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SOMETHING ON YOUR MIND?

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THE FRONT BURNER

9-11: Is America safer 14 years later?

Greater clarity, awareness translates to better security

BY PAUL DONAHUE | Guest columnist

The differences between pre- and post-9-11 are America's alertness, the baseline for which we define ourselves as "safe," and our own history.

Starting in reverse, as a child growing up in Miami in the 1970s, I witnessed firsthand the 100,000-plus Cuban criminal immigrants Fidel Castro sent to Miami on a one-way ticket. In the short term, this flood of different languages and cultures turned Miami upside down. Overpasses became holding cells lined with chicken wire on either side for population constraint, and our police did a magnificent job with keeping the peace of a city. This cause and effect made Miami less safe in the short term.

But, then came thousands of additional Cubans who were hard-working and ambitious. They helped build Miami into what it is today — the gateway to Latin America. I view my experience in Miami as a microcosm of America — where we first slide backward before focusing forward.

Security is defined as "free from care." Pre-9-11, most Americans were free from care — not because we were secure, but because we didn't know any different, which is a reflection of our alertness then and now. The greatest threat to our security is historical amnesia. With 225 years of relatively attack-free history, America was rightfully shocked on 9-11. Attacks were previously made at the World Trade Center and Oklahoma City, and terrorism has always existed — recall the 1981 Iran hostage crisis, where 52 Americans were held for 444 days.

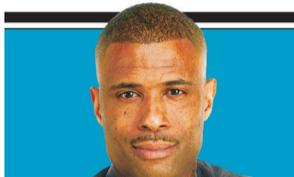
We have more intelligence now than ever before, and better methods for analyzing and bundling data smartly today. Some of these data come at the expense of our privacy. Before drones, ISIS and cyber battles, we had shoe and underwear bombs, hijackings and the murder of Robert Stethem — a U.S. Navy sailor killed by Lebanese Hezbollah in 1985 on live TV. He was tossed from the cockpit onto the tarmac. I was only 16 but remember it clearly.

Pre-departure screening at our airports is not perfect, but exponentially safer and smarter than it was pre-9-11. The transparency of security failures is painful and may appear sometimes like zero-sum maneuvering, but compared to pre-9-11, it's necessary to keep us ever-focused as security is a 24-7 operation. The prudent move to make pre-departure screening a public-private venture is innovational, and is a critical next step in America's overall protection strategy. The use of state-of-the-art screening technology at ports has been transformational as our vessels, containers, contents and passengers are safer. Radiation readers at key road, railway, weigh stations and refuse centers help keep America closer to being free from care. Laws like the Enhanced Border Security Act, Secure Fence Act and Visa Entry Reform Acts (all post-9-11) are also not perfect, but collectively move us forward to being free from care.

Americans are more alert today. While we are not airtight safe, we are clearly safer today than 14 years ago. If America's expectations are to be bubble-wrap safe, that is an unrealistic expectation in a world of 7.5 billion people. We 320 million Americans are a greater threat to each other day-to-day than those elsewhere. The pursuit of certainty in an uncertain universe is unrealistic. Anyone living in a gated community knows that just as many bad guys exist on the inside of the gates as the outside. The bell of 9-11 can't be un-rung. Where security was left to the professionals pre-9-11, we are now all deputies of our own safety and security. There is still much to do with our borders, screenings, vetting, intelligence and privacy balance; but on the whole, we have more clarity and more awareness. This baseline, when coupled with continuous self-education, makes us safer today than 14 years ago, as we're all sitting on the same side of the table in the battle for American safety.

Paul Donahue is president and CEO of Centerra Group LLC in Palm Beach Gardens, a global government and critical infrastructure services company, which provides protective services to the federal government.

Today's moderator

DARRYL E. OWENS
Editorial Writer

One, then another airplane crashed into New York's World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

After the shock and horror, after the heartbreak, after the unabiding sense of violation, and after the Twin Towers buckled and fell to their knees, in the space where the 110-story structures had stood since 1970, Americans ruefully could see clearly.

What the coordinated suicide attacks by al-Qaida terrorists in the Big Apple and the Pentagon — and a thwarted third attempt that crashed down in a Pennsylvania field — revealed was a glaring hole in America's domestic security.

It's a hole that America has been trying to patch ever since.

The Transportation Security Administration was born two months after the attack. Congress passed the USA PATRIOT ACT ("Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism") to fortify security management. The Department of Homeland Security emerged as America's domestic defense shield.

Yet, 14 years after 9-11, after the National Security Administration surveillance on citizens, after the death of 9-11 mastermind Osama bin Laden, the question remains: Are we safer?

With heightened security and greater overall awareness, some, like one of today's columnists, say America not only is safer, but far less likely to be blindsided by another 9-11-like attack.

Others, like today's other columnist, argue that the rising threat of ISIS, domestic terrorists and poor border control may even eclipse the threat that felled New York's twin titans.

BY THE NUMBERS

■ 2,753: Number killed in New York attacks.

■ 189: Number killed in Pentagon attack.

■ 44: Number killed when United Flight 93 crashed in Pennsylvania.

Security concerns linger in years after terrorist attacks

BY PETER MARTIN | Guest columnist

You might think it would be hard to argue that security efforts implemented after 9-11 haven't worked, since similar incidents have not happened. But doing so ignores the facts: Current threats from domestic and international sources are just as lethal and determined — but much harder to detect and prevent.

Mass shootings are the epidemic of today. Perpetrators can be co-workers, neighbors or relatives with an agenda, such as the workplace-violence incident that just left two co-workers dead in Virginia, the shooting of innocent victims at a Colorado movie theater, or the slaughter of schoolchildren in Connecticut. Mass shootings are also the work of domestic terrorists with a political agenda or fanatics radicalized through the Internet. But no one has gained any traction in efforts to identify these individuals and access their Internet rantings before they commit the acts.

The randomness of these crimes makes people feel helpless. Corporations admit that shootings by employees are going to happen and can't be stopped. The government's inability to slow down these crimes leaves citizens desensitized. When the 1999 Columbine shootings happened, the world was stunned. Now we see a mass shooting and accept it as a part of society.

Current threats from domestic and international sources are just as lethal and determined but much harder to detect and prevent.



Meanwhile, there's been a seismic shift in how citizens view law enforcement. The erosion of confidence in the police has led to cold-blooded attacks and unlawful protests by highly motivated individuals with automatic weapons. This lack of respect for the rule of law destabilizes communities. The security challenges land at the doorstep of citizens and business owners who can't know where the next protest is going to pop up. By that time, additional security layers are inadequate at best.

These incidents actually work against efforts at gun control, because people feel they need to be armed to respond to an active shooter. In fact, as schools and institutions

are locked down, flea markets, open-air concerts, sporting events, malls and other places with public access are going to be targeted.

Border-security issues are particularly disturbing. The U.S. border is porous, and people risk crossing daily to escape a bad life — or law enforcement.

Again, there is no easy solution. Local law enforcement and federal agencies blame each other for the lack of a coordinated response. When individuals penetrate the border and perform illegal activities in the U.S., is deporting them so they can do it again the best security policy?

Finally, ISIS has been a game-changer in the international arena. Its leaders use social media to find people in the U.S. who can carry out an attack from within. It's a brilliant, but sinister tactic. When ISIS leaders talk to thousands of people on social media, they don't need to know which one is actually going to pull off a hostile act. These incidents are not targeted at governments; they are targeted at people. And that is detrimental to people's feeling of security. There are desensitization programs, but they are hard to start, hard to get traction within a community, and very hard to sustain.

That's why it's been so hard to formulate a strategy. The president doesn't want boots on the ground — reckoning that the American public can't stand any more war casualties. At the same time, federal surveillance programs have been canceled, Facebook is not cooperating, and the media don't want to be a platform for new security ideas. There are not a lot of tools in the tool box for law enforcement to identify perpetrators and shut them down.

About 3,000 people were killed on 9-11. If you look at how active shooters, gangs or ISIS can kill 10 people at a time, it doesn't take long before separate incidents far surpass that body count.

Peter Martin is CEO of AFIMAC, a Florida-based, global security consultancy made up of former military and law enforcement professionals that work with public, private and Fortune 500 organizations to help mitigate risks, including those from extremists and terrorists.