

Schneier on Security

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The Comparative Risk of Terrorism

Good [essay](#) from the *Wall Street Journal*:

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.

Consider that on this very day about 6,700 Americans will die.... 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 killed by their husbands or boyfriends, 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.

[...]

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.

Kevin Drum takes issue with the analysis:

Two things. First, this line of argument -- that terrorism is statistically harmless compared to lots of other activities -- will never work. For better or worse, it just won't. So we should knock it off.

Second, even in the realm of pure logic it really doesn't hold water. The fundamental fear of terrorism is that it's not just random or unintentional, like car accidents or (for most of us) the threat of homicide. It's carried out by people with a purpose. The panic caused by the underwear bomber wasn't so much over the prospect of a planeload of casualties, it was over the reminder that al-Qaeda is still out there and still eager to expand its reach and kill thousands if we ever decide to let our guard down a little bit.

So even if you agree with Campos, as I do, that overreaction to al-Qaeda's efforts is dumb and counterproductive, it's perfectly reasonable to be more afraid of a highly motivated group with malign ideology and murderous intent than of things like traffic accidents or hurricanes. Suggesting otherwise, in some kind of hyperlogical a-death-is-a-death sense, strikes most people as naive and clueless. It's an argument that probably hurts the cause of common sense more than it helps.

While I agree that arguing that terrorism is statistically harmless isn't going to win any converts, I still think it's an important point to make. We routinely overestimate rare risks and underestimate common risks, and the more we recognize that cognitive bias, the better chance we have for overcoming it.

And Kevin illustrates another cognitive bias: we fear risks deliberately perpetrated by other people more than we do risks that occur by accident. And while we fear the unknown -- the "reminder that al-Qaeda is still out there and still eager to expand its reach and kill thousands if we ever decide to let our guard down a little bit" -- more than the familiar, the reality is that automobiles *will* kill over 3,000 people this month, next month, and every month from now until the foreseeable future, irrespective of whether we let our guard down or not. There simply isn't any reasonable scenario by which terrorism even approaches that death toll.

Yes, the risks are different. Your personal chance of dying in a car accident depends on where you live, how much you drive, whether or not you drink and drive, and so on. But your personal chance of dying in a terrorist attack also depends on these sorts of things: where you live, how often you fly, what you do for a living, and so on. (There's also a control bias at work: we underestimate the

risk in situations where we're in control, or think we're in control -- like driving -- and overestimate the risks in situations where we're not in control.) But as a nation we get to set our priorities, and decide how to spend our money. No one is suggesting we ignore the risks of terrorism -- and making people [feel safe](#) is a good thing to do -- but it makes no sense to focus so much effort and money on it when there are far worse risks to Americans.

Jeffrey Rosen [wrote about this](#) last year. And [similar sentiments](#) from Baroness Murphy of the British House of Lords.

Remember, the terrorists [want us to be terrorized](#), and they've chosen this tactic precisely because we have all these cognitive biases that magnify their actions. We can fight back by [refusing to be terrorized](#).

Tags: [fear](#), [risk assessment](#), [terrorism](#)

Posted on January 12, 2010 at 6:15 AM • 88 Comments

Comments

Francois • [January 12, 2010 6:59 AM](#)

At least this time there is a start of a debate about this, which I, for one, see as a good thing. I don't remember prominent news outlets publish these kinds of analysis in the previous scares, or so soon after them.

Jonathan • [January 12, 2010 7:06 AM](#)

They jump directly from "America has a lot of guns" to "banning guns would reduce crime" without any logic, reasoning, or evidence. There's a substantial body of academic work (Trent Lott & Gary Kleck's for starters) that indicates that guns prevent more crimes than they cause. If an international comparison is desired, Mexico has no legal guns and more crime, and Switzerland has legal machine guns and less crime.

Freek • [January 12, 2010 7:23 AM](#)

I would have a harder time to cope with a relative who died from terrorism or homicide than from a relative who died in a car accident. Indeed "a death is a death" is too simplistic.

We not only want to spend money on preventing fatalities, but also on revenge. Apparently, we think we are at some kind of war, and like to win. (Now we only need to define what "winning the war against terrorism" actually means...).

Johan Grönlund • [January 12, 2010 7:30 AM](#)

Are you sure about the numbers in this article. 6700 americans that will die today sounds too few for me.

uk visa • [January 12, 2010 7:41 AM](#)

We all know that allowing anybody to own a gun no matter how low their IQ or how little reasoning they're capable is a bad idea that leads to innocent lives lost.

We all know that lowering speed limits and enforcing with driving bans would lessen lives on the road.

We all know that a little loss of freedom might prevent the future, untimely loss of a person we cherish above life itself.

But we all know that are freedoms are sacrosanct and lie above what's potentially best for us.

Tim • [January 12, 2010 7:44 AM](#)

Jonathan: Switzerland doesn't have Americans!

Just to give you some perspective: Most of the world thinks America has a crazy and scary obsession with guns.

Marian K. • [January 12, 2010 7:49 AM](#)

The fact is that Americans of European origin have remarkably low levels of violent crime.

But Europeans, Asians etc. look at the total crime numbers, and Americans are too timid to tell them that majority of these numbers are work of the black and Hispanic gangs. They do not want to be perceived as racists. And, therefore, they are labeled as crazy and scary... etc.

This is all fruits of political correctness. Oddly enough, in France or Italy, everyone knows that some populations are problematic wrt to violent crimes (Algerians, Roma), and they would understand the situation immediately if it was described in sincere terms.

Jeff Martin • [January 12, 2010 7:49 AM](#)

I think of it a the 'percentage change' effect. A terrorist attack is a huge jump in our idea of the likelihood of an attack (from zero basically). Car accidents happen constantly, so we don't think about it much because the percentage change is low. This is the same reason time goes by so fast as we get older, it is a smaller percentage of our total life so far.

Sean • [January 12, 2010 7:52 AM](#)

It very much sounds to me like Drum's argument there can be boiled down to "It's OK to be afraid, in fact, we *should*, because they WANT us to be afraid."

Bull.

Michael Ash • [January 12, 2010 7:58 AM](#)

@Johan Grönlund

The number is pretty close. See for example:

<http://www.wolframalpha.com/input/?i=US+annual+deaths>

That claims 6862 deaths per day on average. This works out to 2.5 million per year, which is a bit under 1% of the entire population, which definitely passes the smell test.

I suspect that 6700/day sounds too small to you, but that 2.5 million/year sounds fine, thus providing another fine example of just how bad humans are at simple math. (Not meant to be a criticism, it's just an interesting illustration of the fact.)

Clive Robinson • **January 12, 2010 8:08 AM**

Well,

"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."

The best abuse of statistics I've seen today.

There is no distinction between those that commit a single murder (for whatever reason) and those that are repeat offenders. And believe me when you look at the stats for some countries (not seen the recent US ones) it will make your eye lids hit the back of your head.

Likewise suicide, if somebody is intent on killing themselves (as opposed to give a cry of help) is the method they use going to be relevant?

That is, is removing guns from their reach going to stop them? Or will they just swallow pills, jump off high points / in front of fast vehicles? Or worse use other methods that will kill or injure innocent people around them?

The UK stats for "gun deaths" show that most legally owned firearms are not used in the UK for much other than sporting activities. It is by far the majority illegally owned weapons used in crimes.

Why would people expect that stopping legal ownership of guns would stop the trade in illegally owned weapons?

A few minor changes such as making seat belts and skid lids mandatory and requiring legally owned weapons to be properly locked up would make significant differences in the untimely mortality rate in the US, for very little loss of "perceived" freedom.

The fact that the Swiss allow people to drive around with loaded guns (but not traveling without seat belts) is probably not the deterrent people think it is when you start looking at other per capita figures like income and its range etc.

It is a very very complex subject and it is too easy to make the mistake of thinking Occam's Razor is the way to go...

Winter • [January 12, 2010 8:11 AM](#)

Clearly, many are willing to sacrifice most of democracy and freedom to "save" a few lives from terrorism, substance abuse, or .

These same people are not willing to give up even the smallest fraction of freedom to save a LOT of lives from traffic and firearm "accidents", or even from lack of healthcare and healthy food.

Somehow, I think there is a political angle hidden in there.

Winter

[Chirol • January 12, 2010 8:19 AM](#)

So wait, it's ok to eliminate civil liberties only when it's the ones lefties don't like? The right to own a firearm is a fundamental human right enshrined in our constitutions. There is not nor will there ever be the option to ban handguns or any types of guns. It's amusing and yet sad that so many people don't understand the inseparable connection between the 2nd amendment and the rest of our civil rights. You can't pick and choose.

Moreover, gun crime has gun up about 90% since the UK banned handguns and nearly banned everything else. So even if you take the route of eliminating freedoms, the fact remains that only criminals will have guns.

Rich B • [January 12, 2010 8:26 AM](#)

"Terrorism" should be covered exclusively by the "News of the Weird" column.

[Michael Ash • January 12, 2010 8:29 AM](#)

@Chirol

You can't pick and choose? Would you say that if I proposed abolishing, say, the third amendment, or modifying the \$20 limit in the seventh amendment to account for the inflation that took place over the intervening centuries?

I suspect not. Only a few amendments get this special treatment, and yet people can't agree on which ones. The Bill of Rights isn't magical. It's just something written down by a bunch of guys that happens to have worked pretty well over the years. As an open, democratic society, we can, nay *should*, have open debate over what portions of our founding document continue to be useful and what portions should be changed.

Your attempt to shut down the discussion by saying "You can't pick and choose" without actually arguing your side in any meaningful way is sad.

[Matt Simmons • January 12, 2010 8:30 AM](#)

The conclusion that eliminating private ownership of guns and instating life without parole for murderers would lead to a lower murder rate is a bit...logically iffy. At least with the evidence that was presented.

Pretty much what Jonathan said up there.

Steve Loughran • [January 12, 2010 8:41 AM](#)

As someone involved in improving pedestrian/cycle access of a city, I find the rate of death-by-car appalling. dismissing terrorism as "not as deadly as traffic incidents" -incidents which are downgraded to "accidents" to portray their inevitability is wrong. We should be thinking about why traffic deaths are considered acceptable.

1. The terminology "traffic accident". Portrays a kind of "act-of-god" feel to things. Imagine if the news said "another terrorist accident" the next time we had a suicide plane bomber. Yet many of the traffic deaths in the country are consequences of bad road design, or conscious decisions by drivers "I will go at this speed", "I will make a phone call".
2. Blame the victim. "They were cycling without a helmet". "He was on his ipod". Absolves the driver from blame.
3. The fact that most victims tend to be pedestrian/cyclist, often poorer and less influential, whereas those who drive often come out unscathed. "The airbags in my SUV protected me when I ran the bicyclist over".
4. The fact that the low-intensity traffic death rate doesn't even merit TV coverage. Normally it goes on local TV as an inconvenience to other drivers "Finally, at 4th and MLK, A truck ran over two pedestrians, avoid this junction, the police will have re-opened it to traffic by this evening". In low-intensity civil wars (Northern Ireland) the same kind of reporting develops, and less overreaction.
5. We've been conditioned to accept traffic death. It's not. Those people who want to speed, who want to drive while on the phone, don't realise the cost of their decisions on others.

John • [January 12, 2010 8:54 AM](#)

I think this is mostly a problem of penis.

That is, people are dicks.

I really don't see everybody playing nice in the near future.

Can't we just go back to having bar fights? The world was a lot nicer when the biggest problem you had was possibly getting a table thrown at you for cheating at poker.

Randy • [January 12, 2010 8:54 AM](#)

@Johan Grönlund:

According to the CIA World Factbook for the USA, as of July 2009...

The death rate is 8.38 deaths / 1000 annualized.

The population is 307,212,123.

So $8.38 * 307,212,123 / 1000 / 365$ is 7053 deaths per day.

Randy

AppSec • [January 12, 2010 8:57 AM](#)

@Steve Loughran:

Any valid argument you had went out the window when you allowed the bicyclist to use the excuse: I was on my iPod.

I guess you think it's ok for a cyclist to use their cell phone as well?

I'll reserve my other comments to this topic for a later time.

Eamon Nerbonne • [January 12, 2010 8:57 AM](#)

@Marian K:

"Oddly enough, in France or Italy, everyone knows that some populations are problematic wrt to violent crimes (Algerians, Roma), and they would understand the situation immediately if it was described in sincere terms."

Specifically wrt to the Italian hatred for Roma, it is not at all clear to me whether that is a justified opinion; certainly wrt to rapes (which is what triggered the latest hysteria), it looks to be untrue. There were several cases where Roma were accused of being the perps - only later to be exonerated (and the number of rapes actually fell; the immigrant wave did not coincide with a rise in rapes).

Which isn't to say that your essential premise is false; certainly some crimes are more prevalent in some groups than others - but *perception* of those crimes may be altogether unreasonable (and conviction rates follow accusations to some extent, so using those isn't entirely reasonable either).

There also may be a certain degree of self-fulfilling prophecy going on here; if society expects Roma to be criminal, they'll be most exposed to criminal contacts and perhaps most likely to be criminal (and have a harder time getting and holding a legitimate job).

This blame-game isn't a good one to be playing. We should be looking for solutions, not pretending it's just someone else's problem.

Johan Grönlund • [January 12, 2010 9:01 AM](#)

Thank you for all your answers:)

The reasons that is sounded so small for me was that it says that under 1 % of Americas populations dies every year. That means that 99% of the population lives on. If you add babies that are born during one year it must give USA a huge population boom?

Bruce Schneier • [January 12, 2010 9:05 AM](#)

Please, everyone, do not let this thread turn into a gun control debate. Debate the point the author made, not the validity of his example.

Eamon Nerbonne • [January 12, 2010 9:07 AM](#)

There is perhaps something especially nasty about intentional deaths. However, the frequency with which these things occur still matter, and when it comes to terrorism vs. (say) traffic, the numbers are so overwhelmingly skewed that in my perception it's simply immoral to pretend that all those slaughtered by (generally preventable) carelessness matter less than those very, very few that happened to be victims of the rare wacko terrorist plot.

And it's not just the driver's who are at fault - there are many, many factor that affect such accidents (such as road design, traffic patterns and car weight) and it's all too easy to just scapegoat the guy behind the wheel and thus ignore all the other ways in which accidents might be mitigated.

Traffic accidents can be prevented. Even if the driver is a fallible human and even if he's drunk, that does excuse laxness by everyone else because it's "his fault".

What a terribly poor excuse to sit by and let people be killed.

Carlo Graziani • [January 12, 2010 9:16 AM](#)

Kevin Drum's attitude is, depressingly, the more common one. It's the romantic's defense of the primacy of emotional reaction over reason.

The point of comparing terrorism risk to other "mundane" risks is that this is the only way to normalize risk. No risk is "too high" or "too low" in isolation. It is necessary to understand it in relation to other risks in order to understand its magnitude. And this normalization is crucial when we get to the stage of allocating scarce resources (be they regulation costs, law enforcement, emergency response, infrastructure costs, cost to liberty, etc.).

We've never lost a city to a WMD attack. But just a few years ago, we lost a major city to a hurricane. Nonetheless we spend a tiny fraction of the resources spent on terrorism prevention on civil engineering for hurricane abatement. I'm sorry, that's not mere poor judgment, that's just stupid. Stupid. Which how we'll clearly appear to the ourselves and to the world _next_ time New Orleans gets washed out to sea.

And that's the point. Risk assessment is not just an empty armchair exercise in ranking what we're most scared of. It has real consequences for how we deploy scarce resources to abate those

risks. If we refuse to apply reasoned analysis to measure these risks, our emotional responses will lead us to make stupid allocations, with the real result that more people will be killed or injured than would have been the case if we'd been willing to make a more dispassionately optimal allocation.

Captain Oblivious • [January 12, 2010 9:22 AM](#)

The overall point is good, but the analysis is terrible: so what if there are 200,000 convicted murderers walking around? Are they likely to kill again? If not, there's no risk! But that's never addressed; it's just assumed (maybe correctly, maybe not) that murderers who have served their time are likely to kill again.

And don't even get me started on whether "banning" guns would help (hint: murderers are not known for obeying the law in the first place, and with 200,000,000 guns out there, even if no more were ever sold or imported, they'd last a VERY long time). Hell, we can't keep millions of people out of the country, or tons of drugs... what would make any sane person believe that we can keep guns out of the country???

peri • [January 12, 2010 9:30 AM](#)

I keep seeing people posting statistics that are attempting to illustrate that people should be worried much more worried about death in a car vs death in an airplane. I just want to remind everyone that imbalance will be gradually but drastically reduced, and possibly eliminated, in the near future by autonomous vehicles.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DARPA_Grand_Challenge

One should be careful not to stray to far from illustrating the truth of the imbalance as a way to put fear of terrorism in its proper place. I think Paul Campos' WSJ article fell into the trap of trying to get people to replace their irrational fear of terrorism with another particular issue -- in this case gun control and that leaves people only talking about the particular issue suggested.

David Veatch • [January 12, 2010 9:45 AM](#)

Not necessarily on topic, but I agree with Steve Loughran... and call "Car Head" on both article authors and Bruce. There are very few traffic "accidents."

Accidents are defined as "an unfortunate mishap; especially one causing damage or injury, or "anything that happens suddenly or by chance without an apparent cause" where a mishap is defined as "bad luck: an unpredictable outcome that is unfortunate". Car wrecks are rarely without apparent cause, or simply due to bad luck. They are caused by poor road design, or poor driver choice (including intentional acts of road rage). To call them "accidents", implying as Mr. Loughran states, an act-of-God scenario, is to excuse involved parties of responsibility, and is evidence of a sense of entitlement that stands dead center in the way of improvements.

Steve Loughran • [January 12, 2010 9:53 AM](#)

@AppSec

It's usually pedestrians that get blamed for listening to their ipod when they get knocked down, usually ignoring such details as vehicle speed, rights of way, etc. Cyclists get blamed for not having helmets even when they end up in situations "under large trucks" where it would have made no difference.

Clive Robinson • **January 12, 2010 9:54 AM**

@ Chirol,

"The right to own a firearm is a fundamental human right enshrined in our constitutions. There is not nor will there ever be the option to ban handguns or any types of guns."

Err a gun is a tool, a heck of a sight more specific than a hammer but a tool neather the less.

It is the hand that holds the gun, that puts the round in, that pulls the trigger, that is responsible for using the tool.

The reason the US treat guns diferently from any other tool is not realy the constitution or law it is plain and simple fear.

Why do you think the primary MAD tool was called the "minute man"?

It is from the notion that the people of the US have to stand at a "minutes notice" to defend their freedom from what at the time was "force Majure" of other nations.

Times have changed so have the tools.

The right to use obsolete tools is not a "human right" it is just a nicety of life.

Life, liberty, not undergoing persecution for faith race or where you live, access to the minimum of food water and shelter these are human rights they will still be human rights as long as man exists.

But apparently not in the US if the US press is to be believed.

The US like the British Commanwealth and other Empires before will all eventually fail and be little other than notes on the page of history.

Man moves on so does his tools get over guns they are just so much of a waste of resources in most respects.

Like driving a vehical licence the operator and test they meet a certain minimum standard. Likewise ensure as for other dangerous items there are recognised storage procedures as well as safe operating procedures and check they are adheared to as with pilots licences.

Nearly every tool is a force multiplier and thus can be used as a weapon from the simple rock / branch lever upwards.

As long as man has tools they will be subverted one way or another the planes in 9/11 where

perfectly viable tools of transport up until they hit solid objects. The box cutters the 9/11 terrorists used were likewise tools in their own right.

People need to get a grip on the problem, which is tools enable terrorism to happen to greater effect in the hands of those so minded.

Mankind needs the tools to maintain the current level of existence, therefore people need to re-appraise their thinking about what the real issue behind terrorist activity is and deal with that. Not "fart around" banning useful tools simply because a criminal has used them for a criminal purpose.

A gun is a tool it can be a weapon it can be used for a criminal act. Don't get hung up on a historical ideal that was born out of fear and repression.

All tools can be used for good or bad with or without intent. Deal with the directing mind in the way the law has established over hundreds of years as being the reasonable way.

thinker • [January 12, 2010 10:12 AM](#)

there we have it. people chew the numbers and quibble about gun control. It is just an easy choice - how many deaths society accepts for a given benefit. In case of individual transport (flexibility! time!) it is one number, in case of gun ownership another. We accept it because it is distributed and anonymous. But how about a hypothetical lottery: you offer a benefit to society (a new technology) but you say in advance "this technology will kill xy people for sure every day" - Do you think this technology would (should) be implemented? And how about naming the victims ("this tech will kill x% of this specific town" - think nuclear power)?

Same with terrorism - we should regard the deaths caused by terrorism as normal like car accidents. The benefit is the freedom and privacy. Unfortunately these precious concepts are not as tangible as your average SUV in your driveway. But society will miss it more than individual transport if taken (or thrown away).

A democracy with bicycles, railways, buses and public cabs is still fully operational - without freedom and privacy it can not even stay democracy.

Someone should teach children very early in life to calculate risks.

• [January 12, 2010 10:26 AM](#)

- > 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.

Which explains why being in prison is safer than being outside of prison?

AppSec • [January 12, 2010 10:45 AM](#)

@Steve Loughran

Thanks for the clarification, but I still don't buy it. Too many times the iPods play a distinct distraction like a cell phone to a driver -- people fail to follow the walk/don't walk signs. They don't look both ways before crossing. They jump out between parked cars (I know, I've done this many times when in the "zone").

Accidents are just that -- there's generally a number of variables that cause the incident (could be road design, could be the driver was distracted by another visual signal like another cars movement, could be a mechanical failure, could be a distraction by the cyclist or pedestrian).

With terrorism there is one cause: the intent of the person to do harm. It doesn't matter how. So again, if you are going to do comparisons of statistics, it has to be against homicides and/or kidnappings. Once you do that you then have to look at the cost per intentional act -- those needed to investigate, side effects of shutting down various services, etc.

I just don't by the comparison of something intentional by nature versus something unintentional.

Everyone seems to think that the TSA's actions are to protect the common fears, rather than their own fears of blindly trying to upgrade the essentially last line of defense.

Sean Ellis • [January 12, 2010 10:45 AM](#)

A quick thought about the "can't drive unless you're sober" device.

Any device that actively prevents something happening (e.g. speeding, drink driving) will enable other, rare, nastier things to happen (e.g. battered wife cannot evade her husband in a car chase, gay guy gets beaten up by rednecks because he's had a couple of beers and can't start his car).

I would much prefer to see an "annoyatron" attached to this kind of device - something that's a right royal pain in the butt, but does not actually prevent you from escaping from something more nasty than the annoyatron itself.

Nasty noises come to mind.

Short N. Sweet • [January 12, 2010 10:51 AM](#)

Spend half the "anti-terror" money on cancer and heart disease research.

RH • [January 12, 2010 11:24 AM](#)

I love how a significant chunk of these comments center around a single example in the article: gun control. I love it even more because, before reading them, I was about to add one of them myself. Meh, might as well anyways

(insert "gun control ensures only criminals can shoot" argument... you've all heard it before)

Does anyone have a pie chart of causes of death in America? I'd love to see how thin the sliver is for terrorism

DavidE • [January 12, 2010 11:30 AM](#)

This could have been a good article if it had stayed with terrorism and stayed out of the gun ownership debate.

Gun death numbers are just like all the other examples given above, subject to interpretation and distortion.

A cop shoots a crook during a robbery response and he dies in the emergency room: Brrring - the anti-gun crowd racks up another 'death by gun' count. Brrring - the pro-gun crowd racks up another 'crook defeated by gun' count.

A homeowner grabs a revolver from under his pillow and kills a crook during a home burglary: Brrring - the anti-gun crowd racks up another 'death by gun' count. Brrring - the pro-gun crowd racks up another 'crook defeated by gun' count.

A gang member shoots everyone standing outside a home and kills a child while her grandfather watches in helpless horror in a drive-by shooting. Brrring - the anti-gun crowd racks up another 'death by gun' count. Brrring - the pro-gun crowd racks up another 'crook kills defenseless unarmed victim' count.

I could go on for pages with examples that are fodder for arguments on both sides, usually distorted by selective counting and discarding...

The totals reported by both sides are almost always slanted to their side of the argument. The truth, as usual, probably lies in between.

One thing is certain: banning gun ownership does almost nothing to keep the crooks from having guns [HELLO, they already ignore the law!], a fact the referenced article conveniently ignores.

David Thomas • [January 12, 2010 11:33 AM](#)

@Steve Loughran and David Veatch

Your definition of accident agrees neither with common usage nor dictionary definition. Accidents, traffic and otherwise, are quite often the result of inattention to safety precautions; the question is one of intent. A driver talking on the phone or speeding or even driving drunk does not intend to hit the cyclist or pedestrian or other vehicle - we have another term for that: vehicular homicide. We still can, should, and do hold people responsible for putting others at unreasonable risk. We still assign fault in the event of an accident, as a recognition that at least one party was usually taking an unreasonable risk.

By this metric "terrorist accident" has the problem of inaccuracy, but I do prefer "terrorist incident" (which doesn't seem significantly more alarmist) to the scarier "terrorist attack," in line with the respective risks.

Bruce Schneier • [January 12, 2010 11:39 AM](#)

"This could have been a good article if it had stayed with terrorism and stayed out of the gun ownership debate."

Let's all do better than the article, then, and stay out of the gun ownership debate.

Brandioch Conner • [January 12, 2010 11:50 AM](#)

@Kevin Drum

"First, this line of argument -- that terrorism is statistically harmless compared to lots of other activities -- will never work. For better or worse, it just won't. So we should knock it off."

Yeah. Well, you're wrong. Deal with it.

"Second, even in the realm of pure logic it really doesn't hold water. The fundamental fear of terrorism is that it's not just random or unintentional, like car accidents or (for most of us) the threat of homicide. It's carried out by people with a purpose."

So? I don't think you understand this "pure logic" you mentioned.

You're just as dead if you die in a car accident as if you die from a terrorist. That's pure logic.

Who cares what the terrorists want if they cannot do it?

But the lack of a terrorist attack doesn't sell news programs.

Clive Robinson • [January 12, 2010 11:53 AM](#)

@ Bruce,

"And Kevin illustrates another cognitive bias : we fear risks deliberately perpetrated by other people more than we do risks that occur by accident."

Oddly I posted about just this subject, a little before you did with my comment at January 12, 2010 5:22 AM

http://www.schneier.com/blog/archives/2010/01/my_second_cnnco.html#c407054

(Mind you, you do say it in a nicer way 8)

More Seriously however, the bias is actually worse than you would think due to amongst other things "news worthyness".

News Editors know that the human mind is good for between 3 and 7 active thought threads (the old 5 + or - 2 rule).

Thus they tend not to report more than 3 of the same type of event/accident in any given time period (hence people think the myth of "bad things come in three's").

However they also know you can "add to a thought thread as emotion carries it forward". That is if there is somebody "to blame" or "point the finger at" then a News Editor knows they can string it out over many many reports (see recent UK MP's expenses scandle in the UK Telegraph News Paper). It becomes like a snowball rolling down hill and eventually develops a life of it's own.

Thus it does not matter to the News Editor if it is a single person or many people as long as there is a clear simple (usually overly so) point of focus for Jo Public to hang onto.

Thus the US press and politicians need "al-Qaeda" very badly to keep US citizans "On Message" or as it has been put by others "In perpetual fear of shadows".

Which is where,

'And while we fear the unknown -- the "reminder that al-Qaeda is still out there and still eager to expand its reach and kill thousands if we ever decide to let our guard down a little bit"

Is very much hyperbol***ks".

It is painfully obvious to those that look, that what we in the West call al-Qaeda is "our own invention". Just like a childs "Boggie Man Under the Bed".

Al-Qaeda is made up (by the US et al) for pragmatic reasons, and likewise for other pragmatic reasons individual terrorist groups are happy to go along with the myth.

This myth of a world wide secret organisation controlling terorism is just that. However it suits both sides, as it gives the perception of "an unstoppable force" that can only be stoped by shear National Effort. Which gives great PR for both sides...

Actually have a look through what is currently happening in the world and you will find that "Cptn Underpants" and "Cpl Hotfot" where basicaly willing goats to be sacrificed (in the same way people offered themselves up to being slaughtered and eaten by a German).

Those that gave them the help they baddly needed to have even a remote chance, probably did so just to get rid of them as they represented a very real threat to their own recruiting organisations (for insurgents etc, who generaly don't want to go up in smoke for just one event).

The real action as it where is in insorgancy. Roadside IED's etc and the resulting body bags back to the US/UK.

Again however this is usefull to both sides (insurgents/terrorists & Politicians) as it helps perpetuate the myth.

A fairly impartial analysis was, that prior to the "war on terror" (which actually started befor 9/11) terrorism of that sort was most definatly on the decline as "regional conflict" was tying up the "terrorsit" manpower.

Well it appears to have gone back to that, the major difference being is "Boots on the ground". The US/UK et al had favoured "stand off" attacks where high value technology is traded off against the bad press of body bags of "fallen Heros".

Saddly though it does not work against non "hi-tec" opponents as has been seen repeatedly (Afganistan has resisted imperialistic invasion very successfully for hundreds of years the Russians being the last military invaders sent home with their tails shot off).

The mistake the US&UK politicians made for whatever reason was believeing the "war hawks" that "stand off" could be "scaled up" to cover "ground forces" by use of "superior force" (Boznia etc had already shown this was not the case).

As we now know this is not going to do anything other than play into the wrong hands. Who then profit by it to a very great extent.

How we get out of the mess is a subject for another day but perpetuating a myth is at best not helpfull to Jo Public or the "boots on the ground" at worst it is sentencing a group of them to death on a regular basis...

John F. • [January 12, 2010 12:03 PM](#)

One overlooked point is that if the terrorists had the means to kill us by the hundreds of thousands, they would use them. This is implied in the "malign intent" argument but should be made explicitly. As such, we are not just guarding against terrorists at their current level of danger but against what they could become if we allowed them to.

HJohn • [January 12, 2010 12:33 PM](#)

The one point I'll make about the gun control analogy is that proponents of gun control react to crime the same way the proponents of counterterror measures react to terrorism... they respond to the guilty by taking (or restricting) objects from the innocent.

I'm not saying that there is no place for banning/restricting some items in airline security. As someone who opposes prohibition of guns from the population, I dont' mind them being banned from planes given the risk. Ditto with knives, I don't see where there is any use to a switchblade on a plane. However, there are very valid uses of liquids and shoes on a plane, and taking those away is just not worth it considering the low risk. Now, if we had endured several instances of liquid and shoe bomb attacks (even failures), perhaps it would be worthwhile. But not now.

Basically, my point is we have a nasty little habit of responding to crimes committed by people by restricting/banning objects, and those objects are getting more and more benign. There is a point where it is reasonable (no guns on airplanes) and a point where it is not (liquids). Honorable, well intentioned people can disagree where to draw the line and as two how the risks add up, but we're going to far.

Muffin • [January 12, 2010 12:57 PM](#)

So, Kevin Drum's counter-arguments are basically

1) People aren't rational, so we shouldn't use rational arguments, and

2) When people are scared by something, we're not allowed to argue there's no need to be scared of that something.

When you think about it, of course, 2) is really just an application of 1), with a dash of naturalistic fallacy ("everything that's natural is good") added for good measure.

Riskprevention! • [January 12, 2010 1:02 PM](#)

For certain determined attackers, the risks are bigger than single case statistics suggest:

<http://www.pi-news.net/>

Mark J. • [January 12, 2010 1:08 PM](#)

I don't know about control being a factor in fear, at least when it comes to car accidents. I'm far more comfortable behind the wheel than I am flying, and that *is* about control. But it's not fear so much as frustration at the lack of information that I hate about flying. I know exactly what's happening when I'm driving. I have no clue what's going on in the cockpit when I'm in a plane. I find that lack of information very disconcerting. I trust the pilots to do their jobs and if there was a video camera and microphone in the cockpit so I could see what was going on all the time, I'd be much more relaxed while flying. And then I'd at least be aware of the fact that the pilots were too busy fooling with their laptops (or sleeping) as we passed by our destination.

Andy • [January 12, 2010 1:16 PM](#)

@Freek: I would have a harder time to cope with a relative who died from terrorism or homicide than from a relative died in a car accident. Indeed "a death is a death" is too simplistic.

Really? Do you have ANY reason to believe that the hole created in my life when my daughter was run over by a car is any larger or smaller than the one created for my friend when her daughter was murdered by a Hamas bomber? Neither my friend nor I do -- we both grieve for our daughters.

I pray you never have reason to really understand how wrong you are.

DangerToMyself • [January 12, 2010 1:20 PM](#)

Humans are redundant.. we lose a few, we can always make more.. Deal.

Or put another way:

Life sucks. Wear a helmet.

Risk incurred in any activity can never = 0.

takyaek • [January 12, 2010 1:21 PM](#)

I agree with the point but not comparing to traffic accidents. Some people are more at risk to get into traffic accident, one can choose car, routes, time,..., some of traffic accidents are suicides.

Instead compare to homicides against random people. In my country most homicides happens within 'family'.

jacob • [January 12, 2010 1:27 PM](#)

Bruce, you and others have discussed the distortions about safety and security when processed by the human brain. BTW good work by you and others.

Points:

1. people are illogical
2. people are ignorant
3. people make poor evaluations
4. people make poor choices

Now the audience of this blog are for the most part more logical than most.

There is a raging debate in NY about mandating reduction in salt content. People are actually upset. go figure.

I believe if people said to the counter, no salt, they would if enough people said something. But, no they are going to require it. interesting. I have no dog in this fight. I'll break out the salt shaker if I want.

People are apparently willing to go through scanners for the appearance of safety or at least short term safety. At my age I'll take the pat down over the scanner. cheap thrills had by all. :)

GregW • [January 12, 2010 1:36 PM](#)

I agree with Bruce's overall conclusion, "refuse to be terrorized" and much of his reasoning, but not on these statistical grounds alone. The pure statistical reasoning argument, while helpful to consider, is not a sufficient grounds for decision making action or inaction.

Specifically, statistics are not really meaningful unless we understand the probability distribution of what can occur. Is it Gaussian, or there a big "black swan" in the tail? If something has a 1% likelihood of happening (say, nuke in US city) , but it kills 100k people and cuts US GDP by 25% boosting unemployment to 30%, does it really matter that "on average only 10,000 people died per decade from terrorism"?

And while I'm a fan of Bayes theorem, is it really wise that in the domain of human-initiated terrorism events, we want to shape our response by such a backward-looking assessment? Are we saying "past performance *is* a guarantee of future returns?" in terms of prevention and effects?

I am not saying we should adopt Cheney's "one percent doctrine", but I just find the "average deaths per year" reasoning A) leaves out issues like the probability distribution B) leaves out the non-mortality effects (economic effects and all the side-effects of those economics), and C) is backward rather than forward looking.

It might be good for a citizen to decide whether to board a plane, but not good for shaping social policy, and I think a well-focused argument would recognize that the threat models for those two scenarios are different.

HJohn • [January 12, 2010 1:42 PM](#)

@GregW at January 12, 2010 1:36

I think you make a good point. One problem I've seen with statistics is that they do not calculate what would be done in the current climate without countermeasures in place. That's not to say all countermeasures are high quality, but it is tough to calculate. For example, there have been zero commercial airline deaths due to guns... but that does not mean guns aren't a threat to airline safety.

I end up going back and forth from time to time because I do see both sides at times. For example, I think the liquid ban is absurd and ineffective. However, I'm intellectually honest enough to concede that I'm not sure if the ban hindered the christmas bomber.

Moderator • [January 12, 2010 1:44 PM](#)

Bruce asked twice that everyone stay off the gun-ownership tangent. Please honor that request, and don't comment about it at all. Even if you just bring it up briefly or as an analogy for something else, there'll be someone who can't resist arguing with you. So I'm asking everyone to stay off the subject completely, and from this point on I'll be removing any comments that do mention it.

American • [January 12, 2010 1:55 PM](#)

America is not a country, it's a continent. The country you're referring to is called United States.

John Campbell • [January 12, 2010 1:55 PM](#)

"A single death is a tragedy. A million is a statistic." - Stalin

The problem, of course, is that people are already becoming statistics BEFORE anyone dies... all through spreadsheets that bean-counters wield.

Please note that "News Organizations" make money when catering to fear so these mechanisms provide leverage to various fear-mongers, all in the pursuit of profit.

xysmith • [January 12, 2010 2:34 PM](#)

What exactly what his point? He merely stated some facts and said "don't be scared." I think that he draws the wrong impression from the coverage of the Dec. 25 attempt, it's not an expression of national panic. Seriously, how many of you are cowering in your closets? How many of your neighbors?

The reality is, if we did nothing to reduce the harms of various things in our culture, the risk would be greater. This applies in every aspect of life. Over the last decades cars have become much safer. Policies have been implemented. And in a country of 300+ million people with a hundred million cars and millions of miles driven every day, we have 120 deaths each day.

Telling us that the risk is low is a valueless message. Telling us not to be terrorized is a valueless message. Everybody already knows the risk is low. They may not be able to give a specific number, but from observing how people live their lives we know that no measurable portion of our populace is wetting it's pants over the terror risk. Additionally, risks are often low because the risk was recognized and we've adapted our culture to minimize the risk. Which is vastly better than refusing to acknowledge risk.

Finally whenever I hear someone spout some statistics and suggest we spend less on reducing the cost of ameliorating whatever fetish the speaker has, I wonder if they'd be willing to be the statistic.

Brandioch Conner • [January 12, 2010 2:40 PM](#)

I think that Robert Stethem would disagree with the statement that no one has ever been killed with a gun on a commercial flight.

HJohn • [January 12, 2010 3:01 PM](#)

@Brandioch Conner at January 12, 2010 2:40 PM

You're correct. I inadvertantly left out a word in the sentence. I didn't correct it because the post triggered a moderator request to drop the topic.

So, I'll just say you are correct and my comment is wrong.

Moderator • [January 12, 2010 3:11 PM](#)

HJohn, if you want to specify how you'd like the original comment corrected, I can make the change and remove the subsequent discussion of it. I think that would be best under the circumstances.

HJohn • [January 12, 2010 3:22 PM](#)

@Moderator: HJohn, if you want to specify how you'd like the original comment corrected, I can make the change and remove the subsequent discussion of it. I think that would be best under the circumstances.

When discussing the difficulty of statistically measuring countermeasures at 1:42 PM I had meant for my sentence to read "For example, there have been zero commercial airline deaths due to guns in recent years... but that does not mean guns aren't a threat to airline safety."

I inadvertently forgot to state I was referring to the recent. In any case, I certainly wasn't intending to defy Bruce's request that we not discuss gun-ownership. I couldn't think of a better reference to how risk statistics are tough to measure (i.e., the small number of incidents say nothing for what the stastitcal risk is without countermeasure). I apologize if I had unintentionally crossed the line.

Moderator • [January 12, 2010 4:09 PM](#)

HJohn,

Oh, okay, I see what happened now. My comment at 1:44 wasn't a response to yours at 1:42, just a cross-post. I take that comment of yours to be about screening for guns in airports rather than gun ownership. That's okay, although I would ask anyone replying further to be careful not to let it morph into another debate over gun ownership.

HJohn • [January 12, 2010 4:18 PM](#)

@Moderator at January 12, 2010 4:09 PM

I probably should have realized that, 2 minutes would have been a pretty good turnaround time (I didn't notice the times). Of course, my 12:33 PM post was likely one of the culprits, so I'm not completely innocent -- so I won't retract my apology. :)

Happy New Year

David • [January 12, 2010 4:34 PM](#)

@xysmith: The author's point is that, since terrorist attacks kill very few people, spending money and other resources to reduce them is probably inefficient. For example, if we've spent \$X over five years on measures that prevented the equivalent of another 9/11, and \$X spent on highway safety would have reduced traffic fatalities by 5%, then we would have saved about 6,000 more lives by spending the money on highway safety.

While people aren't acting terrified, they are acquiescing in spending more money and more time and giving up normal civil rights to reduce a nearly nonexistent chance of terrorism in the air. We have arbitrary regulations, intrusive searches, and Kafkaesque lists that do not, as far as I can tell, make us any safer. The useful changes have been the hardening of cockpit doors and the change in the attitude of passengers. The provision of air marshals might be useful or might not; air marshals have already caused one unnecessary death, and there's no clear evidence that they've prevented any. Neither the shoe nor the underwear bomber were deterred by the possibility of air marshals, and both were subdued by passengers.

As far as volunteering to be a terrorism statistic, I assume you're volunteering to be either a murder victim or traffic fatality, since you criticize proposals to divert anti-terrorist resources into anti-murder or anti-traffic measures.

Face it, the world is dangerous, and there's very many ways I could die before tomorrow dawns. Trying to prevent all of them is fatuous, and concentrating on a minor danger is pointless.

BCS • [January 12, 2010 4:38 PM](#)

I'd live to see some stats on deaths as the intended result of some action. Murder vs. suicide vs.

terrorism vs. war.

Or how about the even more random and calculating; deaths caused by action people took where they knew in advance the act would kill people: building power plants, upping the speed limit on some arterial road, letting some medicine for an elective procedure pass FDA testing.

Mike • [January 12, 2010 4:42 PM](#)

Terrorism is like global warming: it may be likely that it won't kill too many people, but there is a small risk that it will kill millions.

Clive Robinson • [January 12, 2010 5:06 PM](#)

@ John F.,

"One overlooked point is that if the terrorists had the means to kill us by the hundreds of thousands, they would use them."

Actually I seriously doubt that.

Put simply by the usual definitions terrorists are trying to achieve some political end via the application of a force multiplier against whom they regard as the "political enemy". Thus the application of terror shortly before an election may well effect the outcome of the election.

People hell bent on mass murder against another people are not generally terrorists, that is they are not likely to have a political agenda but a theft / revenge agenda.

We normally reserve such titles as "ethnic cleansing" for their mass murder actions.

With regards,

'This is implied in the "malign intent" argument but should be made explicitly.'

A 'malign intent' does not imply mass murder or even murder at all, at best it represents a stated "desire". The question is thus, is the statement one made to induce fear or one of an actual objective. If the latter it is usually counter productive to fore warn people.

In fact in reality it is extremely unlikely that a terrorist organisation with serious aims and objectives and the resources to carry them out actually want to cause indiscriminate death via mass murder.

For a number of reasons.

Firstly mass murder is usually what they accuse those they seek to terrorise of doing.

Also if their political agenda is for their "home audience" and not those they are terrorising then they are very very unlikely to cause mass civilian casualties as that would almost certainly involve children and that is generally seen by most as a "vote loser" not "vote maker".

Then there is the issue of "making a rod for their own backs". Embarking

on mass murder will bring many others into the conflict against the perpetrators not just those against whom it is aimed. Generally it would be treated as attempted genocide and international law reserves few if any penalties against those taking action to prevent genocide. It almost excuses any measure of human rights abuse you would care to think of.

It is a little like the international laws on piracy on the high seas. Which basically summarise to,

"You catch em you can hang em as high as you want as publically as you want, and the rest of us will say thanks for that".

And contrary to what you appear to think with,

"As such, we are not just guarding against terrorists at their current level of danger but against what they could become if we allowed them to"

The simple answer is that "we do not allow" no "we actively create" terrorists by our actions.

As was pointed out by a UK Minister "there were no terrorists in Iraq before we invaded"...

Brandioch Conner • [January 12, 2010 5:18 PM](#)

@David

"We have arbitrary regulations, intrusive searches, and Kafkaesque lists that do not, as far as I can tell, make us any safer."

I agree. And how about looking at it through a few scenarios?

#1. Terrorists take over plane and crash it into a building. Not very likely any more and the flight deck door improvements have helped that.

#2. Terrorists blow up a plane killing everyone on it. As shown by the shoe bomber and Captain Underpants, we have done NOTHING to address this issue. And air marshals wouldn't help, either.

#3. Terrorists kill everyone on a plane by some means other than blowing a hole in it. At least the metal detectors are helping stop guns from being brought on board. The air marshals might help in some of these situations.

In none of those situations does a "no fly but do not arrest" list help at all.

Clive Robinson • [January 12, 2010 5:25 PM](#)

@ HJohn,

"One problem I've seen with statistics is that they do not calculate what would be done in the current climate without countermeasures in place. That's not to say all countermeasures are high quality, but it is tough to calculate."

Hmm not just tough I would say impossible.

Asside from the moral aspect, the problem is you cannot be an independant observer in such an experiment. Thus your observations would effect the outcome.

It falls to the old "Defense Spending" issue which is effectivly,

"The only time you know your past spending was not correct is when you get attacked"...

Thus you can only say (if not attacked) that you are spending sufficient against an unquantafiable threat.

And unlike normal hard science where you can repeate the experiment as much as you like you can not repeate a "defense experiment" with the same starting conditions.

As an example it has been argued that the costly Falklands War only happened because of a very minor cut back in defense spending...

nathan_h • [January 12, 2010 5:48 PM](#)

@David Thomas

You're correct about the definition of "accident", which I why I don't join others in claiming that car crashes are "not accidents", but I do join them in preferring the term "crash" as one that better reflects the violent and destructive nature of the event compared to, say, a baby pooping its diaper.

Definitions out of the way, intent is fundamental but not uniquely important. Negligence in mobility was one thing when bumping in to somebody meant having to readjust your top hat. And it was still another thing when motorized transportation was new and people were rightly horrified by the deaths caused by carelessly operated vehicles. There are some fascinating stories in the early 20th century NYT archives of the police pursuing people for speeding at 15 or 20 mph; they chased them around the city until they caught them and put them in jail.

But over time we've become very accommodating to traffic fatalities. You said that we still assign fault for negligence in accidents, but if you follow the news for fatal car crashes you'll see that is simply not true. Much more often than not, today's police will dismiss a fatal crash as "just an accident" and leave it at that. There's your common usage, and the reason many of us avoid the word. It's not that we've forgotten about intent—it's that everyone else has forgotten about negligence. Which, by the way, is also subject to deterrence.

By all means we should be comparing fatality numbers, estimating risks and allocating public resources to fix them in ways that are effective. It doesn't mean we ignore intent, it means we factor it in instead of becoming so angry and terrified of it that we ignore everything else.

Clive Robinson • [January 12, 2010 6:01 PM](#)

@ jacob,

With regards to your list,

- "1. people are illogical
2. people are ignorant
3. people make poor evaluations
4. people make poor choices"

I'm not sure what you mean by "ignorant" it has atleast a couple of meanings in the UK one is to be unknowing of the facts another being unlearned.

I'll assume you mean the former. And thus it is the most important of the 4 from which the other three follow.

Thus your list could be redone as,

- 1, Insufficient facts, leads to,
- 2, Poor situational logic, which leads to,
- 3, Incorect evaluation, which leads to,
- 4, Incorect choice.

Thus I would argue if steps one and two are corrected steps 3 and thus 4 have a much lower probability of occuring.

For some one regarded as a logical thinker POTUS's recent action with regards "Capt Underpants" and the three letter agencies just does not sit well. And I think in the very near term he will regret it.

It smackes of "political advise" that is out of date. I realy think that we have reached a tipping point and the reality of the situation is finaly getting through to people. Despite the best efforts of various self interested parties.

That is "step 1" has finaly happened and "step 2" is just now correcting it's self. Hopefully steps 3&4 will occur in the right way.

With regards,

"At my age I'll take the pat down over the scanner. cheap thrills had by all. :)"

I would encorage everybody to ask for the "Personal Touch" in a way that makes it sound like you do want a cheap thrill. The demoralising effect it would have on most "normal people" (ie that of being used for anothers pleasure) hopefully is true of TSA staff and thus cause their supervisors problems.

As regards the "at my age" bit the Scotish stand up comic claims on turning 60 he was given four words of advise by an American acquaintance. Which were,

- 1, If you see a toilet use it, irespective of if you think you need to.
- 2, Stop worrying about offending people just say it then it's their problem.
- 3, Never ever waste an erection, even if you are on your own.

4, Feel good about anything you can still feel.

As I'm now well into the third box of cake candles each year I'm beginning to see the wisdom of some of the points ;)

Clive Robinson • [January 12, 2010 6:07 PM](#)

@ jacob,

Opps senility strikes & I forgot to say which Scottish Stand up it is...

Step forward Dr Billy Connerly (Hon) PhD, who was amused that his wife (Pamala Stevenson) had to get her PhD the hard way ;)

Russell Coker • [January 12, 2010 7:41 PM](#)

What would happen if terrorists started using cars to kill people?

Every city seems to have a shopping area where there are crowded footpaths that are not separated from a nearby road. If someone was to drive a 4*4 on such a footpath they could easily kill more people than the median terrorist attack and it would not require any special preparation (just a driver's licence and \$100 for renting a vehicle). Would they ban 4*4s from central city areas?

Also there is the option of paying someone to have a fatal "accident". I wonder how many people who would refuse a regular "hit man" job offer would accept payment for not braking soon enough when someone jay-walks in front of them. If al Quaeda announced a policy of making such payments then all deaths on the road would have to be regarded as terrorist attacks by default.

Russell Coker • [January 12, 2010 7:47 PM](#)

Clive: You make a good case for a rational terrorist organisation to avoid killing large numbers of people. There are two problems with this, firstly the policy of terror bombing was used throughout WW2 despite not being effective. So in some situations political command-driven organisations will deliberately kill large numbers of people.

The next problem is that terrorist organisations have to be loosely knit, small cells and little hierarchy. Organisations that have a good command structure are likely to be shut down quickly. So this means that while certain things may be against the general policies of the group, or even be utterly irrational - that doesn't prevent one cell from thinking it's a good idea and trying to do it.

The big advantage of fighting a state opponent is that you can negotiate terms for the battle and negotiate a cease-fire or surrender. But with a non-state enemy you might get part of the enemy organisation to agree while others will just continue on their own path.

Winter • [January 13, 2010 1:40 AM](#)

It is not necessary to give up democracy, freedom, and the rule of the law in the face of terrorism.

Many countries have been able to do that, UK, Spain, Israel, to name a few. Their citizens have lived under terrorist threats far worse than present day USians without breaking down.

Maybe the people of the US should get some courage and believe in their own political system. Or maybe it is just that they do not believe in their own fellow countrymen/women anymore?

Winter

Marian Kechlibar • [January 13, 2010 2:58 AM](#)

I think that Bruce does not address one aspect of terrorism, which is probably irrelevant in the USA, but very relevant in "diverse" countries like Lebanon, Yugoslavia, Iraq, Pakistan etc.

Sectarian or ethnic terrorism in such countries, if not held in check vigorously, has awful potential to start a spiral of violence leading to an all-out civil war between religious or national factions.

After all, if, every morning, streets around you are "decorated" by heads and entrails of people mutilated just because they were Sunni or Shia or Bosniaks or Armenians or whatever, and you are also a Sunni, or Shia, etc., and you know that you or your children may be next: how long before you start thinking along the "us vs. them" lines and join "your own" sectarian or nationalist militia to protect yourself?

Either that or you run away with the whole family. You can't possibly stay neutral in this condition.

Marian Kechlibar • [January 13, 2010 3:04 AM](#)

BTW Such acts may transform the whole generations.

Some historians say that a lot of today's bad blood between the Jews and the Arabs in Israel can be traced back to the Deir Yassin massacre by Irgun, because that was the event which started the mass exodus. It was not the bloodiest incident during the 1948 war, but it had by far the largest emotional impact.

If Irgun was disarmed and absorbed by HaGanah three months earlier, the history might have been very different.

(I realize that any discussion of Israeli-Arab relations is a very hot third rail, however I think the example is worth the risk of another flamewar).

Been there • [January 13, 2010 10:00 AM](#)

Chirol says "Moreover, gun crime has gone up about 90% since the UK banned handguns". In the forties, the annual number of murders was about 600 in a population of about 50 million. Now it is about 800 in about 60 million. If you scale that up to the US population it would be about 4000 annually. Reality in the US is nearer 30000. The problem is American readiness to kill.

gaston • [January 13, 2010 10:42 AM](#)

In the United States, cars kill more people every year than do firearms. Swimming pools on a per capita basis are one of the biggest killers of children. All three of these are tools: cars, swimming pools, and firearms. People kill people. Removing the tool does little. Banning firearms in violation of the Bill of Rights, does not address the problem of homicide. Teaching people to be responsible and making them accountable for their actions will make for a better society.

Security theatre does not make society safer and provides us with an excuse to surrender our sense of social responsibility. I would feel safer if I could screen the passengers myself or know that competent individuals were in positions of authority. An story has it that King Louis the XIV was asked what subject he trusted most in France and his answer was his barber. Since the barber holds a knife to his throat every day.

Geek Prophet • [January 13, 2010 11:03 AM](#)

@xysmith

"Finally whenever I hear someone spout some statistics and suggest we spend less on reducing the cost of ameliorating whatever fetish the speaker has, I wonder if they'd be willing to be the statistic."

By that reasoning, I conclude that we should spend large sums of money on preventing shark attack, because I really wouldn't be willing to be attacked by a shark.

We are not talking about small numbers here, or trading one death for another. We are talking differences in orders of magnitude. If we have X dollars to spend and no more, and we can use them to prevent 10 deaths over here, or 1,000 deaths over there, you better have a damned good reason for spending it on the 10, and letting 990 people die.

paul • [January 13, 2010 11:59 AM](#)

I think that the accident/other/intention death axis that Bruce brings in may be not nearly as important as the familiarity axis.

mcb • [January 13, 2010 2:16 PM](#)

@ xyzsmith

"Finally whenever I hear someone spout some statistics and suggest we spend less on reducing the cost of ameliorating whatever fetish the speaker has, I wonder if they'd be willing to be the statistic."

We are the statistics. I am almost certainly going to die of heart disease, cancer, or stroke and almost certainly not going to expire at the hands of a terrorist, from a bolt of lightning, or by being struck by a meteorite. We are being asked to spend billions to further reduce the odds of getting whacked by a terrorist. Thoughtful people will ask if the same money wouldn't go farther (save

more lives) addressing more common and more tractable threats. Fearful people always seem to be asking why they don't feel better yet.

Bruce Monk • January 13, 2010 6:15 PM

The terrorists are winning because we have chosen to allow their activities to disrupt our way of life in tremendous disproportion to the harm they have done to date. The psychological impact of these attacks and our “knee jerk” reactions have cost far more than actual damages done.

Any loss of life is a tragedy, but we lose the equivalent of a jumbo jet a month to pedestrian deaths. The equivalent of twelve jumbo jets per month dies in driving related deaths. I do not mean to minimize 9/11, but the statistics show we lose an equivalent number of people on average every month to the common flu (<http://www.cdc.gov/Flu/keyfacts.htm>).

Our quality of life is in direct proportion to how secure we feel. Our political leaders and the media have chosen to react/respond in such a way that leaves most people in fear far beyond what the terrorist successes/failures should have produced. Walter Burien presents a similar perspective at <http://cafr1.com/Terror.html> .

Having said this, it should be noted that WMD in the hands of terrorists can certainly produce fear that would be well justified. Early responder “Theater” and allocation of these resources on a political versus a priority basis takes away from both the benefit and the true priority which should be annihilation of the organized terrorist threat before they ever get to mount an attack.

I do not oppose investment in preparedness, but feel that organization and deployment of limited resources needs to be focused on where the largest and most likely benefit can be derived. I have the same concern for our investments in Border Security, Aviation Security, To a professional it just appears that we are much more interested in political show and commerce as usual than we are in security.

If you Google for statistics on mortality rates for a while you come up with some interesting relative (but perhaps not relevant) information. For example, we lost twice as many people to pedestrian accidents as compared to military deaths of all kinds over the last 7 years. The Iraq and Afghanistan wars added an average of about 650 deaths per year to a baseline of about 860 with no wars. The military is a dangerous job!

We consider firefighting and law enforcement to be dangerous jobs (and they are!) 118 firefighters lost their lives in 2007 and 124 law enforcement officers died in 2009 from all causes (48 from gun shots and 56 from traffic accidents). The combined total is no where near the top ten categories for workplace related deaths.

My only conclusions are that our perceptions of risk and what constitutes a secure life are highly individual and constantly manipulated by politicians, commercial entities and the media for their own interests. If anyone wants the source links to any of the raw numbers, I will put up a pdf-file that you can download from our website www.fraudfreeid.com . A last side note, Tobacco, "Poor Diet and Physical Inactivity," and Alcohol result in nearly 900,000 deaths per year or about the same as the 9/11 death toll every day! These are largely personal choices and the societal costs for these choices dwarfs the entire Homeland Security Budget! Much of the consequential costs for this behavior show up in our sky rocketing healthcare bill!

jacob • [January 14, 2010 1:02 AM](#)

@clive. thanks, you are more articulate than I am. Yes, The list as you revised is much better and said what I intended. I once had a meeting immediately post 9/11 where the clients had a very large installation site with potential high risk. They wanted to install cameras. I asked and explained about perimeter security, Access Control, radiation detectors, manned security, live video and audio to roaming security, etc. I was told," no we just want cameras and we'll pay whatever it takes." My exact words, "You'll have great video of the explosion". Their jaws clicked open, but no changing of minds at the time.

No installation, procedure or goal can prevent something 100%. I am waiting for the condom bomb. What then? Cavity searches? Then they make computer cases out of thermite? Check how magnetic it is...Fat suits with bombs underneath? Let's see the scanners deal with that. (do a patdown) The only way I see it stopping is if the people, politicians, and burros stop reacting. fat chance. Note: NSA just started reading this.....

I was joking about the cheap thrills. Trying to make a case about the absurdity. These scanners obviously can store pictures and they can be emailed. Show me the unit and I'll tell you how you could do it. Eventually, after they go into common use it will happen. I have stopped yelling at and watching tv crime shows that show a touch screen that has no LEDs, backscreens. or zooming in on ATM camera footage and showing a face or license plate. You can't make pixels or crack crypto of a master criminal in 3 hours. A 10\$ latch guard is a good investment on any security system as well as layered security. Go outward in. Right now do they check cars and parking lots???

They should hire some convicts to test security, think outside the box. Some of these guys are pretty clever. Let's do an xprize for security!!!

The only reason I can think of these is the industry I'm in since I'm not criminally minded. Asking the typical burro to do the same is too much of a stretch. Sorry, maybe I have't calmed down in my old age. :)

[Brad Templeton • January 14, 2010 2:49 AM](#)

There is an interesting case to be made here, though with a risk of circular reasoning, that the main thing we have to fear is fear itself.

The chances of being hurt by a terrorist attack are slim. The chances of being hurt because your behaviour changes out of fear of a terrorist attack is larger, and somewhat but not entirely up to

you.

The chance of being hurt because of other people's response to the fear of a terror attack is much larger, and much less in your control.

We often have to wonder, why do terrorists want to blow up planes? Yes, it's a decent way to kill a modestly large group of people, but there are much easier ways to do that, other crowded places with no security against bringing in bombs. But these places, for better or worse, are not as scary to us. The terrorist wants us to be afraid, to hurt us through our fear more than through the actual mayhem.

And in a perverse counter-effect, the terrorist also wants to blow up the plane because it's hard. They want to say, "see, we hit you where you were trying your hardest to stop us. You can't be safe anywhere."

And it's true, we can't really be safe from such an attacker anywhere. But the terrorist hopes to remind us of it, to make us feel it.

To that end, in spite of what Bruce says about the futility of defending against the previous attack, I believe terrorists probably would like to repeat attacks after we have upped our defences, to show again that even when we are waiting for them, they can still do it.

Bruce Monk • January 14, 2010 8:45 AM

I don't believe it is futile to defend against previous attacks. "Theater" against previous attacks is a waste. Theater serves to cause great levity amongst our adversaries and a desire to try it again without the "mistake" from before. Effective counter-measures should be deployed in secret to keep the terrorists from moving to another procedure that we may not have a defense against.

Sherwood Botsford • January 15, 2010 12:37 PM

When dealing with a dog, confidence is key. You must not let them know you fear them.

The best thing we could have done the day after 9/11 was to carry on as usual. Sure, implement the best real security we can behind the scenes, but up front there is no change.

The second best thing is to mock it. For example: Several thousand Americans died last year slipping on the soap in the bathtub. Obviously Proctor & Gamble and Lever Brothers are terrorist organizations. GM, Ford, Chrysler, Honda, Nissan, Kia... are the Great Cabal trying to terrorize Americans. Last year they managed, what, 50,000 fatalities.

I am a dual citizen, (Canadian/US) and live in Canada. With this latest round of theatre, I have decided to treat it the same way I do bad conventional theatre. Do something else instead.

I was going to fly down to New Mexico this spring to visit my brother. Now, I'm not going to. I have friends who are going to New Zealand for a month this spring. They have paid slightly extra to take a flight that doesn't pass over the U.S.

So you lose a few planes. The brits did it right during WWII. Move the kids out of harms way, but carry on. The bombs fell. People died. They carried on.

"Hitler says he will wring Englands neck like a chicken. Some chicken. Some neck."

We are becomming a continent of wussies. Parents are afraid to let their kids bike to school for fear of them getting run over, or abducted by child molesters. We'll ignore the fact that they are on a fast track to dying of obesity instead.

Life is NOT safe. Accept it. Have fun.

urs • January 15, 2010 1:46 PM

Switzerland has legal machine guns? Not true. Even museums are under tight control and their inventory is regularly being checked.

And we (the Swiss) are allowed to drive around with a loaded gun? I do not know one person who has a gun in his car, loaded or unloaded.

This sounds made up. Make sure you got your facts right or risk not being believed altogether.

Excellent article, Bruce!

The same can be applied to swine, bird or next dog flu and the application of practically untested vaccine. Or any other threat to our seemingly thoroughly manageable lives...

Ped • January 18, 2010 3:58 AM

While the start of the article is interesting, I think the ending point "We can fight back by refusing to be terroroized." is the most important truth in the case of "terrorism".

I always wonder why people are so willing to watch videos where terrorists are killing people, etc. That's exactly why they killed them and filmed it. If nobody would spread such video, they would give up and look for something else.

Terrorists are like irritating kids, unable to deal with their problems in civilized (discussion) manner. If you react to such kid and looks irritated, it will be happy to the bone and try even harder to irritate you more. If you ignore it, it will eventually get bored and try to find somebody else to bother.

Of course dying in the course of ignoring would be highly unlucky. And not trying to prevent it would be plain stupid.

We should put more silent and reasonable effort to prevent attacks (I'm afraid there's not much more to be done on that front) while we should control ourselves much more and give less sh*t about terrorists publicly. Maybe once such attacks will have the same coverage in news as common driving accident, it will force terrorists to plan on larger scale, to scare people again. Plans on larger scale are usually much more difficult to execute, so it gives those countermeasures better chance to catch it up early.

Panicking over death of 100 people in airplane crash is very likely a natural human reaction, but we shouldn't. Even if we have to forcibly control ourselves.

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