

TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF SECURITY

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By

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I take my title from the work of the Japanese philosopher and educator, Masahiro Morioka, who views a painless civilization as one permeated by structures and mechanisms to enable people to avoid suffering and pursue pleasure. He included certain concepts of security as contributing to such a civilization in much the same way as domesticated animals enjoy security at the cost of freedom and challenge.¹

What do we mean by security? We hear so much about Social Security, homeland security, border security, data security, personal security, identity security, that the term security has become so blurred and diffuse as to be meaningless.

People probably always feel they know what security means, so no real examination of its meaning has seemed indicated. Mostly, it means stopping bad things from happening, but what bad things? Security is, today, probably not definable, and is therefore a terrible term. By avoiding having to define it or describe it, one can avoid the problem of thinking about it. This has allowed others, particularly governments, to decide for each of us what security is to mean.

Not too long ago, security to most people meant having a pension, health care, and lifelong employment. Now it appears to mean none of those things; rather it means something else involving exaggerated efforts to address concerns about personal safety and financial security, even if at great expense.

Some of the expense now being incurred for security is personal - gated communities, personal savings for retirement, personal firearms, home alarm systems, software for protection of data, increasing payments for healthcare insurance, insurance for specific diseases, and for life-long care. Some of the expense for a vision of security is mandated, but not paid for by government, such as airbags in our cars, child restraint seats, food and drug purity and safety standards, environmental regulations, and smoking bans.

And the greatest expense to support a vision of security is provided and therefore controlled directly by government. This comes in the form of, at least currently, the vast security apparatus of our Department of Defense, and the Department of Homeland Security. Security is now viewed as requiring a greater and greater emphasis on military might, and government intervention in and the restriction, surveillance and monitoring of personal freedom.

Without a philosophy, or even a definition of what is meant by the term "security", it is difficult to determine if any of the expense and sacrifices incurred in the name of security is providing anything like real security.

For instance, do we now feel more secure against terrorist acts after the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security? Do we feel more secure by virtue of escalating military expenditures in Iraq and Afghanistan? Do we feel personally more secure in the safety of our environment, and the safety and security of our food and drugs, or the safety of travel?

Or, have we simply overreacted to perceived threats, real or imagined? If so, what has been the consequence of such overreaction, and has it led to a greater sense of security however defined?

Overreaction is what the United States does in times of crisis. These overreactions have caused more harm than the threats - to civil liberties, the economy and to human lives. Many of the surprises we have suffered come to be treated as threats to our national existence, such as Sputnik, the ethnic conflicts in Europe, the Iranian hostage taking, and the domestic Communist threat. We are not so concerned about other threats such as meteor strikes or global warming. Perhaps our overreactions are limited to those threats we can associate with some human or political agency - in other words, there is someone, or something to blame.

We all can recognize that any concept of complete or absolute security is not only unachievable, but is nonsense. To avoid any conceivable danger, individually, nationally or globally would mean avoiding all change of any kind, because everything is in a state of change and therefore new vulnerabilities are being constantly created.

Religion has historically been a methodology to provide a path toward a complete sense of security, but as science pushes back the bounds of ignorance, the universe is revealed as a place of change, affording some predictability, but little security. New viruses are found, new environmental threats emerge, and the affairs of people constantly fluctuate between the poles of what is good for any particular group, and what is "not good" for the same group.

The definition of security now apparently being deployed by our national government means defending our borders, policing the population, protecting our transportation systems and projecting our national military power. It does not appear to mean to our governors the protection of financial security, health security, or environmental security. In other words, all our national government seems to seek to provide is protection against violent death except for criminal acts. Exactly where the line exists dividing deaths inflicted by terrorists and those by criminal acts is unclear. But our reaction to 9/11 has been excessive - a kind of a national temper fit, which has engendered contempt for the United States throughout the world, just as we all feel contempt in the presence of one who has a temper fit.

Is the cost of this quest for security worth while? Are we getting our money's worth? How do we determine if the cost of the security we actually get, however defined, is justified? This is a risk management approach. If we seek total security in order to prevent another 9/11 event, we could permanently ground all aircraft. This would certainly be effective, but at the same time ridiculous. Such management of the risk would be too great a price. Efficacy of security measures is not, then, the only consideration. Bullet-proof vests, for example, are

effective as protection against gunshots, but the risk for most people of suffering gunshot wounds is not worth the cost and inconvenience of their daily use to address such a low risk. I say this even in light of the tragedy at Virginia Tech. This seems to be the point being missed by our political leaders. We have, as a nation, essentially had imposed upon us a national bullet-proof vest at a tremendous cost of money and loss of freedom, for a relatively low risk from terrorist acts which could best be otherwise addressed. For example, hiring and training more Arabic speakers, funding stepped-up sophisticated police resources internationally, and creating closer and more intimate contacts with foreign nations would address the so-called terrorist threat more effectively than has massive military intervention. There is little that nuclear aircraft carriers and submarines can do to counter terrorist attacks.

This country is not really importantly threatened by terrorists. The 9/11 toll was horrendous - more than 3,000 dead, but this has not affected the existence of the country. After all, we kill more than ten times that many people in traffic each year, without the danger of the United States being toppled. We do not impose draconian measures to increase security from traffic deaths and injury, such as limiting the automobile speed limit to ten miles an hour, which would be certain to cut down on the number of deaths and injuries. But the risks of such deaths and injuries are not worth the disruption of our entire transportation system.

It is clear that the group that we refer to as terrorists do not have the military wherewithal to challenge the United States, or indeed any of the western powers militarily. The terrorists are not, after all, Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union with vast military and industrial resources. This huge disjuncture in objective power is usually overlooked when considering security and fear.

Even if our massive security apparatuses are intended to address fears of weapons of mass destruction, the cost is too great for the actual risk involved. According to the Gilmore Commission Report to Assess Capabilities For Terrorism Involving Weapons Of Mass Destruction, the making and deployment of a nuclear bomb is immensely difficult and requires detailed technical expertise and discipline, well beyond the competence of any terrorist or group of terrorists.²

Chemical, biological and radiological weapons also present a low risk. Each has serious drawbacks as a weapon of mass destruction- chemicals disperse quickly, biological and radiological weapons do not produce immediate large-scale death and injury, and they all share in common the need for sophisticated on-going technical capabilities. The exaggerated fears have, however, had an effect upon increasing the security measures undertaken by our government in order to protect our population. The U.S. Postal Service, for instance, has spent, and continues to spend upward of \$5 billion to address the 2001 anthrax scare - about \$1 billion for each fatality inflicted by terrorists.

The Roman Empire had an approach to the concept of security very much like our own. Within the protection of the Empire, there was apparent order, while outside was chaos and disorder and barbarians. To maintain this order, greater and greater authority came to be vested in the Emperor ostensibly to protect the people of the Empire and to direct military efforts both

within and without the Empire. The Empire, that is the homeland, had to push its boundaries farther and farther away from the center by military means. Thus out of the fear of the other people that is those outside the boundaries of the Empire constant military action and vigilance was required, and the requirement of such constant action and vigilance authenticated the Empire. This expansion, coupled with the burden of a large military, and the elimination of any checks on the central authority were probably significant contributors to the decline of the Roman Empire.

Now we are doing much the same. The American homeland is where it is safe, orderly and predictable, and, the justification goes, military boundaries of the homeland need to be extended to remote countries far from the boundaries of the homeland. We hear that if we were not combating the terrorists in Iraq, they would be fighting us here in the homeland. This does not make sense, but that is the position of our political leadership. There is no explanation of how numerous armed terrorists could make it to our shores without our knowledge. If only a few such terrorists were to come here now, surely they could be spared from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, so where are they? To the extent that these others are close, we are erecting actual physical walls around the homeland to keep the others out.

The very concept of a homeland creates a sort of discrimination, a fortress mentality. This discrimination raises questions as to who is entitled to the benefits of homeland security. Are those entitled to claim homeland security somehow better than those outside the homeland? How do we judge who can be permitted to enter the homeland? Will not such exclusionary and discriminatory positions create enemies outside the boundaries of the homeland?

This concept of a homeland with barbarians just outside generates a sense of fear of those others outside, and this fear animates and justifies the entire national security and military apparatus. As long as a sense of national fear obtains, methods to address this fear can be justified - round up people who might be a locus of fear, and, perhaps torture some of them to identify additional such people. Increase the military budget. Issue color-coded warnings without any specifics of the nature of the danger, for, as the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security said, "An attack here could come in any form, at any place, on any timetable."³ To defend against such a universal concept of attacks is too tall an order for mere mortals, however prepared.

One of the steps being taken to obtain security is to engage in a "war on terrorism". By that definition, such a war cannot be winnable. Terrorism is a tactic, and has been a tactic since the dawn of time. Think of the American Indians, the Viet Cong, Mosby's Raiders, Stout Cortez or the Russian Bolsheviks. But really what are we fighting for? Are we fighting for a society in which we can feel secure without knowing what secure means? Is this fight to be done with high-tech armament, and a government with increasingly authoritarian powers? As we become more authoritarian, are we not losing that for which Western Civilization, particularly the United States, stands?

What we are seeing in the war on terrorism as a means of achieving security is actually security theater - that is things done to appear to make us feel more secure, but which provide little or no real security. The detailed searches at airports (but not railroad or bus stations) by differently uniformed personnel are security theater. The silly color coded alerts are security theater. The brave speeches by politicians inveighing against not only the terrorists, but those who question our methods of combating terrorists, are security theatre.

Even the actions of our military in Iraq are Security Theater. The well armed and disciplined United States military personnel filmed in combat settings with their splendid equipment as a backdrop to endless media personalities serve as security theater to keep us feeling at once frightened by the prospect of terrorist outbreaks, and comfort in the powers of our military to protect us against such outbreaks.

All of this security theater is staged to inculcate a feeling of security without making us in any real sense more secure. It also serves to provide distractions from what should really concern us. Global warming is probably a much greater threat to our way of life than are a bunch of middle eastern fanatics, but addressing global warming is not as dramatic as armed combat, and does not provide a lot of money to our military industries.

But is this security entertainment having the desired effect? We are made to feel that our security is centered upon our overwhelming military might, but the effects of military might are having the opposite effect. Deployment and application of overwhelming sophisticated military might have been shown in Iraq, and also in Lebanon, to have such shortcomings as to be not only not overwhelming, but to be devastatingly disappointing in their failure to achieve the goals announced in advance, leaving many with a feeling of powerlessness and dread.

If sophisticated military cannot prevail, the sense of insecurity can only increase, because the ineffective military is now revealed as unable to provide any security at all against the terrorists threat we have exaggerated and created as the major threat to our security, and no alternative to military might is in prospect.

Religion seems to be an increasingly popular choice to provide a sense of security. This may be a reversion to an earlier pre-scientific age, when religion provided a sense of security because religion claimed to explain the inexplicable and therefore provided security based on the appearance of some kind of control over the forces of the world. But the varieties of religious belief, and non-belief, create a conflicting concept of the function of religion vis-à-vis security. Interestingly, religion seems to be one of the forces driving the current terrorist threat to the western world's sense of insecurity. The danger de jour of Islamic fanatics, whose religious beliefs lead them to commit criminal acts of violence, utilizing suicidal volunteers is apparently inspired by the possibility of religious ecstasy.

If religion contributes in part to a sense of insecurity, as well as possibly providing a sense of security for those who believe, then what else is there? Many, it seems, are attempting to achieve a sense of security by buffering themselves from the dangers of the world with

acquisition of material possessions and comfort, even at the cost of staggering debt. If we are physically comfortable and surrounded by many possessions, and distracted by the quest for still more possessions, we kind of kid ourselves into feeling secure, or at least, so distracted that we are not thinking about any issues of security. It is clearly difficult to consider one's self as insecure sitting in a large and comfortable, well-furnished home with plenty of furniture and entertainment appliances.

Coupled with our buffering ourselves from the danger of the world by material possessions and comforts, is our increasing utilization of virtual reality. Virtual reality is created by computer and television, but the freedom represented by the information networks, after all, is not real. No matter how much information or wealth is generated virtually, the very real problems threatening our security are still left unaddressed, and virtual reality in a very genuine sense acts to distance people from one another. In virtual reality, we don't have to encounter real dangers and risks, unless we choose to do so.

In fact, it turns out, that security does not have much of an effect of people's mood or sense of well-being. A recent study reveals that people's mood may dip after a significant terrorist event, but unless they are directly affected by the event, they return to normal in a day or two. The issue of income security seems to affect one's sense of life satisfaction more than do issues of personal security, according to this same study.⁴

The foregoing demonstrates that the concept of security is elusive, and ultimately impossible to achieve, however defined. Things change all the time; we all die, get sick, and get old. All of this can lead to feelings of insecurity, but this is the human condition. As pointed out earlier, absolute security is impossible to achieve.

So where are we finding some kind of philosophy, a way of thinking about security? Our government spends a fortune of resources to convince us the world is frightening and stages security theatre.

But security is really a state of mind, whereby we recognize the risks inherent in living, and attempt to manage those risks. People who live in upscale gated communities still face death, illness and loss, and even the occasional crime. The present state of security, particularly Americans' security concept is unsustainable ecologically, is socially irresponsible, and is leading to a greater global instability. Massive military expenditures and activity are not addressing any of these issues.

Is not the combination of security theatre, and the failure of any approaches other than military leading to an overall greater feeling of personal insecurity?

Our notions of what provides a sense of security is an based upon government-provided military power to protect us, and closed off and isolated within the walls of that power, we feel free to indulge in a life of comfort and materialism. We, with the connivance of our government, are seeking to live in a painless civilization, as outlined by Mashahiro Morioka. We expect our

government to make us feel protected from violence, so as to permit us to live in a dream of material splendor. Our very success at developing a highly technical apparatus has led us to think that any possibility of pain needs, and can be, at once addressed and eliminated. Thus any errors, such as deaths by friendly fire, or anthrax in posted letters, failures in the virtual transmission of data, or the failure to detect strange goings-on in airplane pilot training give rise to overreaction, which is wasteful, and distracts from thinking carefully about an appropriate response. It does give the appearance of action, however, and that is comforting.

What we must do is react with those others outside the homeland. Our relationship with those others has been, and remains, the application of hard military power, and the exclusion of those others from our homeland and its benefits. If we do not engage the rest of the world in meaningful ways, the world of the others will continue to breed and foster angry terrorists. The application of military power by the U.S. has distracted the world's attention from the real threats to security - extreme poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy and environmental degradation.

If a significant portion of the resources now devoted to military action were to be directed to addressing real dangers, our real, ultimate security would be enhanced. This will not prevent the occasional criminal acts of terrorism, but neither has military activity, unless, of course, we can come to regard the deaths being inflicted upon the people of Iraq as preventing terrorism.

As a beginning, we need to pressure our government to refrain from fits of temper and overreacting to isolated acts of terrorism, however horrific, and maintain a steady effort to address the real dangers to our security, and apply careful, sophisticated police work to identify and limit the individuals who commit terrorist acts. This was the approach in Spain after the Madrid railroad bombings, and in Great Britain after the subway bombings there.

We cannot achieve a painless civilization, free of suffering, especially one dictated by government. We can only make judgments concerning risks, and make sure our representatives maintain a sense of proportional response to risks.

Otherwise, I feel that not only will we lose any sense of security; we are at risk of losing our civilization.

References

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