

**“Assessing the Terrorism Threat:
The Implications for Homeland Security”**

Written Testimony to support
a hearing of the
Committee on Homeland Security
United States House of Representative
on
“The Evolving Nature of the Terrorism Threat – Nine Years After the 9/11 Attacks”
by

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Cannon House Office Building – Room 311
Washington, D.C.

10:00 a.m.
September 15, 2010

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Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member King, and distinguished members of the Committee on Homeland Security. I am honored to have this opportunity to testify alongside my National Security Preparedness Group colleagues, Bruce Hoffman and Peter Bergen. Bruce and Peter are two of the top terrorism experts in the world and they have written an outstanding report that provides a timely and comprehensive update of the terrorism threat, nine years after the attacks on New York and Washington. I have been asked to provide my assessment on what the implications of this threat analysis are for homeland security.

In my view, there are five findings that should command the attention of this committee. First, the incidence of radicalization and recruitment on U.S. soil is on the rise. Second, that the Americans that are attaching themselves to al-Qaeda and aligned groups do not fit any particular ethnic, economic, educational, or social profile. Third, the frequency of less-sophisticated terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland is likely to grow. Fourth, these kinds of attacks are extremely difficult to prevent. And fifth, this trend reflects a change in al Qaeda’s tactics that arises from their conviction that any terrorist attack on U.S. soil, even a near-miss, will generate a disproportionate political response that will contribute to their strategic objective of sapping the economic strength of the United States. In short, al Qaeda and its affiliates are shifting to a war of attrition rather than concentrating their limited capabilities on organizing and executing catastrophic attacks on the scale of what they carried out on September 11, 2001.

This shift in threat has serious implications for how the United States has been prosecuting the war on terrorism. I need not remind this committee that the overarching emphasis of America’s counterterrorism efforts since 9/11 can be summed up as waging an “away game.” Former-President George W. Bush often expressed it this way: “We fight the terrorists overseas so that we don’t have to fight them here at home.” Former Vice President Richard Cheney went further, arguing that, “Wars are not won on the defensive. To fully and finally remove this danger (of terrorism), we have only one option—and that’s to take the fight to the enemy.” The Obama Administration has continued this emphasis on overseas operations.

Arguably the strategy of combating terrorism abroad has resulted in an important and constructive outcome that is noted in the NSPG report: it has put al Qaeda central on the defensive and has eroded its capacity to carry out large-scale attacks using weapons of mass destruction. However, the nation’s post-9/11 strategy has not anticipated and adapted to the change in tactics that this outcome has helped to spawn. Succinctly stated, the homeland security enterprise is currently not up to the task of dealing with the terrorism threat we face today.

The senior intelligence, law enforcement, and homeland security officials with whom we met over the past year acknowledged to us that their counterterrorism efforts are basically calibrated for dealing with sophisticated attacks with an international dimension that require significant organizational and logistical support. Attacks that seek to achieve catastrophic loss

of life and/or mass disruption cannot be carried off by a zealous suicide bomber, operating on his or her own. Generally, there needs to be a cell of several terrorists with clearly assigned roles for which each operative has been carefully trained. The cell periodically will need to communicate with remote leaders who are providing financing and guidance to the operation. Potential targets must be scouted out in advance and typically attacks are rehearsed before being executed. All this takes time, money, and qualified people. In short, the more ambitious the attack, the greater are the opportunities for detection and interception by intelligence and federal law enforcement officials. Less sophisticated attacks on the other hand, particularly those being conducted by homegrown operatives and lone wolves are almost impossible to prevent because their organizational and logistical footprint is so small.

Let's be clear about just where things stand today. Quite simply, the national security, intelligence, and even the federal law enforcement communities are not able to serve as our first line of defense. When terrorists are homegrown, it is the streets of Bridgeport, Denver, Minneapolis, and other big and small communities across America that become the frontlines. That translates into local cops on the beat and increasingly the American public at large who must be better informed and empowered to deal with the terrorism threat.

Of course, the importance of better engaging the broader American society to help deal with the threat of terrorism is a lesson we should have learned long ago. As we mark the 9th Anniversary of the September 11 attacks, we should once again reflect on the sobering fact that the only successful counterterrorism action against al Qaeda's attacks on that tragic day was undertaken not by our armed forces or federal law enforcement agents, but by the passengers aboard United 93. By charging the cockpit and preventing al Qaeda from striking the U.S. Capitol, they ended up protecting the lives of many members of Congress and others who were here on that September day in 2001.

Especially in light of the terrorism risk we are facing today, we should be troubled by the fact that the brave Americans flying aboard United 93 had to learn via their cell phones from friends and loved ones what many inside the U.S. government knew but failed to share with even one another—that al Qaeda was contemplating using airliners like cruise missiles. There is no way for us to know what the passengers aboard the first three planes that struck the twin towers and the Pentagon would have done if they had been provided that threat information. What we do know is that the protocol for passengers up until 9/11 was to stay quietly in their seats and wait until the plane had landed for the professionals to negotiate with the hijackers. In other words, the people aboard the planes that hit the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were deprived of the opportunity to take the kinds of measures the people aboard United 93 took to try and protect themselves and al Qaeda's intended targets.

Yet we continue to leave the American public largely on the sidelines despite even the events of this past year. In the May 2010 bombing attempt on Times Square it was a sidewalk T-shirt vendor, not the NYPD patrolman sitting in a squad car directly across the street, who sounded the alarm about Faisal Shahzad's explosive-laden SUV. Shahzad was not on any federal or NYPD database that identified him as a suspected terrorist. On Christmas Day 2009, it was not a federal air marshal, but the courageous actions of the passengers and flight crew aboard Northwest Flight 563 that helped disrupt the attack once it was underway.

In short, the changing nature of the threat reinforces further the imperative for the federal government to better inform and engage local public safety agencies and everyday Americans in helping to detect and prevent terrorist activities. Unfortunately, as this committee is well aware, there still remain serious issues with sharing information and providing quality counterterrorism training to local police. And we have a very long ways to go when it comes to engaging the American public.

But the changing nature of the terrorist threat highlights another important area which has been explicitly recognized in the new White House National Security Strategy, but for which far more attention needs to be devoted: our *resilience* as a society when terrorist events occur. Again, one of the primary motivations for terrorist groups to embrace less-sophisticated attacks is their growing confidence that these attacks will generate a big-bang for a small buck. Specifically, they are counting on even small-scale attacks that produce few casualties and modest destruction to generate fear, political recriminations, and a rush to put in place expensive and disruptive safeguards. If how we react—or more precisely, when we overreact—elevates the appeal of carrying out these attacks on U.S. soil, it follows that there is an element of deterrence by denying these terrorist groups the return on investment they hope to receive.

As a stepping off point, it is important for senior federal officials and responsible elected leaders of both parties to follow Secretary Janet Napolitano's lead in frankly acknowledging to the American people that it is simply impossible to prevent all acts of terrorism on U.S. soil. This is not an act of resignation or defeatism, but a mature recognition of the inherent limits of our national security, intelligence, and federal law enforcement tools to detect and stop "homegrown" attacks by U.S. citizens or residents that originate within the United States. Further, by investing in, better preparing for, responding to, and rapidly recovering from attacks when they occur, we end up communicating to terrorists groups that Americans will not be cowed by their attacks.

It is also important that elected officials not inadvertently play into efforts by terrorists to exploit political fissures within our society. The 24-hour news cycle practically guarantees the kind of overwrought media coverage that terrorist groups are counting upon for amplifying the value of small-scale attacks. Therefore there should be an explicit commitment by political leaders in both parties to studiously avoid making any public comment which might elevate public anxiety in the aftermath of terrorist events.

In closing my testimony, let me simply endorse the conclusion of the NSPG terrorist assessment:

"When we demonstrate an unwillingness to inflict damage on our way of life in the face of terrorism, terrorism becomes a less attractive weapon for our adversaries to confront the United States. When federal agencies work well with each other and their counterparts at the state and local levels and reach out to the everyday Americans, we will be far better able to detect and prevent future attacks. In short, nine years after the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, the changing nature of the terrorist threat makes clear that we must be willing

to reexamine many of our counterterrorism assumptions and approaches. Only then can we succeed at maintaining the upper hand in the face of an adversary who continues to demonstrate the ability to learn and adapt..”

Chairman Thompson and Ranking Member King, I thank you for this opportunity to testify today and look forward to responding to any questions that you might have.

*Stephen Flynn is the president of the Center for National Policy and a member of the National Security Preparedness Group. He is also author of **The Edge of Disaster: Rebuilding a Resilient Nation** (NY: Random House, 2007).*