

## So, what’s this all about?

Last updated December 2013

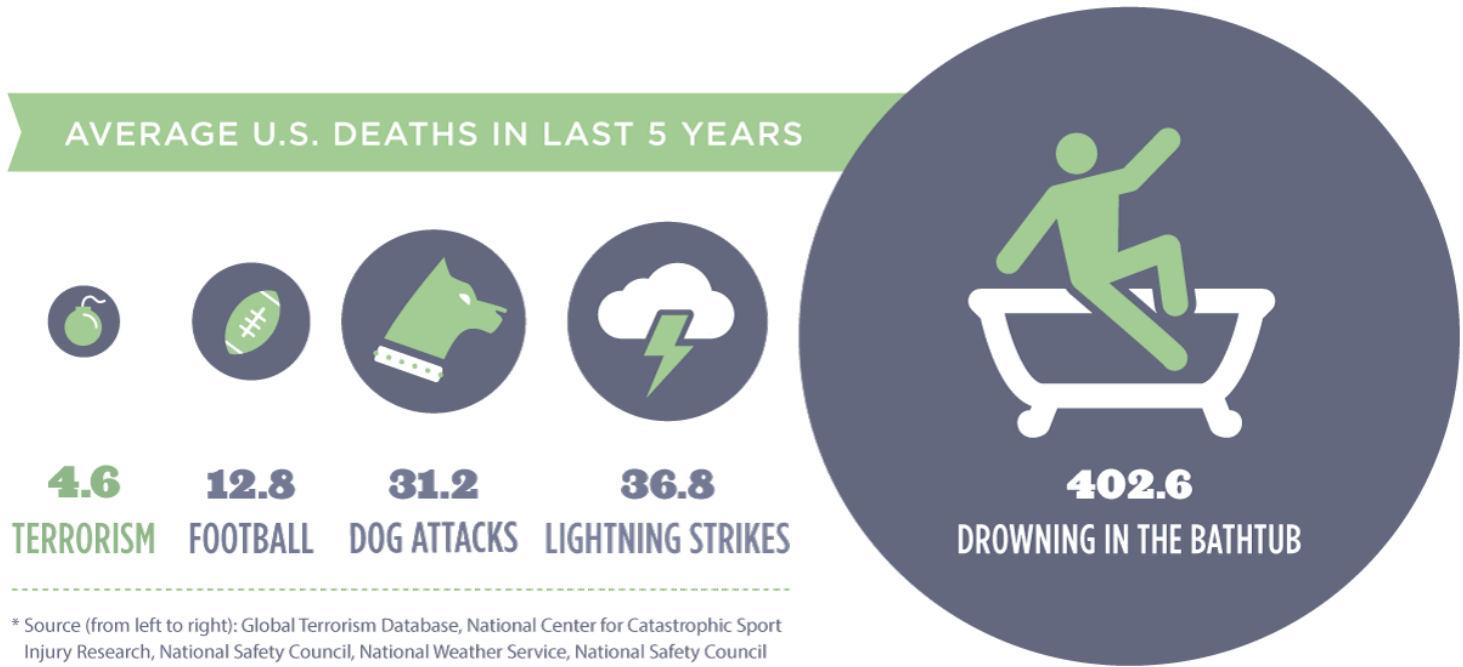
**American media and elected officials talk about the threat of terrorism daily.** In the last decade, the threat of terrorism has been used to justify special exemptions from the Constitution, invasions of other countries, secret surveillance laws, monitoring of innocent people with no reasonable cause for suspicion, and continuous budget deficits, as vast sums of money go to fund the military and surveillance apparatus.

**When examined, the actual death toll from terrorism in the United States is astonishingly small.** In the last 5 years for which data is available, an average of 4.6 Americans per year died from domestic terrorist attacks. And when we look at the publicly known terrorist attacks that have been thwarted, we see that they were small in number, limited in destructive capacity, and in a majority of cases, would probably have never come to fruition on their own.<sup>1</sup>

*Here, we’ll break down the facts for you.*

## How many people die from terrorism in the United States?

Averaged over the last 5 years<sup>2</sup>, 4.6 Americans per year have died from terrorist attacks.<sup>3</sup> Far more people have died of lightning strikes<sup>4</sup>, dog attacks, bathtub falls<sup>5</sup>, and playing football<sup>6</sup>, individually.

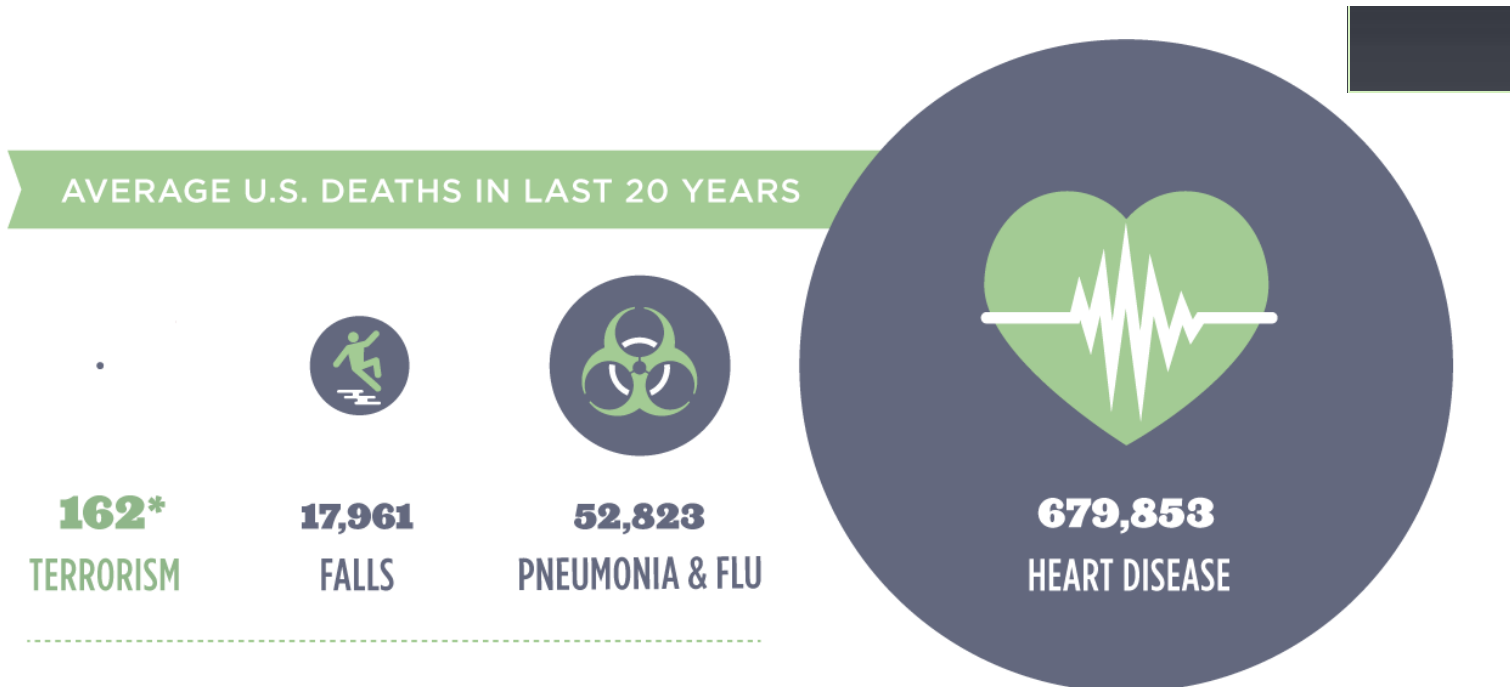


Over the last 20 years (which includes 9/11) average deaths from terrorism total 162 Americans per year.<sup>7</sup> To put that perspective, compare it to the 679,853 who die of heart disease each year, 52,823 who die of the pneumonia and the 17,961 who die of “falls.”<sup>9</sup>

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\*IF DRAWN TO SCALE, SIZE WOULD NOT BE VISIBLE ON YOUR SCREEN

\* Source (from left to right): Global Terrorism Database, National Safety Council, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

## But what about the lives we may have saved through anti-terrorism efforts?

**When terrorism cases result in arrests, it becomes a public record, and therefore, thwarted terrorist attacks that involve arrests cannot legally be kept secret when the activity is in the United States.** So, we can get a rough picture of what the threat of terrorism in the U.S. looks like, by surveying these cases.

Professor John Mueller of Ohio State University has compiled [a report that includes all known cases of Islamic extremism](#)<sup>10</sup> which have occurred within, or have been targeted against the United States since 9/11. Out of a total of 52 cases:

- 3 involved situations where no plot had yet been hatched, but authorities worried one might arise.
- 27 were “essentially created or facilitated in a major way by the authorities.” In other words, a would-be jihadist, often mentally ill, would be provided the coaxing and resources necessary to carry out an attack, and then arrested once proving that they were willing participants.
- There are no known plots disrupted that involved weapons of mass destruction.
- All but two cases involved nothing more dangerous than a plan to set off conventional explosives.

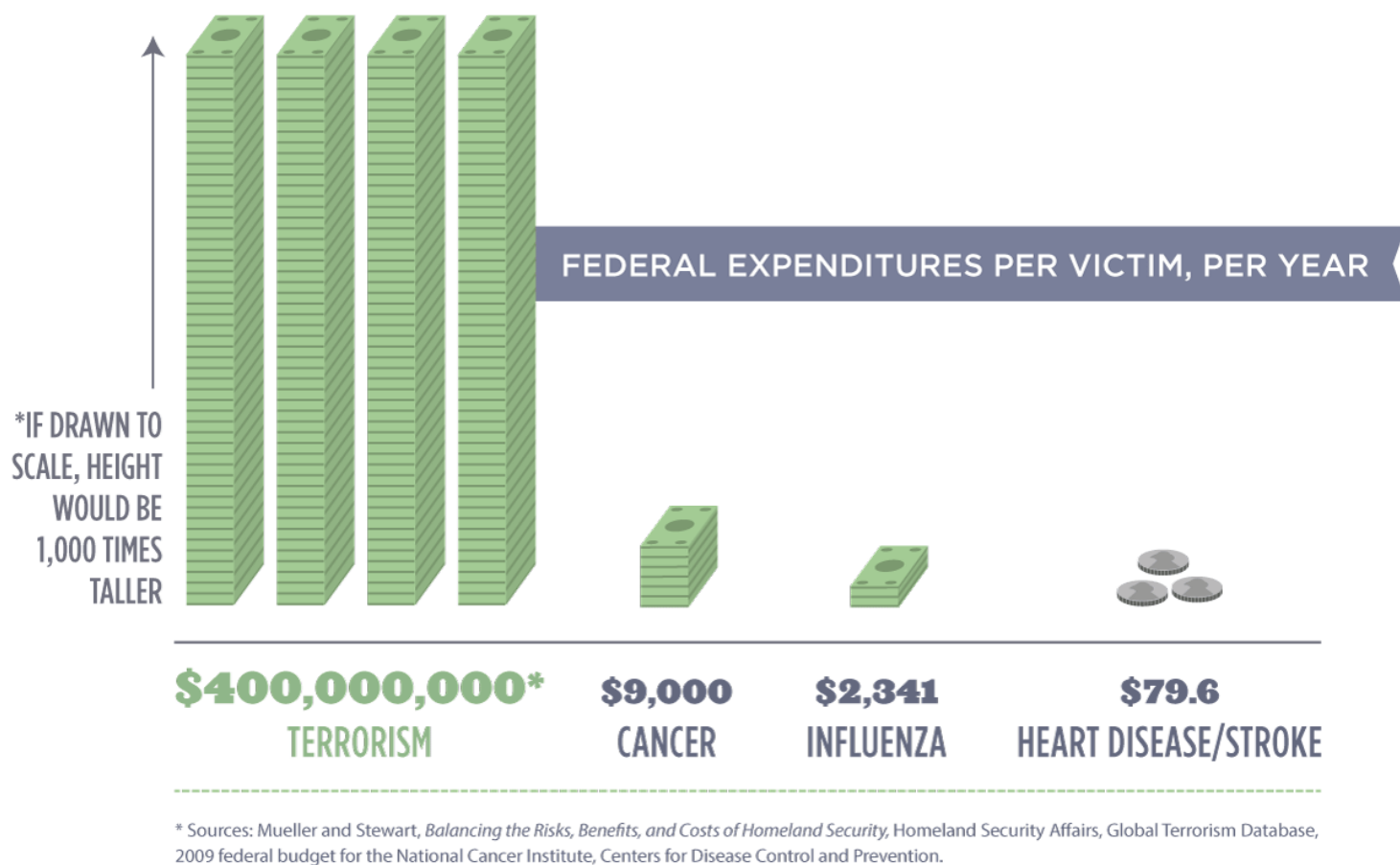
Of the two cases which included something more dangerous than conventional explosives, one involved a ludicrous scheme to bring down the Brooklyn Bridge with a simple blowtorch, which the plotters abandoned before they were even arrested. And the other was a plan by a group of Lebanese men to flood railway tunnels under the Hudson River in which the plotters never acquired bombs, nor did they ever make it to the United States.

Additionally, in the vast majority of cases, terrorists within the United States have proven inept, [as written about by Bruce Scheier](#) in Wired. In only one of four cases in which terrorists attempted to set off a bomb since 9/11, did they even succeed in even igniting it.

## How much do we spend on terrorism?

Since 9/11, the federal Homeland Security and intelligence budget has increased by **\$65 billion per year**. If local and state, private sector, and opportunity costs are included, the cost goes up to **\$132 billion per year**. That number still excludes quite a lot, including U.S. military expenditures.

A [New York Times survey of expert estimates](#), which takes into account a wide range of costs, puts the total cost of anti-terrorism efforts at over \$3 trillion since 9/11.



Using only the \$65 billion figure, annually the **U.S. currently spends over \$400 million on terrorism prevention per victim, as compared to cancer, for which we spend only \$9,000** for prevention research per victim.<sup>11</sup> The same general pattern holds true for other big killers, like heart disease, strokes, and influenza.<sup>12</sup>

## But if it saves any lives at all, isn't the sacrifice worthwhile?

[Standard cost/benefit analyses](#) can and are used by the government every day to answers difficult questions like this. When deciding whether to create a safety regulation, the government weighs the lives saved against the monetary cost of the regulation. Generally speaking, if the monetary cost of a saving an individual life is greater than \$8 million (at most), the regulation will not be adopted.

As it pertains to anti-terrorism efforts, the expenditure of money outweighs by hundreds of times its ability to deliver security. Professor John Mueller estimates [we would need to thwart at least 1,667 Times Square style attacks per year](#)

(assuming they were all successful) in order for the current expenditures to be a net benefit.

Previous to the Affordable Care Act, [45,000 Americans died each year as a result of not having health insurance](#). On average, every \$5 million spent on giving health insurance to people, will result in one saved life. **We could save at least 10,000 American lives every year by redirecting the federal security budget increases since 9/11 to health insurance coverage for those who lack it.**<sup>18</sup>

**And if we gave a value to basic civil rights what would it be?** If we were willing to sacrifice one amendment from the Bill of Rights in order to save 3000 lives per year, what would that look like? At that rate of exchange, we’d be willing to trade all 10 sections of the Bill of Rights, in exchange for preventing all car accident deaths.

## Isn’t dying from violence worse than dying from natural causes like the flu or cancer?

Humans are naturally both more afraid of, and more traumatized by violent death. So maybe saving lives from terrorism is more important than saving people from non-violent forms of death. But what about other violent crime? In that case, it turns out **the U.S. spends more money on anti-terrorism efforts, than all other crime fighting, combined.**<sup>14</sup> This is in spite of the fact that Americans are 3000 times more likely to die of a homicide than a terrorist attack.

## What about a rare but devastating attack?

Conventional weapons, like bombs or guns, are naturally limited in their potential to take human life, barring having an army of people to use them. Given that there are approximately 16,000 homicides per year in the United States, it’s hard to make an argument that conventional terrorist attacks, currently averaging 162 deaths per year (when 9/11 is included), should give rise to spectacularly large expenditures or sacrifice of freedom.

While there’s no evidence that terrorists have any potential to attain them, more dangerous are chemical and biological weapons. In theory, certain chemical and biological weapons could kill thousands in a single very successful attack, though the [Rand corporation writes](#), “the resources and capabilities required to annihilate large numbers of persons—i.e., to achieve a genuinely mass-casualty chemical and biological weapon or nuclear/radiological device—appear, at least for now, to be beyond the reach not only of the vast majority of existent terrorist organizations but also of many established nation-states.”<sup>15</sup>

**Glenn L. Carle, former deputy national intelligence officer for transnational threats at the CIA [wrote in an op-ed in the Washington Post](#)**, “[Al Qaeda] has only a handful of individuals capable of planning, organizing and leading a terrorist operation. Al-Qaeda threatens to use chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapons, but its capabilities are far inferior to its desires.”

Dirty bombs, another commonly cited threat, which involves a conventional explosive used to disperse radioactive material, does not have a destructive capacity much beyond that of a conventional explosion. The US Nuclear Regulatory Commission [writes](#), “Most RDDs would not release enough radiation to kill people or cause severe illness – the conventional explosive itself would be more harmful to individuals than the radioactive material.”

True nuclear weapons, however, have immense destructive capabilities, and even though they’re extremely unlikely to be attained by terrorists, this is a threat truly worthy of attention. It’s considered unlikely that any terrorist organization could attain the substantial technological capability of building one, and procuring one from a hostile government is also unlikely. That said, a reasonable expenditure on anti-terrorism efforts is necessary, and this is a very smart place to put some of that

funding. A paper in 2006 demonstrated that only a little more than \$1 billion of anti-terrorism funding was going towards the nuclear threat.<sup>16</sup>

## What have we sacrificed in the “war on terror”?

According to the Pentagon, we’ve spent at least \$1 trillion in the “war on terror” while some outside experts estimate that number at over \$3 trillion.<sup>17</sup> And the federal government alone currently spends a minimum of \$65 billion per year on counter-terrorism efforts. That’s money that could be saving far more lives if directed elsewhere.

**We’ve also sacrificed constitutionally protected rights.** The founders of our country created the Bill of Rights to defend us against the possibility of tyranny, but starting with the Bush administration and continuing under the Obama administration, the government has:

- Illegally and unconstitutionally spied on innocent Americans.
- Claimed the power to assassinate US citizens without due process of law.
- Passed a bill that allows the military to imprison US citizens indefinitely without due process of law.

Additionally, almost 10,000 Americans have been killed in the “war on terror.” And Iraq Body Count reports there were at least 115,000 civilian Iraqi deaths in the Iraq War, based only on documented events.

## I know that mass surveillance was used by the Soviet Union for political oppression against its people, but could that really happen in the United States?

In 1971, in the United States, an FBI program called COINTELPRO was publicly exposed to the American people. This program included surveillance, disruption of political organizations and in rare cases, assassination of individuals the government considered subversive. **Targets of the program included Martin Luther King, Jr., the civil rights movement, and the anti-Vietnam war movement.** A congressional committee, commonly called the “Church Committee” produced a report that documented these activities in detail. According to the report, the use of the FBI for harassment of political dissidents had been occurring for decades leading up to the disclosures.

## So what does it all mean?

Given the astonishingly small risk of terrorism to American lives, and the fact that most of the responses to it don’t even seem to target the real dangers of this phenomena, it doesn’t take a huge leap to make the argument that the real purpose of the “war on terror” is not saving lives, but rather providing a wide-ranging and never-ending justification for a whole range of regressive policies. By invoking terrorism, the government has justified wholesale invasions of other countries, a massive stripping away of our basic liberties, and shifting money to military contractors and away from things that threaten human life on a huge scale.

## What can I do?

Luckily, we still have a lot of freedom to fight back against these abuses. What we’re doing is to try to raise awareness, to

help turn the tide of public opinion. A good start is sharing this web site with your friends and family. But, awareness won't be enough – by joining our email list and/or liking our facebook page, you'll receive updates in the coming days about how you can take concrete action to change policy.

[1] Terrorism since 9-11: The American Cases, edited by John Mueller, February 2013.

[2] 2006-2010, government death statistics are only available starting 2 years past the dates in question

[3] Statistics on fatalities from terrorist attacks in the US from the Global Terrorism Database

[4] [Statistics on lightning strike fatalities from the National Weather Service](#)

[5] Statistics on dog attacks and falls from the National Safety Council, Injury Facts 2011 and 2013 Editions

[6] Football related fatality statistics from the [National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research](#)

[7] Statistics on fatalities from terrorist attacks in the US from the Global Terrorism Database

[8] Statistics on heart disease and the flu from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – National Center for Health Statistics , National Vital Statistics System

[9] National Safety Council, Injury Facts 2013

[10] Terrorism since 9-11: The American Cases, edited by John Mueller, February 2013.

[11] Numbers for expenditures for victims of terrorism based on calculations from John Mueller and Mark Stewart, (Homeland Security Affairs), on Homeland Security federal budget increase in 2009 from 2001 and statistics on fatalities from terrorism in the US over the past 20 years from the Global Terrorism Database; Expenditures for fatalities from cancer based on 2009 federal budget for the National Cancer Institute and statistics on fatalities from cancer from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[12] 2009 Federal budget information from the Department of Health and Human Services Fiscal Year 2010 – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Justification of Estimates for Appropriation Committees*

[13] [1,667 Times Square-Style Attacks Every Year](#), Salon.com, John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart,

[14] Veronique de Rugy, “The Economics of Homeland Security,” in *Terrorizing Ourselves: Why U.S. Counterterrorism Policy Is Failing and How To Fix It*, eds. Benjamin H. Friedman, Jim Harper, and Christopher A. Preble (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2010), 123.

[15] First Annual Report to The President and The Congress of the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction, I. Assessing the Threat. Page 21.

[16] Toward a Cost-Benefit Analysis of Nuclear Terrorism Prevention Technology, George Willcoxon, Avi Springer, Sean, West, Mark Ihimoyan, Zaheer Maskatia, December 7, 2005.

[17] [The \\$5 Trillion War on Terror](#), Mark Thompson, June 29, 2011

[18] Calculation: 46 million (without insurance in the U.S.) / 45,000 (die each year as a result of not having health insurance) = 1022. Therefore, 1 in approximately 1022 people die each year as a result of not having health insurance. \$5000 (est. cost of insuring one person for one year) x 1022 (number of people required to be insured to save an avg. of one life) = \$5.1 million (TOTAL COST PER YEAR TO SAVE AN AVERAGE OF ONE LIFE VIA HEALTH INSURANCE EXPENDITURES).



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