

THE TYRANNY OF THE 1%: THE ILLUSION OF OVERCOMING TERROR

- MARCH 23, 2016
- WRITTEN BY [DR. MATTHEW CROSSTON](#)
- PUBLISHED IN [TERRORISM](#)



~ If you want total security, go to prison... The only thing lacking is freedom. Dwight D. Eisenhower

And now we have Brussels to add to a list that can never grow shorter. Only longer. There are many names on this list. Many cities. Many countries. In some minds the list has grown faster ever since the global community's major powers formally declared 'war' against such extremism and the killing of innocents.

To many that seems bitterly ironic and heinously inappropriate. As leaders all over the world lined up to express their horror and offer sincere condolences to the people of Belgium, there is one sentiment repeatedly expressed: we must all truly unite to fight off such old-world barbarism. While I understand the sentiment and the angry frustration residing deep inside it, I fear it is also an impossible dream for a reason we do not openly discuss. Namely, there can be no perfect security where there is already perfect

freedom. It is not a tension. It is not a problem of imperfect policy. It is not the failure of executing proper countermeasures. It is an axiom: if we are to be free as a society then we can never be idyllically safe as well. The two interests are in contrast to one another. And that, much more than suffering from terrorism while the world declares war against it, is the profoundly bitter irony we must all adjust to. For as with all axioms, it shall never be reversed.

This is not a standard exposition on the quaint platitudes that we often read and will no doubt read again in the immediate aftermath of Brussels. About how freedom isn't free or how the person willing to give up liberty for security is deserving of neither. This is not a criticism of people in the modern day as much as a confession as to what democratic freedom truly means in society. Freedom of movement; freedom of association; freedom to travel; freedom of belief; freedom of information; freedom from unlawful search and seizure; freedom from unjust prosecution. These things we hold to be so basic, so fundamentally rooted in the essence of our free societies, that we forget such precious things also come with severe consequences. The most important of which is the general mystery and secrecy with which we can all live our lives. Even in the hyper-technological 21st century, where most of us are either online or recently were online, our every movement, location, and thought potentially transmitted and revealed to friend and stranger alike, it is remarkable that we forget how easy it is to NOT be noticed at all. There is an old Russian proverb I love to remind people of: if you only knew how little people think of you, you wouldn't worry about what people think. It is a humbling reminder of how fantastically small we all are in a giant world of billions. No matter how big, how famous, or how well-known in our individual spheres of influence we become, the reality is for most of us that 99% of the world does not know us or care to. Why does this matter and how does it pertain to Brussels? Quite simply, it explains why a free society can never achieve perfect security: exactly because of its freedom and how people can so easily remain disconnected from each other's attention.

Many people do not know that several of the terrorists who perpetrated 9/11 in the United States learned how to fly jumbo jets on simulators in various private flight schools in small-town America. Fewer still realize that these men with foreign-sounding names and middling English-language skills were adamant in insisting to their instructors that they be taught how to take off and fly but showed no interest whatsoever in learning how to land. One astute American even went so far, given the unique weirdness of the situation, to call in to his local FBI office and report it. Unfortunately, the unique weirdness was so unique and so weird and so out of the ordinary that the local agent was unable to consider it anything except the random oddity one sometimes finds in a truly free land. This is America, after all, where anyone can pretty much do whatever they want. And thus, it went uninvestigated and several unique and weird men were allowed to acquire a few odd aviation skills that would literally change the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century. The point of this quirky little anecdote is to show how hard it is to be noticed in a free society even when you are doing things that should in all rights be noticed quite readily. Now just imagine when you are actually trying to not be noticed and subtly undertake multiple strategies

to be unseen and unheard, both physically and digitally. In a free society it is remarkably, and scarily, easy to do. And that horrific but righteous combination, to be free and unnoticed, is what makes Brussels happen. And San Bernadino. And Paris. And Nigeria. And Kenya. And Madrid. And London. And Moscow. And New York. And countless other cities and countries most of us don't even know because we were too busy being free to bother noticing.

Remember that I said 'perfect security.' For if there is any silver lining in this black cloud of analysis it is that for every Brussels and Paris and New York there are one hundred, one thousand, ten thousand avoided Brussels and Parises and New Yorks. Some of them we hear of. Most of them we don't. But even if we did I doubt it would give much relief to those caught up in the wake of the terror of the successful 1%. For that is the truly heinous nature of terrorism in the modern age: our technology and policing and intelligence capabilities are so advanced and keen that we truly do succeed in stopping 99% of possible incidents, preventing those who wish do us harm simply because our societies are unjustly judged evil and unholy and perverted. But the intensity and shocking insecurity of that remaining miniscule percentage makes us contemplate Grand Strategies and call upon global unified collaborations to sweep up that final 1%. And that, alas, is the saddest news of all: the 1% will never be swept up. This is not because of the brilliance of the planners or the cunning of the executors. That miniscule 1% succeeds because we do in fact live in free societies. And any society that gets close to being perfectly free can never ever hope to also be perfectly secure. That irony may be bitter, but it is also glorious. I hope we can always remember that in the aftermath of such tragedies like Brussels.



[DR. MATTHEW CROSTON](#)

Matthew Crosston is Professor of Political Science, Director of the International Security and Intelligence Studies Program, and the Miller Chair at Bellevue University. He is the Director of The Greater Caspian Project and Vice-Chairman on Modern Diplomacy's Advisory Board.

http://moderndiplomacy.eu/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=1299:the-tyranny-of-the-1-the-illusion-of-overcoming-terror&Itemid=487