

Over-Analysis

While June Smyth's letter ("Not Just Fortress America") and your January/February, 2002 editorial are well intended, I believe both pieces miss the mark on the crucial issue. Ms. Smyth writes that Americans need to address the question of why the terrorists have come to hate us so much. On the contrary, it is the terrorists and their helpers who need to examine why they hate Americans and Israelis.

Both the letter and the editorial appear to be critical of Americans, but the criticism is done coyly and without specifics. The letter states that we need more "balance in our world." The editorial has a vague reference about "bullying." You both must be hinting at something bad that America or Israel has done, which in context suggests that these transgressions are a cause, if not the cause, for the Sept. 11 attacks. I strongly take exception to

this inference that somehow Americans or Israelis are to blame. I believe a citizen of the United Kingdom put it best: "We are not at war with them but they sure as hell are at war with us."

I have done much soul searching since the Sept. 11 attacks, sought out news, information, and opinions. I am struck by how much one can over-analyze the situation, and give too much import to peripheral matters, misguided opinions, and madmen. Too much analysis sidetracks us from the important facts:

- There is a group of people filled with hate who have, as far as we know, targeted all Americans and Israelis for death. They have the means and the motivation



to reap horrible destruction. This letter refers to them as the terrorists.

- The terrorists are not seeking more "balance in our world" or more "understanding," quite the opposite. To borrow your editorial's phrasing, the terrorists are the bully on this playground. The other kids need to stick together and say "no more" or risk being picked on one at a time. Haven't we learned this lesson before?

- There is poverty and despair throughout the world. There is poverty and despair in America. However, the vast majority of the world's poor and desperate are not terrorists. The particular terrorists who have targeted us have done so for complex reasons that they need to resolve themselves. No amount of diplomacy, charity, understanding, etc. will do this for them. "Village building" will not happen with someone who wants to burn your village down.

- Only a strong and vigilant defense, united with our allies, can protect us from attack from this group of terrorists.

- Israel is our friend, and America should stand beside them through thick or thin. We can disagree about West Bank settlements or some other issue of the day, and we have. We can apply diplomatic pressure on Israel, and we have. However, at the end of the day, America and Israel are friends threatened by the same enemy.

JASON J. BECKWITH
NEW YORK CITY

Muted Response

I have noticed that people in the different professions—doctors, lawyers, accountants, etc.—have different habits of thought. This is probably due to a combination of the natural inclination of people who enter these professions and their professional training. I believe the same applies to actuaries, and may in part explain their muted response to the events of Sept. 11. The following is my

1/3
Lynchval
Page 6

personal response, and I make no claim whatever that it is a common response among actuaries, or even that it is shared by any other actuary. I will go so far as to say that it is the result of habits of thought common among actuaries.

I find it morally offensive that the value of people's lives should be evaluated based on the manner of their deaths. Each death as a result of the events of Sept. 11 is a tragedy, but there are tens of thousands of equally tragic premature deaths each year in the United States. The dependents, relatives, and friends of these latter victims do not benefit from nationwide sympathy and huge government handouts. Suppose, by a miracle, everyone in the twin towers had escaped alive, but at the same instant an earthquake on the West Coast had killed a group of people who exactly match the twin towers victims demographically. The result would be the same, but the national response would be entirely different.

I am appalled, though not surprised.

And then I look around the world and see millions dying prematurely each day, often as babies and children, due to poverty, oppression, and war. Against this background, the events of Sept. 11 stand out much less starkly to me than to most Americans. Looking at the emotional response to the events of Sept. 11, I am re-

mindful of the response to the death of Princess Diana. To me, Sept. 11 is Princess Di squared (note the mathematical metaphor).

I have long been aware of the risk of large-scale terrorism. I am also aware the risk is declining every day due to the anti-terrorism measures being taken by the government and private sector. Flying has long been safer than driving and now is even more so, yet most Americans are shunning planes in favor of their cars whenever possible. I shake my head, but again I am not surprised.

It's been more than 10 years now since someone put cyanide in some bottles of Tylenol, killing several people. Since that time, tamper-proof packaging has come into use, not only for drugs but for all manner of foods and beverages as well. We pay a small tax each time we use one of these products to pay for the packaging, but we hardly notice either the tax or the packaging.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a burgeoning environmental movement, aided by tragedies such as Love Canal, brought the nation's attention to the need for cleaning up many of our domestic and industrial practices to ensure that our country would remain livable over the long term. Since that time, innumerable measures have been taken to improve the environment,

from smokestack scrubbers on electric power plants to catalytic converters on automobiles. Each year we collectively pay an environmental tax of hundreds of billions of dollars in the form of higher utility bills, more expensive cars, etc. Yet we hardly notice either the tax or the resulting improvement in the environment.

Will the events of Sept. 11 change our lives? Yes—more than the Tylenol scare, but less than our environmental awareness. We will pay a tax and change some of the ways we do things, but these things will become part of our lives, and we will hardly notice.

Sometimes I wish everyone thought like an actuary; then the world would be a much saner place. But then I wonder—if everyone thought like an actuary, would we have undertaken such a successful (so far) program to undermine the international terrorist network? For that matter, would we have undertaken the successful effort to rid the world of the Nazis a generation ago? Emotional responses to high-profile events do not seem to have hurt our country much over its glorious history, and they may even be one of the keys to its success. So maybe it's good not everyone thinks like an actuary. But I'm glad some people do.

ERIC J. KLIEBER
CLEVELAND, OHIO

WHAT ARE THE ODDS?

- ▶ Number of people in Washington, D.C., who were murdered by anthrax poisoning between Sept. 11 and Nov. 9 **2**
- ▶ Number of people murdered by other means in the same city during the same period. **53**
- ▶ Number of U.S. residents who died of anthrax between Oct. 1 and Nov. 1 **4**
- ▶ Approximate number of U.S. residents who died during the same month as a result of having smoked cigarettes **33,000**
- ▶ Probability that someone who flies once a month will die in a commercial airplane crash in the coming year in the United States (where concern about terrorism has cut flying sharply) if terrorists hijack and crash one plane every month **1 in 540,000**
- ▶ Probability of dying of a heart attack in the United States (where tens of millions of people fail to exercise or maintain healthy diets despite the risk) in the same year: **1 in 400**
- ▶ Odds of a U.S. resident being killed by terrorists in a shopping mall in the coming year if the person spends two hours a week in malls and if terrorists destroy one mall (and everyone in it) each week: **1 in 1,500,000**
- ▶ Odds of the average U.S. resident being killed in that year by cancer: **1 in 600**

Sources: Allan Lengel, "D.C. Views Differ on Post-Sept. 11 Crime Increase," Washington Post, 12 November 2001; CDC Confirmed Cases of Anthrax, Centers for Disease Control, www.bt.cdc.gov/documentsapp/anthrax/11022001/pm.asp; "AP News Anthrax Timeline," Associated Press, www.imdiversity.com, viewed 15 November 2001; Michael L. Rothschild, University of Wisconsin, "Terrorism and You—the Real Odds," Washington Post, 25 November 2001. Reprinted with permission from World Watch magazine, January/February 2002.