The Terror Trap

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The 'war on terror' is disturbingly similar to the 'war on poverty' and 'war on drugs', and seems destined for the same ignominious failure.

The Australian government is mobilising huge resources to join the 'war on terror'. This war, like the 'war on poverty' and the 'war on drugs' that preceded it in the United States, is inherently unwinnable. The cost of the government's overreactions to last year's tragic Bali bombing—our September 11—will exceed the benefits, and may actually increase rather than decrease the inconsequential risk that such attacks pose to Australians. The shock of that event, and the emotional intensity of the images published and broadcast in its immediate aftermath, should not overwhelm dispassionate thinking about its causes and consequences.

Historical context

Other events transpiring on a single day at a specific place have killed large numbers of Australians. On 19 February 1942, for example, Japanese air raids at Darwin killed 243 people. Between 23 October and 4 November 1942 at El Alamein, the 9th Australian Division suffered 2,694 casualties, including 620 dead, 1,944 wounded and 130 taken prisoner.

The record of World War I is even bleaker. At Gallipoli, roughly 10,000 Australians and New Zealanders—and almost 50,000 Britons and Frenchmen and even more Turks—fell. As with Britain and Canada, Australia's single blackest day occurred in July 1916: at Fromelles, on the Somme, 5,533 Australians became casualties within 24 hours.

On 16 February 1983, 75 people died, 2,545 buildings were destroyed and more than 390,000 hectares of country laid waste by massive fires in Victoria and South Australia. With the exception of the Ash Wednesday fires, then, the loss of large numbers of Australian lives on a single day as a result of a single incident tends to occur during wartime. Considered as a single event, the Bali bombing on 12 October 2002 killed more Australians than any other event since World War II.

Despite the unprecedented number of deaths not only at Bali but also in the World Trade Center (WTC), terrorist incidents kill very few Australians per year. Not since 13 February 1978, when a bomb exploded outside The Hilton in Sydney (the site of that year's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting), killing three and seriously injuring several others, has such an incident occurred in Australia. It is true that every year a handful of Australian tourists travelling overseas are kidnapped; thankfully, however, most are released. But not all of them are. On 26 July 1994 the Khmer Rouge attacked a train and kidnapped (among others) an Australia, a Briton and a Frenchman. Each was subsequently murdered. And on 28 December 1998 armed militants kidnapped a group of tourists including 12 Britons, two Americans and two Australians travelling in Yemen. Three Britons and one Australia died in the rescue attempt by Yemeni officials.

Including these incidents and the WTC and Bali attacks, and assuming that up to 100 Australian nationals perished at Bali, during the past ten years terrorist attacks have killed an average of 11 Australians per year and 55 per year during the past two years.

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A statistical outlier

Given that the resident population of Australia is projected to be 19,767,520,[1] that 11 Australians per year, on average, have died in terrorist incidents during the past ten years and assuming that this toll will continue into the future, it follows that the likelihood that a randomly-selected individual will die under such circumstances during a given year is 0.0000006 (that is, a chance of 6 in 10 million or 1 in 1.7 million). Further, given that 55 Australians per year, on average, have died in terrorist incidents during the past two years, and assuming that WTC and Bali-like incidents continue and therefore that this greater toll will continue into the future, the annualised risk of death from terrorism will increase to 0.000003 (that is, 3 in 1 million or 1 in 333,333).

This risk compares to the odds, over the course of an average North American life span (let us assume that these odds are roughly comparable to their counterparts in Australia), that one will die from pesticide poisoning (1 in 200,000), a lightning strike (1 in 30,000), a motor vehicle accident (1 in 60), and disease caused by smoking one packet of cigarettes per day (1 in 6).[2] Relative to the major killers of Australians, the 'terrorist threat' is thus minuscule; and to assert that terrorism poses a grave threat to our safety is simply false.

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Pundits and politicians, however, say almost unanimously and unequivocally that it is a significant threat. 'There can be no doubt that we have entered a period of extreme and violent anarchy, perhaps comparable with that at the turn of the previous century when anarchists committed widespread acts of terrorism in Europe' (*The Australian* 24 October 2002).

They also assert that the Commonwealth Government is able to do something about it. 'Taxpayers will have to face paying at least $1 billion extra a year to meet the greatest challenge to Australia's security since the Cold War, Paul Dibb, the country's leading strategic thinker, has warned.' Further, 'NSW Premier Bob Carr will today ask Prime Minister John Howard to create a ministry of homeland security . . . Carr also wants a big boost to resources given to the task . . . Our situation is not good and is in need of rapid repair . . . The top priority must be a massive infusion of new resources into the human intelligence side of counter-terrorism, especially ASIO . . . (*The Australian* 24 October 2002).

For its part, Canberra appears to be more than ready to oblige. Asked whether the Bali bombing would prompt the Commonwealth to increase its defence budget, Mr Howard said 'I think it is inevitable that we will have to spend even more on defence. I feel it in my bones. It is just elementary that when some transforming event like this occurs, you have to go back into your critical infrastructure in a whole lot of areas. That's just inevitable' (*The Australian Financial Review* 24 October 2002). The 2002-2003 budget, presented to Parliament in May last year, unveiled a range of counter-terrorism measures that will cost $1.3 billion over five years. The defence budget is presently $13.1 billion; that is, 7.7% of the Commonwealth's $170 billion of annual expenditure.

A curious kind of war

Since 11 September 2001, American politicians have told Americans that their country is at war. Australia, too, according to many of its politicians and journalists, has been at war; and the frequency and stridency of their declarations have increased markedly since 12 October 2002. But this 'war on terror' is peculiar. It is seemingly, given the indistinct nature of the enemy, a war with no clear objective, no strategy to achieve this objective and no criterion to determine whether it has achieved its end. But all of its proponents agree that it will last years and cost an enormous amount. What kind of war is that? It sounds suspiciously like a Great Society programme, and in that respect there are disturbing precedents.

Wars on such 'enemies' as poverty and drugs are endless wars because poverty and drug addiction, like prostitution and xenophobia, are ineradicable. When a government declares 'war' on poverty or drugs it means that the government decrees the mobilisation of taxpayers' money and 'committed' bureaucrats. In practice, it also signifies the government's implicit admission that it cannot improve matters but that that it may (and sometimes does) do much to worsen them. Indeed, in the names of 'compassion' and 'commitment' governments have repeatedly caused disasters where none previously existed.[3]

Allowing for the innate and perhaps insuperable difficulty of the tasks to which they are charged, the US intelligence agencies (the CIA, NSA and FBI) were unable to alert Americans of the approach of suicide-hijackers; and ASIO, ASIS and other Australian

organisations were unable to anticipate bombers at Bali. In belated response, politicians and various 'experts' have clamoured that more money, staff and power be allocated to these agencies. Similarly, the 'war on drugs' has failed to reduce the consumption of drugs; in response, politicians and their advisors have greatly escalated the war's reach, intensity and destructive effects.

The perverse logic of this 'if at first you don't succeed' approach is that major programmes that do not achieve their objectives and generate unintended consequences will be rewarded with more resources. Consider the impact upon bureaucrats' incentives when their political masters in effect tell them: 'if you succeed we'll ignore your success; but if you fail spectacularly then (abetted by an uproar in the media and among the general public) we'll quickly conclude that you're "underfunded" and shovel more resources your way'.

Australia's politicians fall into the terror trap

War, as Gwynne Dyer noted in an excellent article,[4] can and does devastate whole societies. Terrorism is not war: it is an essentially marginal activity, undertaken by the relatively weak, that succeeds only if it can provoke its much stronger nemesis into drastic overreaction. Dyer notes that from 1942 to 1945, after all the major participants had joined the carnage, World War II caused deaths at the rate of more than 1 million per month. That is equivalent to a Bali bombing every 10 minutes, day and night, for four years. By that horrible standard and whatever its cause, terrorism is a localised, minor and tolerable (except, of course, for those whom it kills, injures and traumatises) phenomenon.

Statistical reasoning ignores the intense emotional reaction of governments, journalists, 'experts' and members of the general public to events that kill many people in a single place. But because politicians watch television, read the newspapers and participate in talkback radio, they, like most Australians, react instinctively and emotionally to heartrending accounts in mainstream media—and not dispassionately from deductions from first principles using hard data.

Terrorism, then, is viewed in a unique light and its risk is exaggerated. As a result the Commonwealth Government is prepared to spend many times—probably several hundred times—more in response to one death from a terrorist attack than it is in response to one death from (say) heart disease, an accident in the home or a car crash. And most voters, journalists and 'experts' strongly support this prioritisation. Human beings obsess about threats that they falsely think they (or governments) can reduce, minimise or eliminate; at the same time, they discount or ignore dangers that they falsely think they can do little to control. The result is the common reality of a (say) a middle-aged man who eats too much of the wrong things, exercises too little, drinks too much, smokes and drives long distances without rest breaks—and, whilst slouching in front of the TV, frets about anthrax, the Ebola virus and terrorism.

Terrorists seem to understand this principle and use it ruthlessly to their advantage. Hence, according to Gwynne Dyer, the first objective of any competent terrorist is to attract the attention of the target government and to make himself a primary focus of public concern and government policy. It is by provoking that far larger and more powerful society to over-react drastically and in ill-considered and self-defeating ways that a terrorist seeks to achieve his objective.

Conclusion

Empathy with those who lost friends and family on 12 October (and, indeed, on any other occasion) and the rightful demand that the perpetrator(s) of those murders are apprehended and punished should not distract attention from the fact that the risk to Australians posed by subsequent attacks is minute. The 'war on terrorism' is inherently unwinnable. Australian politicians' responses to the Bali bombing will increase rather than decrease the inconsequential risk that such attacks pose to Australians. The challenge to Australia's politicians is to learn the rudiments of risk and probability, and to acquaint themselves with the history of drastic and disastrous over-reaction to minuscule risks. To fail this challenge is to embark upon a futile and misguided crusade that may expend much energy for little gain.

Endnotes

1 As of 25 October 2002. For the latest count see, the ABS Population Clock at http://www.abs.gov.au

2 James Walsh, *True Odds: How Risk Affects Your Everyday Life (*Silver Lake Publishing, 1996); see also Joel Best, *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists* (University of California Press, 2001); and Aaron Cohl, *Are We Scaring Ourselves to Death? How Pessimism, Paranoia, and a Misguided Media Are Leading Us Toward Disaster* (St. Martin's Press, 1997)

3 See in particular Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*, 10th anniversary edition (Basic Books, 1995); Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation As a Basis for Social Policy* (Basic Books, 1996); Thomas Sowell, *Is Reality Optional?* (Hoover Institution Press, 1993); and Eric Schansberg, *Poor Policy: How Government Harms the Poor* (Westview Press, 1996).

4 'Falling into the Terror Trap', *The Toronto Star* (17 October 2001).