

Cultural influences on resilience and security

Bill Durodié gives his thoughts on the social forces underlying the UK government's homeland security policy

In addressing the issue of terrorism, it is as important to understand what our responses teach us about ourselves — both as individuals and as a society — as it is to deal with the terrorists or tackle what we perceive to be the root causes of terrorism.

Warnings

UK Prime Minister Tony Blair gave a sober assessment of the situation confronting him in his speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet in November 2002. He indicated that "barely a day goes by without some new piece of intelligence about a threat to UK interests — some of it may be misinformation, some of it will be gossip. The dilemma lies in taking preventive measures without destroying normal life. Where there is specific intelligence about a particular attack, we act to thwart it directly... Where there is intelligence suggesting potential targets, we increase surveillance or security as far as we can without causing unnecessary hardship or alarm..." (I have paraphrased the prime minister's speech slightly.)

The prime minister concluded his speech on responding to terrorists by noting that if we were to take action "on the basis of a general warning... we would be doing their [the terrorists'] job for them".

In my opinion, this was a fairly balanced and reasoned approach to the problem.

Clearly, our primary task is to avoid increasing the destructive impact of any attack or emergency through our own overreaction to events. We need to rise above the rumours and random responses that will proliferate at such times by discouraging speculation and risk inflation, and emphasising our capabilities by focusing on what we do know rather than on what US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has termed "unknown unknowns".

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UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's government has issued many warnings and dispensed much advice to the public on responding to terrorism, but it has yet to establish a homeland security and resilience ethos.

Politicians and officials naturally perceive themselves to be under tremendous pressure from a public demand to be noticeably decisive in a crisis. Yet decisiveness should not be confused with effectiveness — the two are not synonymous. Furthermore, the decision-makers' perception of what the public expects can be wrong.

Three years after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, we must emphasise the need for a slower, more methodical approach that seeks to:

- gather evidence;
- rank risks; and
- formulate appropriate, effective and proportionate measures.

Recovery

It is worth remembering that the actual impact of 11 September was relatively short-lived. In narrow, economic terms, worst-case estimates of the total rebuilding cost, as well as personal and corporate compensation, has amounted to less than 1% of the US gross domestic product in any one year. To put this into perspective, it should be noted that both the Enron and WorldCom corporate scandals cost substantially more.

Within a month of 11 September, the Dow Jones Industrial Average had returned to its pre-attack levels. Likewise, many of the effects in the aviation and tourism sectors can be attributed to a downward trend that was evident before the attacks.

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There is nothing unusual in such a speedy recovery. The UK Royal Air Force raids on Hamburg in July 1943 left 40,000 dead and 900,000 homeless, yet the city returned to 80% of its productive capacity within five months. A similar scenario can be noted in relation to the atomic attacks in August 1945 on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. Essential services were restored fairly swiftly and people had no choice but to get on with their lives.

Fears

Shaped by mass political disengagement and the fragmentation of once-core social networks, many people increasingly fear the worst. Sadly, they are encouraged in this fear by political, cultural, and scientific elites. This has led to a situation where cynicism, suspicion, and mistrust of all forms of authority are at an all-time high.

Accordingly and gradually, over a period of about a decade, a cultural climate has developed that is defined by an insatiable appetite for anything relating to personal safety. In this context, it is evident that whatever actions the Blair government (or any other

will take in relation to the 'war on terrorism' fall into the following categories of increased demand:

- the Opposition (to polarise the political debate);
- the emergency services (to cover their new roles);
- the public; and
- a new army of private security providers.

The new security climate clearly offers tremendous revenue opportunities for those in the private sector, which consists of a huge growth of so-called 'expert' agencies offering services to nervous individuals and institutions. Such services range from protection and detection to information security and business continuity planning, and even include areas such as therapeutic counselling.

These consultants argue that they are meeting an existing demand and are simply identifying gaps in need of support. It is worth noting, however, that meeting this demand is not the same as assuaging it. The one question that ought to be asked, however, is that if whatever the government does increases demand, who will apply the brakes?

Canary Wharf in London was evacuated after news broke of the 11 September 2001 attacks. Significant events, places or buildings are still regarded as potential Al-Qaeda targets.



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AND SECURITY**Risk**

Much of what happens in the world today is viewed through the prism of risk. It should be noted that this is a new and sometimes debilitating situation. Every significant event, place and business is now regarded by the security services as a potential target for Al-Qaeda. As a consequence, among other phenomena we have seen a tremendous increase in insurance premiums, combined with a decline in the cover being offered.

We should recognise, in this regard, that insurance is not simply a mechanism that allows for rebuilding, replacing, and compensating lost or damaged property. It also serves as a significant enabler for future development. When the insurance industry retreats, social and technical progress is postponed.

We require a proportionate response to the threat of terror. No one can predict what, when, or where the next incident may occur. The real problem facing society today is that we were not very good at dealing with such uncertainties even before the fear of terrorism took hold. As a consequence, our ability to meet current and future challenges comes under greater scrutiny.

Responses

Behind many of the responses promoted by those in charge lies the assumption that prevention is better than the cure.

This is not always true, however. Prevention is only better than the cure when the probability of an adverse effect is relatively high, and when the preventive measures can be shown to be effective. In all other circumstances, prevention can readily become a useless totem exemplified by exhortative requests to be 'vigilant' or 'alert, not alarmed'.

Risk management, in particular, is a very limiting approach to dealing with such issues, yet it is the framework continuously raised and used by senior figures. For instance, in the aftermath of the Istanbul bombings in late 2003, the UK Foreign Office understandably began an audit of all of its foreign embassies and consulates, assessing their location (how close they are to a major road) and the degree of protection afforded by walls or other obstacles.

While this makes perfect sense from a narrow managerial perspective, it makes no sense at all in foreign policy terms. The very point of having some kind of embassy or consulate abroad is based on having a sense of engagement with the local population. Digging in to a deep bunker in the desert outside any major town and surrounding it with razor wire rather defeats the object. Accordingly, we need to be clear as to our true aims and priorities if we are not to paralyse ourselves abroad as well as at home.

Technical responses to these problems often serve to divert resources from where they could best be used in society, and may distract us from many of the more likely and severe risks we continue to face as individuals and as a society.

We also know that a determined terrorist will be able to get through to the target, no matter how many cameras, concrete blocks or computer models are used to dissuade them. In fact, such measures serve to corrode the very social bonds we need to engender if we are to combat terrorism effectively.

Regardless, it is easier to regulate than liberate; to prioritise insecurity over confidence; to ask people to be suspicious rather than show solidarity; to make people dependent rather than independent; and to live according to a plan rather than encourage individual initiative. Worse, this approach serves to encourage future terrorists, hoaxers, loners and cranks, and avoids the necessary political debate — as to who we are and where it is we are heading as a society — that would actually make us resilient. It becomes a self-fulfilling fantasy that puts pressure on others to comply with the new norms of behaviour, scrutiny, and insecurity.

Resilience

Ultimately, real resilience is not a technology one can purchase. It is a cultural attitude stemming from a confident engagement with society and a clarity of meaning and purpose. If resilience means being able to pick yourself up and keep going, then we need to know, as a society, where it is exactly we are heading. That is a political task.

A crisis of confidence, which is the real crisis that confronts us, long predated 11 September. This crisis is not one that any security manager or business continuity planner can address; it is the remit of government.

Governments should provide a sense of meaning and direction to society rather than issue edicts as to the numbers of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear warfare suits to be provided, or where it is that information is to be posted.

Authorities need to remind people that there is much more to life than the fear of terror. Governments need to be brave enough to engage in this debate rather than play on people's fears.

This article is based on a recent contribution to a panel discussion, 'Transport Security – Two Months on from Madrid', held at the Royal United Services Institute in May.

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