



Accepting the risk of a terrorist attack would be un-American

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A frequent talking point when discussing terrorism is that everyday Americans are more likely to die in a car accident than a terrorist attack. Implicitly, therefore, the United States is spending an outsized effort combating a threat that, on paper, isn't that great. What critics don't understand is that we as Americans cannot and should not accept the inclusion of a terrorist attack as an everyday risk.



(https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/RTSN7M1_911_terror-e1475763005243.jpg)

Steven Monetti Jr. walks through the Empty Sky memorial on the morning of the 15th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in New Jersey, September 11, 2016. REUTERS/Andrew Kelly.

Certainly, America has wasted billions since the September 11, 2001, attack on securing the homeland. We all know the stories of terrorism grants used for [reckless purchases](#) (<http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/05/nation/la-na-terror-waste-20121205>) and the [ballooning of the US Department of Homeland Security \(DHS\) from 180,000 employees in 2003 to more than 240,000 employees](#) (<https://www.aei.org/publication/why-we-should-eliminate-the-department-of-homeland-security/>) today. Critics of what America's policymakers did over the last fifteen years don't have to look far to find examples of waste, inefficiency, and ineffectiveness. Both the [US Government Accountability Office](#) (http://www.gao.gov/browse/topic/Homeland_Security) and the [DHS Inspector General](#) (<https://www.oig.dhs.gov/>) have cataloged in great detail countless failures and frustrations.

That said, critics are just plain wrong to equate the risk of dying from terrorism to the risk of dying in a car accident.

The difference between the two risks goes to the concept of acceptance. When we get behind the wheel of a car, we knowingly and willingly accept the risk that we could be in an accident and suffer injury or death. We don't like to think about that risk, but we know it exists and is part and parcel of everyday life. To protect against that risk, we use seat belts, put our younger kids in carseats, mind road signs and speed limits, and push the automobile industry to build safer cars using airbags, antilock brakes, and stronger materials. We mitigate against the risk we know is there by taking specific actions.

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In stark contrast, Americans simply don't undertake everyday activities like shopping, attending a sporting event, or going out to dinner accepting the risk, however small, that a terrorist could launch an attack against them. Other than exercising vigilance, carrying a gun, or never venturing out, there are no specific actions America can take to mitigate against a terrorist attack. Critics might be right to assert that Americans should accept this risk just like Israelis have come to internalize the risk as part of their daily lives.

Without the frequency of attacks experienced by Israelis, however, Americans won't add this risk to their daily calculus of risks. Because Americans don't accept the risk of a terrorist attack, they expect their government to do what it needs to do to keep them safe (constitutionally, of course). When attacks occur, they are right to be outraged, especially when they learn that a terrorist had intersected with law enforcement before the attack (i.e., [had been previously investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) (<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/06/orlando-terrorism-fbi-omar-mateen-213971>)) or had dropped clues of his intent to family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances (i.e., [tested bombs in his parent's backyard](#) (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/chelsea-bombing-witnesses-wanted-by-authorities-1474478760>)).

Spending billions to secure America against what is currently a small risk isn't inherently the problem; spending billions to *not* secure America is. It is the latter issue that vexes Americans as they read about the waste, stand in unnecessary security lines at airports, hear about the porousness of our borders, learn about vulnerabilities in our visa system, and see news reports of terrorist attacks on television and over social media.

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Let's hope Americans never face a daily existence in which they have to accept terrorism in the same way they accept the risk of driving a car, using a knife in the kitchen, or having furniture fall on them. We are spending billions (nay trillions when US Department of Defense appropriations are included) to preserve the American way of life. It should get us some positive return on our investment.

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