AMERICA
REMAINS AT RISK—FROM ITSELF
BY STEPHEN FLYNN

OUT THERE
AL QAEDA IS WEAK
BUT ACTIVE.
Americans can be excused for thinking that terrorism is largely behind them. Eight-plus years after the 9/11 attacks, Al Qaeda has yet to strike the United States again. Airport screening seems routine and more relaxed, and anxieties over employment, mortgages, and health care have supplanted worries about anthrax and suicide bombers.

Were Americans’ fears of terrorism ever justified? Or more hype than reality? The answer is complicated. Al Qaeda and its imitators were and remain committed to attacking the United States. Yet they’ve demonstrated a very limited capacity for doing so. The ranks of what U.S. intelligence agents call “Al Qaeda Central” have been thinned through many successful kills and captures, and the remaining leaders are now holed up in Pakistan. Although there is a growing number of Qaeda-inspired groups at large, the presence of actual Qaeda operatives on U.S. soil was tiny on 9/11—and was essentially eliminated in the attacks of that day.

Still, U.S. officials are not imagining things when they say, as Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano did in July, that “the terror threat to the homeland is ‘persistent and evolving.’ ” The September 2009 arrest in New York of Najibullah Zazi makes that clear. That said, it’s important to retain perspective about the probability and the consequence of potential attacks. Zazi’s arrest is an important reminder that today’s terrorists are hardly infallible. For example, when he tried his hand at bomb making in the United States, he was quickly tipped off to authorities by a Denver store clerk. Meanwhile, the average American remains far more likely to be a victim of a hurricane, earthquake, or wildfire than a suicide bombing. Add H1N1, avian flu, and SARS to the list and there are few plausible terrorist scenarios that can go head-to-head with Mother Nature.

But that doesn’t mean no threat remains. A 2008 survey of 100 U.S. foreign-policy experts found that nearly two thirds think a catastrophic attack is likely within the next five years. Yet the greatest threat today is not an attack but the risk the country would overreact. Major national traumas don’t always bring out the best in the U.S. government—at least at first. Pearl Harbor led, among other things, to the internment of Japanese-Americans. In the wake of 9/11, Washington grounded all airplanes and effectively closed its borders, thereby doing, at least for a short period, what no adversary could: blockade the U.S. economy.

Today the dangers that the United States would overreact are arguably greater than they were on 9/11. That’s thanks to the Bush administration. In his farewell address, Bush claimed that his most important legacy was that there had been no more attacks on his watch. In a series of postdeparture interviews, former vice president Dick Cheney has blamed Democrats for putting Americans at risk by wanting to close Guantánamo and limit harsh interrogation techniques. In the process, they’ve set up a dynamic that provides the Obama administration with little wiggle room if an attack does come. They’re likely to embrace tough security measures in order to face down accusations that they’ve lowered the nation’s guard.

There is one way to avoid this scenario, and it involves ditching the muscular but unrealistic “protection at all costs” approach. A constant refrain heard during the Bush years was that while terrorists need to get things right just once, the nation’s defenders have to be right 100 percent of the time. This set an impossible standard. There is no precedent of any government ever getting anything right all the time, and U.S. efforts have been far from flawless. Success in combating terrorism requires timely and accurate intelligence, and America’s intelligence services are a long way from effectively recalibrating themselves to meet this imperative. Bureaucratic battles continue, and the CIA still has too few spies. U.S. borders are not and never will be impermeable.

The Bush approach also (with its bombastic rhetoric and prisoner-abuse scandals) played into anti-American narratives and sidelined the nation’s most important asset by telling ordinary citizens to leave terrorism to the professionals. That was a reckless mistake, for nearly every successful thwarting of terrorist activity on U.S. soil relied on civilians. Remember that on 9/11 it was the passengers on United Flight 93 that prevented Al Qaeda from striking the U.S. Capitol or the White House.

Terrorism will remain attractive to America’s enemies so long as they can be confident it will generate a big bang for a small buck. Deterring attacks thus requires two things: improving America’s ability to detect and intercept terrorist activity and reducing the likelihood that the nation would overreact.

By treating terrorism as a hazard to be managed by all Americans, terrorism can also be starved of its ability to generate dread, panic, and paralysis. Terror works only if it convinces people they are vulnerable and powerless. By being candid with the American people about the threat they face and by giving Americans ways to address their vulnerabilities—such as providing detailed guidance on what suspicious activities to report and encouraging citizens to get emergency preparedness training—Washington could make terrorism far less terrifying.

Instead of feeding Americans a diet of alerts they ignore, the Obama administration should continue reminding them that they are and must be a resilient people. Washington should ask citizens to share the responsibility for preparing the nation to cope with the man-made and natural disasters, for example by expanding funding for the Citizens Corps program. When individuals and communities are better able to withstand, recover, and adapt to catastrophic risks, terrorism will become more like the common cold: a new strain may emerge each season, but it will have little effect on the nation’s daily life.

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