

The World Under Assault: Can Science Beat Terrorism?

The above title advertises a [Cambridge Science Festival event](#), (9 March 2009) in which I have been invited to participate. My answer to the question in the title, will be spelt out in my first PowerPoint slide:

“No: because paranoia cannot be cured by CCTV, or DNA databases, or ID cards, or CRB checks, or number plate recognition, or GPS tracking, or email archiving, or data mining.”

Further, I intend to argue that the combined force of all of these measures feeds the threats that they purport to defend against.

In March 2008 the UK Government published [The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an interdependent world](#). Its objective, proclaimed in its concluding sentence, was to enable the inhabitants of the United Kingdom “to go about their daily lives freely and with confidence, in a more secure, stable, just and prosperous world.”

In February 2009 David Omand, former Home Office Permanent Secretary and former security adviser to Tony Blair, published a report for IPPR entitled [The National Security Strategy: Implications for the UK intelligence community](#). In it he argues for the necessity of breaking accepted ethical rules, but insists that this will be acceptable so long as the rule-breaking is proportionate:

*The realm of intelligence operations is of course a zone to which the ethical rules that we might hope to govern private conduct as individuals in society cannot fully apply. Finding out other people’s secrets is going to involve breaking everyday moral rules. So public trust in the essential reasonableness of UK police, security and intelligence agency activity will continue to be essential. A significant challenge supporting the National Security Strategy will be how the intelligence community can access the full range of data relating to individuals, their movements, activities and associations in a timely, accurate, **proportionate** [my emphasis] and legal way, and one acceptable in a democratic and free society, including appropriate oversight and means of independent investigation and redress in cases of alleged abuse of power.”*

Anticipating opposition to his proposed rule-breaking license he proposes a set of rule-breaker guidelines:

1. *There must be sufficient sustainable cause.*
2. *There must be integrity of motive.*
3. *The methods to be used must be in proportion to the seriousness of the business in hand.*
4. *There must be proper authority.*
5. *There must be a reasonable prospect of success.*
6. *The recourse to the methods of secret intelligence must be a last, not a first, resort.*

I limit myself to two reservations.

First, the data mining and pattern recognition methods that he espouses in order to identify the bad guys can only work at the expense of enormous numbers of “false positives”, i.e. mis-identifying good guys as bad guys. This will generate grievances and feed resentments. An excellent explanation of why this will be the result can be found in a recent piece in the Guardian by Ben Goldacre entitled [“Spying on 60 million people doesn’t add up”](#).

Second, there will be fierce disagreement about what is **proportionate**. The degree

to which the suspension of traditional ethical rules can be justified will depend on the magnitude of the threat, and who is evaluating the threat. [Overblown](#) by John Mueller, provides a persuasive account of how the “terrorism industry” has justified the spending of many billions of dollars and the suspension of many traditional rights and freedoms in the United States by grossly exaggerating the threat of terrorism.

I offer a homegrown UK example of what those in charge of our security consider a proportionate response to a terrorist threat. London cyclists are not allowed to park their bicycles anywhere near Parliament Square or Whitehall or Trafalgar Square because their bicycles might be pipe bombs in disguise – despite the lack of evidence of anyone, anywhere, ever having been killed by such a device (for chapter and verse see [“Bicycle bombs: a further enquiry and a new theory”](#)).

The actuarial evidence suggests that the risk of death by bicycle pipe bomb is the same as that of playing conkers without goggles. But actuarial evidence relates to the past. Risk is a word that refers to the future and that exists only in the imagination. David Omand describes *anticipation* as “the second ‘big idea’ driving modern security thinking.” Anticipators are free to anticipate anything, especially if they can claim to have access to information about threats too sensitive to reveal to the common citizen.

Paranoia, an exaggerated, irrational distrust of others, afflicts both sides in the War against Terrorism – our irrational fears of them feed their irrational fears of us. I conclude with a mundane example of institutional paranoia in action in Britain.

Last June the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) [sponsored a public debate on the motion “This house believes we should fortify our cities”](#). The motion received just seven votes from an audience of well over one hundred. Undaunted the RIBA a few months later joined forces with the Home Office, NaCTSO (National Counter Terrorism Security Office) and the RSA to launch a competition for students of architecture called [“Public Spaces, Safer Places”](#). The aim of the project was to “draw attention to the issues of security and counter-terrorism in the process of designing places visited and used by the public.”

Those entering the competition were expected to respond to a *Project Scenario*:

*For the purposes of this brief, the following fictitious scenario has been constructed, **based on a likely attack scenario**.*

In the summer of 2007 there was a devastating terrorist attack in the heart of a major city in Europe.

Two suicide PBIEDs [person-borne improvised explosive devices] and two suicide VBIEDs [vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices] were deployed in Vincent Square, a piazza full of people enjoying lunch on a warm, sunny day. One VBIED was able to enter the front atrium of an office block facing onto the piazza. The resulting blast caused the building to collapse. The two PBIEDs were detonated within the crowd of people on the piazza and the second VBIED managed to get close to a building but was unable to penetrate it. Although there was extensive damage to the building it did not collapse.

The four devices resulted in over 500 fatalities and 1500 people injured. Most of the casualties were caused by the building collapsing and secondary fragmentation from glass and office furnishings (desks, office partitions and office equipment) flying through the air.

Why is this pernicious? It is a classic example of paranoia. The threat that those entering the competition are required to design against is unprecedented. It is a gross exaggeration, a figment of the anticipator's imagination. With the exception of 9/11, which involved four hijacked planes, a possibility not included in the "likely attack scenario", there have been no terrorist attacks producing anything remotely approaching the imagined death toll imagined. But further, it feeds the delusion that it is possible to "design out terrorism", that architects can produce a built environment that will be invulnerable to terrorism.

It is manifestly impossible to "harden" the whole world against such threats. Terrorism, whether in the form of suicide bombers, or bombs dropped from great heights on defenseless villagers, can only be defeated by policies promoting justice: policies that confront and defeat the fears and grievances that inspire acts of terrorism.

"The World Under Assault: Can Science Beat Terrorism?", The very question feeds the idea that terrorism has become what is increasingly referred to as an "existential threat" – a threat to our very way of life. Only if we make it so. Since 9/11 no American in the United States has died as a result of an act of terrorism. On 7 July 2005 four suicide-terrorists with bombs killed 52 people in Britain – fewer than were killed in road accidents during the same week. Since then no one in Britain has died of an act of terrorism. Can this actuarial evidence justify the current encroachments on established civil liberties? No. The encroachments are justified by the vivid imaginations of anticipators. The evidence thus far of the harm they are capable of inflicting justifies describing their imaginings as paranoid.

Ross Anderson, also speaking at this event, [when addressing the issue of terrorism](#), likes to quote Benjamin Franklin:

"They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

I cannot think of a better note on which to end. Hope you don't mind Ross.