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Discarded liquid and gel items sit in the back of a trash truck at San Francisco International Airport Aug. 10, 2006 in San Francisco. The Department of Homeland Security raised the terrorism alert to Red, the highest level for commercial flights from Britain to the United States. The U.S. government banned all liquids and gels from flights effective immediately.

U.S. IS ‘MORE SECURE’, NOT ‘TOTALLY SAFE’

Terrorists will seek chinks in the armor

BY KAREN ROEBUCK
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Five years after the terrorist attacks, the United States is more secure, yet Americans feel more vulnerable.

That's the legacy of terror.

"In very broad terms, we are quite a lot safer than during the height of the Cold War when thousands of nuclear-armed ICBMs were aimed at us," said William Keller, director of the University of Pittsburgh's Matthew B. Ridgway Center for International Security Studies.

"But many people don't feel safe today," he said. "So safety has significant psychological dimensions. We feel less safe about flying today than we did in early August, before the British authorities uncovered the plot to blow up flights bound for the United States. But because they arrested the plotters, we are probably safer."

Safer, but experts agree, we never will be completely safe.

From increased airport security to biological and radiological detectors to a refocused intelligence service, the nation undoubtedly is safer, agree terrorism experts, law enforcement leaders and government officials on both sides of the aisle.

Key among the changes is increased cooperation and unprecedented information sharing among federal, state and local authorities and between the government and the private sector, experts said.

"I think every day since 9/11, in a variety of different ways, we have truly become safer," said Tom Ridge, who following the attacks stepped down as Pennsylvania's governor to become the nation's first homeland security chief. "We are certainly more secure, but the fact of the matter is, as safe as we are today, we need to do more to be safer tomorrow. And we are."

"... But we also need to understand, we'll never be able to create a fail-safe system where we're capable of combating all threats at all times, against all forms of terrorism."

Some experts, including U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, said they fear Americans have become complacent in the absence of another attack here.

They warn that terrorists, whether al-Qaida members or other jihadists, are patient, intelligent, creative and determined to attack the United States again.

"Although we have hurt their operational capabilities, we have not dented their determination," said Brian Michael Jenkins, a RAND Corp. senior adviser and one of the world's leading terrorism experts.

In the past five years, terrorists have successfully carried out a major attack somewhere in the world once every seven or eight weeks — not including those in Iraq, Afghanistan or Russia — and killed about 1,200 people, Jenkins said.

Another 30 to 40 major attacks have been thwarted, meaning terrorists have planned a major attack every three to four weeks, he said.

The number of Web sites devoted to al-Qaida ideology has soared from a few on Sept. 11, 2001, to hundreds now, said Jenkins, who has studied terrorism since 1972.

So-called "soft targets" — restaurants, hotels, subways, nightclubs, hotels and marketplaces — all have been hit.

"Those same targets, despite our enhanced security, are also vulnerable in the United States," Jenkins said. "... We have very limited security and, in some cases, virtually no security."

An American's chance of dying in an automobile accident is about one in 9,000, compared to a one in 500,000 chance of being killed in a terrorist attack, according to his recently published book, "Unconquerable Nation."



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SECURITY SECRETARY

Jihadists still are determined to attack the United States again on a large scale, similar to 9/11 when nearly 3,000 people were killed, Jenkins said.

Terrorist leaders might see no benefit in carrying out small-scale attacks, especially since those might lead to tighter security measures and frustrate their bigger plans, Jenkins said.

Gordon Mitchell, a Pitt associate professor of communication, director of debate and U.S. security strategy expert, disagrees.

"There is much less risk of a catastrophic terrorist attack than we saw on 9/11," he said. "... Al-Qaida central is gone. Its command structure has been dissipated. Its sanctuary in Afghanistan has been ruined, and its financial and communications structure have been hit hard."

Satellite groups inspired by or loosely connected to al-Qaida cannot attack on such a massive scale, he said.

Mitchell is among those who believe the United States should declare victory on the war on terrorism, define it as "a struggle" and combat it through law enforcement measures rather than military force.

Ridge and Jenkins disagree, saying both military and law enforcement should be used. Al-Qaida has declared war on the United States and it and other jihadists are willing — sometimes eager — to die for their cause, unlike criminals, who strive to avoid detection.

"We really need to consider these people as enemies," Ridge said. "They are warriors. It's an asymmetrical war and (the response needs to) be much more aggressive than the normal law enforcement community would be."

Keeping the country on permanent war status diverts money and attention and plays into the enemies' misconstrued rhetoric that the United States is fighting a global war on Islam, said Mitchell, who with Keller co-edited a book on preventive force, "Hitting First," which is to be released this month.

Ridge, Jenkins, and other experts say the United States has failed to counter misconceptions that it is fighting a global war, not only among jihadists but among some other Muslims as well.

American officials and citizens need to better understand the Islamic religion, culture and history and the issues that are important to Muslims, Ridge said. U.S. officials do not understand how followers of such a peaceful, prayerful religion become jihadists willing to kill innocent people in the name of religion, he said.

Muslim clerics in the United States are not fulfilling their responsibility to loudly oppose the radical misinterpretation of the Koran, he said.

Until that radical message is effectively countered, Jenkins said, "then even if we are effective in blocking a number of these attacks — some inevitably get through — we are condemned to a strategy that is the equivalent of stepping on cockroaches one at a time. This will be endless."

He and others said U.S. officials also have failed to enlist the American public in the war on terrorism, unlike during World War II, when citizens rallied to leaders calls for support, patriotism and sacrifices.

Jenkins believes U.S. leaders improperly conveyed "a message of fear" to Americans following the attacks through "melodramatic and breathtaking statements" and the color-coded alert system.

Instead of giving helpful information, authorities gave "useless advice, like 'be vigilant,'" he said. "The American public was resigned to the role of frightened passengers."

People will feel less anxious if they have a role to play and have valuable information about what to do and expect, he said.

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Is America more or less secure

Most Americans — **58 percent** — believe the nation either is less secure or the same as before the 9/11 attacks, according to a nationwide Pittsburgh Tribune-Review poll conducted by Susquehanna Polling and Research. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

"My general feeling is that it's less secure," said Morris Chester, 81, a retired physicist in Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif. He blames the news media for divulging too many details about dangerous chemical reactions, unguarded openings along the Canadian border and other information that could jeopardize Americans' safety.

"What I worry about most are the things I don't know about, and the things I'm afraid the government isn't aware of," he said.

Thirty-eight percent of the 1,000 people surveyed believe the nation is more secure.

"I personally feel safe. I do think that there are risks out there. I don't live in fear, though," said Karen Young, 42, a nurse from Gaithersburg, Md. "... As long as there's someone willing to die for the cause, we're always going to have terrorism."

She believes changes after 9/11 made the nation safer, but the war in Iraq has made it less safe.

"I think we had no business going over there," she said. "I think we have a lot more enemies."

A slight majority, **52 percent**, say the Iraqi war has made the nation less safe. **Thirty-three percent** believe it has increased safety, while **10 percent** do not think it has had any effect on national security, according to the poll.

"I think it ultimately will make us more secure. I don't divorce Iraq from terrorism," said John Yanik, 74, an architect and university professor from Bethesda, Md.

Counter-terrorism in Western Pennsylvania

Following 9/11, the FBI changed its priority from solving crimes to preventing terrorism, leaving the bulk of bank robbery, narcotic and fugitive investigations to other agencies. Its Joint Terrorism Task Forces, formed in 1998, were expanded nationwide and now is the Pittsburgh office's largest investigative unit, FBI Special Agent Jeff Killeen said.

The agency's 56 field offices also hired analysts — about a dozen in Pittsburgh — to go over all intelligence and disseminate it internally and to other law enforcement agencies as needed, he said.

The Region 13 Task Force, a counter-terrorism and all-hazards response group of Allegheny and 12 surrounding counties and Pittsburgh, often is lauded as among the nation's most prepared. Formation was spurred by the 1990s bombings of the Oklahoma City federal building, the World Trade Center and the Olympic Park in Atlanta.

Officials are still working on evacuation plans for Downtown and reverse-traffic flows for highways and the area's three biggest tunnels, said Bob Full, chief of Allegheny County emergency services and Region 13 chairman.