National Security Indicator

by Colonel Daniel M. Smith, Ret.

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The opening paragraphs of the original Calvert-Henderson National Security Indicator stressed that national security is a state of mind, something felt or sensed by a population. Put another way, it is a way of being affected by and having an effect on the world, rather than an absolute state of existence that can be precisely defined in everyday life.

Not since the days immediately following December 7, 1941 was the validity of this observation more apparent nationwide than in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. That day, four airplanes controlled by suicidal terrorists stripped the American psyche of the illusion that a deliberate man-made major catastrophe would never happen here. In less than 90 minutes over 3,050 civilians died, the largest American civilian death toll in a single day, surpassed only by the one day toll of soldiers in the Battle of Antietam during the Civil War.

In practical terms, September 11 called into question the nation's ability to protect its vital interests and the American "way of life" against significant, unwanted intrusions and influences. Not that there had been no warnings or earlier attempts that inflicted death and destruction. In the 1980s there were 16 significant incidents, 10 in 1985 alone. The list for the 1990s and 2000 is half as long but more deadly:

**February 1993:** the attempt to topple one of the World Trade Center towers using a car bomb kills six and wounds 1,062;

**April 1995:** the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City is destroyed by a truck bomb that kills 168 and wounds over 600;

**November 1995:** a car-bomb in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia kills five Americans who are part of a U.S. training team for the Saudi National Guard;

**June 1996:** a fuel truck explodes near Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, killing 19 U.S. service members and injuring 515 (240 Americans);

**July 1996:** a pipe bomb explodes in Centennial Park, Atlanta, Georgia during the Summer Olympics killing one and injuring 111;

**June 1998:** rocket propelled grenades explode near the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon;
August 1998: truck bombs outside U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania kill 301 (12 Americans) and injure over 5,000; and

October 2000: the attack on the USS Cole in Aden, Yemen harbor kills 19 sailors and wounds 39.

Except for the 1993 attack in New York, these were either "over there" or the work of domestic malcontents. But what seemed never to rise in the collective American consciousness as these incidents accumulated—and therefore created a psychological tsunami when September 11 occurred—was the fact that no administration could guarantee one hundred percent that a major attack against the U.S. homeland would never happen.

Moreover, when the attack finally occurred, the reaction was to cast national security in stark black and white terms rather than in its true multiple shades of gray. If the nation can be attacked in a way that is entirely unexpected, then government must inaugurate crash programs and spending to ferret out every possible weakness and shore up every possible defense. Since the "American way of war" holds that the best defense is a strong offense, in such a black and white universe, those nations that are not with us are obviously enemies and therefore fair game for U.S. action.

Without question, there are groups of people who, for whatever reason, seek to harm the United States and its interests. While government has a duty to protect citizens to the best of its ability, the lesson that has increasingly emerged since September 11 is that no nation on its own can attain and sustain security for its people.

This may seem quite obvious from the simple fact that even a superpower must abide by international laws and treaties. But it is also true psychologically because in its broadest sense, national security is a negative concept, one that individuals and groups, from the family to the nation-state to the world community, apply to the specific conditions of their environment. National security is of paramount importance only when a people sense it is absent, for then it causes panic or immobility, the classic reactions to fear.

Conversely, when a people feel "nationally secure," even though this state is unacknowledged, it forms the primary backdrop against which citizens move about their daily activities. Thus national security helps define the overall quality of life (as distinct from the way of life) we enjoy. In a real sense, what the nation lost on September 11 was the freedom from the fear of going about our collective daily routines. We became like so many other nations that have lived with terror for decades.

If September 11 caused a metanoia—a fundamental change of outlook—the government’s response did more to add to the chaos and crisis of confidence than to reassure the general public that its security had been restored. For example, the government:

- closed the national airspace, grounded all civil airplanes, and started combat air patrols;
- increased police presence at airports, began luggage searches, and banned metal tableware on flights;
• stationed armed National Guard troops in airports and bridges and closed tunnels;
• created the position of Coordinator for Homeland Defense with a supporting bureaucracy; and
• moved to expand the intelligence collection and detention powers of the Justice Department with regard to "terrorist suspects."

At the Administration’s behest, Congress passed a $40 billion emergency spending measure, designating half to New York City and the other half to federal and state entities to lessen the chances of follow-on terrorist attacks. (The Pentagon received $9.6 billion.) For Fiscal Year 2003, the President’s budget request directly increased "national security" spending by $67 billion to include $48 billion for traditional military accounts (totaling $396.1 billion for the Pentagon and military-related activities of the Department of Energy) and $19 billion for the Office of Homeland Defense (totaling almost $38 billion).

An Executive Order dated Nov. 13, 2001 entitled, "Detention, Treatment, and Trial of Certain Non-Citizens in the War Against Terrorism," opened a new front. Specifically, the Order:

• asserted that an extraordinary emergency existed; (The President had already declared this a war, but one against a non-state entity.)
• authorized military tribunals for non-U.S. citizens, setting the terms for prosecuting suspected terrorists and empowering the Secretary of Defense to set the standard of proof;
• described as potential defendants anyone suspected of complicity in the September 11 attacks or of harboring those who participated; and
• provided that two-thirds majority of a tribunal could impose the death penalty.

Although the American Bar Association took a stand against the use of tribunals as described in the Executive Order, there was little public protest to any of the post-September 11 measures put in place. The public’s craving for orderliness and security after the sudden seeming loss of control over the nation’s destiny trumped any concern that the government’s actions might irreversibly affect the free wheeling style and quality of life that had contributed to America’s ascendancy.

But control or order is not the opposite of chaos; it is the complement of chaos. Chaos lies at the root of our universe, scarcely limited by physical laws. We fear chaos because it suggests disintegration, particularly of a central “truth” or guiding principle. Properly understood, however, the disintegration of one center gives rise to another, a new paradigm. The task is not to try to recapture the old truths but to re-form life and relationships around the new center without sacrificing basic principles. In short, the effort properly is to discern the order that is within the chaos and organize our existence around it.

One very important tenet that Americans must be willing to include in this changed paradigm is that complete order, complete control, complete security, are impossible, even unnatural. To hold otherwise transforms security—or the drive for it—into an addiction, and as such it can never be satisfied no matter what steps are taken or principles sacrificed. Moreover, one nation’s addiction
frequently threatens to dis-empower others, and if that is what is on offer, it will be resisted covertly if not overtly, inviting the perception if not the reality of increasing chaos. There is no such thing as security for one.

What we decide will affect how we live. We cannot go back completely to the pre-September 11 world, but we must go back as nearly as is possible. The winds of change may always blow, but if the nation hoists sail and rides them, we can control our general direction and make sure we move forward.
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