

# Perception and Threat: Why Vulnerability-led Responses will Fail

This essay is based upon a recent contribution to a lunchtime panel discussion in the School of Social Science and Public Policy at King's College London. **Bill Durodié** argues that one of the biggest dangers of 11 September is overreaction and that we need to develop responses based upon our values rather than focusing upon our vulnerabilities.

The events of 11 September 2001 have changed the world we live in. This has, in large part, been due to our responses, as well as our perceptions of the incidents and anticipation of future threats, rather than the actual impact of the attacks themselves. The need to achieve a balanced and coherent response poses a significant dilemma for government.

## Symptoms, Causes and Vulnerabilities

Those seeking to identify practical responses to those terrible events, highlight the need to tackle both symptoms and causes. Hawks tend to emphasize the former, whilst doves express a preference for the latter. Those who think we should be tough on both crime and the causes of crime, believe that an effective anti-terrorist campaign should target both.

Either way, these suggested solutions contain a common assumption. As Lawrence Freedman, Professor of War Studies at King's College London has indicated in a recent contribution to the subject; 'In both cases taking action will probably mean ignoring inhibitions against interfering in the internal affairs of other states'.<sup>1</sup>

Just as significantly, there is one angle that is not explored through this 'symptoms and causes' approach. That is, the extent to which our perception and understanding of both are culturally framed.

Our understanding of and reactions to 11 September and the Anthrax incidents that followed have been shaped by a growing, contradictory and, some might say, disproportionate sense of social and personal vulnerability that clearly predated the events themselves. If so, our responses - both to

symptoms and perceived causes - may well be driven by an unnecessary, exaggerated sense of fear rather than measured reflection and calm confidence. 'This fear', as Defence Committee advisor John Gearson recently reminded us, 'can lead some states to terrorise themselves far better than the terrorists'.<sup>2</sup> We would end up effectively doing the terrorists work for them.

Our tendency to systematically over-emphasize the downside of the problems we face can be traced back at least ten years. Issues such as BSE in cattle, genetically modified organisms, fears over the use of mobile phones, and the recent MMR vaccine controversy, all highlight the supposedly new risks we encounter in a globalized environment. So too have the Ebola virus incidents in Central Africa, concerns over 'super-viruses' in general, responses to the foot-and-mouth outbreak, global warming fears and campaigns against 'toxic chemicals' including so-called endocrine disrupting chemicals. The list goes on seemingly limited only by our imagination.

It is not just scientific and technical developments where we increasingly elevate risk over opportunity. Age-old social and cultural difficulties have also been reassessed through this new outlook; sun-bathing, school bullying, child abduction and untrustworthy GPs, all form part of an ever-expanding set of issues highlighting our vulnerabilities and downgrading our achievements. Even relationships are often nowadays viewed through the prism of risk analysis.

Unsurprisingly, and despite the fact that a degree of risk is unavoidable, this 'Culture of Fear', as the sociologist Frank Furedi has coined it,<sup>3</sup> significantly informs our responses to and interpretations of the events of 11 September and thereafter.

## 'Anthraxiety'

Probably, this analysis is at its clearest in the reactions to the Anthrax incidents in the US that followed in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks. These generated five fatalities but also triggered widespread disruption that continues to this day. They led to hundreds of thousands demanding the antibiotic Ciprofloxacin from their doctors and needlessly administering it to themselves, as well as, more pointedly, over 2,300 false alarms in the first two weeks of October 2001 alone.

Notably, sixteen children and one teacher were hospitalized when paint fumes set off a bioterrorism scare at a Washington state middle school. Similarly, window-cleaning fluid being sprayed on the Maryland subway caused thirty-five cases of what Simon Wessely, Professor of Psychiatry at King's College London, describes as 'mass sociogenic illness', including symptoms of nausea, headaches, drowsiness, irritability and sore throats.<sup>4</sup> In other words, there is a danger that under such circumstances of heightened vulnerability we could literally be worrying ourselves sick.

It is important to understand that government warnings and actions at such times can in fact intensify these fears, rather than assuaging them. Governments have a responsibility to produce balanced responses that do not feed our insecurities. For instance, whether the deployment of personnel in full CBW suits at every alarm over the discovery of white powder, or the placing of armed police outside every London railway station in the aftermath of terrorist incidents, is a measured response, remains a moot point. They may rather convey the sense of a society that has lost control.

There is in fact a large literature emanating from the field of clinical psychology that points to the difficulties of providing reassurance to anxious individuals. The problem is that we were already anxious well before 11 September, as any cursory glance at the figures for self-reported stress and depression indicate. These factors have helped shape what may be described as a 'vulnerability-led' response. They focus more on speculative 'What if?' type questions - particularly emphasizing low incidence/high consequence scenarios, such as the use of CBRN weapons - at the expense of realistic 'What will? What has?' type evidence. The fact that CIA officials recently turned to Hollywood film producers to advise them as to possible future scenarios is a case in point.

This focus on hypothetical risks and new technologies - beloved by the media and some other social commentators - can readily distort the allocation of necessary resources and distract us from the real sources of danger, which on the whole remain rather

more mundane. We need to place greater weight on the need for effective action rather than be obsessed with the political drive to 'be seen' to act. Indeed, there is little particularly 'new' about these purportedly new threats. Chemical weapons have been with us for over a century, radiological and nuclear weapons technology is over half a century old, while as to biological weapons, it seems likely that a major flu epidemic would have a greater impact. The Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan invested millions into investigating these prior to their limited impact using Sarin nerve gas on the Tokyo subway in 1995. Another key lesson of that incident which seems to have been forgotten is that Aum Shinrikyo were subsequently eliminated, as has been the case with most such groups who have overstepped the mark.

Businesses too, have a responsibility in such circumstances to be robust and act in a rational manner. The fact that the insurance industry - who one would have supposed were in the business of managing risk - have been turning down policies for tall buildings, or have been busy redefining what counts as a terrorist act in order to off-load the risk, sends important signals that frame public perceptions.

## The Asymmetry of Risk and Vulnerability over Resilience and Values

Since 11 September people have been rebuilding their lives and - in time, if we are confident enough - New York will be rebuilt too. The Dow Jones index dipped for one month in the aftermath but recovered soon afterwards - although the Enron crisis, a rather more home-grown issue, had its own impact. To give a sense of perspective on these matters, even the worst-case estimates for the total cost of these events, both structural and in terms of compensation, still amounts to less than 1 per cent of the worth of the US economy in any one year, a figure that stands at some \$10.2 trillion.

Our reluctance to appreciate our own strengths suggests that one of the key elements of asymmetric warfare may well be the heightened perception of vulnerability in advanced societies, as opposed to any inherent structural weakness. These perceptions could be robustly challenged rather than adapting to the perceived public mood, although unfortunately the opposite trend seems to be more evident in the sphere of scientific debate where public dialogue and stakeholder group-led research agendas are now in vogue.

The main asymmetry exploited by those who oppose democracy and development is that of targeting societies that have become increasingly risk-averse in order to compensate for their lack of power and resources. In this respect, we should note that how we react to acts of terror has an educative function not just for our own authorities - but also for the potential

terrorists themselves. In such circumstances, focusing on our vulnerabilities can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Rather than confidently affirming what we stand for, vulnerability-led responses can lend themselves to invoking a more cautionary orientation to the future. In some quarters this has taken the form of vilifying an assumed American arrogance. As in science, success and ambition become problematized, and are replaced with a greater emphasis upon risk and uncertainty. At one level, this denial of the values of rationality and progress is what unites the perpetrators of the events in New York with many closer to home.

Rather than facing a 'Clash of civilizations' as Samuel Huntington would have it,<sup>5</sup> we may be confronted by a clash within civilization. Yet, few seem ready to change their refrain from 'why do they hate us?' to 'why do we seem to hate ourselves by rejecting our own achievements?'. Lest we forget, from the Oklahoma bomber to the Washington sniper, and from Waco to Aum Shinrikyo, Western societies seem perfectly capable of breeding their own forms of resentment. It is also evident that elements of Al Qa'ida refined their views through contact with the West, becoming infused with possibly more nihilism and cultural relativism than Islam would instill.

A resolution to these matters seems a long way off, however. Whilst groups such as the anti-globalization protestors appear to encapsulate many of these trends, they merely reflect views held more broadly amongst wider layers of our own population. These in turn are encouraged by the increasing defensiveness and risk-consciousness displayed both by businesses and governments. Whilst populations that survived two world wars, including aerial bombardment, have many lessons in resilience they can call on, turning this more profound crisis of confidence around will be a protracted project that will take slightly more than simply invoking some kind of 'Blitz spirit'.

### Conclusion

To restore some balance towards acting calmly, confidently and above all rationally, there can be no 'quick fix'. A good starting point for our long-term response may well be to focus a little more upon ourselves than the perceived 'others' and to ask why it is that so many individuals - albeit still a small number - have become radicalized through their experience of advanced Western societies. Could it be, that in our post-political age, we are failing to provide many with a system of structures, rules and above-all values, that would help fill their lives with greater purpose, drive and meaning?

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### FOOTNOTES

1. *Lawrence Freedman (ed.), 'Superterrorism: Policy Responses', a special issue of The Political Quarterly (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), p. 48.*
2. *Ibid., p. 8.*
3. *Frank Furedi, Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation Revised Edition (London: Continuum Books, 2002).*
4. *Simon Wessely, 'Psychological implications of chemical and biological weapons: Long term social and psychological effects may be worse than acute ones', British Medical Journal (Vol. 323, 20 October 2001), pp. 878-9.*
5. *Samuel Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).*

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