Letter from the Director

Thea Harvey

I am too young to remember when the Kennedys or Martin Luther King were shot. 9/11 will be the defining event of my generation. Along with the rest of the world, I watched in horror on that beautiful Tuesday morning. But somehow my sorrow has not turned to fear and anger.

Perhaps because I lived in London during the mid-1970s, when the possibility of an IRA bomb in the Underground or Selfridges was a daily fact of life, I seem not to have reacted in the same way to the attacks of September 11, 2001 as many others in this country have done.

In this issue of the EPS Quarterly, we take a look at Counterterrorism. The first step in formulating any security policy is assessing the threat. These days most talk of counterterrorism refers to intelligence activities: covert surveillance, signals intelligence, satellite intelligence, and electronic intelligence.

The recent stopping of a planned attack in England was a classic example of the functioning of intelligence agencies in counterterrorism. An undercover operative infiltrated a terrorist cell and was able to discover the plot well in advance of its actual execution. Twenty-four people were arrested, and, apart from some inconvenience for those who prefer to carry their own beverages onto planes, the police were heroes all round. Except, as James Galbraith explains in his piece, “Groundhog Day,” there doesn’t seem to have been much of a plot to foil.

However, I believe we, as a nation, are suffering from an over-inflated fear of terrorism in the first place. In his article in this issue, “Terrorism in Context,” David Colt discusses the phenomenon of “social amplification” of fears. He explains that the security strategies which are developed based on this exaggerated fear may actually hinder our ability to mitigate other more dangerous threats.

Even if you accept the Bush Administration’s assertion that “[t]errorist networks currently pose the greatest national security threat to the United States,” you might find that declaring a war of decades’ duration is not the best response. You might instead think that seeking to strengthen alliances, to build on treaties that for 50 years now have kept the world from nuclear war and rapid proliferation, that keeping our promises and taking leadership in engaging partners would be the smart, pragmatic action to take.

In her article, “Small Arms, Big Problem: Many Solutions,” Frida Berrigan discusses one forgotten aspect of the supply chain which feeds terrorists, insurgencies and other non-state paramilitary groups. She discusses the need for an international framework to control the flow of these simple, easy-to-use weapons. Just in the last few weeks (since Ms. Berrigan’s article was written) a draft of a treaty has been introduced. At the UN General Assembly in October, governments will vote on whether to start negotiations on an Arms Trade Treaty regulating international arms transfers.

I see great hope in this development. In 1933 Franklin Roosevelt warned the country that we need only fear fear itself: nameless, unreasoning, unjustified, paralyzing terror. In diverting resources from solutions which are actually proven to work, to policies which may sound better in the short run, we are allowing our fears to get the better of us.
I am blessed to have found a job that allows me to express my personal values in a meaningful way. Economists are naturally inclined to take a step back, to look for evidence, to consider the full costs, effectiveness, and alternatives toward the desired goals before making a recommendation. When formulating security policy, this seems to me eminently reasonable.

In my efforts to turn my sorrow over the events of 9/11/01 to healing, I find that I have been thinking a lot lately of compassion. I believe that one of the things that I can do to help prevent another such happening is to open my heart to the victims, the perpetrators, those who are paralyzed with fear, and those who are goaded by fear to make bad decisions. And once I have sent out into the world such small peace as I have to give, it is my further duty to help them see the light by publicizing the work of the members and friends of EPS; thus, I trust, to strengthen the voices of reason and non-violence.

Economists for Peace and Security

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