The Cost of Defending a Nation: Balancing Liberty and Security in Defending Against Terrorism

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Abstract
Following the 9/11 attacks, the United States began to reassess existing homeland security policies and procedures and determined it was necessary to revise its porous security measures to prevent such future attacks. As a result, the Department of Homeland Security was established and immediately set the wheels in motion to develop tighter security metrics. The subsequent implementation of these stringent security policies immediately led to multiple negative connotations (due in part to the loss of certain freedoms that are expected in a democracy) from the very citizens it vowed to protect. In the realm of security, policymakers are continuously attempting to balance the loss of freedoms versus defending against future terrorist attacks. The formula for success will continue to prove fluid in nature as homeland security will always come at a cost when defending a nation.

“Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must, like men, undergo the fatigue of supporting it.” –Thomas Paine, The American Crisis, No. 4, 1777

Introduction
The War on Terror has filled the residual void left behind after the Cold War came to an end in December 1991. Our ambiguous enemy, better known as the Global Salafi Jihad Movement or what noted psychologist and independent researcher on terrorism, Dr. Marc Sageman (2008), has coined as the “al-Qaeda Social Movement,” became the primary focus of the United States and other Western governments after Osama bin Laden issued two illegal fatwas (religious edicts) in 1996 and again in 1998, culminating in a sequence of aerial attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. These concurrent attacks left the most powerful nation in the world on its heels and reeling from the audacity of a terrorist organization in the form of al-Qaeda (the Base) to successfully launch its surprise jihad inside our borders. Subsequently, those asymmetric attacks have redefined how we as a nation must revisit our strategies to secure our homeland from attacks initiated by our terrorist enemies and their irregular warfare tactics (Clancy & Crossett, 2007).

After sustaining a tremendous amount of infrastructure damage and loss of innocent lives from terrorist attacks such as those sustained in Oklahoma City, New York City, and Washington D.C., Americans quickly discovered a renewed sense of mortality as they sat silently and watched mass chaos and destruction erupt in their own backyard. Their lives were affected forever as fear began to take hold and the realization of a very legitimate and plausible threat proved substantial. Personal, political, and economic sanctuaries were violated, and the vulnerability of America’s underbelly was clearly exposed, leaving many in awe and questioning those charged with the safety and security of their nation. According to Stephen Flynn (2004-2005), a former adviser on homeland security for the U.S. Commission on National Security (Hart-Rudman Commission), [t]he reason that catastrophic terrorism holds out such potential as a means to wage war on the United States is not simply because these attacks can inflict damages to systems we depend on; it is because our enemies have good reason to believe that a successful act of terror on American soil will trigger a reaction in which the U.S. government exacerbates localized destruction with substantial self-inflicted and even global costs. (pp. 8-9)

Historically, the United States has depended heavily on its geographic location as a natural defense against foreign intruders, and, “…we were able to treat national security as essentially an out-of-body experience. When confronted by threats, we dealt with them on the turf of our allies or our adversaries. Aside from the occasional disaster and heinous crime, civilian life at home has been virtually terror-free” (Flynn, 2004-2005, pp. 2-3).
This axiom has proven a successful strategy since the completion of the American Revolutionary War in 1783; that is, until the 9/11 attacks. With these attacks came the necessity to reevaluate the United States’ defensive posture within its borders, while simultaneously launching a counter-offensive against al-Qaeda’s central location in Afghanistan since Kandahar was believed to be the location of Osama bin Laden at the time the United States launched Operation “ENDURING FREEDOM.”

The initial military attack proved successful against both al-Qaeda and the Taliban as the U.S. and other allied military forces decisively captured or eliminated multiple key leaders in the al-Qaeda hierarchy, but the government’s plans to prevent future attacks within its borders have confirmed the incongruous fact that with increased security follows abated freedoms. Within this irony lies the concerns of policymakers, because the people of this great nation fully expect their democratic government to protect them from future terrorist attacks while simultaneously sustaining the constitutional freedoms they have come to expect and enjoy as free Americans. Furthermore, an unpredictable variable added to the goal of balancing security with freedom is the systemic fear in the minds of the government and citizens alike. This fear is generated by terrorist attacks and compounded by repetitive media exposure.

**The Impact of Fear**

The 17th-century English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, once opined:

…that all phenomena in the universe, including political institutions, could be understood using principles of geometry. In 1651, Hobbes printed his most famous book, Leviathan, in which he argued that all humans are driven by two and only two impulses: fear of death and desire for power. If left unchecked, human beings would act on these impulses and live violent, brutish, inhumane, and solitary lives. In order to keep these impulses in check, human beings… drew up a social contract among themselves; the people ceded all authority and sovereignty to a single person in exchange for security from each other and from foreign invaders. The single ruler would control the violent and selfish impulses of individual members in a society through brute force; individuals would lose their liberty, but they would gain security and community. (as cited in Hooker, 1996)

Through this “absolute power,” the fear of death can be minimized proportionately to the level of power demonstrated by our government to better secure against future terrorist attacks committed by the al-Qaeda social movement. Fear is a psychologically normal reaction to terrorist attacks and exactly the effect they seek. It is how that fear specifically motivates people and governments to respond to this emotional apprehension that should cause alarm within a society. The decision to either cower to these, and future, terrorist attacks or take an offensive stance to actively seek out the aggressors are courses of action, when determining the political posture of a nation, known as the fight or flight reflex. The fight or flight response is described as a,

…fundamental physiologic response [that] forms the foundation of modern day stress medicine. The ‘fight or flight response’ is our body’s primitive, automatic, inborn response that prepares the body to ‘fight’ or ‘flee’ from [a] perceived attack, harm or threat to our survival. …[T]his response is hard-wired into our brains and represents a genetic wisdom designed to protect us from bodily harm. (Neimark, n.d.)

Although this reaction is theorized for particular responses as they directly relate to certain individual stressful situations, it is not hard to draw a correlation in how a nation and its government will react as individual or collective entities to the terrorist attacks that have aggressively taken an entire country without warning. Nationally noted expert on the prediction and management of violence, Gavin de Becker (2002), comments that, “After the terrible events of September 11, many people mistook our enemies for superhuman, when they were merely antihuman. Occasionally effective, to be sure, but our enemies are not powerful or ubiquitous.” He goes on to say, “It is sobering to acknowledge that we cannot protect all possible targets, but it is also true that our enemies cannot attack all possible targets.”

Not knowing which targets are next and who the attackers are and where they will originate from clearly establishes an inevitable amount of caution and uncertainty in the minds of everyone involved. As this fear
of the unknown continues to resonate among those who expect protection in the form of governmental support, various laws and other security measures—such as the USA PATRIOT ACT of 2001 and the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002—have been put in place to mitigate or even prevent further terrorist attacks. In an interview conducted with Dr. John Mueller, a political scientist at Ohio State University, Dr. Mueller commented on the potential for long-term fear effects:

Even if fears of terrorism do begin to decline, they can probably be very substantially rejiggered if a lone fanatical nut somewhere shoots up a bus, bank, or beauty salon while shouting “God is great!” The experience suggests, then, that we are hardly likely to relax any time soon. Eventually, fears of terrorism will perhaps begin to fade. But the experience with lingering concerns about the dangers supposedly presented by domestic Communism—internalized after dramatic first impressions—suggests it may be a long wait, perhaps one of decades. (Tierney, 2008)

To help alleviate some of the fears that come as a result of not knowing if or when the next attack will occur, the government has enacted multiple antiterrorism security measures. However, the various physical security measures established to protect innocent lives in an uncertain world have inevitably created a perceived burden in the minds of citizens who have grown secure in their “inalienable rights” of freedom that have been enjoyed by all Americans for over two centuries.

As internationally renowned security technologist Bruce Schneier (2003) has properly observed, “Security is all about trade-offs, but when the stakes are considered infinitely high, the whole equation gets thrown out of kilter.” These “trade-offs” have begun to receive serious criticisms by the very citizens that terrorism has targeted; thus, placing the government and its various federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies in a demanding position of protecting almost 300 million people against future terrorist attacks while simultaneously striving to protect and maintain their constitutional rights. This extremely difficult position is only made more arduous in accomplishing because placing fear and uncertainty in the minds of the general populace are clearly two of the objectives any terrorist organization has in its grand scheme of overthrowing a government along with spreading Islam throughout the lands of the infidels or kafir (referring to a person who does not recognize God (Allah) or the prophet Muhammad).

Assessing Democracy

Politicians are elected government officials that must “…be seen by the public as doing something to improve security” while ensuring the same freedoms they are attempting to protect are in fact maintained together. Generally, politicians have been quick to draft up new, toothless legislation in response to a man-made catastrophic event in an “alpha display” of validating who is in charge instead of insisting that existing laws be enforced. The 18th-century Western philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, believed “…the people [agree] to cede authority to some group in order to gain the benefits of community and safety. If those in power [refuse] to guarantee community and safety, the governed [are] free to disobey and establish a new political contract” (Hooker, 1996). This apparent challenge to “guarantee community and safety” poses multiple issues as the practices of physical security are designed to limit one’s freedom in an effort to protect a valued asset (e.g., critical infrastructure, economic resources, and human lives). Therefore, as increased security measures continue to limit freedoms, legitimacy in the eyes of the general populace becomes a greater challenge with every passing day. The legitimacy of a government, as viewed by those it represents, is essential should a nation face terrorist activity and possible subsequent attacks.

As terrorist cells continue to carefully plan and execute various terrorist guerilla warfare operations within the United States, they not only destroy their practical targets, but they also strike at the hearts of those touched, directly and indirectly, by the incident (Hughbank & Hughbank, 2007). Initially, the attack is seen as a threat to the collective nation; however, as time passes and rigid security measures are maintained at a level of fidelity conducive to preventing future attacks, people tend to develop short-term memories and begin to see the government and its enforcers as the new enemy. Ironically, both terrorist organizations and the government are limiting freedoms, but only those who enact and enforce the most recent restrictions become the immediate target of objection and contempt. Former Federal Bureau of Investigation Agent
Mike German (2007) identifies the following questions as critical elements in determining true legitimacy in a governing body:

Who legitimately represents the will of the people?

If anyone can legitimize an attack against the government simply by claiming to represent the will of the people, how could a government ever establish domestic tranquility and provide for the common defense?

Who gets to speak for the people?

In carefully analyzing these three questions, a person could deduce that the emotional manipulation of the “people,” and their desires plays a critical role in the overall purpose of a terrorist attack. That is, the terrorist attack in and of itself is not necessarily the end state. Although the initial impact of a homicide attack not only kills and destroys, it also creates long-term and severe traumatic stress for all those involved in an experience involving martyrdom (Hughbank, 2007). However, this stressful situation is eventually forgotten and quickly replaced by more prevailing concerns as they directly relate to the restriction of personal liberties, a byproduct of our societal protectors through their efforts to guard against future attacks. Through this innate desire and necessity to protect its citizens against future Salafist jihadi attacks within the United States, the government is forced to step up and find various methods of security that might prove equal to the challenge of homeland defense. In doing so, the government and all of its enforcement agents become vulnerable to criticism and ridicule by the very people they have sworn to protect and serve. The goal of the various security policies is not necessarily to prevent every potential terrorist attack; they are to stop terrorist cells from evolving into a terrorist movement (German, 2007).

Defending Against Terrorism

Although there are several courses of action available to prevent and counter future terrorist attacks, it is almost impossible to avert all of those attacks as “…terrorists rarely execute their operations as a direct result of their doctrines” (Sagerman, 2008, p. 40). With the use of terroristic guerilla warfare by both domestic and international terrorist organizations, antiterrorism and counterterrorism measures become a critical facet in the common operating picture of a homeland defense policy. As terrorism analyst Richard Hughbank (2007) has observed,

The forms of asymmetric warfare adopted by domestic and international terrorist groups alike [are] no longer intended to gain simple media exposure or governmental manipulation; they want to make an overpowering impact by causing massive loss of life and severe damage to infrastructure and are often motivated by religious imperatives and political goals (p. 236).

Security procedures are extremely difficult to enact and enforce without creating some form of an inconvenience to the general populace. Bruce Schneier (2003), internationally renowned security technologist, believes, “One of the reasons security is so hard to get right is that it inevitably involves different parties … each with his or her subjective perceptions of risk, tolerances for living with risk, and willingness to make various trade-offs” (p. 33).

As long as Americans continue to exhibit short-term memories and fail to truly comprehend and accept the threat terrorism and its rational actors create, security measures and constitutional rights will continue to conflict with each other, causing one to eventually overwhelm the other by virtue of priority and necessity. To substantiate the value added to mandated security measures, governmental and law enforcement agencies must find a way to communicate an honest depiction of the vicious aggressors that threaten the United States of America and its citizens. They must also provide subtle reminders of the dangers that have breached their cultural boundaries in an effort to carry out a jihad—or holy war—on the far enemy as identified by Osama bin Laden’s 1998 fatwa “…against Jews and Crusaders.”
Dr. Sageman (2008) believes the terrorist threat no longer comes from overseas (al-Qaeda central), but from within the United States,
…from ‘homegrown’ terrorists, most of whom have never traveled abroad for training or indoctrination. The threat is no longer ‘foreign fanatics,’ but people who grew up in the West and became radicalized there. When the threat came from the outside, a reasonable defense against it was to harden national borders against the intruders. Now that the threat comes from inside, the only way to defend against it is to understand the process of radicalization and devise strategies to prevent its reaching the point of violence. (p. 71)

While this poses a different perspective to the ongoing threat currently presented by the al-Qaeda social network, there is still tremendous concern for domestic terrorists and their abilities to cause harm from within the United States. As Sageman notes, “homegrown” terrorism has become the newest threat in North America as al-Qaeda transcends international borders, and the ability to identify potential targets, educate the average citizen about the threat, and execute effective antiterrorism and counterterrorism measures will continue to pose unique challenges over the course of the next few years. Failing to educate the general populace on the local threat possibilities and the potential to perform terroristic acts against them in the form of martyrdom, the government will eventually create a perpetual resistance among its citizenry as a direct result of limiting the very freedoms it is attempting to protect. According to Richard J. and David L. Hughbank (2008), one method to help characterize terrorism, its actors, and a modus operandi and to educate others is through the use of terrorology.

Although innocent civilians become the victims of homicide bombers, they are not necessarily the only objective targets. Terrorists believe that the general public is not always innocent, because they support the government the jihad is attempting to overthrow. Furthermore, “…Americans’ fundamental wariness of government makes it easier to terrorize them; citizens have little faith in the government’s ability to minimize fatalities in case of an attack. People who don’t trust their government to protect them are more susceptible to panic, and panic may lead to loss of life” (Stern, 1999). It is this perpetual wavering of faith in the government that ultimately makes the most powerful nation in the world such a target-rich environment and just might prove the most extensive challenge facing the United States in defending against modern terrorism.

Final Thoughts
The apparent tragedy for Americans living under the blanket of security provided by a free society is their own false sense of entitlement and delusional view of the real world because of their insulated position within their commonly perceived fictitious reality. For those who have never fallen victim to a direct terrorist attack, who have never been made to suffer at the hands of an individual who believes infidels must die in the name of Allah, or who have never had to concern themselves with the reality of living in pure, unadulterated fear, security efforts become more of a hindrance over time rather than a safety blanket designed to protect them from potential terrorist threats. Citizens have grown to expect almost complete freedom while residing in the United States. With this cultural expectation comes a rationale involving security and safety.

The government is now pinned with the proverbial rose by its constituents as it is continuously forced to search for and create a democratic judicial system capable of protecting while, at the same time, ensuring freedom. This balancing act is always susceptible to ongoing criticism, and terrorist organizations are well aware of this systemic relationship. German (2007) believes, “The government’s goal in responding to terrorism should be to expose as publicly as possible the behavior terrorists engage in … Terrorist groups rule their communities through fear and intimidation … Focusing our enforcement efforts on these behaviors rather than on the ideologies reduces the risk of offending [citizens]” (p. 127). Although all criminals are not terrorists, all terrorists are criminals. Through the continued use of public education in understanding the threat, terrorism could eventually become as readily known and as common as the garden-variety criminal act. Law enforcement and news agencies ensure everyone is aware of local criminal
acts and subsequent security concerns such as murders, rape, arson, and child molestation, but fail to report the various terrorist cell activities within a given community. Although it is irresponsible to report on an ongoing investigation or counterterrorism operation, it is necessary to educate everyone concerned on both criminal and terrorist activity whenever the opportunity presents itself. Furthermore, the education of antiterrorism measures to the general public will also help in heightening daily situational awareness and provide a much needed perspective on the very real daily threat that will continue to combine the need for security with maintaining a democratic nation nested in constitutional freedoms.

Thomas Paine was absolutely correct in his thoughts back in 1777. In modern times, his words have been restated similarly in that it is better to sweat more during peacetime in order to bleed less during war. Additionally, Thomas Hobbes’ and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s social contract theories still exist today in the 21st century, and “[i]f those in power refuse to guarantee community and safety, the governed [will feel] free to disobey and establish a new political contract” (Hooker, 1996). Freedom has always come at a cost, and Americans must acknowledge that everyone becomes a potential victim when the war is fought in their own backyards. Subsequently, it is the inherent responsibility of the leaders of this great country to create a safe haven for its citizens by exacting some measure of security, while maintaining a balance of freedom everyone has come to expect. But, should our safety continue to be threatened through the al-Qaeda social movement, freedoms will be sacrificed through a general erosion process as a byproduct of increased security for the common good if we are to survive future attacks and eventually win the war on terror. This is the cost of defending a nation.

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References


