

Why we're Afraid: Thinking about Terrorism Risk

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Terrorism has a special salience for Canadians: The destruction of Air India Flight 182 in June 1985 by a bomb placed inside an item of checked baggage within Canada, causing 329 deaths, is the second-largest fatality count from this type of attack in modern times – second only to 9/11. Twenty-one years later, in June 2006, the arrest of the “Toronto 18,” and the subsequent revelation of clear evidence of dedicated planning for mass murder, showed that we were not immune to ongoing threats of this kind.

The fact that last week's bombings in Boston was the first such event on U. S. soil since 9/11, as well as the argument that the overall frequency of what may be classified as terrorist attacks in developed countries appears to be declining over the past decades, do not provide much comfort. This is because terrorism strikes most of us as a special – perhaps unique – type of risk, due to its deliberate malevolence directed against innocent and unsuspecting victims and, sometimes, to its suggestion of complex and intractable issues (the “clash of civilizations”). Instinctively, we want to know not just “Who?” but “Why?” And yet the answers to the second question, once provided, are almost invariably unsatisfactory.

The political debate that arose immediately in Canada after the Boston bombings, triggered by the phrase “root causes,” reveals the inevitably unhelpful character of seeking simple, quick responses to these events. The very nature of terrorism, to the extent to which we can understand it (or even classify it as a distinct phenomenon separate from other forms of intentional violence) at all, defies clear explanation. Likewise the quick, ritualistic rejoinder from heads of government, to the effect that they will always respond to them with toughness and swift justice, is simply irrelevant; for the perpetrators, present and future, this threat carries no weight whatsoever.

Yet the history of modern terrorism, from its origins in Tsarist Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century, offers at least some guidance. (I owe what follows to Claudia Verhoeven of Cornell University.) The mind of the terrorist is governed by one overriding idea, namely, to create a radical rupture in time, in history, and in tradition, by means of a singular event, or a connected series of such events, through “propaganda by the deed,” a phrase which also dates from this historical period. This idea thus differs fundamentally from the motivations of modern mass-movements with political objectives, which seek by either democratic or non-democratic means, or a combination of both, over a protracted period, through many setbacks, to achieve radical institutional change by ultimately taking the reins of “legitimate” power.

The competing idea of an instantaneous and thoroughgoing rupture in historical time by an exemplary violent deed is sometimes accompanied by an explicit rationale, in the form of a manifesto, but not always. But this difference is immaterial, because in either case the “thinking” behind the deed is, strictly speaking, delusional. There is not, and

there cannot be, an organic connection between the deed itself and the expected outcome. This is shown clearly in one of the most notorious cases to date, that of the Unabomber, who penned elaborate academic essays in social theory to accompany his deadly packages: There is simply no sensible link between the rationale and the means of its intended realization. But in other cases, such as the inarticulate ramblings of Timothy McVeigh in his interview on *Sixty Minutes* or the episodic Twitter feeds from the younger of the two Boston brothers, we have almost nothing to go on. Sometimes the supposed rationale is simply pathetic: One of the recently-named jihadists from London, Ontario apparently reasoned that, since it was too onerous for a young man to live as a faithful Muslim, without alcohol and women, he would rather earn a quick ticket to Paradise by becoming a warrior for his faith.

For me this clearly delusional character of the necessary acts of deadly violence that must accompany the propaganda by the deed links the kind of events that are explicitly labelled as terrorist attacks with other forms of private acts of mass murder. Thus it is hard for me to see any essential difference between the Boston bombings, on the one hand, and on the other the terrible shootings in 2012 in the movie theater in Aurora, Colorado and the elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut (in both of which there were accidental circumstances that prevented many more casualties from occurring). Others may disagree, of course; in both media commentary and academic analysis, we do not yet have a consensus on a definitive conception of terrorism.

Then what do we have to guide us in thinking about terrorism risk? The surest guide is the evidence that dedicated police work, using a combination of traditional and modern technology-enhanced techniques, has been shown to be, in a number of different countries, a highly-effective means for preventing and mitigating this risk. In Canada this includes the superb infiltration and surveillance operation that forestalled the planned attacks by the Toronto 18. To be sure, this work will always be relatively more effective against small groups, as opposed to so-called “lone-wolf” operations; but even in the latter case, as the events in Boston showed, newer resources such as social-media networks can supply additional tools for the police to rely on.

The legitimate special fears to which certain types of risk, such as terrorism, give rise always require an equal measure of fortitude and balanced perspective on the part of the public. We need to resist the temptation to compromise important civil liberties in our search for an adequate level of protection against this risk, because it simply cannot be reduced much below what we have been living with in recent years. Above all we must ensure that we keep in mind that there are many sources of risk and that it is a mistake to overcompensate on one while paying too little attention to others.