

Harbinger or Aberration?

A 9/11 Provocation

—John Mueller—

THE TERROR attack of September 11, 2001 was quite literally off the charts: no other single act of terrorism has ever done remotely as much damage. Over the course of the entire 20th century, fewer than twenty terrorist attacks managed to kill as many as one hundred people, and none killed more than four hundred. Until September of last year, far more Americans were killed in any given grouping of years by lightning than by all forms of international terrorism combined. Of course, such data beg the central question of the post-9/11 world: Will we revert to the relatively benign levels of the past, or have we really entered a new and nasty era?

Most observers hold to the latter, believing that the September 11 attacks represent a sort of historical step function—the “everything has changed” point of view. Accordingly, they suggest that such extensive destruction to life and property will become common or even routine, particularly if the United States and its allies fail to respond vigorously to the threat. This is hardly a baseless supposition. It is clear that the convergence of certain political and technological trends

gives such concerns real logical traction. However, a case can be made that rather than foreshadowing the future, the attacks may turn out to have been a statistical outlier, a kind of tragic blip in the experience of American national security.

One reason to take the outlier thesis seriously is simple enough: There have been several extreme and highly alarming events in recent decades that seemed to imply future patterns, but failed to do so. Indeed, near the beginning of every decade since at least 1930 there came a major shock that many people presumed to mark the beginning of big and very bad trends. The Depression had convinced many by the early 1930s that capitalism was in terminal crisis. At the beginning of the 1940s came World War II; around 1950 came the shock of both the Korean War and the maturation of the balance of thermonuclear terror; in the early 1960s the trauma of the Cuban missile crisis; then the oil crisis and malaise of the early 1970s; then the Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on the very cusp of 1980; then a decade later the seeming prospect of major ethnic warfare around the periphery of former Communist Europe—and now 9/11. It is worth reviewing this record in a bit more detail, and recalling what people had to say about these and other alarming events at the time.

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Crying Wolf?

WORLD WAR II was the most destructive war in history. It has yet to inspire a sequel, but that is not how it looked to most in its immediate aftermath when historian Arnold Toynbee confidently argued, "In our recent Western history war has been following war in an ascending order of intensity; and today it is already apparent that the War of 1939–45 was not the climax of this crescendo movement."¹ After V-J Day, Ambassador Joseph Grew, one of America's most perceptive diplomats, concluded that "a future war with the Soviet Union is as certain as anything in this world."² Soviet dictator Josef Stalin concurred: "We shall recover in fifteen or twenty years and then we'll have another go at it."³ Relatedly, when the Communists successfully fomented a coup in democratic Czechoslovakia in 1948, there were great fears in the West that this would be followed by further Communist takeovers in Europe, especially in Italy and France. Public opinion polls conducted in the United States in the mid-1940s characteristically found 30 to 75 percent opining that, on account of such trends, the next world war would occur within 25 years.⁴ Even decades later, the prominent political scientist, Hans J. Morgenthau, announced that "the world is moving ineluctably towards a third world war—a strategic nuclear war. I do not believe that anything can be done to prevent it. The international system is simply too unstable to survive for long."⁵

But something was done to prevent it: It was called the containment policy, carried out more or less skillfully by successive U.S. administrations in the context of the NATO alliance. And thanks in large part to the Marshall Plan, Italy and France were not suborned by Communists.

Communist aggression in Korea in 1950 was deeply alarming. As President Truman put it, "The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war."⁶ Bernard Brodie recalled that the Joint Chiefs "were utterly convinced that the Russians were using Korea as a feint to cause us to deploy our forces there while they prepared to launch a 'general' (i.e., total) war against the United States through a major attack on Europe."⁷ The Russians, it turned out, were up to no such thing; there were no other "Koreas" after Korea. (Vietnam arose from Communist insurgency, not direct aggression.)

In the early 1960s, it was widely feared in the United States that Castro's victory in Cuba presaged the embrace of Soviet communism over all Latin America. It didn't. Meanwhile, the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 was the most extreme crisis of the Cold War, and when it was resolved, many felt the Soviets

¹Arnold J. Toynbee, *War and Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 4.

²Grew quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 218.

³Quoted in Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1962), pp. 114–5.

⁴For data, see John Mueller, "Public Expectations of War During the Cold War", *American Journal of Political Science* (May 1979), pp. 303–7.

⁵Quoted in Francis Anthony Boyle, *World Politics and International Law* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), p. 73.

⁶Quoted in Marshall D. Shulman, *Stalin's Foreign Policy Reappraised* (New York: Athenaeum, 1963), p. 150.

⁷Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 63.

would respond to their failure there by creating trouble somewhere else, probably in Berlin. As Defense Secretary Robert McNamara predicted, “sure as hell they’re going to do something there.”⁸ In other words, the “smart money” postulated that the missile crisis was just the beginning of a more intense phase of confrontation as Soviet military power grew, and so, conditioned by several years of Soviet bluster and swagger, the Americans poised themselves for the next challenge. But it never came: Cuba proved to be the last major direct U.S.-Soviet military-strategic crisis of the Cold War.

When the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in late December 1979, many saw it as an aggressive ploy relevant to the entire Middle East and South Asia. Alarmed that the Soviet probe might be a prologue to further adventures in the oil-rich Persian Gulf area, President Carter sternly threatened to use “any means necessary” to counter a further Soviet military move in the area, a threat reiterated by his successor, Ronald Reagan, the next year.⁹ It was the first time Soviet forces had been sent openly into a country outside their empire since 1945. It was also the last.

When ethnic conflicts and warfare broke out on the periphery of Europe in the early 1990s, many expected it to metastasize all over the continent, maybe even leading to a nuclear war between Russia and Ukraine. Even short of such an extreme prediction, many analysts believed that we were in for an age of multiplying ethno-national conflicts in Europe with a terrifying potential to spread and grow. The problems mostly fizzled away, however, and even the larger Balkan conflicts (and the Armenian-Azeri one), ugly as they were, did not spread.

Many other doomsday predictions failed to hold, as well. There was a nearly unanimous expectation in the 1950s and 1960s that dozens of countries would

have nuclear weapons by the end of the 20th century. The CIA extrapolated in 1960 that the Soviet GNP might be triple that of the United States by the year 2000.¹⁰ It was widely assumed in the early 1960s that, since the Soviets enjoyed such an overwhelming lead in the space race, they would surely be first to get to the moon. There was a common fear during the Cold War that a nuclear weapon would inevitably explode somewhere and soon; C.P. Snow said in 1960: “Within, at the most, ten years, some of those bombs are going off. I am saying this as responsibly as I can. *That* is the certainty.”¹¹ Then there was the wisdom that the oil shocks of the 1970s proved that world power was shifting to the Middle East, and the series of related predictions after 1974 and again in 1979 that oil prices would rise sharply, and stay high. None of these things happened.

A similar pattern holds with some more recent extreme acts of terrorism. Since its alarming release of poison gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995—an attack that sickened thousands and killed twelve—the apocalyptic group Aum Shinrikyo appears to have abandoned the terrorism business. And Timothy McVeigh’s destructive truck bombing in Oklahoma City has failed, at least thus far, to inspire successful American imitators. Even Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi, a devil *du jour* of terrorism of the 1980s, seems to have gone on to other, far more innocuous things.

⁸Quoted in McGeorge Bundy and James G. Blight, eds., “October 27, 1962: Transcripts of the Meetings of the ExComm”, *International Security* (Winter 1987/88), p. 92.

⁹Quoted in Morton H. Halperin, *Nuclear Fallacy* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1987), p. 45.

¹⁰Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 54.

¹¹“The Moral Un-Neutrality of Science”, *Science*, January 27, 1961, p. 259. (Emphasis in the original.)

The Uses of Fear

NONE OF this is to suggest that all extreme events prove to be the last in their line. At the time, World War I—called the Great War for decades—was the worst war of its type. Yet, as many expected, an even more destructive one followed. Nor is it to suggest that deep concern about extreme events is unreasonable or necessarily harmful. Fear has its uses. Aid and alliances in Western Europe surely did help to keep the area out of Communist hands, the forceful response in Korea to dissuade the Communists from further direct military probes, anti-Castro efforts in Latin America to prevent further Communist gains there, the reaction to the Soviets' Cuban venture to discredit crisis as a tactic, intervention in the Balkans to contain or defuse similarly-sourced conflicts nearby. Thus, efforts to confront terrorism and to reduce its incidence and destructiveness are certainly wise and justified.

Moreover, while Aum Shinrikyo and Qaddafi may be under control, Al-Qaeda and like-minded terrorist groups are unlikely to die out any time soon: September 11 was, after all, their second attempt to destroy the World Trade Center. And, of course, terrorism itself will never go away: it has always existed and always will. The central issue is whether such spectacularly destructive terrorist acts will become commonplace. Experience suggests that it is entirely possible that they will not.

As we wait to find out, efforts directed against terrorism might perhaps be more usefully considered a campaign against crime than a war. Now, this is not to say that the initial U.S. government reaction to the events of this past September 11 was wrongheaded. The war imagery rallied American people and it helped to clear up the longstanding legal and psychological fog concerning just what our adversaries

have been up to. But from the start there were risks with using such imagery, and we as a society are not compelled to retain it if we conclude, upon reflection, that there is a better way to think about our problems.

One such risk is that war imagery does not fit the facts of the current challenge in a way that most Americans can understand. Wars end, but terrorism and crime, since they are carried out by isolated individuals or by tiny groups at times of their own choosing, never do. One cannot, therefore, “conquer” terrorism. As with crime, one can at best seek to reduce its frequency and destructiveness so that people feel reasonably—if never perfectly—safe from it. Of course, military measures may sometimes be highly useful in the campaign, as they have proved to be in Afghanistan. But to frame the campaign against terror as a “war” risks the danger of raising unreasonable expectations, this despite the administration’s repeated efforts to counsel patience and forbearance.

The war imagery also suggests that ordinary people should be asked somehow to make sacrifices. This popular conclusion is at least partly fanciful. Few Americans except those directly involved in the wars in Korea or Vietnam really made much of a sacrifice, and, although there were inconveniences and shortages during World War II, homefront consumer spending by the Greatest Generation generally surged. A goal of terrorism presumably is to hamper the economy, and therefore the best response to it—hardly much of a “sacrifice”—would be to go out and buy a refrigerator or to take an airplane to a vacation resort. The war imagery suggests we should be cutting back; but cutting back, and hunkering down, helps the terrorists.

It makes great sense to heighten security and policing measures, and to ask people to maintain awareness—as with crime, to report any suspicious behavior to authorities. But it is important that this

be done without inducing hysteria. In the extreme foreign policy events noted above, the creation of panic was only a by-product of the main concern; in the case of terrorism, it is central because it is integral to terrorism as a strategy.¹² Alarmism can be harmful, particularly economically, because it can create the damaging consequences the terrorists seek but are unable to bring about on their own. As Michael Osterholm of the University of Minnesota Medical School has stressed, there is a big difference between living *with* fear and living *in* fear.

This is a difficult challenge, but not an impossible one. It would help if officials and the press were to assess probabilities more sensibly and put them in some sort of context, rather than simply stress extreme possibilities so much and so exclusively. It is certainly reasonable to point out that an atomic bomb in the hands of a terrorist could kill tens of thousands of people, but it may also be worthwhile to note that making such a bomb is an extraordinarily difficult task. And while a “dirty bomb” might raise radiation 25 percent over background levels in an area, and therefore into a range the Environmental Protection Agency officially considers undesirable, there ought to be some discussion about whether that really constitutes “contamination” or, indeed, much of a danger at all given the somewhat arbitrary and exceedingly cautious levels declared to be acceptable by the EPA.

Nor would it necessarily be remiss to note that biological and chemical weapons have not proven so far to be great killers. Although the basic science about them has been well-known for at least a century, both kinds of weapons are notoriously difficult to create, control and focus. Thus far, biological weapons have killed almost no one, and the notion that large numbers of people could be killed by a small number of poison gas explosives is highly questionable. Although

they obviously can be hugely lethal when released in gas chambers, their effectiveness as weapons in warfare has been unimpressive. In World War I, for example, gas attacks caused less than one percent of total combat fatalities; on average, it took a ton of gas to produce one fatality. In the conclusion to the official British history of the war, chemical weapons are relegated to a footnote asserting rather mildly that gas “made war uncomfortable . . . to no purpose.”¹³ A 1993 analysis by the Office of Technology Assessment found that a terrorist would have to deliver a full ton of sarin nerve gas perfectly and under absolutely ideal conditions over a heavily populated area to cause between 3,000 and 8,000 deaths, something that would require the near-simultaneous detonation of dozens, even hundreds, of weapons. Under slightly less ideal circumstances—if there was a moderate wind or if the sun was out, for example—the death rate would be only one-tenth as great.¹⁴

The problem is that the press and most politicians find that extreme and alarmist possibilities arrest attention more effectively than discussions put in their proper, broader contexts. Moreover, there is more reputational danger in underplaying risks than in exaggerating them. H.G. Wells’ prediction that the conflict beginning in 1914 would be “the war that will end war” is often ridiculed in retrospect, but not his equally confident declaration

¹²See David Fromkin’s still excellent essay, “The Strategy of Terrorism”, *Foreign Affairs* (July 1975).

¹³Sir James E. Edmonds and R. Maxwell-Hyslop, eds., *Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1918*, vol. 5 (London: HMSO, 1947), p. 606.

¹⁴Office of Technology Assessment, United States Congress, *Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction: Assessing the Risks*, OTA-559 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), p. 54.

at the end of World War II that “the end of everything we call life is close at hand.”¹⁵ Disproved doomsayers can always claim that caution induced by their warnings prevented the predicted calamity from occurring. (Call it the Y2K effect.) Disproved Pollyannas can bank on no such convenient refuge.

Moreover, the record with respect to fear about crime suggests that efforts to deal responsibly with the risks of terrorism will prove difficult. Fear of crime rose notably in the mid-1990s even as statistics were showing it to be in pronounced decline. When Mayor David Dinkins, running for re-election in New York City, pointed to such numbers, he was accused by A.M. Rosenthal of the *New York Times* of hiding behind “trivializing statistics” that “are supposed to convince us that crime is going down.”¹⁶ New Yorkers did eventually come to feel safer from crime in the 1990s than they had in the 1980s, but this was probably less because crime rates actually declined than because graffiti, panhandlers, aggressive windshield washers and the homeless were banished or hidden from view. So it makes sense, at least for a while, to have armed reservists parading menacingly around airports. It is not always clear how they prevent terrorist attacks, and pulling them from productive jobs hardly helps the economy. But if they provide people with a sense of security, their presence may be beneficial.

More extreme forms of alarmism are not reasonable, however. Some commentators are now arguing, for example, that the United States has become “vulnerable”, even “fragile.” All societies are “vulnerable” to tiny bands of suicidal fanatics, but the United States is hardly “vulnerable” in the sense that it can be toppled by extreme and dramatic acts of terrorist destruction—however grimly, the country can readily absorb that kind of damage. (It does, after all, “absorb” some 40,000 deaths each year from automobile acci-

dents.) There are, as always, dangers out there; as always, too, uncertainties abide and abound. But the sky, as it happens, isn’t falling.

NO ONE really knows, of course, whether September 11 will prove to be a blip or a step function. The record suggests, however, that terrorists will find it difficult to match or top it. The extreme destruction of the events of last September 11 has also raised the bar, reducing the psychological and political impact of less damaging attacks. That even ambitious terrorists will fail to deliver as painful a blow seems at least as likely as that they will succeed.

In practical terms, too, Al-Qaeda represents a difficult but still bounded problem: in its concentric circles of evil, from Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants to the thousands of glassy-eyed misfits trained in Taliban-hosted camps, the numbers of terrorists and terrorist adjuncts are finite and probably manageable. Other potential apocalyptic terrorists from other climes are imaginable, and if many of those potential terrorists emerge, then our problem could slip its bounds. But it is not obvious that these potential terrorists will have either the motivation or the resources to murder Americans in large numbers. A vastly exaggerated U.S. global military response to September 11, however, could inadvertently produce enough fear and resentment abroad to increase the possibility of this happening. No chance of that, is there? □

¹⁵H.G. Wells, *The War That Will End War* (New York: Duffield, 1914); H.G. Wells, *The Last Books of H.G. Wells* (London: H.G. Wells Society, 1968), p. 67.

¹⁶A.M. Rosenthal, “New York to Clinton”, *New York Times*, October 1, 1993. For data showing that crime peaked in New York in 1990 and declined steadily thereafter, see *New York Times*, February 19, 1998.

