

## SECURITY

# Undressing the Terror Threat

The U.S. is locked in an irrational game with only one outcome: The terrorists win. How to change the rules

BY PAUL CAMPOS

I'M NOT MUCH of a basketball player. Middle-age, with a shaky set shot and a bad knee, I can't hold my own in a YMCA pickup game, let alone against more organized competition. But I could definitely beat LeBron James in a game of one-on-one. The game just needs to feature two special rules: It lasts until I score, and when I score, I win.

We might have to play for a few days, and Mr. James's point total could well be creeping toward five figures before the contest ended, but eventually the gritty gummy competitor with a lunch-bucket work ethic (me) would subject the world's greatest basketball player to a humiliating defeat.

The world's greatest nation seems bent on subjecting itself to a similarly humiliating defeat, by playing a game that could be called Terrorball. The first two rules of Terrorball are:

- (1) The game lasts as long as there are terrorists who want to harm Americans; and
- (2) If terrorists should manage to kill or injure or seriously frighten any of us; they win.

These rules help explain the otherwise inexplicable wave of hysteria that has swept over our government in the wake of the failed attempt by a rather pathetic aspiring terrorist to blow up a plane on Christmas Day. For two weeks, now, this mildly troubling but essentially minor incident has dominated headlines and airwaves, and sent politicians from the president on down scurrying to outdo each other with statements that such incidents are "unacceptable," and that all sorts of new and better proce-



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Meanwhile, millions of travelers are being subjected to increasingly pointless and invasive searches and the resultant delays, such as the one that practically shut down Newark Liberty International Airport last week, after a man accidentally walked through the wrong gate, or Tuesday's incident at a California airport, which closed for hours after a "potentially explosive substance" was found in a traveler's luggage. (It turned out to be honey.)

As to the question of what the government should do rather than keep playing Terrorball, the answer is simple: stop treating Americans like idiots and cowards.

It might be unrealistic to expect the average citizen to have a nuanced, grasp of statistically based risk analysis, but there is nothing nuanced about two basic facts:

(1) America is a country of 310 million people, in which thousands of horrible things happen every single day; and

(2) The chances that one of those horrible things will be that you're subjected to a terrorist attack can, for all practical purposes, be calculated as zero. (See article below by Nate Silver.)

Consider that on this very day about 6,700 Americans will die. When confronted with this statistic almost everyone reverts to the mindset of the title character's acquaintances in Tolstoy's great novella "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," and indulges in the complacent thought that "it is he who is dead and not I."

Consider then that around 1,900 of the Americans who die today will be less than 65, and that indeed about 140 will be children. Approximately 50 Americans will be murdered today, including several women

Photo illustration by John Kuczala

killed by their husbands or boy-friends, and several children who will die from abuse and neglect. Around 85 of us will commit suicide, and another 120 will die in traffic accidents.

No amount of statistical evidence, however, will make any difference to those who give themselves over to almost completely irrational fears. Such people, and there are apparently a lot of them in America right now, are in fact real victims of terrorism. They also make possible the current ascendancy of the politics of cowardice—the cynical exploitation of fear for political gain.

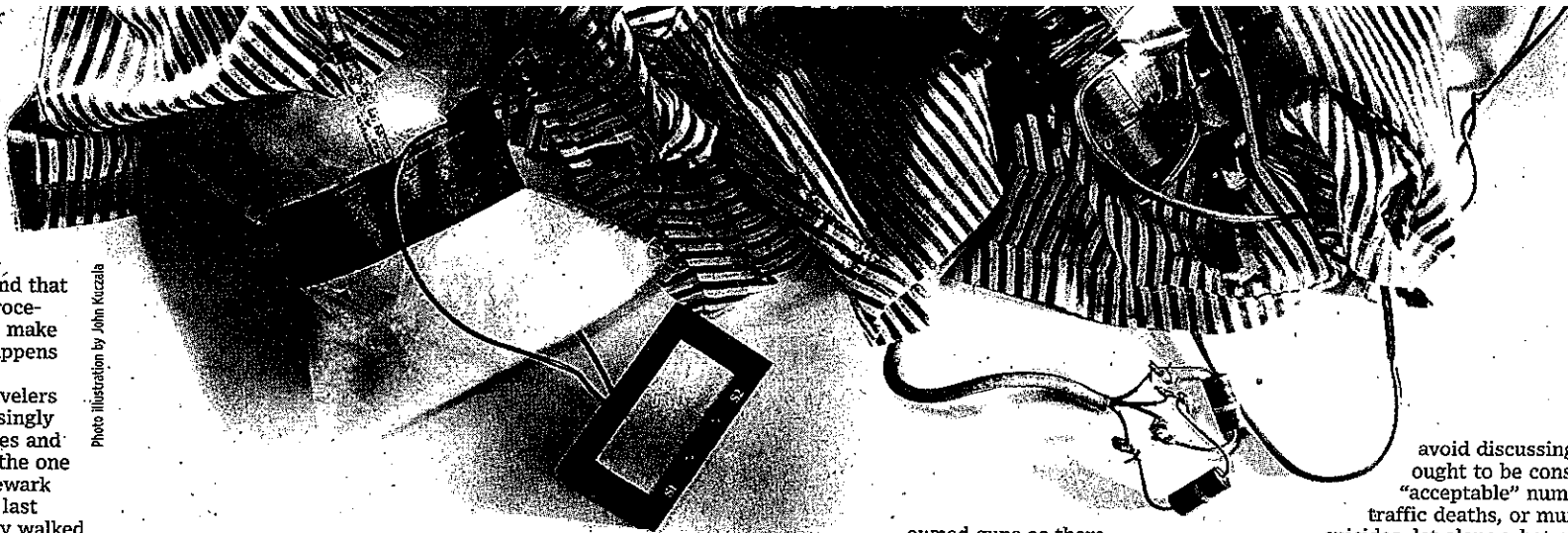
Unfortunately, the politics of cowardice can also make it rational to spend otherwise irrational amounts of resources on further minimizing already minimal risks. Given the current climate of fear, any terrorist incident involving Islamic radicals generates huge social costs, so it may make more economic sense, in the short term, to spend X dollars to avoid 10 deaths caused by terrorism than it does to spend X dollars to avoid 1,000 ordinary homicides. Any long-term acceptance of such trade-offs hands terrorists the only real victory they can ever achieve.

It's a remarkable fact that a nation founded, fought for, built by, and transformed through the extraordinary courage of figures such as George Washington, Susan B. Anthony and Martin Luther King Jr. now often seems reduced to a pitiful whimpering giant by a handful of mostly incompetent criminals, whose

main weapons consist of scary-sounding Web sites and shoe- and underwear-concealed bombs that fail to detonate.

Terrorball, in short, is made possible by a loss of the sense that cowardice is among the most disgusting and shameful of vices. I shudder to think what Washington, who as commander in chief of the Continental Army intentionally exposed himself to enemy fire to rally his poorly armed and badly outnumbered troops, would think of the spectacle of millions of Americans not merely tolerating but actually demanding that their government subject them to various indignities, in the false hope that the rituals of what has been called "security theater" will reduce the already infinitesimal risks we face from terrorism.

Indeed, if one does not utter the magic word "terrorism," the notion that it is actually in the best interests of the country for the government to do everything possible to keep its citizens safe becomes self-evident nonsense. Consider again some of the things that will kill 6,700 Americans today. The country's homicide rate is approximately six times higher than that of most other developed nations; we have 15,000 more murders per year than we would if the rate were comparable to that of otherwise similar countries. Americans own around 200 million firearms, which is to say there are nearly as many privately



owned guns as there are adults in the country. In addition, there are about 200,000 convicted murderers walking free in America today (there have been more than 600,000 murders in America over the past 30 years, and the average time served for the crime is about 12 years).

Given these statistics, there is little doubt that banning private gun ownership and making life without parole mandatory for anyone convicted of murder would reduce the homicide rate in America significantly. It would almost surely make a major dent in the suicide rate as well: Half of the nation's 31,000 suicides involve a handgun. How many people would support taking both these steps, which together would save exponentially more lives than even a—obviously hypothetical—perfect terrorist-prevention system? Fortunately, very few. (Although I admit a depressingly large number might support automatic life without parole.)

Or consider traffic accidents. All sorts of measures could be taken to reduce the current rate of automotive carnage from 120 fatalities a day—from lowering speed limits, to requiring mechanisms that make it impossible to start a car while drunk, to even more restrictive measures. Some of these measures may well be worth taking. But the point is that at present we seem to consider 43,000 traffic deaths per year an acceptable cost to pay for driving big fast cars.

For obvious reasons, politicians and other policy makers generally

avoid discussing what ought to be considered an "acceptable" number of traffic deaths, or murders, or suicides, let alone what constitutes an acceptable level of terrorism. Even alluding to such concepts would require treating voters as adults—something which at present seems to be considered little short of political suicide.

Yet not treating Americans as adults has costs. For instance, it became the official policy of our federal government to try to make America "a drug-free nation" 25 years ago.

After spending hundreds of billions of dollars and imprisoning millions of people, it's slowly beginning to become possible for some politicians to admit that fighting a necessarily endless drug war in pursuit of an impossible goal might be a bad idea. How long will it take to admit that an endless war on terror, dedicated to making America a terror-free nation, is equally nonsensical?

What then is to be done? A little intelligence and a few drops of courage remind us that life is full of risk, and that of all the risks we confront in America every day, terrorism is a very minor one. Taking prudent steps to reasonably minimize the tiny threat we face from a few fanatic criminals need not grant them the attention they crave. Continuing to play Terrorball, on the other hand, guarantees that the terrorists will always win, since it places the bar for what counts as success for them practically on the ground.

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# Crunching the Risk Numbers

By NATE SILVER

Most of us are horrible assessors of risk. Travelers at American airports are taking extensive steps due to fears of terrorism. But in the decade of the 2000s, only about one passenger for every 25 million was killed in a terrorist attack aboard an American commercial airliner (all of the fatalities were on 9/11). By contrast, a person has about a one in 500,000 chance each year of being struck by lightning.

The usual response I get to these statistics—especially in the wake of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's attempt to bring down Northwest Flight 253 on Christmas Day—is that although terrorist incidents aboard airplanes might never have been common, they are becoming more so. This belief, too, is mistaken. Relative to the number of commercial departures worldwide, passenger deaths resulting from what I term "violent passenger incidents"—bombings, hijackings, and other sabotage—were at least five times less common in the 2000s than in any decade from the

1940s through the 1980s.

Indeed, 9/11 looks like a horrible outlier. While it killed nearly 3,000 citizens, no other individual terrorist attack in the modern history of the 38 most highly developed nations has killed more than 329.

Overall, academic and governmental databases report, terrorist attacks killed a total of about 5,300 people in the most highly developed nations since the end of the Cold War in 1991, a rate of about 300 per year. The chance of a Westerner being killed by a terrorist is exceedingly low: about a one in three million each year, or the same chance an American will be killed by a tornado. (The Department of Homeland Security's budget is 50 times larger than that of the weather service).

Nor is it clear that the threat from terrorism is increasing. The years between 2005 and 2009 (313 fatalities), in fact, represents the second safest period on record since at least 1970.

There is one concern that rates as a clear exception to these statistics: the threat of terrorism involving nuclear weapons. The renowned Harvard scholar Graham Allison has posited that there is greater than a 50%



A passenger holding her baby prepares to go through a security checkpoint at Los Angeles International Airport Dec. 29.

life per \$3 million spent, so such screenings would have to prevent 1,150 fatalities per year to meet its benchmark.)

This is not to suggest that no efforts should be made to stop "conventional" terror attacks. But surely we must understand that, at best, we will reduce the risk from an extremely small nonzero number to a slightly smaller nonzero number.

Many object to this sort of analysis—no cost is too high, they say, to prevent the next 9/11. But if history is any guide, the next attack will probably not be like 9/11—it will be like NWA 253, something which threatens the lives of dozens or hundreds of people, not thousands. To the extent we overreact to these incidents—allowing them to disrupt our economy and our way of life—we do little but increase the value to terrorists of committing them.

*Nate Silver is a founder of the political-forecasting Web site [FiveThirtyEight.com](http://FiveThirtyEight.com).*

likelihood of a nuclear terrorist attack in the next decade, which he says could kill upward of 500,000 people. If we accept Mr. Allison's estimates—a 5% chance per year of a 500,000-fatality event in a Western country (25,000 casualties per year)—the risk from such incidents is some 150 times greater than that from conventional terrorist attacks. Other scholars consider the chance of a nuclear incident to be much lower. Even if Mr. Allison has overestimated the risk by fivefold, and the number of casualties by threefold, it would still represent 10 times the threat that conventional terrorism does.

In other words, a more rational anti-terrorism policy would focus resources heavily, perhaps almost exclusively, on threats of nuclear and weapons of mass destruction terror.

And we must be aware of the potential trade-offs. For instance, although it might be politically incorrect to talk about the hardship imposed by adding 15 minutes to each passenger's journey because of increased screening at the airport, if that time is worth \$20 per hour this would be taking about \$3.5 billion of productivity out of the economy each year. (The FAA considers a measure to be "cost-effective" if it saves one

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