

U.S. defense policymakers have adopted the precautionary principle.

The Terrible 'Ifs'

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The United States employs a version of the precautionary principle when it confronts threats to national security. We spend vast amounts on defenses against threats unlikely to affect Americans. Experts, defense officials, and politicians justify the expenditures by saying they are necessary to protect the public from worst case dangers. Those claims ignore what is probable and what defenses cost. They exaggerate the danger our enemies pose and strip resources from more probable dangers, making us less safe. Surrounded by the demons of possibility, the American public perceives a menacing and chaotic world that is mostly fiction.

Consider war a species of risk, danger, or uncertainty. We are not accustomed to that perspective. The theories that inform the study of political violence are not those that guide regulation of health and safety. The Defense Department is not considered to be in the same business as the Food and Drug Administration. But we can glean insights into our defenses from debate about regulatory policy. We can reveal choices among dangers hidden by talk of uncertainty and consider their cause.

RISK AND PREFERENCE

Students of regulatory policy know of the precautionary principle, an idea about risk favored by advocates of various health and environmental regulations. The concept can be stated as follows: Whenever some activity poses a possible risk to health, safety, or the environment, the government should take preventive action. Government intervention is warranted even if the evidence that the activity is harmful is uncertain and the cost of preventive action is high.

In *Laws of the Fear*, University of Chicago law professor Cass Sunstein demonstrates that the precautionary principle is incoherent. The principle fails to acknowledge that decisions about risk, whether they regulate health hazards or arm against a state, cannot deal with one risk alone. Because resources are always limited, efforts to head off a particular danger take resources away from other government programs

and from private investment that also reduce risk. Also, because of unintended consequences, actions that prevent one danger can create new ones. If we took the precautionary principle seriously, we would have to be cautious about all the dangers a particular decision touches. That includes the danger of doing nothing. Taken literally, the principle prevents all action and inaction, making it useless.

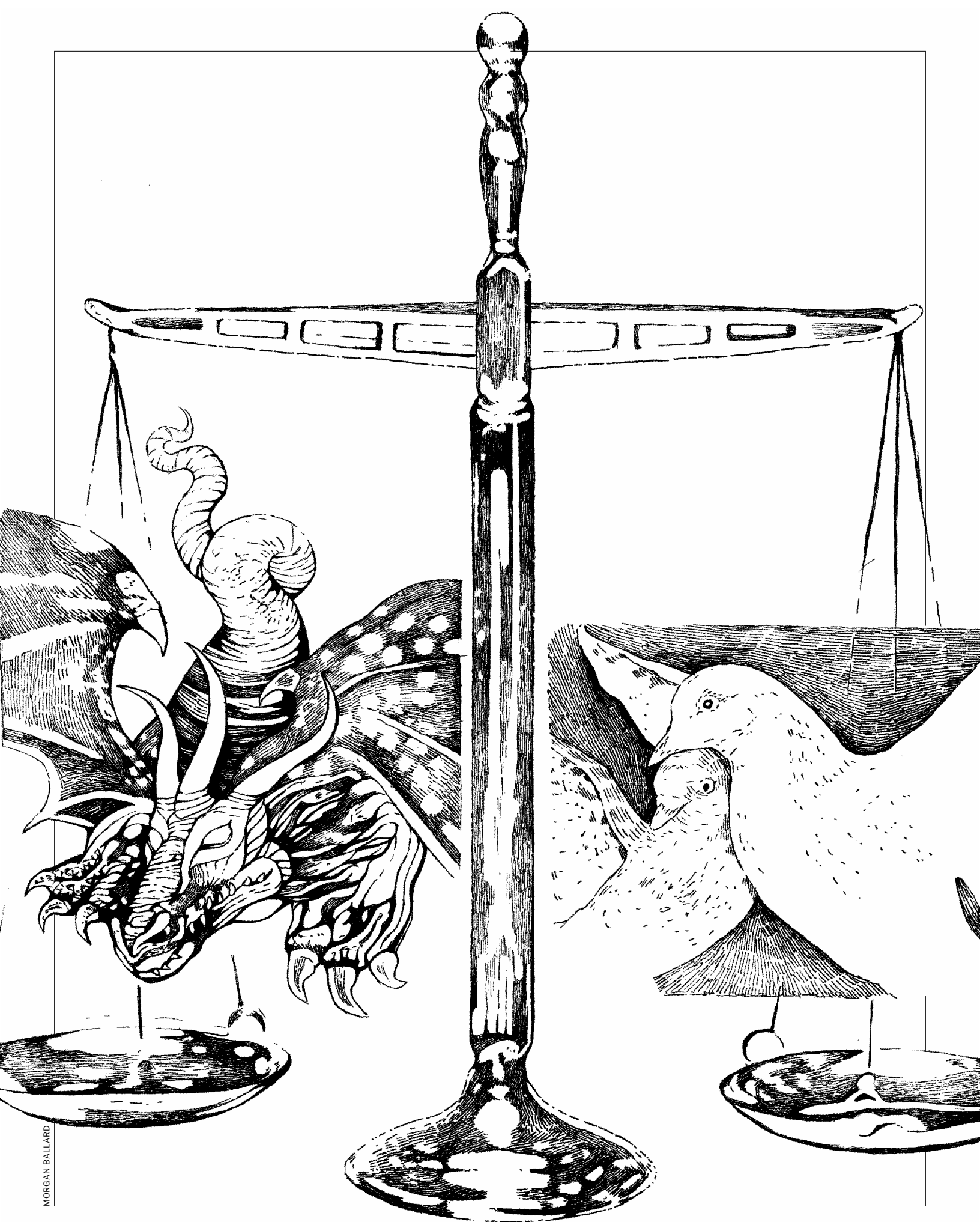
States often ignore this logical failure and apply the precautionary principle to particular hazards. Sunstein argues that in many of those cases, precautionary action will be more harmful to society than running the risk. Those are cases where the danger is small and the cost of prevention is large.

The use of asbestos as building insulation is an example. When contained in walls, asbestos is harmless. If the materials containing it deteriorate, however, the asbestos might be inhaled or ingested and, in very rare cases, could cause respiratory diseases including lung cancer. The precautionary principle can be evoked by those demanding the material's removal. But removal creates new cancer risks and its cost is enormous. Whoever bears it, that cost will take money away from other risk-reducing uses, be it savings, health care, or education. Removal harms society more than leaving the asbestos in place. Another example is genetically modified foods. European regulators argue that the uncertain risks of genetically modified crops justify limiting trade flows and the resulting higher prices on consumers. They exchange an uncertain risk for a sure one.

The illogic of the precautionary principle does not mean that states should not regulate against uncertain dangers. The point is that dangers should be evaluated by cost-benefit analysis. This means that decisions about risk should consider the cost that preventive action would avert, the likelihood that preventive action will work, and the action's cost. Decisionmakers should also consider, as Sunstein notes, not just total costs and benefits, but the equity of their distribution.

The problem with cost-benefit analysis is that it relies on unavailable information about the magnitude and likelihood of the harm. Everyone would agree to head off disaster at low cost and to avoid costly defenses against tiny dangers. Everyone agrees that research is helpful to getting policy right. But some degree of uncertainty is hard to extinguish. You never know,

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some will say, what the true cost is of asbestos as insulation. If science is never complete, cost-benefit analysis is impossible.

The problem with this critique of cost-benefit analysis is that its virtue does not depend on getting rid of uncertainty. Analysts use cost-benefit analysis to get all the potential costs into the debate and force recognition of choice. They show that the pursuit of perfect safety, of chasing a danger out of existence, creates other dangers.

This point shows why debate about the precautionary principle is often phony. Inherent uncertainty means that the decisions about risk are likely to be made by some criteria other than a principle about risk. That criterion will be a prior political preference — in the case of genetically modified foods, probably protection of domestic producers.

Critics of the precautionary principle charge that it is a justification for regulation, not its cause — that the principle's defenders care more about the environment than other public goods. Defenders of the principle claim that cost-benefit analysis serves corporate bottom lines. They are both part right.

Fights about regulating risks are about which risks to confront and which to accept, not about how much risk to accept. All government policies ultimately reduce one risk or another. Politics is competition between risk preferences.

Societies are not consistent in their approach to dangers. They are precautionary about certain risks and acceptant of others. Americans are less fearful — less precautionary — than Europeans about global warming and genetically modified foods. We are more cautious about secondhand smoke, drug approval, and nuclear proliferation. The differences cannot be justified by objective appeals to science.

Scholars offer various explanations for the origins of those preferences. In *Risk and Culture*, Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky argued that culture causes risk perception. They claimed that groups are organized by preferences about what dangers ought to be confronted collectively and that the rise of new political coalitions brings new priorities about danger. University of Oregon psychologist Paul Slovic points to people's psychological tendencies to react to certain risks — such as those that are novel or involve a perceived loss of control — and the way those perceptions spread by social interaction and media. MIT's Harvey Sapolsky argues that risk perception results from the balance of the various special interests that benefit from society either confronting or running the risk. The groups compete to guide public opinion about danger. The variance in the balance of interest groups' power across countries explains their variant reaction to risks. Whatever their origin, political preferences drive demand for regulation of risks. Statements about the certainty or uncertainty of science are often disguises for those preferences.

This discussion about the precautionary principle applies to national security dangers in two ways. First, American national security policy is explicitly precautionary and is thus subject to the same problems as the application of the precautionary principle in other policy areas. Second, the precautionary reasoning advanced to defend our security policies hides political motives. As with the regulatory arena, cost-benefit analysis can help expose choices among risks that advo-

cates of precaution shroud with claims of uncertainty.

Some will argue that security dangers are so distinct from health and safety risks that the comparison is useless. Certainly the two sorts of risk are different. Politics produces national security dangers, making them more uncertain than environmental risks that result from physical phenomena. Moreover, national security dangers — conquest, mass death, economic devastation — are generally catastrophic and sudden. Some health and safety risks share that quality, but in most cases they exact a creeping toll.

The unique attributes of security dangers do not remove the danger of precautionary reasoning. True, uncertain dangers of potentially great and irreversible consequence merit extensive preventive efforts. That is why states have traditionally devoted large portions of their budgets to defense. But high uncertainty and potential consequences do not mean that states can ignore the costs of defenses. Moreover, national security dangers are not always as uncertain and dangerous as we hear.

THE WAR ON UNCERTAINTY

According to American pundits, politicians, and various national security strategy documents, uncertain dangers stalk the United States — known and unknown unknowns, as former defense secretary Don Rumsfeld once put it. We are told that the world is awash in civil war and terrorism, which, according to the 2002 National Strategy for Homeland Security, could strike us “any time, any place with virtually any weapon” and might, as former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard Myers put it, “do away with our way of life.” Terrorists are said to hide in sleeper cells across the country and to plot our destruction from proliferating outposts in failed states. We hear that our satellites are ripe for attack and that we face an “electronic Pearl Harbor” because our computers are vulnerable. We are warned that Iran's nuclear weapons portend disaster, that Iraq may pull the Middle East into chaos, that North Korea might attack us, and that China may soon push us around.

The futures depicted in those arguments are possible, but they are not probable. It is mere possibility, no matter how small and unlikely, that justifies the defenses that policymakers advocate. Because you cannot know for certain the odds of a potential danger, the logic says, you must prepare for it. History teaches nations extreme caution — better safe than sorry.

Precautionary reasoning pervades official writing about U.S. national security. President Bush's speeches and national security planning documents, which are supposed to guide our defense budget, are rife with it. They depict a world of swirling uncertainty and rising danger. They claim that the simple Soviet threat has been replaced by more varied and irrational ones that require expensive preventive measures. Those statements avoid dealing in probability and comparing the costs of defenses with the risks they defend against. They imply that uncertainty has made that calculation impossible.

Laying out his preemption doctrine at West Point in 2002, President Bush said that “if we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.” The National Security Strategy of 2002 echoes that preventive logic and says that

today's dangers are more "complex and dangerous" than the dangers the United States faced in the Cold War. The 2004 National Military Strategy sees "uncertain and complex" threats. The 2005 National Defense Strategy claims that the primary danger that the \$500 billion defense budget confronts is the unknown:

Uncertainty is the defining characteristic of today's strategic environment. We can identify trends but cannot predict specific events with precision. While we work to avoid being surprised, we must posture ourselves to handle unanticipated problems — we must plan with surprise in mind.

The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the defense planning document drafted every four years to guide U.S. defense spending, argues that the United States now faces a hostile mix of terrorists, failed states, insurgencies, rogue states, and large militaries like China's. Like the other documents, the QDR does not estimate the threats' likelihoods and recommend focusing on one or another on that basis. It contends simply that "managing risks" compels the United States to prepare for

Korea was a relatively poor country, North Korea received strong backing from Beijing, and Washington believed in the domino theory. But today the Cold War is over, and South Korea has over 20 times the GDP and 10 times the military spending of its northern counterpart. Would a U.S. pullout from South Korea increase the danger of North Korean aggression? It might, a bit, although the North Koreans would know that the United States could still bring airpower to bear quickly. Would an attack endanger Americans? It might harm our economy and it certainly would offend our values. But strategy should not focus only on preventing remote dangers while ignoring the risk of tying down troops needed elsewhere and expending considerable resources and money. This does not necessarily mean that we should abandon Korea, but that we should consider all the relevant risks.

The continuation of the Iraq war is often justified using similar logic. Advocates of the war imagine the consequences of a U.S. withdrawal as regional Iranian hegemony, a Saudi-Iran war, or a terrorist state in Iraq. Those lurid possibilities are generally offered without attempts to judge their proba-

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all of them. The QDR argues that we must act to head off the risks through direct military attack, support of proxies, or stabilization missions. It then recommends that we retain the weapons and forces we have, with a few tweaks.

The clearest recent example of precautionary reasoning about security is Vice President Dick Cheney's one percent doctrine, as reported by author Ron Suskind:

If there was even a 1 percent chance of terrorists getting a weapon of mass destruction — and there has been a small probability of such an occurrence for some time — the United States must now act as if it were a certainty.

Of course, a low-probability chance of a catastrophic event justifies expensive defensive actions even under cost-benefit reasoning. But pretending that the catastrophe is certain justifies overly risky and expensive preventive actions. If there is a one percent chance of a \$10,000 problem, you should not want to pay insurance worth more than \$100 to prevent it. If the odds are certain, you'll pay anything less than \$10,000. That is the kind of reasoning that makes a \$600 billion dollar defense budget and the Iraq war seem sensible.

Precautionary reasoning extends to more specific defense policies. Why does the United States keep 30,000 troops in South Korea? Originally the troops remained there after the Korean War to protect South Korea against another Communist invasion. That may have made sense when South

bility or how the possible costs of leaving stack up against the certain costs of staying — costs that include further inflaming anti-Americanism, \$2-\$3 billion in military spending each week, an inability to deploy troops elsewhere, lost political capital, recruiting difficulties for the Army, and many dead and wounded American servicemen.

Only a precautionary ethos explains why the federal government spends large sums to protect every American state from terrorism. Terrorists could strike Arkansas. Based on history, if they did so, they would likely kill several dozen people in an explosion. That possibility is so remote and the utility of the spending in addressing the risk is so unclear that the right amount of homeland security spending in Arkansas, and most areas of the United States, is probably zero.

Or consider national policy on prospective employees for U.S. intelligence agencies. Counter-intelligence efforts focus on the tiny risk that an applicant serves a foreign power. To extinguish that risk, these policies slow security clearances to a crawl, especially for applicants of Middle Eastern descent who have relatives overseas. The result is intelligence agencies robbed of the people they most need. Similarly, recent legislation mandates that, within five years, customs agents must somehow search every cargo container entering the United States for weapons. To eliminate the risk of such weapons, we would create huge new risks through slowed deliveries, a more expensive customs agency, and higher shipping costs. Likewise,

increased security to make sure immigrants are not terrorists may have driven away many future entrepreneurs.

In these areas, the hawks claim that the doves accept risk. Pulling out of Korea risks a new Korean war. Cutting homeland security funding to New Hampshire leaves Hanover vulnerable. An immigrant might be a terrorist. An Arab CIA applicant might be spy. All true. But hawks accept more risk from the dangers defenses create. The difference between hawks and doves turns on how they rate competing risks and on what ends of government they most value, not on their penchant for risk or safety.

THE GOOD NEWS YOU DON'T HEAR

The dirty secret of American national security politics is that we are relatively safe. Official rhetoric shrouds an increasingly stable and peaceful world. There is no basis for believing that the world is becoming more uncertain and dangerous. The Cold War was not predictable. Few predicted its end. Few agreed on Soviet intentions, on how much to spend on defense, and on which states were worth defending from Communist aggression or insurgency. The giant clash did not come, but the world was not stable. Rogue states prospered. Civil wars raged. States failed.

Today, peace, liberalism, and order are spreading. According to a 2005 University of Maryland study, there is less war today

U.S. nonintervention were assured. And it is not clear how Americans would be endangered if they did expand. Sure, they all cause trouble: Iran funds or arms Hezbollah in Lebanon, Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories, and Shi'ite militias in Iraq. Syria sponsors assassinations in Beirut. North Korea sells missiles and heroin. None treat their citizens well. But those problems are hardly akin to threatening our freedoms or territorial integrity. Nuclear weapons can help insure those regimes' survival, encouraging their mischief. But it is not clear what added provocations nuclear weapons would allow. And today, Iran's nuclear program is years from producing a weapon, North Korea's is slated for shutdown, and Syria's is nonexistent. Those states bear watching, but they are not grave threats to our safety.

What about other states that are perceived to be threats to U.S. security? China and Russia are no longer communist states with significant expansionary aims and revolutionary ideologies that attract adherents abroad. Aside from China's interest in Taiwan, neither state has much motive for confrontation with the United States. And Taiwan is only an issue because we claim to defend it. China's defense spending is a bit mysterious, but an estimate by the International Institute for Strategic Studies puts it at \$122 billion a year — about a fifth of U.S. military spending. Given that China's

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than at any time since the 1950s. Interstate war is far less common than it was during the Cold War, and seems to be disappearing among the most powerful states. Civil war, the far more common type, has been declining since the early 1990s. A 2006 study from the University of British Columbia reports that the incidence of genocide has declined sharply since the end of the Cold War. Though terrorism is up lately, the number of incidents has not surpassed that of the 1980s. The report also shows that wars have become less deadly on average even as they become less numerous. Meanwhile, gross domestic products are rising around the world, even in Africa, aiding the spread of law and order via taxes. Democracy and liberal values have been spreading in fits and starts for centuries.

Americans are among the most secure people in history. On average we live 78 years, longer than ever before. The threats that have historically driven states' military spending — civil war and invasion — are unthinkable here.

The closest thing we have to state enemies, North Korea, Iran, and Syria, lack the capability to attack U.S. shores directly. Together they spend about \$10 billion a year on their militaries, less than one-60th what we do. None of those states would have good prospects for territorial expansion even if

economic growth is likely to slow in the coming years, it may be decades before Beijing spends half of what we do on defense. Worry about a supposed looming conflict between the United States and China over energy resources should be tempered by the fact that oil is a global commodity — China's oil explorations reward American consumers.

TERRORISM The greatest current threat to U.S. security is from terrorism. Yet terrorists kill less Americans than peanuts in most years. Even in 2001, terrorists killed less than one-10th as many Americans as the flu. The minority of the jihadist movement actively trying to kill Americans has shown no sign of a presence in the United States, as the FBI has grudgingly admitted. (Contrary to what you usually hear, absence of evidence is evidence of absence, but not proof.) The jihadists' perverse ideology makes them unpopular in their own lands — except perhaps when American military occupations give credence to the jihadist propaganda that America is at war with Islam.

The possibility that terrorists will soon manufacture nuclear or biological weapons and kill us in droves is remote. The difficulty of making nuclear and biological weapons is generally understated. (Chemical weapons, often discussed in

the same breath as biological and nuclear weapons, are not much more deadly than conventional munitions and therefore their proliferation to terrorists should not be a special concern.) Weaponizing biological agents is a mean feat for most nations and probably beyond the capability of today's terrorist groups. Nuclear weapons are our greatest worry and we probably should invest more to secure them and their components. However, given their size, the tight security that protects them, and the general need for activation codes to use them, the odds of terrorists stealing such a weapon and using it are close to zero. The most prudent worry is that terrorists might acquire fissile material and employ engineers competent enough to build a homemade nuclear weapon that could be smuggled into the United States. But this scenario requires a number of risky steps: a nuclear terrorist must find a source for fissile materials and other components, buy those materials, smuggle them across borders, design and assemble the weapon, and then deliver it to its target, which will likely be another location, probably across borders. Each of those steps is possible, but the existence of multiple failure points drives down the odds of overall success, especially for a loose-knit group, as Ohio State political scientist John Mueller writes. (See "A False Sense of Insecurity," Fall 2004.)

Large-scale terrorism requires not only hatred but also organization. Only hierarchical organizations reliably store knowledge and distribute it via training and divide labor to achieve complex goals. Harassed by vigilant intelligence agencies, al-Qaeda is today less an organization than a movement of like-minded individuals who are at best loosely linked and distributed among decentralized organizations and fellow-travelers. Al-Qaeda and its allies have managed only a series of conventional bombings abroad since September 11. They appear too disorganized to launch further complex attacks on that scale, let alone the apocalyptic nightmares that we have been told to expect. Because the potential cost of terrorists' acquiring nuclear or biological weapons is so high, we should work hard to prevent the remote possibility. But we must consider that remoteness when we evaluate our nonproliferation policies.

The insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan are troubling, but both can be contained. A Sunni state or region in Iraq might harbor foreign terrorists, but Sunni insurgents' clashes with the group al-Qaeda in Iraq suggest otherwise. If terrorists did remain, they would not be immune from U.S. Special Forces raids or airpower based nearby. The prospects of regional powers entering the Iraq fray if we would withdraw our forces should not greatly trouble us; they have little interest in war with each other and might even aid stability. Taliban militias are gaining strength in the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan, but the Taliban is not the primary enemy of the United States. A Taliban-like entity in parts of Afghanistan would not threaten Americans if it did not welcome al-Qaeda back.

FAILED STATES State failures are often said to threaten the United States by offering terrorists refuge. But history is rife with failed states, and few — 1990s Afghanistan, today's Iraq, arguably Algeria during its civil war — created serious dangers for Americans.

Even in Afghanistan, the primary example of this phenomenon, the problem was that the governing power, the Taliban, allied itself with al-Qaeda. Generally, anarchy is inhospitable to everyone, including terrorists. Because few failed states have produced terrorism, it is wiser to wait and see whether terrorism emerges from these places before intervening in their politics. The assumption that the United States must somehow fix all failed states creates a neo-imperial foreign policy more costly than the problem it is meant to solve.

The lawless regions in Pakistan's northwest show the limits of what outsiders can do to aid central authority abroad. Though intelligence operations and unmotivated Pakistan troops can harass terrorists there, we will probably have to live with danger in the region while awaiting a Pakistani solution. Economic aid can help, but not much. A partial American occupation of Pakistan would likely provoke insurgency, cost hundreds of millions of dollars a week, and generate more terrorism than it prevents. Brief raids are a better option.

The point about these threats is not just that they are not heirs to Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, but that we know enough to defend against them with a strategy that prioritizes dangers. We know enough to use intelligence operations to hunt terrorists in Pakistan. We can argue about whether a Chinese threat is coming, but we know that today it is not as pressing as other concerns. We know that we could chase terrorists and fight our two wars, even while saving a large percentage of our defense dollars, if we cut the Navy and Air Force budgets. We know that the terrorists cannot kill very many of us unless they acquire biological or nuclear weapons, and we know where fissile materials are. We know enough to consider the likelihood of biological and nuclear terrorism when we assess the value of our defenses against it. But it is naïve to believe that analysis can fix our defenses. Our defenses are precautionary because of bad politics, not bad analysis.

THE POLITICS OF PRECAUTION

Why is it that American leaders never tell us the good news about our security? Why do they conjure up so many possible monsters to destroy and then overspend to confront them? One explanation is liberal culture — if Americans see a Manichean world of liberal allies and illiberal enemies, it follows that we would exaggerate the danger of illiberal states and terrorists. Alternatively, psychology says that people focus on large, unlikely dangers like wars or plane crashes rather than less salient everyday costs — that we ignore the opportunity costs of preventing disaster even if they cost more than the catastrophe they aim to prevent multiplied by the probability of the disaster occurring.

These theories explain much about our threat perception. But a more powerful explanation for our precautionary reaction to national security threats is an imbalance of interests and government's near-monopoly on information in the national security realm.

In other policy arenas like environmental politics, there are strong private interests on both sides. Environmental groups preach precaution. Business interests advocate regulatory restraint. The result is a fair political fight that creates debate.

As marketplaces of ideas go, that's not bad. In current national security politics, there is debate, but all the interests are on one side. Both parties see political reward in preaching danger. The massive U.S. national security establishment relies on a sense of threat to stay in business. On the other side, as former defense secretary Les Aspin once wrote, there is no other side. No one alarms us about alarmism. Hitler and Stalin destroyed America's isolationist tradition. Everyone likes lower taxes, but not enough to organize interest groups against defense spending. A scattering of libertarians and anti-war liberals confronts a bipartisan juggernaut. The information about national security threats comes to Americans principally from people driven by organizational or electoral incentives toward threat inflation.

One source of precautionary messages about security is the American two-party system. There is no dove party. In recent decades, the Republicans have won elections by preaching national security vigilance. Few Democrats respond by making the case for a security policy that accepts more risk in exchange for more savings. That position would encourage them to downplay security dangers, as isolationist Republicans did in the first half the 20th century. Instead, Democrats — particularly in presidential elections — move to the political right to neutralize national security issues. They balance their relatively dovish stance on Iraq by supporting the enormous military budget and demanding more spending on homeland security, aid to failed states, and preventing weapons proliferation. The result is a debate where no party profits by helping Americans perceive their safety.

Information about national security also tends to be precautionary because it is provided by a security establishment with an interest in a sense of danger. William C. Clark, writing about the history of risk assessment, notes that medieval Europeans did not much fear witches until they created an inquisition to find them. The inquisition provided its members work, encouraging them to justify it with a threat. The institutionalization of the hunt heightened perceptions of the danger hunted. A similar problem haunts modern Americans. The large supply of defense creates a large demand for it.

It was not always so. Blessed by geography with natural security, Americans traditionally avoided peacetime military mobilization. In the 20th century, we built up large forces and a stable of military contractors for three struggles — World War I, World War II, and the Cold War — united by one purpose: to prevent one power from unifying enough of Eurasia to threaten the United States.

The Cold War's end freed Americans of the prospect that had justified the military establishment. No state rivaled our power. Nuclear weapons provided insurance against attack anyway. But there was no parade when the Cold War ended. Defense budgets were cut, but only to levels around where they were before the Reagan build-up. New demons — ethnic conflict, China, rogue states, Saddam Hussein — justified our continuing to have Cold War defense budgets in a post-Cold War world.

Analysts often describe policymaking as if it is invented anew each year, as if all risks are reassessed and priorities reconsidered. But leaders inherit policies more than they make them. Policies are made by institutions that last. Liberal government

requires consensus across branches and within organizations to function. Veto players abound. Compromise is necessary. The easiest path to compromise is to reinvent last year's compromise, its budgets, missions, and policies. Dangers may recede, but institutions and policies to confront them remain.

The roughly five percent of U.S. GDP that we will spend on defense in 2008 will amount to nearly \$700 billion — more than half the world's total defense spending and an amount greater in constant dollars than what Americans have spent in any year since the end of the Korean War. The budget funds the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the several hundred thousand civilian employees in the Pentagon, the four military services, and the Coast Guard. Those organizations contain multitudes of smaller organizations and interests. A secret portion of the defense budget, probably \$60 billion, goes toward our 16 intelligence agencies.

We will spend another \$61 billion this year on homeland security. Those funds are split among various federal bureaucracies and agencies in every state. The budget also funds the defense industry that serves the Pentagon and, increasingly, the Department of Homeland Security.

Along with the various organizations funded by our security dollars, these funds benefit the congressmen and senators who protect jobs in their districts associated with security organizations. The money also funds contractors, think tanks, and university researchers bankrolled by government grants. There are a lot of interests to fight for theirs.

Military services and other, similar, organizations believe in their missions, which are a public service. Their preferences are conveyed to their members by socialization and the incentive structure that promotion creates. Members advocate for resources to perform their mission in the budget-making process and in public. Threats justify budgets, so agencies sell threats. They sell the threats through congressional testimony, press conferences, leaks, funded studies, and statements of strategy. Our strategy documents are rationalizations of spending, not its guide. The current talk about uncertainty and chaos are a new example of this phenomenon. Note that these organizations generally advocate not war, but preparation for it; they preach myopic caution, not extreme aggression.

National security organizations exist to protect against certain classes of threats, not to consider the total risk associated with their activities. Their job is not to ask whether their budget is a sensible use of money. Alaska's Office of Homeland Security will not tell taxpayers that public safety would be better served by spending on snowplow maintenance. The Air Force is the same way. The precautionary approach to national security is the substitution of parochial perspectives for a national one.

Contractors echo those rationalizations of defenses through studies they fund and lobbyists they hire. So do the politicians whose districts benefit. Senators from Maine harp on the Chinese naval threat because it creates jobs for Bath Iron Works. Because neither the contractors nor the politicians advocate lower defense spending, these organizationally based incentives rarely conflict with electoral ones.

Other sources of information about national security dan-

gers are experts in think tanks and academe. One might think that the independence those scholars claim would prevent them from endorsing precautionary reasoning, but two factors prevent this. First, like the military services, think tanks and academic centers rely on the perception of insecurity. They have little incentive to question the notions that fuel their funding: the idea that security is precarious, that North Korea is a grave threat, and so on. Sometimes analysts do this anyway, of course, but the path of least resistance is to write about how to control a danger instead of evaluating its magnitude. Second, nongovernmental experts often lack true independence. Many receive grants and other forms of funding from a part of the national security bureaucracy. They rarely take orders, but few offer analysis that harms their benefactors. In general, the questions are circumscribed but the answers are honest. Another brake on independence is the hope for political appointments. This ambition encourages

about the same share of the defense budget every year. The tradition encourages them to produce arguments that grow the total defense budget, rather than attacking the relevance of rivals. Another problem is that the recent budgetary plenty has prevented the shortfalls that could produce a scrum for funds.

The messengers of national security precaution — politicians, national security organizations, experts, and the credulous media — are not a conspiracy. They are an alignment of interests that promote an overlapping mélange of possible dangers and (expensive) policy responses. They do not sing together exactly, but their collective voices produce a powerful chorus. The precautionary ethos they produce comes not by design but through the incidental construction of collective belief. As MIT's Stephen Van Evera writes, truth about security falls victim to a free rider problem: we all want truth, but not enough to protect it from those who gain by its distortion. We are left with an imbalanced debate.

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experts to reflect one party's perspective. Because neither party is reliably dovish; there are few reliable doves among ambitious experts.

The problem is not lying. If the people in the national security establishment are simply doing their job and conveying information about threats, they will focus our attention on the elimination of danger rather than its probability. A rare bureaucrat or expert will voice opinions harmful to his organization or prospects for appointment, but even fewer will offer those opinions without being asked, and few policy-makers will ask. People generally respond to their incentives.

The elements of the national security establishment do not have the same interests and thus do not promote the same possible threats. The Department of Homeland Security warns of disasters and vulnerabilities that terrorists might exploit. The missile defense agency warns of missiles. The services themselves are divided into sub-communities that sometimes compete. Air Force space command warns of threats to satellites while the rest of the Air Force promotes threats that could require strategic airpower. On the other hand, the competing interests often defend against elements of the same danger. Both Air Force communities and the three naval communities rely to varying extents on the danger of China.

The interests that comprise the military establishment are more cooperative than competitive. Organizations competing for support might debase the risks that rivals peddle so as to eat their rivals' budgetary lunches. But the interests have little reason to fight. Part of the problem is the tradition, dating to the Kennedy administration, where each military service gets

Left unchallenged, the precautionary reasoning that governs our security policy is broadly believed. Self-interested analysis becomes belief, not only among the public but among analysts, bureaucrats, and generals. The status quo has a powerful hold over our view of dangers. It makes an ideology.

As the intermediary that passes the government's assessments on to the public, the media could combat these misperceptions. But members of the media have three reasons not to evaluate. First, they depend on government sources and experts close to government for stories and quotes, and thus have little choice but to pass on their biases. Second, because of psychology, danger sells more than safety — if it bleeds it leads. Third, the research needed to challenge official characterizations of danger adds work and cost. Where there is debate within government about a danger — today's debate about Iran is an example — the media will reflect it. But the press is rarely an independent source of analysis.

Not all threats are exaggerated. Those that lack institutions designed to confront the dangers (and plead for government support) can be neglected. Because there was no large interest designated to fight terrorism in the 1990s — no natural bureaucratic champion — the threat was arguably given too little attention. Likewise, one explanation for the anemic American reaction to Nazism was the absence of a military establishment that would have gained by promoting it. Some will argue that Nazi Germany proves that you can never have too much vigilance. But the solution to no vigilance is not over-vigilance. And examples of American under-reaction are rare. The general American affliction is threat inflation, not threat denial.

In times of great danger, a large set of interests that profit by promoting danger and defense are necessary. Defense is a public good and, as University of Georgia economist Dwight Lee notes, it will be underprovided unless public entities gain from its provision. But if we conclude that the dangers of defense are greater than the danger they confront, how to right the ship? Can we avoid precautionary security politics? Obviously, Americans should give greater consideration to the costs of defenses. But political problems need political solutions. There is no analytic holy grail.

As with other hazards, the best strategy for dealing with true uncertainty is gathering information to assess the magnitude of the danger, as MIT's Kenneth Oye has written. In national security that means intelligence. Empowering intelligence agencies at the expense of military services might help steer the political energy created by fear into more productive uses.

More generally, what we need are interests that profit by exposing precautionary reasoning in security, the counterparts of the industries that encourage skepticism about the extent of various health and safety hazards. Expanding the American political system to include a party that wins at the polls by attacking militarism might accomplish this, but that is a pipe dream. A more realistic solution is to provoke more competition among government agencies. Today in the Pentagon, "jointness" is a near-religious principle. Open competition between military branches is taboo. But if war-fighters need unity, civilian managers need rivalries to exploit. Security strategies should cap spending and pit organizational budgets against each other, eliminating the fixed shares between the services and threatening to move less useful funds out of defense into intelligence, diplomacy, or foreign aid, and even to the non-defense side of the budget. Made to fight, different federal agencies and departments might publicly wield theories about risk in budgetary battles. For instance, the Army might note (or encourage those it funds to note) that terrorists are rarely found at sea, making the

Navy's claims to counter-terrorism spoils less credible. The State Department might argue that terrorism is primarily a political problem, not a military one. The more public these fights, the better. Public fights let the public learn what dangers are more exaggerated.

We could also use fights that cross risk categories. We need more mechanisms that pit a dollar spent on health care against a dollar spent on defending Taiwan. One way to do this is to strengthen the budgetary overseers in places like the Office of Management and Budget. Another way of provoking competition is a budgetary crisis. Big changes in government tend to come from rare events like wars and landslide elections, not sudden epiphanies by policymakers. Increased entitlement costs combined with an economic slowdown might force a day of reckoning where the 20 percent of the federal budget spent on defense becomes an attractive piggy bank. A competition of risks might ensue. A government decision to take on more health care costs could create similar pressure. Of course, these comparisons occur somewhat today. This helps explain why the defense budget does occasionally decrease. More of this competition is needed.

An obvious fix is less secrecy. Reforming the system of classification to make more information public would make it harder for officials to maximize alarm by cherry-picking information for release. It would also distribute expertise, or credible claims to it, and empower more neutral experts.

Debates about national security could also use more truly independent experts. More think tanks that encourage a contrarian ethos would be helpful, as would more academic security specialists. Tenure's purpose is to insure intellectual independence. Unfortunately, the academy has largely abandoned the study of national security politics as distinct from international relations.

No formula tells us how to maximize safety. But skepticism — toward both what we are told to fear and the defenses we are sold to confront it — is a good start. **R**

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