



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: [contact@chathamhouse.org](mailto:contact@chathamhouse.org)

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 [www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)

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## Transcript

# Counterterrorism: The Right Response?

## Professor John Mueller

Woody Hayes Chair of National Security, Mershon Center for International Security Studies, The Ohio State University; Author, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them*

## Professor Sir David Omand GCB

Visiting Professor, King's College London; Security and Intelligence Coordinator, Cabinet Office, UK (2002-05)

## Chair: Sophie Long

Presenter, BBC News Channel

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**Sophie Long:**

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Sophie Long; I am a presenter for BBC News. But I'm very pleased today, I've been released from the studio this afternoon to welcome you all to Chatham House. Thanks very much for coming out on another very rainy day – always seems to be bucketing down when we come here. Many of you I know are members and will be very familiar with the way things are done here, but just a reminder to you all that today's session is on the record.

Welcome to today's session: 'Counterterrorism: The Right Response?' Global terrorism captures the world's attention and gives the few the ability to terrify the many. It isn't difficult to understand therefore why governments of targeted populations sometimes spend eye-watering amounts to try and counter that.

But terrorism is cheap and it requires very little manpower. Counterterrorism measures are expensive and can have negative consequences. The world also, of course, faces many other challenges: the number of lives lost to terrorism is dwarfed by those lost to disease or indeed road traffic accidents. So why do they keep spending and why so much?

I'm very pleased today we are joined, to explore these issues, by Professor John Mueller, who is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, DC. He is also a senior research scientist with the Mershon Center for International Security Studies at Ohio State University. He is a leading expert on terrorism and the reaction it inspires.

We are also joined today by Professor Sir David Omand, a visiting professor at King's College London and the first appointee to the revamped post of UK security and intelligence coordinator, responsible for the UK's national counterterrorism strategy.

We will hear from them both and listen to their thoughts, and then I will open up to the floor and we will have your questions and hopefully a lively discussion.

**John Mueller:**

Thank you. It's very nice to be here at the legendary Chatham House. My time is quite brief so let me make three quick observations and then we'll have plenty of time to question and discuss, and you can express outrage and so forth if you want.

It seems to me increasingly that 9/11 is looking a lot like Lee Harvey Oswald's assassination of John Kennedy in 1963. A basically trivial man managed to get extremely lucky, from his standpoint, and managed to kill the president of the United States. On 9/11, I think, a fundamentally trivial group – Al-Qaeda – also got fundamentally lucky and created what is by far the greatest and most destructive terrorist act in history.

Obviously Lee Harvey Oswald ceased to exist shortly thereafter; Al-Qaeda does continue to exist, but its record both before and after is something less than monumental and certainly something substantially different from what is frequently called an existential threat to the United States, the West and international civilization or whatever. Before that, there were very few incidents which it had handled, and since then if you look at what has gone on it's not clear that 'Al-Qaeda central' has done much of anything, except maybe act as an inspiration. Maybe do some training here and there and contribute to the Taliban's much larger effort in Afghanistan.

It's also the case that by and large the terrorists that have been picked up or deterred or manipulated in various ways by policing agencies throughout the world have not been a terribly impressive bunch. I'm actually working on something now called 'The Myth of the Mastermind'. Even looking at Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the so-called – he's got two books on him, both of which have 'mastermind' in the title. It's a questionable title. He had zillions of plots, virtually none of which ever reached fruition and most of which were fairly daffy.

Even in the case of his big success – from his standpoint, of course – 9/11, it's not even entirely clear that he knew what he was doing. After the attack he was going to try to do another 9/11, another hijacking, which means he didn't understand why 9/11 worked. Before 9/11 the standard thing was that if you hijack an airplane the people on the airplane basically cooperate, the crew cooperates. In fact, just six months earlier Chechens had hijacked that Russian airliner and it was diverted to Saudi Arabia and so forth. Even on 9/11, with the fourth plane, it was pretty clear that that whole syndrome was missing. So the idea that you could now hijack additional airliners is very questionable.

Also other things, like Ramzi Yousef, the so-called mastermind of the first World Trade Center bombing – basically the bombing couldn't have done much more damage than it actually did no matter what, even if it was bigger. In his total life as a terrorist he managed to be involved in the killing of about 30–40 people, 28 of which were killed in Iran by a bomb he made for an anti-

Shiite group in Pakistan. Not a very impressive record, fortunately for everybody else.

So it seems one place to look is at the capacity of the enemy. It is there, it can do some damage. But since 9/11, as far as I can see and tallying it up, the number of people killed outside of war zones by Islamist terrorists of pretty much any breed has been something like 200–400 per year. That includes the London bombing, Madrid, Bali and so forth. That's 200–400 too many, but it's not exactly a monumental threat.

The second point has to deal with the issue of what we should do about it, the counterterrorism thing. David Omand, in his book, talks about how we should keep the risk to a minimum – that's a primary duty of government. I certainly agree with that but the issue would be: what is the risk now? What constantly gets said, particularly in the United States, is: are we safer? It seems to me that's profoundly the wrong question. If we have one additional security guard someplace, then I suppose we're safer in some microscopic sense. If we remove that security guard, we're equally microscopically less safe than we were before. So it's a bad way to really start the discussion but it's the way the discussion is mostly there and put forward, particularly in the United States.

It seems to me the correct question is: how safe are we? That's where you should begin. It doesn't end the discussion but it certainly begins it, and it's fairly easy to calculate that since we know how many people have been killed by terrorists over the last couple of decades. If you're an American, your chance of being killed by a terrorist is about 1 in 3.5 million per year. That includes in the calculation 9/11, all kinds of terrorism, including the Timothy McVeigh bombing in 1995 at Oklahoma City. In Great Britain your chance is about 1 in 5 million per year. If it's the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, the chances of being killed is about 1 in 1 million. Canada is about 1 in 3.5 million; Australia, 1 in 7 million. Anyway, that's where things should basically start, it seems to me.

So the question is not simply minimizing the risk but asking yourself to begin with: isn't that safe enough? If your chance of being killed is 1 in 3.5 million per year, or 1 in 5 million or whatever, should you really spend a lot of money trying to make that even lower? Also, is it possible that it could be a little bit more risky, and save a lot of money and spend it in other places?

To put that in context, just giving you the American figures, your chance of being killed in the United States in an automobile accident is not 1 in 3.5 million but 1 in 8,000. Your chance of being killed in a homicide is 1 in 22,000.

Your chance of dying from cancer is about 1 in 500. Your chance of drowning in a bathtub is about 1 in 1 million. So the 1 in 3.5 million – although terrorism of course is different from those other hazards in a lot of different ways – is a good basic way to start.

I've written a book that came out two years ago – it's called *Terror, Security and Money* – with my co-author, Mark Stewart, who is a risk analyst and an engineer at the University of Newcastle in Australia. What we tried to do is apply standard risk management techniques and risk assessment techniques to terrorism, the same kind you would have, for example, if you said, 'I think it would be good if we required that seatbelts be put in the backseat of a car.' The question then is how much would it cost to do that, how much good would it do, would it save lives – the backseat is safer than the front seat normally, etc.

So that's the kind of calculation you want to do. You want to look at what are the consequences of a bad thing happening, what is the likelihood of a bad thing happening, how much will a security measure reduce either the likelihood or the consequences of the bad thing, and then compare that to the cost of the security measure. If the benefit of the measure is greater than its cost, then it's worth doing.

We've applied that to a number of situations. Just to give you a few examples, the question is: if you got a standard office building someplace in the United States, what would the probability of an attack have to be to justify fairly limited expenses to make it safer? The answer is that the probability of an attack on that building would have to be 1,000 times higher than it is at present. Similar things. The federal air marshals proved to be wildly inefficient in terms of what they're supposedly trying to do, whereas hardening cockpit doors on planes does prove to be cost-effective.

So that's the kind of analysis that should be done and it seems to me it's simply never done. In that, we're backed up by a report from the National Academy of Sciences which said – they spent a better part of two years studying risk analysis as was put forward in the Department of Homeland Security, and concluded that they don't know what they're doing. They couldn't find any studies that justified any decision the Department of Homeland Security had ever made. I think that conclusion is a little bit too harsh but nonetheless the basic idea is basically sound, it seems to me.

Finally, the question about 'keeping this to a minimum' as a primary duty of government. The key issue is responsibility, it seems to me. As Thomas Hobbes would certainly point out, the primary function – the foundational

function – of government is public safety. Virtually the first words in the American constitution are preserve ‘domestic tranquility’.

It’s the key reason people have governments – they want to be safe walking down the street, their children going to school, etc. They’re willing to pay a lot of money in taxes and in inconvenience sometimes to keep that sound. So therefore dealing with it is a very important measure and it should be done responsibly, because if you are spending a lot of money protecting people when their chances of being killed are very low, you’re not spending that money on hazards that cause far more damage and can be reduced at far lower cost.

So it’s fundamentally a matter of responsibility and it’s fundamentally a matter of morality, in many respects. You’re dealing with human life and if you’re an official in charge of this, what you have to do is try to maximize public safety, given that you only have limited budgets, at the best possible cost. That simply has not been done.

Let me conclude with one final comment related to that. David Omand also says, ‘Let us not unconsciously add security fears to that list of reasons for not getting on with life.’ Another statement I totally agree with. But I’d like to deal with the statement about ‘unconsciously’ – that we should not unconsciously, meaning officials, add security fears to that list of reasons for not getting on with life.

What has happened since 9/11, certainly in the United States, and I don’t think Britain is completely immune from this, is that there’s been a tendency for officials basically to exaggerate the threat, inflate the threat – and without giving full descriptions. Risk communication is very difficult stuff but it should be at least attempted. For example, very early on the Department of Homeland Security said in one of its promulgations, ‘A terrorist can strike at any time, anyplace, anywhere, and with virtually any weapon’ – a case which may be somewhat questionable but nonetheless okay. Now if the next sentence said, ‘However, your chance of being killed is 1 in 3.5 million per year,’ it would at least be in context. But the second number is never there.

Early on, the intelligence forces were sure there were between 2,000 and 5,000 Al-Qaeda operatives loose in the United States; the correct number was extremely close to zero. You have people like Attorney General Ashcroft deliberately – not unconsciously – scaring people in 2004, with the director of the FBI standing next to him, saying that Al-Qaeda was going to strike later that year: 90 per cent of the preparations were through and it would be even bigger than 9/11. Nothing like that happened and what it was based on was

basically a lot of the stuff coming out of Spain apparently, which was actually somewhat known at the time.

Most importantly in this respect are a couple statements that came out a little bit later, 2007. George Tenet, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency at that time – he had just recently retired – said on *60 Minutes* – a top news show in the United States, a news magazine show on CBS Television – that his operational instincts were telling him that Al-Qaeda had infiltrated a second wave of people into the United States even before 9/11. He had no evidence for that, but it was his operational instinct. The conclusion is almost certainly not true. There is a lot of evidence why it probably wasn't true. But the very fact he's willing to scare people based, on his own admission, on nothing, I think is really terribly irresponsible.

That same year, Michael Chertoff, who was the head of the Department of Homeland Security – the other official primarily responsible for American safety – said that his gut was telling him there would be an attack that summer in the United States. Something that, of course, never happened. Once again you have an official, based on his own admission on nothing – his gut – scaring the American people. That strikes me as being extremely irresponsible.

So what seems to me to be important in these discussions is that officials not only analyse it in an appropriate manner, in cost-benefit analysis and risk management techniques that have been known for 200 years – it was mostly started out here by a friend of Isaac Newton, a mathematician he very strongly admired – and also to communicate risk in a responsible manner. As far as I can see, there has only been one case in the United States in which a public official has said: get a life, your chance of being killed by a terrorist is about the same as being killed by lightning. Once. That was Mayor Bloomberg in New York around 2007. That's the only time.

The problems would be, of course, that if you say your chance of being killed is 1 in 3.5 million per year, there's a danger someone might say to you, 'Then how come we're giving you so much money?' Perfectly understandable. There's also a danger that if you seem to be downplaying the dangers and then something bad happens, you'll look very foolish and might lose your job.

But it seems to me that's not a terribly good defence. It seems to me that people who are worried about that shouldn't take the job in the first place. It's somewhat like a fireman getting into business and saying, 'Hey, I didn't know there were fires out there.' Or a soldier saying, 'My god, I'm being shot at – I didn't sign up for that!' Essentially it's a matter of public responsibility to deal

with public safety in a responsible manner and to not participate and not give a view that – not to explain fully what the situation is to the people you are responsible for is, again, basically an irresponsible act.

Thank you very much.

### **Sir David Omand:**

Thank you very much for the opportunity to comment very briefly on John's thesis. What I'd like to do is just offer some comments under four headings: the question of resources – how much is being spent and how is it all organized; questions of threat perception; questions about the response and the strategy; and then the very interesting point John was making about risk management and personal risk. The main thought I offer you is that the analysis is very different on the two different sides of the Atlantic.

I've seen an estimate that the United Kingdom spends about £3 billion a year on counterterrorism. I've seen an estimate that the United States spends \$1 trillion, per head of population [*sic*]. Statistics show that Western Europeans since 9/11 have been some 19 times more likely to die from terrorism than Americans. By my calculation, the United States is spending per head of population about 65 times more than we are. Now, you might reasonably – and I think I would – draw the conclusion the United States is overspending. You might also draw the conclusion maybe we're actually not spending enough.

When it comes to organization, I would be the first to admit – because I used to co-chair the US–UK Contact Group on Homeland Security with Admiral Jim Loy, when they were setting up the department and he was the deputy secretary. We already had a homeland security department called the Home Office. It had existed since the 18th century. We had had to deal with the Irish terrorist threat. In Washington, it was all new. There was no central American department dealing with this subject. The Ministry of Interior did kind of Indian affairs.

So they were starting from scratch, almost certainly creating an organization that was too big and too cumbersome. They had my sympathy because it was much easier in the UK when I was putting counterterrorism strategy together. We could get everybody in a room smaller than this and work out how to do it. So size is a real disadvantage. We tried to keep it simple and so we didn't, for example, take aviation security out of the aviation department and put it in



with customs and immigration and borders and create a giant. So no doubt Washington at some point will have to look again at how all that is organized.

Turning to the threat, the threat over here has been very different from that in the United States. There are no doubt fairly deep cultural reasons to do with assimilation, the famous 'melting pot' in the United States; to do with the nature of the diaspora – or diasporas – that we have in this country and the links they have back, for example, to Pakistan. But the truth is that there were and still are several thousand people in this country who are fundamentally hostile and violently hostile. These are the people that the Security Service have talked about and they are trying to prevent from carrying out attacks.

Since 7/7, there have been about a dozen plots, attempts to attack this country. If the authorities hadn't uncovered and frustrated, for example, the airlines plot, then several airliners filled with Americans would have gone down into the Atlantic – probably, if the terrorists had succeeded. I'm not saying they would, because I share John's view they are not as competent as sometimes portrayed. But if they had, that would have created casualties greater than on 9/11, and the argument we would be having would be a different one if that had happened.

So you can't really argue, I think, that the UK level of concern has been disproportionate relative to the very real threat that we face. And of course we still have a residual Irish threat to worry about as well. So I wouldn't accept that threat perceptions over here have been exaggerated and that out there, there aren't people who do mean us harm.

Has the response been proportionate? I think there are huge differences across the Atlantic. The US security strategy under the Bush administration after 9/11, the first sentence of that strategy was: 'America is at war.' The US strategic aim was, and I imagine still is, to destroy Al-Qaeda. The chosen means, we know, was the war on terror – not now a term much used. But it has its extension in the form of, for example, drone attacks, signature strikes and so on.

The legal construct within which the United States has pursued this campaign is fundamentally different from the legal construct within which the United Kingdom has done it. For the US, it's a war, so international humanitarian law is what applies, and the terrorists have forfeited their non-combatant immunity by their actions and can be attacked whenever and wherever they are found. The United Kingdom's view is that outside the battlefield it's international human rights law that applies and lethal force can only be used in self-defence against those who are posing an immediate threat. So the constructs

have been very different. Although the cooperation has been very close and we've worked very closely with our American friends, actually fundamentally the basis is different.

When we started work on the UK counterterrorism strategy back in 2002, we chose and put to the Cabinet and they endorsed a strategic aim. It wasn't 'destroy Al-Qaeda', it was normality. The strategic aim of the counter-strategy was to reduce the threat from international terrorism so that people could go about their normal business freely and with confidence – freely meaning the rule of law still applies; with confidence, tourists still come, we use the Underground, markets are stable. We have those conditions today, so the terrorists have failed and we have prevailed, because we have set our sights as normality, not destroy all terrorism.

They are, however, still fighting back. The Iraq war undoubtedly gave AQ a boost, as the Joint Intelligence Committee predicted it would. The long campaign in Afghanistan, what has been seen on the web, has continued to provide this radicalizing spur. So I would maintain that the current level of investment in security, policing and intelligence in the UK is certainly not disproportionate – probably, about right.

In terms of risk management, the counterterrorism strategy we put together is a risk-based strategy. It's not seeking absolute security; it's saying we want enough security so that normality can prevail. The level of casualties from terrorism has been kept down by very good security effort and a certain amount of incompetence on the part of the terrorists, but there have been some very close near-misses. It's illogical to infer from low casualty figures that the effort is unnecessary and we're wasting the resources.

From this very platform in this room on several occasions, and some of you may have heard me say it, I have said: if you travel, anyone in this audience, on the London Underground, your chance of being blown up by a crazed terrorist is less than your chance of being struck by lightning. That's an accepted fact. It's not what justifies the effort to maintain normality. It's not just individual risk; it's societal risk.

You just need to think: after 7/7 and the tragic bombings on London transport, a couple of weeks later there was another attempt to do the same thing, which failed. If it had been successful, and then suppose we had had a couple of assassinations or whatever, you bet the corporate lawyers of the big American banks and finance houses would have been advising their clients, 'We're not sure London is a safe place.' Very quickly the impact of being unable to contain terrorism would have been felt: on the stock market, on the

markets, on confidence in London as a safe global financial centre. It would have had impacts on inter-community tensions – we saw that very quickly after Woolwich. Attacks on mosques, for example, vigilantism.

So I would urge us not to underestimate the power of the jihadist narrative to radicalize. Whether it's people directly linked to AQ, whether they have a sophisticated understanding of the ideology or not, doesn't really matter.

A final word on risk management. One of the great advantages of constructing the counterterrorism strategy the way we have in the UK is it is risk-based. It is based on the risk equation: the risk we face is the product of the likelihood of something happening, your vulnerability to it, or society's vulnerability to it, the impact it will have if they get through the defences, and then the duration of disruption for the public whilst the mess is cleared up and things are put back to normal. By working on all those factors in the strategy, we have been able to maintain normality and keep the level of risk down.

A lot of the investment we've made though – reducing vulnerability, improving the emergency response, improving resilience – is multi-purpose. It's exactly that investment that you see in action when there's a pile-up on the motorway, when there's flooding, in the future when there are cyber attacks. So investing in a more resilient society is not just about countering terrorism.

So to conclude, I think the positions are very different on the two sides of the Atlantic. I wouldn't deny that part of John's thesis at all, but I would be a little cautious about some of the inferences from it.

### **Sophie Long:**

We'll have questions in just a moment. I just wonder if you'd like to respond to anything you heard there before we open it up to the floor – that the threat is exaggerated much more so in the United States than it is here.

### **John Mueller:**

I basically agree. In fact, we have used the British example to try to urge the American politicians to think more seriously about it. The increase of spending in the United States since 9/11 on domestic security – not including anything overseas, either in intelligence or policing or the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan – has been about \$1 trillion. The increase of spending since 9/11 in Britain has been somewhere between 25 and 50 per cent – has been about

half as much on a per capita, per GDP basis. The increase in both Canada and Australia has been about one-quarter as much.

So we use those figures frequently, saying that Britain certainly has a terrorist problem – the IRA as well as current things – and the politicians there are still in office and they seem to have controlled it with proportionately about half as much additional expenditure. That could probably hold the same within the United States.

I'd add just one other issue though, the question about hatred. I've done a case book in the United States – it's on the web – called *Terrorism Since 9/11: The American Cases*. There's been 53 cases which have come to light, come to trial or are in the process of coming to trial, in the United States since 9/11, and there's a case study following a similar outline for each of those cases. Some are not quite written up yet because they're so recent, but it's in process. Every year I update it.

The effect there is very similar; basically it's hatred that comes up. Overwhelmingly, however, the hatred is of American foreign policy. I ask the people writing the case studies – mostly honours students at Ohio State – what motivated these guys, and I was not surprised qualitatively but I was really surprised somewhat quantitatively that the main thing that radicalized them, if you want to use that word, is outrage at American foreign policy: support for Israel part of the thing but also obviously the two big wars, support for Saudi Arabia and so forth. It was almost entirely the motivation. They hardly mentioned caliphates, they hardly ever mention sharia law – in fact most of these guys wouldn't be able to spell either word. So even though the Muslim community is probably in better shape and better integrated in the United States than in Britain – at least that's commonly argued – there are still plenty of people who are very much motivated and willing to engage in these actions.

In many cases, however, the impact has been from the policing agencies. I don't know if this can be done in Britain, but for example there was a recent case in Baltimore where a guy decided he wanted to do jihad so he advertised on Facebook for fellow people to help him with jihad. He got three responses. The first response was from somebody telling him to stuff it, the second response was someone trying to argue him out of it, and the third was from an FBI informant who said, 'Yeah, I want to do that myself, I've got this car bomb in my basement and I really want to set it off – maybe we can meet and make beautiful music together.'

So of the 53 cases, more than half are of that sort, in which a police or FBI informant actually joins the plot, helps bring it along – he doesn't originate it, he helps bring it along – and then the person starts to press the button and is arrested. So in many of the cases, it seems to me, there may be a provocateur kind of element to them. But in no cases has there been legalistic entrapment, in the sense that in all cases the informants have come into a plot that was already at least in the embryonic stages.

**Sophie Long:**

I've got lots more I'd like to ask, but we'll open it up to the floor.