

## **Terrorism a threat, but not to our way of life**

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The Age

11 September, 2006

For a few Australians, the war on terror has been very real. The surviving victims of terrorist attacks in New York, Bali, London and elsewhere; the families and close friends of those who have died in those attacks; the Australian Defence Force personnel who have been deployed on operations. And on the other side, those who have been drawn to the terrorists' cause, and those who have been innocently or not so innocently caught up in our response to it.

But for the rest of us, the whole thing has been somewhat unreal, even surreal.

Remember the Government's fridge magnets? Every household in Australia was sent one, in early 2003, 18 months after the September 11 attacks. Have you still got yours? Ours is a little dog-eared now, but still holds a prime spot on the freezer door, jostling with the cartoons, postcards, school effort certificates, and untried recipes.

Nothing more poignantly illustrates the confusion of the past five years than this strange artefact, designed by the Government to bring the global war on terror into the homes and lives of each of us.

"Let's look out for Australia," it says, "protecting our way of life from a possible terrorist threat." That captures neatly the core message from Government since September 11, 2001: that terrorism is an "existential" threat - a threat to the existence of our society and our way of life - and we need to work together, and make exceptional efforts, to defend ourselves from it.

But what are we to do? Well, the fridge magnet helpfully offered spaces for us to write in important phone numbers we might need to call if our house is the target of a terrorist attack - the local council, for example, and the vet. What? Faced with a threat to our very existence, we need to call the vet? It's almost whimsical in its absurdity. And it captures perfectly the inability of our society - and many others - to find a rational, proportionate and effective response to the sense of insecurity that many of us felt after the twin towers fell.

The heart of this confusion is the fridge magnet's message that terrorism poses an existential threat. Much of the way that Western societies - not just governments, but wider communities as well - have responded since 9/11 has been shaped by this conviction. Today it remains widely accepted, or at least seldom contested. Why? Where is the evidence and the argument?

I think that to the calmer view of future historians this conviction, which is apparently self-evident to so many people today, will seem surprising, even bewildering. Of course the destruction of the West is the declared aim of the terrorists themselves. But why would we believe they have the capacity to do it? Even nuclear terrorism, which would cause terrible suffering and disruption, would hardly threaten the underlying fabric of Western societies.

The truth is that terrorism presents a serious threat. It poses a small, but not negligible, danger to the safety of each one of us. But it does not pose a threat to our society at large. Of course it needs a serious response. But the best response is effective police and intelligence work - mundane, routine and unspectacular. Some, at least, of the credit for the fact that there have been relatively few terrorist attacks since 9/11 can be attributed to the effectiveness with which much of this work has been done.

But in the face of threat that so many of us, including governments, see as existential, this hardly seemed enough. So we have been drawn by our own misperception of the problem into wildly inappropriate responses. When the complex skein of reasons, motives and pretexts that propelled us with the US into Iraq is finally untangled, I suspect an important factor will prove to be an overpowering need to be seen to be doing something bigger than police work in the face of an existential threat.

And now, having made that decision, our leaders are locked into an account of the threat that justifies it. And the more serious and demanding the commitment to Iraq appears, the more apocalyptic our leaders need to make the threat sound in order to justify landing us in it.

Five years on, the way the West's leaders talk about terrorism is now much more shaped by the need to justify what they have done since September 11, than by any sober judgement about the threat of terrorism itself.

That is why Tony Blair thinks he has to say now that we are engaged in a global battle "utterly decisive in whether the values we believe in triumph or fail". That is why President George Bush thinks he has to say, as he did recently, that if the terrorists are not defeated in Iraq, they will have to be fought in America, and compares Osama bin Laden with Hitler.

How to we get out of this vicious cycle of misperception and counterproductive response? We need to start scrutinising statements like these much more carefully and ask: Are they true? Where is the evidence? Do they provide a realistic basis for policy and action? Because before we can establish a more balanced, coherent, sustainable and successful approach to the problem of terrorism, we are going to need to start describing the problem in much more realistic ways.

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