

This is Your Brain on Terrorism

JULY 23, 2013 27 COMMENTS ([HTTPS://LIBERTYMCG.COM/2013/07/23/THIS-IS-YOUR-BRAIN-ON-TERRORISM/#COMMENTS](https://libertymcg.com/2013/07/23/this-is-your-brain-on-terrorism/#comments))

The new home of Brian McGlinchey's independent journalism is [Stark Realities with Brian McGlinchey: Invigoratingly unorthodox perspectives for intellectually honest readers](https://starkrealities.substack.com/) (<https://starkrealities.substack.com/>).

Read this article on my new, reader-friendly, ad-free platform: [This is Your Brain on Terrorism](https://starkrealities.substack.com/p/this-is-your-brain-on-terrorism) (<https://starkrealities.substack.com/p/this-is-your-brain-on-terrorism>).

Edward Snowden's revelations (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/the-nsa-files>) about the federal government's mass collection of phone records, emails, web browsing history and social media interactions have prompted a collective contemplation of a critical question: Should we surrender Constitutionally-enshrined liberties for the government's promise of security against terror?

Unfortunately, our ability to reach a rational decision on this question is hampered by our humanity: **While the homo sapiens brain has come a long way, it's still wired to assess potential threats with emotion rather than reason.** As a result, we're susceptible to extreme exaggeration of the threat of terrorism and may be making a catastrophically bad bargain with our essential freedoms.

Our Lizard Brains: Wired for Snakes

Our tendency to miscalculate on terrorism is in our DNA. In a New York Times piece aptly titled "[Scaring Us Senseless](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/24/opinion/24taleb.html?_r=0)" (http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/24/opinion/24taleb.html?_r=0)," Nassim Taleb writes:

Terrorism exploits three glitches in human nature, all related to the management and perception of unusual events. The first and key among these has been observed over the last two decades by neurobiologists and behavioral scientists, who have debunked a great fallacy that has marred Western thinking since Aristotle and most acutely since the Enlightenment.

That is to say that **as much as we think of ourselves as rational animals, risk avoidance is not governed by reason, cognition or intellect. Rather, it comes chiefly from our emotional system.**

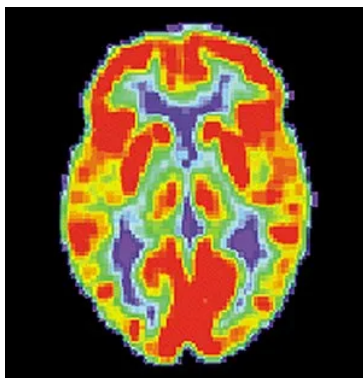
When assessing the terror threat, our ability to reason is further undermined by "[availability bias](http://www.psmag.com/culture/driving-terrorism-deadly-dangerous-availability-heuristic-55361/)" (<http://www.psmag.com/culture/driving-terrorism-deadly-dangerous-availability-heuristic-55361/>)," the tendency to overestimate the likelihood of events that are more available in our memory banks. Since availability is amplified by the emotional impact of an event and how often we hear about it, our views on terrorism are especially prone to this effect.

Long ago, when human self-preservation was focused on perils like snakes and rival tribes, emotion- and memory-fueled threat assessment surely served us well. Today, in an era of 24-hour cable news networks and social media, the process is completely short-circuited: By the very definition of "news," we hear very little about the dominant threats to our lives, and the most about the rarest, including terror.

Just how small is the terror threat? Consider your annual odds of perishing by terror compared to two alternatives:

- Dying in a [car accident](http://reason.com/archives/2011/09/06/how-scared-of-terrorism-should) (<http://reason.com/archives/2011/09/06/how-scared-of-terrorism-should>): 1 in 19,000
- Dying in a [bathtub](http://reason.com/archives/2011/09/06/how-scared-of-terrorism-should) (<http://reason.com/archives/2011/09/06/how-scared-of-terrorism-should>): 1 in 800,000
- Dying in a [terror attack](http://reason.com/blog/2011/11/21/why-we-should-fear-bathtubs-more-than-te) (<http://reason.com/blog/2011/11/21/why-we-should-fear-bathtubs-more-than-te>): 1 in 3.5 million

With bathtubs posing a substantially greater danger than terrorists, why are politicians silent on this menace? Why don't they accuse rivals of being "weak on bathtubs"? Where are the recurring TV news segments? Why is there no Bureau of Bathtub Security with a [\\$4 billion](#)



(http://commons.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:PET_Normal_brain.jpg)

PET scan of a human brain (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

(<http://reason.com/reasonstv/2012/11/23/3-reasons-to-kill-the-dept-of-homeland-s-headquarters> (<http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/133423>)) and an accompanying array of intrusive, government-mandated safety measures?

That's absurd, some may say — bathtub deaths are accidental, and terrorist attacks are intentional!

That objection is itself a case study in reasoning warped by emotion. After all, if our government's goal is to preserve American lives, it makes no difference whether one hazard is accidental in nature and another results from a deliberate act. Both result in grieving families. The difference in our society's reaction to the two is found deep in our lizard brains, which assign disproportionate importance to exotic threats. If we are to pursue rational policies, however, our efforts to reduce deaths from shocking acts should carry the same sense of proportionality we apply to more mundane perils.

Availability Bias Reinforced

To do that, we must first overcome our emotional biases about terror. That's a challenge made steeper by the role our media and government play in reinforcing them.

When it comes to other phobias like air travel and sharks, the media and government contribute to our biases, but usually make some effort to help us overcome them too. For example, after a spectacular air crash, they remind us we're far safer in the skies than on the roads. Following their lead, individuals remind each other of that increasingly well-known fact too.

Where terrorism is concerned, the media and government almost exclusively *reinforce* our emotionally-charged and deeply flawed conclusions. Each has powerful incentives to do so.

Ghastly as terror attacks may be, news executives will tell you they're great for ratings (<http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/boston-marathon-bombings-manhunt-coverage-boost-ratings-article-1.1325312>). After terror attacks like the one in Boston, networks cast all other stories aside and spend weeks positively saturating the public in images, interviews and commentary that reinforce availability bias—and provide terrorists the very publicity they sought in the first place. And, having long ago morphed from detached observers and critics of government to de facto communication outlets for it, major news organizations spend precious little time scrutinizing government claims about terror.

That's problematic, because the government has its own incentives to exaggerate the threat. In the wake of 9/11, the United States began building a massive anti-terror bureaucracy, and the first mission of bureaucrats is to not only defend their power and budget but to expand them. To that end, they benefit more from fanning the public's terror worries than moderating them.



(<https://libertymcg.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/dhs-headquarters.jpg>).

Department of Homeland Security's \$4 Billion Headquarters: Still under construction, the largest project in GSA History

Terrorcrats are aided in that effort by the same potent mix of politicians, lobbyists and federal dollars that has pushed U.S. military spending far beyond (<http://www.cato.org/blog/tax-dollars-work-subsidizing-security-wealthy-allies>) its rational limits. If Eisenhower were here today, he'd surely be disturbed to find that the military-industrial complex he warned us about (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8y06NSBBRY>) is now paired with a formidable terrorism-industrial complex (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/05/private-firms-fear-9-11>) touching more than 1,200 government organizations and 1,900 private companies (http://boston.com/community/blogs/on_liberty/2011/01/democracy_and_the_rise_of_a_te.html) and consuming billions in taxpayer money. (There's no telling how many billions: Much of the anti-terror budget is classified (<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/top-secret-america/articles/a-hidden-world-growing-beyond-control/>), shielded from scrutiny under the absurd pretense that mere knowledge of the price tag would aid the enemy.)

Saving Lives: Weighing Costs and Benefits

We return, then, to the question at hand. Are Americans making a reasonable trade-off between:

- Government policies that are supposed to decrease our risk of dying in a terrorist attack, and
- The cost to society for the additional margin of safety actually gained?

With the shocking images and deep sadness of 9/11 understandably seared into their psyches, many Americans seem to feel that no cost is too high to ward off future attacks. However, few would reach the same conclusion about other risks.

Consider this: Some 30,000 American men, women and children die in vehicle accidents each year. Would you support a government-mandated safety feature that would spare 3,000 of those lives and add \$50 to the cost of every single car? Probably.

What if it cost \$500, and even current car owners were ordered to add it? How about \$5,000? \$15,000? \$25,000?

At some point, your answer likely became "no." It's not because you place little value on those 3,000 American lives—a 9/11 casualty count every single year—but because you realize life is inherently risky and we have to weigh the costs, benefits and unintended consequences of our various life-preserving policies.

Which brings us back to terror. Here, the cost is measured not only in untold billions of dollars but in something even more precious: our liberties (<https://libertymcg.com/2012/09/11/liberty-an-unmourned-casualty-of-the-war-on-terror/>). Endangering generations to come, all three branches of the federal government have colluded to give current and future presidents and their appointees the power to engage in mass domestic surveillance (<https://www.eff.org/nsa-spying/how-it-works>), indefinite detention (<http://rt.com/usa/rand-paul-at-cpac-275/>) and execution without trial (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/18/opinion/the-drone-that-killed-my-grandson.html?_r=0)—offering us a promise of enhanced security in return.

But how much extra security are we actually getting for that price? It turns out most of the plots the FBI claims to have foiled were concocted and often even *equipped* by the FBI itself (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/story/2013/05/01/f-q-a-trevor-aaronson.html>), coaxing a variety of social misfits into attempting attacks they didn't have the capability to carry out on their own. Meanwhile, as the Boston Marathon bombing demonstrated, government agents aren't nearly as skilled in thwarting attacks that weren't their idea in the first place.

And remember, this massive and expensive effort is directed at a mortality risk that's already among the slimmest Americans face: Despite Islamic terrorists' dedication to destruction, our "porous" southern border and the countless low-tech means of killing people, they've only claimed an average of 1.6 lives per year (<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/johncassidy/2013/04/after-boston-a-few-facts-about-terrorism.html>), within the United States since 9/11.

To counter that fact, defenders of domestic surveillance and other counter-terror programs will point to the same threat their confederates used to justify the invasion of Iraq: What if the terrorists go nuclear? For a variety of reasons (<http://reason.com/archives/2012/05/17/the-implausibility-of-nuclear-terrorism>), their prospects of making the leap from box-cutters and pressure cookers to a nuclear bomb are almost unfathomably slim.

Caveat Emptor

None of that is to say we shouldn't make *any* effort to thwart terror. The question is whether today's extraordinarily expensive and un-Constitutional measures represent a rational, cost-effective and proportionate response to the danger terrorism truly presents—not in the emotion-laden recesses of our lizard brains, but in the real world.

In the domestic war on terror, the federal government is essentially making this offer to the American people: "Give up your Bill of Rights and plunge the country far deeper into debt, and I'll improve your risk of dying in a terror attack from one in 3,500,000 to—who knows—one in 3,501,000."

Considering what we're being offered, giving away the protections we fought a revolution to achieve is a bargain so outrageously lopsided that future historians will certainly marvel at what is unfolding today.

Given what Americans are up against—their own flawed reasoning and an imposing set of forces with powerful incentives to exaggerate the risk of terror—there's little reason to hope a majority can be persuaded they're paying an obscene price for the slimmest margin of additional safety against an already-modest risk.

But we have to try.

The new home of Brian McGlinchey's independent journalism is Stark Realities with Brian McGlinchey (<https://starkrealities.substack.com/>), a Substack newsletter that undermines official narratives, demolishes conventional wisdom and exposes fundamental myths across the political spectrum.

Read this article on my new, reader-friendly, ad-free platform: This is Your Brain on Terrorism (<https://starkrealities.substack.com/p/this-is-your-brain-on-terrorism>)

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27 Responses to *This is Your Brain on Terrorism*

Caroline Blainey says:

December 20, 2021 at 8:40 am

Protect the old and frail against health risks, outlaw banning of helpful cheap drugs that have been used successfully abroad and at home in favour of more expensive drugs, ban paying hospitals, doctors, universities, politicians etc from accepting \$ for health decisions(and punish with jail/ double the financial gain as penalties)..... then hope most others ,including the hapless vaccinated, get omicron and earn their immunity against all covids, research who developed/ weaponized Covid over last 20

years through patents and put them in jail for life. Feel free to add to my tirade! Keep our eyes open to the next round from attacking and ignoring our democratic freedoms under the guise of medical catastrophe.....Ps I was born on occupied Holland and have an extreme bias in favour of democracy!

Reply

fortiori says:

[December 19, 2021 at 6:30 pm](#)

I've read thousands of articles on the web and in print since 1995. This is easily the best article and the most important article I have ever read in my lifetime of 42 years.

Bravo and thank you.

BTW, i've shared this article at every opportunity and I hope doing so has brought you some of the success you so rightly deserve.

Reply

Brian McGlinchey says:

[December 20, 2021 at 10:19 am](#)

Wow, what a wonderful comment to read. The fact that the article is perceived to have value 8 years after posting makes your praise all the more encouraging. Note my new writing now appears at Stark Realities with Brian McGlinchey, a Substack newsletter: <https://starkrealities.substack.com/>

Reply

Brian McGlinchey says:

[February 10, 2022 at 11:17 am](#)

Inspired by your feedback and frequent sharing of this article, I've republished it at my new Substack platform, Stark Realities with Brian McGlinchey: <https://starkrealities.substack.com/p/this-is-your-brain-on-terrorism>

I'd encourage you to share the article using that link. Substack has a much more reader-friendly, ad-free layout, and readers will also have access to all my latest writing. Thank you once again!

Reply

Holly says:

[February 23, 2016 at 4:38 pm](#)

Best article on terrorism I've ever read. I'm a lucky individual blessed with the rare ability to estimate risk properly fortunately.

Reply

LibertyMcG says:

[February 24, 2016 at 8:55 am](#)

Thank you very much...please share it with others!

Reply

smartmillion says:

[September 23, 2013 at 3:14 pm](#)

First they came for the bikers who don't wear helmets, and I didn't say anything because I'm not a biker, and then they voided email privacy and I didn't care because I have nothing to hide. Then they restricted the right to take nail clippers on airplanes, and I didn't say anything because I don't plan on using any. Then they rescinded the right to freely associate and I didn't say anything because I'm a nerd. Then they changed the freedom of speech and I can't tell you how happy I am to live in a society where the supreme ruler is such a fantastic man we should all aspire to be like him.

Reply

The Federal Farmer says:

[August 14, 2013 at 12:53 am](#)

"...if our government's goal is to preserve American lives..."
Our government's obligation is to protect our liberties.
They have failed.

Reply

jeromefromlayton says:

[August 12, 2013 at 9:01 pm](#)

Works for gun control, too. Compare the deaths due to guns vs the number of owned guns. Now, check the death rate due to medical provider error. Whoa, Nelly! That suggests we should buy more guns and do everything we can to stay out of hospitals.

Reply

Pingback: [Let's Fight Terror without Sacrificing Our Liberties | Consider, Reconsider](#)

Robert says:

[July 26, 2013 at 5:16 pm](#)

I think this is an excellent analysis. However one criticism I'd make is that it focuses on the expected number of deaths for each cause, not the volatility of the number of deaths. It is also looking backwards at what has happened not forwards at what could happen in the future.

The number of deaths per terrorist attack is very very volatile, much more volatile than the number of deaths per car accident or bath accident. It therefore could be rational to spend more money on reducing the risk of terrorism, if what you reduce is the risk of a very severe attack which kills lots of people. It might even be rational to increase the expected number of deaths so as to reduce the volatility of the number of deaths. I have no idea what could be done to achieve such an effect, I'm merely making a very high-level point. This is not so strange though – it's exactly what you do when you buy insurance, you increase your expected cash outlay so as to reduce the volatility of your cash outlay.

The article above also uses historical data to calculate the odds of dying in a terrorist attack. This is done for understandable reasons – we actually have actually observed the past, and so have solid data that we can use to input into our calculations. But I don't really care about the average number of people who have died in terrorist attacks per year over the past twenty (or whatever) years. What I care about is the *distribution* of the number of people who will be killed in terrorist attacks over the next year (and the one after that, and so on). Historic data is only a small part of the information that should be used to estimate

this; the distribution is constantly changing, and is very difficult to estimate. Once you've estimated a distribution then you have to decide what part of that distribution you'd like to change (do you want to reduce the expected value, or the 99th percentile, or something else?). You also have to decide what you would trade to achieve this (how much money to spend, would you accept an increased mean for a decreased 99th percentile? etc.).

Having said all that I agree with the general thrust of the article. The risk of terrorism is vastly exaggerated, and the response of the government is wildly irrational. I doubt that there is anything remotely sophisticated about the way governments analyse terrorism risk. Government policy is driven by individual politicians making self-interested calculations of short term gain.

Reply

LibertyMcG says:

[July 26, 2013 at 5:27 pm](#)

Excellent points and thank you for sharing them. You're correct that future death tolls in this realm are quite unpredictable and that historical data has limited use.

That said, one of the implications of the auto safety hypothetical is this: We feel 30,000 dead Americans isn't too high a price to pay for the convenience of car travel; we might likewise decide a 30,000 or even higher annual death toll from terrorism may not be too high a price to pay for the essential freedoms that define(d) the United States.

Reply

Pingback: [A "stop watching us" smorgasbord | Knowledge Problem](#)

dburly says:

[July 26, 2013 at 12:12 am](#)

I bet if it were called a "happy" attack instead of "terror" attack, people would be far less afraid of it and more likely to be rational about it... Never mind that that's just Orwellian in the opposite way of the government's way... But my point is purposefully making fun of what you fear the most, can help you think about it more rationally and balanced, because it loses its "fear" hold on you mentally, so that you can think about it properly...

When I was a very small child, I was afraid of toilets... specifically, I was afraid of falling into them. After all, they were this huge hole (relative to my size at the time), with a rim that was hard to balance on (when you're small enough), that made these huge swishing and gulping/swallowing noises when flushed... what's not to terrorize any small child with that? At one point, I decided to make a funny audio recording of it, pretending to make it sound like I fell in and got flushed down somehow. I was never afraid of it ever again after that point, because I realized just how preposterous it all was, you could never seriously fit down there, not even a hand or an arm.

So we should also do the same with "terrorist" attacks. Thank you for your thoughtful words explaining it rationally.

Reply

BobM says:

[July 25, 2013 at 3:39 pm](#)

A very impressive analysis that I happened on by indirection, via the Washington Post. If it's excruciating to be a US citizen watching your liberties being stolen by the ruling elite/cartel, it isn't much better being a UK citizen observing the UK establishment's lapdog subservience to the US. Keep up the good work.

Reply

LibertyMcG says:

[July 25, 2013 at 3:43 pm](#)

Thank you very much for your compliment and for offering insight into your UK perspective.

Reply

MattL says:

[August 14, 2013 at 1:26 pm](#)

Did you just subtly imply that the government of the United Kingdom is simply "following orders" from Washington when they place cameras all over London (and I presume other cities). Sorry, but I'm pretty sure your bureaucrats came up with that brilliant idea on their own. Your boogeyman is only a boogeyman.

Reply

jmattharrison says:

[July 25, 2013 at 8:34 am](#)

Social psychology is an interest of mine and you nailed the underlying current of the terror threat on the head. I am a therapist with a foot in the political spectrum only in the sense of wanting to see changes towards freedom and autonomy. What's happening in the world right now fascinates the hell out of me. This is right in line with what I see going on.

Reply

LibertyMcG says:

[July 25, 2013 at 3:44 pm](#)

Thank you, it is a very interesting topic. It's important that people take a step back to examine their thinking and to understand the subtle factors that can impact it and lead it astray.

Reply

Kevin McG says:

[July 24, 2013 at 10:13 am](#)

Thanks for the level-headed analysis.

Reply

jmattharrison says:

[July 24, 2013 at 7:48 am](#)

If we have nothing to hide, why look? It works both ways..and at which point do you draw the line? Video cameras in your house? After all, if you have nothing to hide...

Reply

Lester says:

[July 23, 2013 at 1:53 pm](#)

I count myself among those willing to abridge personal freedoms in an effort to stop terrorists – if you have nothing to hide, why fuss, after all. LibertyMcG has once again caused me to think more rationally about this position. Excellent, thoughtful and rational. Welcome back from your long hiatus.

Reply

Bob Roberts says:

[July 24, 2013 at 5:40 pm](#)

Because we're wasting tens of billions of dollars annually on fiction lizard brains.

Reply

Max-1 says:

[July 26, 2013 at 2:24 am](#)

Why should I have to relinquish my Liberty so that YOU can feel safer... under your bed?

If you don't have anything to hide... then why is the NSA tracking you and collecting data ON YOU?

Reply

dburrry says:

[July 26, 2013 at 10:27 am](#)

Nowhere does the constitution or the bill of rights say "...unless we all have an irrational hyper fear for our safety, then never mind!"

Reply

bill says:

[July 26, 2013 at 4:18 pm](#)

I heard it put this way once... I have no reason to believe you have a pound of heroin up your a--. Take off your pants while I check. After all, you wouldn't say no if you have nothing to hide

Reply

Lester says:

[July 28, 2013 at 6:10 pm](#)

I count myself among those who are afraid to say no to anyone

Reply

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