

THE JUST RIGHT FEAR INDUSTRY, IN 18,000 WORDS

Steven Brill thinks we're not worried enough about bioterrorism and dirty bombs. He makes that argument even while acknowledging that a dirty bomb attack launched in Washington DC would result in just 50 additional cancer deaths. And curiously, his extensive discussion about germ threats (inspired by a Scooter Libby report, no less!) doesn't mention that the Russian military is currently struggling to contain an anthrax attack launched by a thawing reindeer.

That's the problem with Brill's opus: anthrax attacks only matter if they're launched by Islamic extremist reindeers, not reindeers weaponized by climate change. (And if you were wondering, although he discusses it at length, Brill doesn't mention that the 2001 anthrax attack, which was done with anthrax derived from a US lab, has never been solved.)

He makes a similar error when he spends 18 paragraphs focusing on what he (or his editors) dub "cyberterrorism" only to focus on OPM as proof the threat exists and includes this paragraph from Jim Comey admitting terrorists don't yet have the capabilities to hurt us our Chinese and Russian adversaries do.

For his part, the FBI's Comey worries more about a cyberterror onslaught directed at the private sector than one directed at the government. "These savages," he says, "have so far only figured out how to use the internet to proselytize, not to wreak physical damage. What happens when they figure out how to use it to break into a chemical plant, or a blood bank and change the blood types? We know they are trying. And they don't have to come here

to do it.”

Biothreats and hacking are a threat. But it would be sheer idiocy to approach the problem, at this point, as primarily one of terrorism when climate change and nation-state adversaries clearly present a more urgent threat.

But it’s not just Brill who adopts some weird categorization. The article is perhaps most interesting for the really telling things he gets Comey to say, as when he suggests FBI drops investigations when they hear a “wing nut” making bomb threats in a restaurant.

“Think about it from our perspective,” Comey said when I asked about this.

“Suppose someone is overheard in a restaurant saying that he wants to blow something up. And someone tells us about it. What should we do? Don’t we need to find out if he was serious? Or was he drunk? The way to do that is to have someone engage him in an undercover way, not show up with a badge and say, ‘What are your thoughts in regard to terrorism?’ ”

“Plenty of times it’s a wing nut or some drunk, and we drop it,” he continued.

I actually think the FBI, as an institution, is better than this. But to have the FBI Director suggest his bureau wouldn’t follow up if someone making bomb threats was deemed a radical but would if they were deemed a Muslim is really telling.

Which gets to the core of the piece. Over the course of the 18,000+ words, Brill admits – and quotes both President Obama and Comey admitting – that what makes terrorism different from the equally lethal attacks by other mentally unstable or “wing nut” types is the fear such attacks elicit.

President Obama described the difference

to me this way: “If the perpetrator is a young white male, for instance—as in Tucson, Aurora, and Newtown—it’s widely seen as yet another tragic example of an angry or disturbed person who decided to lash out against his classmates, co-workers, or community. And even as the nation is shaken and mourns, these kinds of shootings don’t typically generate widespread fear. I’d point out that when the shooter or victims are African American, it is often dismissed with a shrug of indifference—as if such violence is somehow endemic to certain communities. In contrast, when the perpetrators are Muslim and seem influenced by terrorist ideologies—as at Fort Hood, the Boston Marathon bombing, San Bernardino, and Orlando—the outrage and fear is much more palpable. And yet, the fact is that Americans are far more likely to be injured or killed by gun violence than a terrorist attack.”

The FBI’s Comey agrees. “That the shooter in San Bernardino said he was doing it in the name of isil changed everything,” he told me. “It generates anxiety that another shooting incident, where the shooter isn’t a terrorist, doesn’t. That may be irrational, but it’s real.”

Nevertheless, all three – even Brill, in a piece where he takes Obama to task for not publicizing his change in dirty bomb response, refers to “deranged people and terrorists” obtaining assault weapons as if they are mutually exclusive categories – seem utterly unaware that part of the solution needs to be to stop capitulating to this fear. Stop treating terrorism as the unique, greatest threat when you know it isn’t. Channel the money being spent on providing tanks to local police departments to replacing lead pipes instead (an idea Brill floats but never endorses). Start treating

threats to our infrastructure – both physical and digital – including those caused by weaponized reindeer as the threat they are.

And for chrissakes, don't waste 18,000 words on a piece that at once scolds for fearmongering even while perpetuating that fear.