

## Speaker says attacks are remote

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Despite widespread fears among the American public of another al-Qaeda attack like 9/11, the possibility remains so remote as to be almost non-existent, Ohio State University political scientist John Mueller told an audience Dec. 7 at the downtown Hyatt Regency.

Mueller spoke at a forum sponsored jointly by the Columbus Metropolitan Club and the Columbus Council on World Affairs.

Mueller, who holds the Woody Hayes chair of national security at Ohio State, contended that the threat posed to the United States by international terrorism has been greatly exaggerated by politicians, bureaucrats, media representatives, academics and business executives who profit in one way or another by inflating the presumed danger.

“There is an incredible amount of worst-case-scenario thinking going on,” Mueller said. “My basic take on terrorism is that it isn’t terribly important. It doesn’t do that much damage. Generally, international terrorism results in the deaths of only a few hundred people a year worldwide, almost all of them outside America.”

He added: “That’s a tragedy and a horror and a monstrous thing. The number should be zero. But it’s not an existential threat to the United States or to world order, nor is it a threat to the American way of life, as many people are constantly talking about.”

Indeed, Mueller said, the chance of an American being killed by international terrorism during his or her lifetime is about one in 80,000 — about the same chance, he maintained, of being killed by a comet or a meteor.

Even if there were a 9/11-scale attack every three months for the next five years, he added, the likelihood that an American would number among the dead is one in 5,000.

“What we’re dealing with is a fairly limited threat,” Mueller said. “It is a threat. There are bad people out there. But the idea is to keep it in proportion. It’s something we can deal with. It’s something we can absorb. It’s something we can have some success in policing.”

Mueller, whose most recent book is titled “Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats and Why We Believe Them,” stated that the nation’s reaction to 9/11 has been more costly in terms of economic losses and human lives than the 9/11 attack itself.

“What happens with terrorism is it frequently results in two things: intense fear — and fear is costly — and policy overreaction. And that is also very costly.”

Mueller said the economic costs of 9/11, including the destruction of physical assets and rescue and cleanup costs, totaled about \$40 billion, while the loss in human lives was almost 3,000 Americans, most of them civilians.

By comparison, he said, the costs of the war in Iraq are going to run to \$1 trillion to \$2 trillion, with the number of American deaths in that conflict having reached almost 3,000, mostly military, and still climbing.

“The war in Iraq was not politically possible without 9/11,” he commented.

In addition, he said, the Department of Homeland Security, created in 2002 in response to the 9/11 attacks, has an annual budget of \$50 billion, while the U.S. Postal Service spent about \$5 billion in anthrax protection following the still-unsolved anthrax attacks in the weeks immediately after 9/11.

“That’s about \$1 billion for every person killed by anthrax in 2001,” Mueller pointed out. “The expenditures are vastly greater than what the terrorists actually did.”

Mueller also cited a University of Michigan study that found that more than 1,000 Americans died in automobile accidents between Sept. 11, 2001, and the end of that year because they drove rather than flew, out of fear of another al-Qaeda airliner hijacking.

“The policy overreaction and the fear are exactly what the terrorists try to create,” Mueller said. “Right after 9/11, Osama bin Laden said, ‘The United States is filled with fear, from north to south, from west to east. Thank God for all that.’ ”

Mueller said the public’s fears are made worse by what he termed the “terrorism industry.”

“That’s basically the politicians, bureaucrats, the press and interest groups that have things to sell,” he explained. “They have a strong interest in exacerbating the threat.”

Intelligence estimates in 2002 held that as many as 5,000 al-Qaeda terrorists and supporters were in the United States, Mueller said.

“However, a secret FBI report in 2005 leaked to ABC News said that the FBI had not been able to identify a single true al-Qaeda sleeper cell in the United States,” he said.

The political scientist outlined several steps he contended the government could take to take the edge off the public’s fears and put the terrorist threat into proper perspective.

“There are certain things that could be done, like international policing and trying to deal with the potential for nuclear dispersion,” he said. “Beyond that, people should be told repeatedly that their chances of being killed are very small and that we can absorb almost any kind of damage that terrorists could do, because they are fringe groups.”