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Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism

By John Mueller, Mark Stewart



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Since 2001, the United States has created or reorganized more than two counterterrorism organizations for every apprehension it has made of Islamists apparently planning to commit terrorism within the country. Central to this massive enterprise is what the FBI frequently calls "ghost-chasing"-the efforts by police and intelligence agencies to follow up on over ten million tips. Less than one alarm in 10,000 fails to be false-the rest all point to ghosts. And the vast majority of the leads deemed to be productive have led to terrorist enterprises that are either trivial or at most aspirational. As John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart suggest in *Chasing Ghosts*, it is often an exercise in dueling delusions: an extremist has delusions about changing the world by blowing something up, and the authorities have delusions that he might actually be able to overcome his patent inadequacies to do so.

Chasing Ghosts systematically examines this expensive, exhausting, bewildering, chaotic, and paranoia-inducing process. It evaluates the counterterrorism efforts of the FBI, the National Security Agency, the Department of Homeland Security, and local policing agencies. In addition, it draws from a rich set of case studies to appraise the capacities of the terrorist "adversary" and to scrutinize "the myth of the mastermind." Mueller and Stewart also look closely at public opinion, a key driving force in counterterrorism efforts. The chance that an American will be killed by a terrorist within the country is about one in four million per year under present conditions. However, poll data suggest that, although over a trillion dollars has been spent on domestic counterterrorism since 2001, Americans say they do not feel safer. No defense of civil liberties is likely to be effective as long as people and officials continue to believe that the threat from terrorism is massive, even existential.

The book does not argue that there is nothing for the ghost-chasers to find-the terrorist "adversary" is real and does exist. The question that is central to the exercise-but one the ghost-chasers never really probe-is an important and rather straight-forward one: is the chase worth the effort? Or is it excessive given the danger that terrorism actually presents? As *Chasing Ghosts* shows in vivid detail, standard evaluative procedures suggest that the costs often far outweigh the benefits.



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Editorial Review

Review

"Does civilization face an existential threat of terrorism? Politicians and security bureaucrats have a vested interest in answering 'yes,' while blowing off the costs (in money, opportunities, and lives) of responding to their exaggerated and sometimes hallucinated threats. This evidence-based exposé of the counterterrorism industry is witty and eye-opening, and offers a sound basis for intelligent policy and for our conception of the world we live in."-Steven Pinker, Johnstone Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of *The Better Angels of Our Nature* and *The Sense of Style*

"In their provocative and well-informed book, Mueller and Stewart evaluate the policies and the politics of counterterrorism. *Chasing Ghosts* challenges the fundamental premises on which the post-9/11 counterterrorism framework is built, finding that the overall terrorism threat is limited, that many would-be terrorists are incompetent amateurs, and that much of the spending on counterterrorism is wasted."-Daniel Byman, Senior Fellow, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings Institution

"This terrific book is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the U.S. War on Terror. Mueller and Stewart show that America's national security elites were so spooked by the events of 9/11 that they started seeing imaginary terrorists everywhere. To deal with these ghosts, the Bush and Obama administrations spent huge amounts of money and unnecessarily grew the national security state to the point where it is now a potential threat to our civil liberties. When future historians look back someday at this period, *Chasing Ghosts* will stand out as a rare example of measured thinking about a threat that has been inflated to absurd proportions."-John J. Mearsheimer, Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago

"This book comes as more and more evidence is emerging that the real 'terror' on our streets is being created by those who have been charged with eradicating it!"-Lowell Bergman, Distinguished Chair in Investigative Reporting, University of California, Berkeley

About the Author

John Mueller is a political scientist at Ohio State University and at the Cato Institute. He is the author, co-author, or editor of 18 books and hundreds of scholarly and popular articles.

Mark G. Stewart is Professor of Civil Engineering at The University of Newcastle, Australia. He has 30 years of experience in probabilistic risk and vulnerability assessment of security systems and has published more than 400 articles, papers, and reports.

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