Enoch Ngan

Professor Andrew David

Directed Study

July 31, 2024

# The Shift in Security Perception Post-9/11

The collapse of the Twin Towers in 2001 sent shockwaves of horror and distraught across the United States. Al-Qaeda's bombings exposed Americans to their own vulnerabilities within their borders. The trauma of 9/11 was amplified by the chain of disasters following the airplane crashes. The Twin Towers, one of New York's iconic landmarks, almost entirely collapsed, decimating the nearby buildings and civilians. As the most dominant country of political influence, economic control, and military power, many civilians were stunned by the poor display of security by their country. Immediately after the attacks on 9/11, almost 71% of American civilians felt uneasy and depressed, with almost half of the American public being paranoid about their safety (Hartig). During the uncertain days after 9/11, President Bush issued an optimistic speech to unite Americans against a common threat (Bush). These signs of reassurance towards the public began to foreshadow the future execution of national security's public perception.

Within the following years, the US government reassessed its strategies for national security, implementing multiple restructured agencies and overhauling emergency protocols and regulations for American infrastructure (Gunturu). While the vast American public enjoyed the comfort of increased surveillance and protection measures, some of these efforts were scrutinized for their effectiveness. Experts within the relevant fields of politics and foreign affairs argued that these security measures serve for psychological purposes instead of contributing to realistic

safety standards. As growing security threats have challenged contemporary American life, the definition of safety has drastically evolved over the past decade. From the idealistic pre-9/11 notion of complete security within American borders, the US government now faces the question: what constitutes a "safe" environment in the post-9/11 era? A deeper analysis of the intent behind these actions by the US government will reflect their shift in terrorism and security perception.

After 9/11, the implementation of new security measures reflected America's new approach to strengthening national security. As America better understands ever-evolving terrorist threats, the US government has acknowledged the impossibility of complete security, striving to make America as reasonably safe as its limitations allow. Agencies have opted to focus on emergency protocol measures that contain and rebuild after tragedies rather than relying on preventive strategies. With that said, these strategies of increased surveillance and building regulations, such as innovative restructuring of the World Trade Center, are still implemented for "faux" efforts to reassure an anxious American public.

**The American National Security Strategies before 9/11**

The events on 9/11 were not the only instances where authorities reconsidered the implementation of American national security strategies. Security measures against foreign threats have continuously been adapting since the creation of civilization. From medieval moats and triple-layer defenses to modern military artillery and fire-resistant strongholds, states are always innovating new methods to counteract potential dangers (FEMA). For the United States, security strategies on a national level began to ramp up after notable terrorist attacks on governmental buildings, such as the World Trade Center parking lot and the Murrah building.

These incidents from 1993 and 1995, respectively, highlighted the importance of enhanced infrastructure security for future facilities (FEMA).

In response to these incidents, new research groups and Federal committees were established, overhauling multiple old security measures. For example, the damages from the Murrah building bombing in Oklahoma City could have been significantly reduced if "the Murrah building [had] a properly designed barrier system and adequate stand-off" (FEMA). "Stand-off," the concept of protected physical setbacks from blasts, began to become de-facto in Federal government buildings. Executive Order 12977, issued by President Bill Clinton after the Murrah building bombing in 1995, aimed to strengthen Federal buildings and facilities. The order established the Federal Interagency Security Committee (ISC), a committee that developed "long-term construction standards for locations requiring blast resistance or other specialized security measures" (FEMA). Two years later, the General Services Administration (GSA) and the US Air Force Center for Environment Excellence published comprehensive planning guides with recommendations on securing civilian environments. These publications, the Draft Security Criteria and Installation Force Protection Guide continue to be used today in modern construction projects (FEMA). These infrastructural changes and guidelines were believed to be sufficient to encourage civilians to return to normalcy. This shift marked a move away from the idea of complete protection towards a reasonably secure and functioning environment. Rae Ann Hoffmann, a general manager at the World Trade Center, stated that following the reparations of the parking lot bombings, she was encouraged to "ensure that current tenants felt safe and supported as they returned to their offices" ("Snapshots of Work Life"). Despite these efforts of restoration, the vulnerabilities of American infrastructure shocked civilians again in the early 2000s.

Constructed throughout the 1960s, the Twin Towers were synonymous with New York City's skyline. The global financial hub stood at around 1360 feet tall, making it the tallest building in the world after its completion in 1973 (Krauth). Unfortunately, the iconic reputation of the Twin Towers made them a perfect target for perpetrators against America. On September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda carried out the biggest terrorist attack on American soil. After hijacking two commercial airplanes and crashing them into the World Trade Center, both towers collapsed within hours of impact. The catastrophe showed America that "national security wasn't just something 'over there' [outside the US], but that the government had — through good and bad, mistakes and successes — to take its homeland defenses seriously" (Gibson).

Engineers of Port Authority New York and New Jersey, who oversaw the construction of the World Trade Center (WTC), designed the buildings to be safe in the event of impacts from foreign objects. They believed the World Trade Center towers could "withstand the accidental impact of a Boeing 707 seeking to land at a nearby airport" (FEMA). These hypothetical scenarios estimated airplanes at about 263,000 pounds with a flight speed of 180 mph. However, on the day of 9/11, both Boeing 767-ER type aircraft that hit the Twin Towers "had estimated gross weights of 274,000 pounds and flight speeds of 470 to 590 mph on impact with near-full loads of fuel" (FEMA). Although the buildings partially survived the initial crashes, the fully loaded fuel tanks were the ultimate demise of the World Trade Center. While civilians attempted to escape the collisions, "the burning fuel proved to be the deciding factor in the collapse of the towers" (FEMA). At the time, the Twin Towers were built against total collapse; however, the idea of "progressive collapse" was not totally understood. Damages in weak key points of the Twin Towers caused multiple stories to "domino" into subsequent destruction. As the skeleton of the World Trade Center towers slowly melted, everyone around and within the buildings was

trapped amidst burning flames. Multiple professors within the field, such as Hanif Kara, stated that “structural engineers like myself were shocked.” The uncoordinated efforts that led to the monumental destruction of the Twin Towers forced the US government to rethink national security strategies (Chao).

**The Response to 9/11 by the United States Government**

The United States government immediately responded to the attacks on 9/11 by establishing the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This department aimed to enhance national security through the consolidation of 22 agencies, improving coordinated efforts against terrorism. Agencies such as the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the United States Coast Guard played crucial roles in enhancing security measures. Airports and train stations began implementing advanced screening protocols and technologies while ports and waterways were fortified with maritime security (Gunturu). One of the most prominent figures involved with coordinating and implementing such security measures was the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Created in 1979, FEMA was initially focused on dealing with natural disasters, such as hurricanes and earthquakes. Although man-made disasters were also within their realm of responsibilities, their primary concern was elsewhere, previous to the events of 9/11. However, after the fallout of 9/11, FEMA soon became far more involved with the threat of terrorism (FEMA). A considerable overhaul in emergency guidelines by FEMA saw improved efficiency in emergency response protocols in the following years. Under the DHS, FEMA revised regulations to focus on emergency preparedness and seamless cooperation. FEMA’s introduction of the National Incident Management System (NIMS), National Preparedness Guidelines (NPG), and the National Response Framework (NRF) all worked to provide

departments with the necessary resources and structures to work efficiently during emergencies. In 2002, the first edition of the National Fire Protection Association Codes (NFPA Codes) was published, significantly reviewing how buildings were fireproofed and secured (Chapman). FEMA, alongside multiple other agencies, created these codes to protect from “progressive collapse” due to fires. The DHS consolidated these efforts to address what they believed to be the biggest issue in US national security: coordination and communication. Over the course of several subsequent years, intelligence sharing between these agencies increased to not only prepare for times of crisis but also work to maintain and shut down threats as soon as they emerge (“Implementing 9/11 Commission Recommendations: Homeland Security.”). Yet whether this resolution was an effective tactic requires a deeper look into how America reconsidered its security measures after 9/11.

The rebuilding of the World Trade Center (WTC) reflected these new FEMA regulations and DHS guidelines. Published in May 2002, the "World Trade Center Building Performance Study: Data Collection, Preliminary Observations, and Recommendations,” more formally known as FEMA 403, analyzed the collapse of the Twin Towers, providing recommendations and improvements to the reconstruction of the WTC. External structural alterations included thicker reinforced concrete walls, utilization of high-strength concrete, and incorporated steel microfibers. These changes effectively fireproofed the frame of the WTC while also enhancing its blast resistance. Further fireproofing methods were implemented within the building. The new WTC’s interior has wider staircases and advanced emergency strategies for improved and swift evacuation (Parsons). The One World Trade Center’s new design highlights lessons learned from past tragedies. As of July 2024, these changes have protected the new WTC from significant attacks, alongside most of the American landmarks built after 2001 (Parsons). However, the

looming threat of attacks on national security continues to grow to even more concerning levels. Some may have even begun to question whether these regulations and guidelines were built with the intention of protecting American lives or for public safety assurance.

**The Types of Security Measures: Real, "Faux," and Fake**

The attacks on 9/11 were a televised disaster that shocked communities around the country. According to the Pew Research Center, "a sizable majority of adults (71%) said they felt depressed" following the disastrous event. In the fall of that year, a psychological impact on public perception began to take hold, with "most Americans [saying] they were very (28%) or somewhat (45%) worried about another attack" (Hartig). As fear, rage, and uncertainty spread through the American people, President Bush was quick to address them in his Presidential Speech, "Freedom at War with Fear." He acknowledges the grief within the nation in his first few sentences; however, he is quick to shift focus to an optimistic outlook on America's response and future. He rallies the American people with hope in a grim setting, naming people such as Todd Beamer, a passenger who "rushed terrorists to save others on the ground" (Bush). Bush pinned the blame on al Qaeda, unifying Americans under a common enemy. In October 2001, the same month Bush gave the speech, "60% of adults expressed trust in the Federal government – a level not reached in the previous three decades, nor approached in the two decades since then" (Hartig). On May 2, 2011, Obama's administration defeated al Qaeda during the execution of Operation Neptune Spear. Osama bin Laden's death brought relief to millions of lives affected by his attacks ten years ago. Yet whether or not America was safe from future attacks was still up for debate (Brill). To an average American, safety felt reinforced by the US government's efforts

to increase protection, such as terrorist awareness and security checkpoints. However, some of these efforts serve as psychological solace in response to the fallout of 9/11 (Liberman).

Experts within the relevant fields of political science and government security questioned the efficacy of post-9/11 national security protocols. A significant number of these individuals urged the US government to critically re-evaluate whether the country's allocation of resources into these efforts. While some argued that post-9/11 national security protocols were excessive due to an overly exaggerated perception of terrorism, such Political Science professor at Ohio State University, John Mueller, others believed these protocols were ineffective and deceiving (Mueller).

Akiva Liberman, a researcher at Columbia University, has categorized the effectiveness of security protocols under three buckets: Real, "Faux" and Fake security (Liberman). In terms of the practicality of these national security initiatives, many professionals still doubt the true effectiveness of specific methods. In his article on Urban Wire, "Security Measures after September 11," Liberman defines real security as effective measures that "eliminate threats before they can be carried out" (Liberman). Barriers around Federal buildings, metal detectors at public events, and x-ray machines at airports are all examples of real security measures outlined by Liberman. Catching threats through these methods serves one purpose, but deterring motivators from causing offenses is another. "Faux" security measures are efforts that primarily serve the latter purpose, such as unmanned cameras and untrained security personnel. These measures may discourage criminal activity but do little to eliminate threats. Liberman also categorizes "faux" security measures with forensic utility, efforts entirely for psychological purposes with little to no preventive potential. Security cameras, ID check locations, and building sign-ins "might deter offenders not motivated enough to mask their identities." These

efforts may deter a common crime but would not stop a terrorist who hopes to be identified for their causes. Liberman also categorizes several more efforts as completely fake security, where efforts impact public perception and resource allocation while providing a false sense of safety. One main example he uses is the requirement of ID checks without any ID matching, stating that they "seem to be primarily symbolic, intended to somehow make us feel secure." Like other scholars who study American national security post-9/11, Liberman urges Americans to be more "problem-focused rather than emotion-focused." According to Liberman, symbolic security measures, such as "faux" efforts by the US government, only work to obscure the "true state of affairs" within the country (Liberman). Perhaps the illusion of safety through the psychological persuasion of these symbolic security measures reveals how American national security shifted post-9/11.

**Conclusion**

In terms of Liberman's security categories, the changes and regulations the US government has implemented post-9/11 are debatable. Written in 2011, Liberman's definitions of real, "faux," and fake security were all under the context of events around the 2000s. Terrorism threats were primarily associated with bombings and destruction, but in the age of exponentially developing technology, a new unpredictable threat may emerge within days (Brill). In hindsight, Liberman's examples of real security are flawed. Perpetrators will always have the upper hand to find a way around Federal building barriers, metal detectors, and X-ray machines. Developing terrorist threats diminishes the effectiveness of real security measures, soon degrading them to a "faux" standard. For example, structural engineers believed the Twin Towers were secured with "real" security standards such as a "tube within a tube" design. Dense outer steel frames and central

core steel columns were believed to distribute the load of a potential impact. However, they did little to protect the building when the fire burned through the framework (FEMA).

The United States has limits to its protective abilities over its people. Published in 2009, "Engineering Security" by Kelly Shortridge urges building owners of high-profile businesses or iconic structures to protect their properties from terrorist attacks to the best of their ability. However, incidents such as the 2015 San Bernardino attack, a mass shooting, and the attempted bombing of a non-profit agency for people with disabilities showed that "everything is a target" (Brill). As much as the United States can hope to defend the American people, "they can't find everyone, and they can't be everywhere… there is a limit" (Brill).

With this information in mind, FEMA's post–9/11 initiatives in emergency management protocols are much more comprehensible. The realization that complete security is intangible forced the US government to rely not only on protective protocols but also on other efforts that efficiently respond to threats. The DHS' emphasis on cooperation and coordination reflects their goal of a seamless working relationship between different US departments during times of crisis. Although unguaranteed safety is unsettling for some Americans, preventive measures, such as pre-9/11 efforts like screenings and metal detectors, are continuing to be implemented at increasing rates with effective results. According to the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute, "there were likely 1,018 more traffic fatalities in the three months following 9/11 than there would have been had people believed flying was safe. In other words, the reassurance provided by the establishment of the TSA arguably saved more than 300 lives a month" (Brill).

Liberman believes that these "faux" efforts, which evidently encompass his examples of "real security," wrongfully obscure the true state of national security from the American public.

However, the true state of national security is a hard pill to swallow. The events of 9/11 revealed that American society is not invulnerable to the dangers overseas. No matter how hard the US government attempts to fill in these gaps, foreign and domestic dangers will always pose a threat to American lives. After 9-11, a shift in security perception produced efforts to minimize the possibility and fallout from these threats through the creation of DHS' communication and coordination protocols. The psychological "faux" sense of security that preventive measures like security cameras and armed personnel should not be dismissed. They provide emotion-focused solutions to some Americans, which Liberman even addresses. Liberman states that the implementation of automatic weapons in airports made "some of [his] acquaintances [feel] reassured" (Liberman).

Since the attacks on 9/11, threats ranging from climate change to the country's cyberspace continue to challenge the US government to restructure, adapt, and prepare. As former DHS official Juliette Kayyem stated in an interview with the Harvard Kennedy School, "there are still gaps" in the security America can provide for their citizens (Gibson). Yet America has proven capable of effectively filling these gaps when issues arise, such as the events on 9/11. 9/11 may have stripped America of its sense of impeccable security, but the event has permanently shifted its perception of safety. As Kayyem clarified, "'safe' means we do not allow the flow of people, goods and ideas that allow our nation to thrive" (Gibson). Since 2001, America has recovered and flourished as a nation. Therefore, Americans should feel safe, even if the feeling is artificial and influenced.

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