

A FALSE SENSE OF INSECURITY

By Bill Bonner

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"Americans are afraid of terrorism," say the pollsters. The fear is so jacked up by the media, politicians and generals, it is to the point where the average man could see his house firebombed, his children abducted and his wife raped before his eyes. "Terrorists threaten our 'way of life'," said President Bush. "Terrorists put the U.S. Constitution at risk," added the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The actual risk of being a victim of terrorism is as remote as say, the risk of drowning in your own bathtub. You wonder why people get so worked up about it. Even in Israel, a person is 4 times as likely to die in a traffic accident as in a terrorist attack.

The U.S. State Department didn't begin counting terrorist deaths before the late '60s. Since then, even including the deaths from the outlier attack on the World Trade towers of September 11, 2001, the number of homicides resulting from terrorism has been about the same as the number of people who died from severe allergic reactions to peanut butter. Yet, since 2001, the U.S. government spent billions in efforts to protect Americans from terrorism. As far as we know, it spent none to protect us from peanut butter. For your editor, who is allergic to peanut butter, Skippy, Jiffy and Peter Pan represent a far bigger threat than Osama or Moktar.

But the difference is this: Peanut butter is a private danger. Even if 100 people gag on it tomorrow, no reporter is likely to come around. If the 100 go down in a terrorist incident, on the other hand, every paper in the country will cover the story...and probably millions or billions of dollars will be spent as a result. It is the public spectacle that draws out the money, the headlines, and the absurdity.

Of course, the real danger from terrorism, people will tell you, comes from things the world has never seen. Terrorists might step up their operations. Or, they might get hold of "weapons of mass destruction" and really do some damage.

Suppose they were to bring down more airplanes? According to University of Michigan researchers, Michael Sivak and Michael Flannagan, they'd have to crash as many planes as they did on Sept. 11 every month in order for the risk of flying to equal the risk of driving a car.

Or suppose terrorists were to set off a "dirty bomb?" Yes, it would increase radiation levels. Enough to harm many people? Maybe. Maybe not. No one really knows. That is the case with biological and chemical weapons too; they are hard to control and deliver. That's why terrorists, as well as traditional military forces, usually stick to things that blow up in the old fashioned way. So far, as near as we can recall, more people have been killed by John Kerry than by dirty bombs...and more people have died in Ted Kennedy's car than in terrorist attacks with chemical weapons. And all the terror incidents of the last 1,000 years have probably killed fewer people than the war George Bush launched against it three years ago.

The most effective response to the terrorism is probably the one most likely to frustrate terrorists and least likely to become public policy: ignore it.

"Get on the damn elevator!," writes Senator John McCain. "Fly on the damn plan! Calculate the odds of being harmed by terrorists! It's still about as likely as being swept out to seas by a tidal wave. Suck it up, for crying out loud. You're almost certainly going to be okay.. And in the unlikely event you're not, do you really want to spend your last days covering behind plastic sheets and duct tape?"

Instead, the attacks of Sept. 11 produced the results the terrorists desired: The Bush administration panicked...got out the duct tape...and created what Leif Wenar at the University of Sheffield cleverly calls "a false sense of insecurity," which panicked the American people.

The aim of terrorists is to terrorize. What they want to do is to create a mood of instability and hysteria--luring their targets to overreact. In the language of Marxist terrorists of the '60s, their real aim is to radicalize the workers, moving them to join the cause.

That is just what the Bush administration seems to have done. Rather than calmly and quietly track down the perps, it blundered right into Iraq and stirred up terrorist ambitions all over the Middle East. Where previously there had been only a handful of fanatics to worry about, now there are thousands of them, radicalized, armed and motivated.

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