

# Introduction

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was driving my 12-year-old son to school when news that an airliner had struck the south tower of the World Trade Center came over the radio. "It's probably a terrorist attack," Luke concluded. "No," I replied, "It's probably just some poor guy in a Piper Cub learning how to fly." I arrived home just in time to see the second plane strike the north tower. My son had been right. The phone rang almost immediately. WGN TV News asked me to come in to the studio and provide commentary on the unfolding events. I spent the next thirteen hours at the station and have returned countless times in the weeks, months, and years since. Out of that media work grew the idea for this book.

In my many TV appearances, radio interviews, and public lectures, I have consistently encountered a single pressing issue: the need for basic information devoid of hype and untainted by political rhetoric. An educated, non-academic audience wants and needs clear and accurate information on the terrorist threat and how to respond to it. A book that aims to provide such information should neither oversimplify nor needlessly complicate the nature of terrorism in the contemporary world. It should, however, address popular conceptions and misconceptions in a systematic way, replacing rumor and speculation with evidence and analysis. Above all it should seek to dispel the generalized climate of fear stemming largely from ignorance and in some cases deliberately manipulated for political gain. "Fear," an old Dutch saying has it, "is a bad counselor." Unfortunately, that unreliable advisor has had the public ear for far too long.

The title of this book defines its approach. Let me make clear from the outset: I am not declaring terrorism to be a myth; quite the contrary, a real threat certainly exists. Nor do I deny that what the pundits commonly call the *new* terrorism does differ in key respects from what has gone before. Instead I argue that popular perceptions of terrorism contain an undesirable blend of myth and reality. This noxious mix has kept people in a state of needless agitation and unhealthy anxiety. Anxiety in turn hinders serious assessment of real risks and rational consideration of how best to address them. Without such a sober cost-benefit analysis, we are consigned to wasting millions of dollars on measures that make us feel better

without offering any real security. The response to the London Underground bombings of July 2005 offers a poignant illustration of this problem. For a month after the attack the city of Chicago put extra police and bomb detection dogs on its elevated platforms to counter the remote possibility of another bomb attack. Because the police could not possibly cover every stop at all times, the extra security would have been easy to evade had an actual operation been planned. Of course, no attack occurred, convincing many observers that the precautions justified the expense. In reality the taxpayers bought an expensive placebo.

The design of the book supports its goal. Each chapter begins by identifying prevailing myths, misconceptions, and oversimplifications about a specific aspect of terrorism. The remainder of the chapter then addresses each issue in detail. Chapters 1–3 progress from a theoretical discussion of the nature of terrorism through a historical overview to an analysis of patterns and trends. Chapters 4–5 focus specifically on al-Qaeda, its origins, organization, evolution, and ideology. Chapters 6–7 assess the terrorist threat and consider how best to respond to it. Chapter 8 examines the U.S. strategy for combating terrorism, considers its effectiveness, and offers an alternative approach.

A few broad themes run through the book as a whole. First, I maintain that much of what passes for “new” terrorism has a long history. Even those aspects of the problem that have not appeared before represent the culmination of trends developing over time. The increasing lethality of terrorism, which so many experts note, is a case in point. Individual terrorist attacks have grown more deadly (although terrorist campaigns have not) but not necessarily for the reasons commonly given: religious fanaticism. Media coverage blended with prime-time TV continually raises the threshold of violence. A dozen deaths no longer shock us the way they once did, so terrorists (like movie producers) up the ante by serving up more mayhem. The globalization of terrorism too represents an evolving trend rather than an entirely new phenomenon. Terrorism has always had an international dimension. In the 1920s the Irish Republican Army depended on support from the Irish American community. During the more recent “Troubles” in Northern Ireland (1969–98) the organization continued to receive support from the expatriate community but also linked up with the Basque separatist organization Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA, from the initials of its Basque name, *Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna*) and eventually received help from the Libyan government. In many ways al-Qaeda represents the latest stage in the evolution of terrorism. It has indeed gone global for the same reasons McDonald’s, Toyota, and IBM have: air travel, satellite television, and the Internet have knitted the world more tightly together.

This book also challenges most emphatically the idea of a “Global War on Terrorism (GWOT),” which has become one of the most socially

enervating and politically debilitating phenomena in recent history. If the word “war” served only as a metaphor for a protracted and difficult struggle, I would have little quarrel with its use. GWOT, however, has become in the eyes of many a real war but a war with no clear definition of an attainable victory. The state of war has been used to justify actions ranging from wiretapping without warrants to drilling for oil in the Alaskan wilderness. Politicians have manipulated the fear it engenders to get elected (or reelected). Besides being socially and emotionally debilitating, fear is expensive. To the billions of dollars spent on military action and necessary security must be added millions more spent on worthless measures that create a temporary sense of well-being without making people safer. The health care costs from stress-related illness and anxiety disorders in the general population may never be measured but are certainly high.

Rejecting GWOT necessitates reexamining the current approach to dealing with the terrorist threat. Rather than conventional war, I argue that counterinsurgency might be a better model for combating terrorism. Such an approach emphasizes addressing the root causes of terrorism while using limited military and extensive police resources in a protracted struggle to wear down al-Qaeda and its affiliates. This strategy also requires us to face an unpleasant but inescapable fact: the scourge of terrorism can no more be eliminated than can crime or poverty. We can and must work to reduce the threat to an acceptable level, but at some point we have to learn to live with it. Terrorism like violent crime has become a permanent part of the social landscape. Far from paralyzing us, this truth may in fact set us free. I can say with virtual certainty that the United States will suffer another terrorist attack, possibly a catastrophic one, in the foreseeable future. I can also add that the chance of any individual American being the victim of such an attack is remote, far less than the chance of dying in an automobile accident, less even than the odds of being struck by lightning. This realization should not make us complacent, but it can enable us to go about our daily lives with less worry.