

Security Über Alles

Josef Joffe

Some years ago, while living in Munich, I received a terror threat. If I did not apologize publicly and profusely for a column I had written criticizing Iran, I would be killed by Friday, September 13—what an auspicious date! The threat came in the mail, and at first, I assured myself that real terrorists don't write letters; they just murder you. But then, being the father of small children, I reported the threat to Bavaria's *Staatschutz* ("state security"), which sent a couple of experts to our house.

Here is what they told me: Your front and back doors are worthless; get armored ones. Order bullet-proof windows. Build a safe room. Install panic buttons with direct lines to the police. Get rid of your silly chicken-wire fence and put in steel and concrete. Don't use the driveway when coming or going; try to vary your access routes ("You mean I should sneak through the neighbor's garden?"). Finally, they offered me a permit to carry.

Pretty soon, we were talking six figures and contemplating emigration to Iceland. Yet the appointed day of my demise came and went: Real terrorists, as I had correctly surmised, do not telegraph their punches. But the moral of this story will remain etched in my mind forever: When security is at stake, there is no limit to either fear or fortification, and life comes down to nasty trade-offs between costs and peace of mind, for individuals as well as nations.

Fear is a tax, and al-Qaeda *et al.* have done a better job levying it globally than the IRS or even the German *Finanzamt*. Think about the extra half hour that millions of passengers have to stand in line to get through security at the airport; the annual cost in work-hours lost runs into billions of dollars and euros. Add to that freight delays in ports and airports, the cost of checking money transfers as well as goods in transit, the price of surveillance cameras and police computers, and the wages for beefed-up security forces around the world. And that doesn't even attempt to put a price tag on the compression of civil liberties or the loss of human dignity imposed by having to undress in full public view at the airport. This global transaction tax represents the most significant victory of Terror International to date.

Try to enter a U.S. institution abroad. It is just as well that all those American cultural centers in Europe have fallen under the axe of the budget cutters: Who wants to submit to search-and-seizure on the way to the magazine rack? In Berlin, it is easier to get into the Russian Embassy than into the American one; even if you are invited to lunch with the ambassador you are given the once-over twice. If you live in Hamburg or Munich and need a student visa for the United States, you have to fly to Frankfurt to argue your way into the "land of the free and home of the brave." The State Department may protest, but Homeland Security makes the rules—and invents new *verbotens* by the day. The demand for security is like an obsession. It spreads relentlessly, as Freud's "Little Hans" case study showed. At



first, Hans fears a particular horse, then all horses, then all large animals. And there is no rational counter. “What if?” always trumps “Why more?”

A more fruitful dialogue with the U.S. Homeland Security *apparatus* would be “What is the national interest?” It would start abstractly: Which face does America want to show to the world? A mien distorted by fear and suspicion—or the face America used to present: that of a boisterous, easy-going and welcoming society? Not Jack Bauer’s grim visage in *24*, but George Bailey’s genial grin in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, where Jimmy Stewart’s optimism and the town folks’ trust conquered greed and evil.

This is not idle idealizing. Imagine how the U.S. Army would have fared in liberating Europe if the embedded commissars of Homeland Security had called the shots after 1944. How America bestrides the world has hard consequences. Does it attract or repel, open its arms or ball up its fists? Growling rarely elicits smiles, and distrust never reaps its opposite. To present a friendly face to the world is not a matter of saccharine niceness, but of well-considered interests, especially for a fearsome giant like the United States of America. Trust breeds authority, and authority breeds influence.

Let’s turn from homilies to numbers to make the basic point. In November 2007, the U.S. Department of Commerce reported a 17 percent decline in overseas travel to the United States between 9/11 and 2006. That slump has cost the United States \$94 billion in

lost tourist spending, nearly 200,000 jobs and \$16 billion in tax revenue forgone. Overseas visits to Los Angeles, Orlando, San Francisco and Miami—classic tourist destinations—have shrunk 29–33 percent, and this while the dollar kept falling.

Why? The quarterly journal *Tourism Economics* gives the predictable answer: “The perception that U.S. visa and entry policies do not welcome international visitors is the largest factor in the decline of overseas travelers.” Two-thirds of survey respondents worried about being detained for hours at ports of entry because of a simple mistake in their travel forms or a misstatement at the immigration checkpoint. Here is the ultimate irony: “More respondents were worried about U.S. immigration officials (70 percent) than about crime or terrorism (54 percent) when considering a trip to the country.”

The situation with visiting international scholars is a mixed bag. Chinese, Koreans and Indians keep coming to the United States, reports the International Institute of Education (IIE). The academic year 2006–07 saw growth rates of 3–6 percent over the previous year. But the “Western” numbers are falling: Germany, Canada, Great Britain, Israel, Japan, Australia and Holland show declines of 1–13 percent over same period of time. Why this is so, these statistics do not divulge. Presumably, the decision to go or not to go is made on the margin. The richer a country, the less its scientists may be willing to brave the obstacles they face to enter the United States (or to extend their stays afterwards). Hailing from poorer countries with more limited pro-



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fessional opportunities, Chinese and Indians remain undaunted. To further complicate matters, there are the cases of the Poles and Russians who showed a double-digit drop in 2006–07, though they are not a lot richer than Indians and Chinese. Conversely, the number of French scholars in the United States increased by 6 percent. More research, as they say in academia, is needed to unearth the real explanations.

The pattern for international students resembles that of the scholars. For 2006–07, the IIE reports the “first significant increase in total international student enrollment since 2001–02.” Again, the rise is led by Indians, Chinese and Koreans. Germany is down, and so is Japan. Hence the IIE’s veiled warning that “America needs to continue its proactive steps to insure that our academic doors remain wide open, and that students around the world understand that they will be warmly welcomed.” Amen to that, as these foreign students contribute about \$14.5 billion annually to the U.S. economy. Higher education is the fifth-largest service-sector export of the United States, and foreign talent that stays ranks among America’s most important natural resources.

Apart from tourism, the picture is not as bleak as it was in 2003–04, when foreign student enrollment fell by 2.4 percent—the first decline since the 1970s. Yet obsessions tend to spread, and so, in February, the United States unveiled a new security package. One part calls on the European Union to supply personal data on all passengers *overflying* America in order to keep or gain the right to visa-free travel to the United States. The idea here must be to nab a future Mohamed Atta on his way from Copenhagen to Acapulco and thus nix his plot to drive the plane into New Orleans’s French Quarter. The second part would compel all travelers to apply online for permission to enter the United States *before* buying a ticket. This will do wonders for business and tourist travel to the United States.

The most interesting question, however, defies statistical answers: What is happening to the American character? True, the United States has gone through various crises

of confidence, some of them cresting in sheer hysteria—from the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 to Joe McCarthy’s search for a Commie under every State Department desk. But the most offending 1798 Acts were repealed after four years, and the Senator from Wisconsin was censured four years into his red-baiting career. Yet the Patriot Act and the reign of Homeland Security have already passed the four-year mark, and neither is fading.

Will the new dispensation, brought upon us by 9/11 end up changing the American character in ways John Adams’s laws and Joe McCarthy’s mendacity could not? The answer is still “no” when you go to the heartland, where trusting little old ladies let you shove a memory stick into the public library’s computer. They think a virus scan refers to the common cold. The heartland is still Jefferson country. But when I travel through JFK or Dulles, I notice nervousness bordering on angst, which is not a classic American trait. No, your neighbor will not let you leave your bag on the seat while you walk off to the coffee stand. Ground personnel watch aggressively for the slightest deviation from what they have been trained to accept as “normal behavior.” Security guards stand ready to pounce like pit bulls. Nor will they deviate from the book when having make an autonomous decision. This part of American society has become “teutonic”—as have all those millions of Americans who stand meekly in the security line, ready to suffer the indignities of semi-strip searches.

Have the free and brave lost it? If they have, so have the French, for the controls at Charles de Gaulle are just as gruesome as those at Ronald Reagan. The European Union now wants to fingerprint all foreigners who enter or leave its sprawling domain. So there is a larger moral to this tale: Security is an obsession that defies natural limits. And many of us submit because we are lulled by the promise of some extra safety. Al-Qaeda likes it, too. Never before have so few terrorized so many with so little. 🌐

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