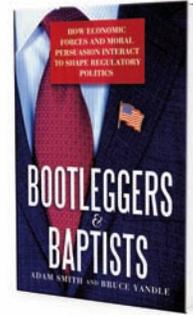




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## The Most Dangerous World Ever?

BY CHRISTOPHER PREBLE

In February 2012 Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared, “I can’t impress upon you [enough] that in my personal military judgment, formed over 38 years, we are living in the most dangerous time in my lifetime, right now.”

One year later, he upped the ante: “I will personally attest to the fact that [the world is] more dangerous than it has ever been.”

But General Dempsey is hardly alone. Dire warnings about our uniquely dangerous world are ubiquitous. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified in early 2014 that he had “not experienced a time when we’ve been beset by more crises and threats around the globe.”

Members of Congress agree. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), born before World War II, explained in July 2014 that the world is “in greater turmoil than at any time in my lifetime.”

Is it? Do we actually live in a uniquely dangerous world? And, if we do not, why do we believe that we do?

In his magisterial study of the decline in violence worldwide, Harvard’s Steven Pinker posits that “we may be living in the most peace-

able era in our species’ existence,” even as he concedes that most people don’t believe it.

If our perceptions aren’t entirely accurate, if the world isn’t, in fact, more dangerous than a decade ago, or a century ago, we could blame our 24/7 media. After all, reporters don’t write about the planes that land safely; the 11 o’clock news never leads with the murder that didn’t happen. Likewise, the stories about the personal information not stolen by identity thieves, the wars that aren’t

fought, and the trade and commerce that flows uninterrupted, are rarely told.

Moreover, we lack perspective. There is little focus on the threats that no longer threaten. Few talk about the dangers no longer looming. It is rare, even, to find people putting today’s threats in context with the recent past. Or the distant past. Few even bother to ponder the question.

Maintaining, or even gaining, perspective,

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Cato adjunct scholar TIMOTHY SANDEFUR (left) chats with Sen. RAND PAUL (R-KY) at the Hart Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill after his presentation to Paul and his staff on his latest book, *The Conscience of the Constitution*, in which he argues that the Declaration of Independence is the intellectual underpinning of the Constitution.

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however, is not an easy task. From wars between states to wars within them, from crime and terrorism to climate change and cyber-mischief, we are beset by a seemingly endless array of threats and dangers. How can one compare them to past threats, especially given that the judgments of what should or should not frighten us are inherently subjective?

It remains true that the only existential threat to the United States comes from a prospective thermonuclear war—the stuff of countless novels and Hollywood films during the dark days of the Cold War. Who is to say that this event, which has never occurred, is, or should be, more frightening than the very real acts of violence that do take place every day? And does society benefit if our fears of very low probability, high-impact events (e.g., global thermonuclear war) were merely supplanted by fears of slightly higher probability, low-impact ones?

Some might say that it is better to be safe than sorry. That we should worry about *all* potential threats. By this logic, it is better to fear things that aren't real than to take too lightly those that are.

Perhaps the tendency to take seriously even seemingly modest dangers has been programmed into our DNA, a product of thousands of years of natural selection. Our distant ancestors who correctly perceived a four-legged creature charging at them from a distance to be a dangerous predator had time to either flee or defend themselves, and thus lived to procreate. By contrast, their threat-deflating neighbors, who believed the approaching beast to be harmless, realized their error too late and were mauled to death.

But while we have learned to take threats seriously, we are also taught to differentiate the real from the imaginary. Fallacious claims of impending danger will erode one's credibility, to the point that the congenial fear-monger is no longer taken seriously. The parable warns of the dangers of crying "wolf" when there are no wolves, but it doesn't teach us to stay silent when we see one. In the

“Individual liberty is often threatened during periods of heightened fear, a fact that informed the very structure of the U.S. government.”

parable, the wolf eventually does come, and the dishonest boy is eaten. The moral of the story is not that all dangers are inflated, but rather that the phony ones should not be.

In truth, we should be on the lookout for *both* kinds of errors. The business world punishes both the imprudent optimist as well as the too-gloomy pessimist. The financial analyst who rated all tech startups as “strong buys” in 2000 or the housing speculator who bought multiple condominiums in Miami in 2007 could rightly be cast as too optimistic.

On the other hand, extreme risk aversion can blind us to possibilities. And excessive fear can be harmful to both our physical health and emotional well-being. The National Institute of Mental Health explains that “excessive, irrational fear and dread” are key symptoms for one of several anxiety disorders, which according to one estimate, afflict 18 percent of Americans.

#### **FEAR IS THE HEALTH OF THE STATE**

But there is a political harm as well. Individual liberty is often threatened during periods of heightened fear and anxiety, a fact that informed the very structure of the U.S. government.

James Madison, in making the case for restraining the new government's war-making powers, warned the delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia: “The means of defence against foreign danger, have been always the instruments of tyranny at home.”

He went on: “Among the Romans it was a standing maxim to excite a war, whenever a revolt was apprehended. Throughout all

Europe, the armies kept up under the pretext of defending, have enslaved the people.”

A decade later, Madison returned to this theme in a letter to Thomas Jefferson. Madison knew that there was already some demand for a standing military, and that a few would use fear of foreign threats to whip up public sentiment in favor of a more powerful state. Indeed, Madison postulated “a universal truth that the loss of liberty at home is to be charged to provisions against danger real or pretended from abroad.”

Others since then have stumbled upon similar ideas about popular notions of threats, and of how the fear of threats has been used to grow the power of government. For example, the noted writer, social critic and satirist H.L. Mencken declared “the whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, most of them imaginary.”

Madison and Mencken's warnings remain relevant today. Recall how in November 2008 incoming Obama chief of staff Rahm Emanuel called for swift government action to deal with what he said was an urgent threat. “You don't ever want a crisis to go to waste,” Emanuel explained in an interview, “it's an opportunity to do important things that you would otherwise avoid.”

While Emanuel was talking about an economic crisis, an increasingly powerful state can be used in many different ways, regardless of whether it was precipitated by fears of foreign or domestic threats. The same sorts of powers that allowed the Justice Department to go after suspected terrorists allowed the IRS to harass suspected tea partiers.

#### **NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NEW FEARS**

Because inaccurate or misleading characterizations of threats pave the way for the growth of government, it is crucial to understand their true nature.

Thus, is the world more dangerous than ever before? In a word, no. Americans, especially, enjoy a measure of security that

our ancestors would envy, and that our contemporaries do envy.

This is not to say that there are no dangers in the world today, as the residents of Tel Aviv and Gaza City will attest. Nor can we say that circumstances will not change for the worse in the future. No one would have predicted that a single act of violence in late June 1914 would precipitate a series of events that culminated in the First World War. Could the 21st-century successors to Gavrilo Princip deploy cyber-weapons to wound, or even kill, their chosen targets? Could they do more than simply kill a single head of state, but do grievous harm to millions? Or could their actions, as Princip's did, lead to a major war, which in the nuclear era would result in the deaths of hundreds of millions?

The possibilities cannot be ruled out. But, for now, they are only that: possibilities, and unlikely ones at that.

Since their inception, nuclear weapons have been the one true weapon of mass destruction. And following the 9/11 attacks, many believed that they would inevitably fall into the hands of terrorists or other nonstate actors inclined to use them. Still others worry that more nation-states will acquire them. The fear of proliferation is not new. In either case caution is warranted, but excessive fear is not. Few countries have ever seriously aspired to possess such weapons, and many of those who did eventually gave up. In a few cases, countries actually turned over their weapons entirely. In fact, for nearly every country in the world, nuclear weapons are more trouble than they are worth.

Terrorists and nonstate actors have, so far at least, come to a similar conclusion. Contrary to the apocalyptic predictions immediately after 9/11, al Qaeda and others have relied exclusively on conventional weapons—chiefly bombs and bullets—to terrorize their victims. They seem to be heeding the advice found in a memo on an al Qaeda laptop seized in Pakistan in 2004:

“Fewer Americans have been killed by terrorism globally since 2002 than have died from allergic reactions to peanuts.”

“Make use of that which is available . . . rather than waste valuable time becoming despondent over that which is not within your reach.”

#### **NATION-STATES VS. NONSTATES**

What of the more traditional threats posed by states? While Vladimir Putin seems to be trying to restore Russia to its place at the top of the enemies list, China is the one country with sufficient size and potential wealth to directly challenge the United States in the future. But it is premature, to say the least, to assume that a war between China and the United States is inevitable. To be sure, U.S. treaty commitments to some of China's neighbors risk drawing the United States into vexing territorial disputes, and China has been developing military capabilities that could significantly raise the costs for the United States if it chose to back its allies' claims by force. For now, however, all parties have many reasons to try to resolve these claims peacefully—including the fact that China is the leading trading partner throughout the region. Similarly, the United States and China have many reasons to work together to address other problems beyond the Asia Pacific region.

Many of those common dangers emanate from nonstate and substate actors, from terrorists and insurgents to revolutionaries and rebels. And while these threats are real, they pale in comparison to what states used to do to one another on a regular basis. Terrorism is, in fact, far less dangerous than widely believed. Consider, for example, that a total of 19 Americans have been killed in four separate terrorist incidents carried out

by Islamist extremists on American soil since 9/11. For reference, 50 people were killed in just three separate incidents during a 14-month span in 2012 and 2013 (Aurora, Colorado; Newtown, Connecticut; and the Washington Navy Yard). Excluding U.S. military personnel, fewer Americans have been killed by terrorism globally since 2002 than have died from allergic reactions to peanuts (an average of 50–100 per year).

Although a relatively small number of people are killed or injured by terrorism every year, many people worry that new technology will allow nonstate actors to inflict harm in other ways, say, for example, by attacking the Internet, or company or individual computers connected to it. States, too, are known to have used so-called cyberweapons, or have aspired to do so. Thus, numerous U.S. officials have warned that cyberattacks are the single greatest threat to national security.

Here again, however, some skepticism is in order. Hackers and criminals are adept at exploiting the vulnerabilities in computer networks, but it is extremely difficult to carry out a major attack with far-reaching consequences. Even an attack that managed, somehow, to crash the banking system completely would be unlikely to undermine confidence in the wider economy, let alone trigger a recession. As the RAND Corporation's Martin Libicki points out, NASDAQ's three-hour shutdown on August 22, 2013, didn't spark a wave of panic selling. “It would require data corruption (e.g., depositors' accounts being zeroed out) rather than a temporary disruption,” Libicki explains, “before an attack would likely cause depositors to question whether their deposits are safe.”

The greater threat may come from measures taken to prevent attacks if they significantly impede legitimate transactions in cyberspace. Similarly, poorly conceived or badly executed policies after the fact might cause more harm than the original incident that precipitated them. The attribution problem compounds the risk. The difficulty in tracking possible cyberattacks to their true

source, and in ensuring that the punishment or retaliation is directed at the perpetrators, places a high premium on measured, targeted responses. Maintaining that standard will help ensure a safer world.

Another factor that can explain why the world is becoming less, rather than more, dangerous, is evolving social norms. Harvard's Pinker notes a perceptible shift in public attitudes toward violence, and documents an associated decline in violent crimes of all types. The rate of such crimes, including murder, rape, and assault, are at or near all-time lows. Within the United States, for example, the homicide rate (homicides per 100,000 residents) fell by nearly half (49 percent) in the 20-year period from 1992 to 2011.

#### **SUPPOSED THREATS TO GLOBAL STABILITY AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY**

Still others worry not so much about physical security, but rather about our prosperity and way of life. They fear that a war could cripple the international economy, or that the mere threat of war could disrupt global trade and commerce, including the world's oil supplies. This concern, at least today, is the main justification for the U.S. military's forward presence around the world, a posture oriented around stopping possible threats before they materialize.

But the patterns of global trade are far more resilient than the pessimists envision. War between major trading partners is highly unlikely, and, even if it were to occur, trade flows between nonbelligerents would not be disrupted, or not for very long. Indeed, Eugene Gholtz shows that when countries shift resources to the purchase of military goods, the result is similar to other consumption binges. During wartime, neutral nations may well benefit economically, as they become a safe haven for investment diverted from warzones, and as they are able to buy certain goods at low cost. While war itself has many horrific effects, the costs that Americans pay to stop all wars are unlikely to be outweighed by the benefits.

There are other risks associated with main-

“A better understanding of what actually threatens us will help us tame our tendency to overreact.”

taining a forward military posture. Current U.S. strategy encourages other countries to free-ride on the security guarantees provided by the U.S. military, imposing an unnecessary—and ultimately counterproductive—burden, on U.S. taxpayers. Exaggerated fears of distant conflicts could even prompt the United States to fight wars that pose no direct threat to U.S. security and to spend too much on the military, which, in turn, weakens the overall U.S. economy.

#### **PUTTING TODAY'S THREATS IN PERSPECTIVE**

Although the world will never be free from dangers, we should aspire to understand them clearly. Maintaining perspective isn't easy when we are bombarded with images of fighting from Eastern Ukraine or Gaza.

But, in many instances, we are today merely seeing what has always existed beyond our field of vision. Tragic, even horrifying, stories of human suffering do not portend that we are living in a more dangerous world. In most respects, we are living longer, better lives. Our chances of suffering a violent or premature death are very low, and still declining. And our prosperity and broader well-being are protected by a dynamic and resilient international economy, and by the spread of powerful ideas that have reduced poverty and disease.

A better understanding of what actually threatens us will help us tame our tendency to overreact. An honest assessment of the threat environment—problems that lurk today and on the horizon—will allow us to redirect some of the money that goes to the Pentagon and military contractors back to the taxpayers and private entrepreneurs. And, recalling Madison and Mencken's warnings about how and why states exaggerate threats to grow their power, a more accurate assessment of the world's dangers will ultimately help us to preserve our liberty. ■

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