they nevertheless happened. In the Cold War the focus was on a very unlikely Soviet military assault on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and nuclear escalation. Perhaps the trillions of dollars spent to deter such an attack was simply wasted, but considering how the Cold War turned out I would not choose to re-run the experiment with baseline defense budgets like the \$14 billion just before the invasion of South Korea.

It is quite true that the number of people killed by terrorists over the past several decades is too small to justify a high place on the national security agenda for counterterrorism. Were typical terrorism what is most at issue, I would share Mueller's opposition to emphasizing the threat. He and others are wrong, however, when they pooh-pooh concern about WMD. Purchase of usable nuclear weapons from greedy Russian custodians, deployment of efficiently aerosolized anthrax that could overwhelm local public health programs, or multiple strikes with moderately destructive chemical or radiological weapons are all improbable eventualities, but reducing effort to prevent or hedge against them is not an experiment I would choose to run.

Terrorism poses fewer costs than does reaction to it, says Mueller. Perhaps, depending on what we assume the counterfactual history would be. If we had done little to improve counterterror defenses after September 11, perhaps an increase in the frequency, effectiveness, and intensity of Al Qaeda attacks great enough to outweigh the billions of dollars saved would not have occurred. His boldest suggestion is that doing nothing in reaction to a terrorist attack "is not necessarily unacceptable." (This is reminiscent of his questioning of whether the United States should have responded to Pearl Harbor by going to war as it did, rather than by a continued policy of restrained containment against Japan.)² Why is it that this sort of suggestion strikes most people as shocking, even though it is in line with the economic analysis of costs and benefits that makes so much of Mueller's counterintuitive argument persuasive? Perhaps because, for better or worse, costs and benefits in nonmaterial dimensions like honor and symbolism matter to people in ways that are economically irrational.

Mueller quotes several egregious exaggerations of the damage terrorism can do, and he performs a service in putting silly rhetoric in its place. Of course American society would not "collapse" in the face of even large and frequent terror attacks (although the extreme veneration of privacy and other civil liberties that distinguishes the United States could prove dispensable with surprising ease). But the specter of collapse is not the standard by which to estimate mistaken levels of effort. One reason that flying is so much safer than driving is the system's extraordinary, indeed obsessive, attention to aircraft maintenance and safety procedures. By Mueller's sort of economic analysis one might advise a marginal reduction in those expenditures, since another crash or two every few years might be outweighed by resources saved.

I strongly doubt that Mueller would advise running that experiment—not least because it could weaken the trusty comparison between flying and driving that serves so well, and so often, to illustrate arguments about risk. All considered, the bigger puzzle may not be why Americans fear terrorism more than they should, but why they generally fear driving not at all.

Notes

1. See his *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989) and articles in *International Security*: “The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Postwar World,” 13, no. 2 (1988); “Pearl Harbor: Military Inconvenience, Political Disaster,” 16, no. 3 (1991/92); “The Banality of ‘Ethnic War,’” 25, no. 1 (2000).
2. Mueller, “Pearl Harbor,” 197, 203.