Affirmative Case: Harm to Citizens

The attacks on September 11th were a serious and devastating tragedy that warranted counterattack by the US. But instead of a measured response, we kicked into a permanent state of hysteria. A decade and a half later, we’re still feverishly bombing and eavesdropping and tossing around reckless, irrational propaganda. It’s time to calm down and act based on fact, which is why I am *Resolved: when in conflict, the right to individual privacy is more important than national security*. Let’s start with an

# Anti-Value: Harm to Citizens

The word “anti-value” means we use it just like a normal value, but we turn it upside down. In this case, I’m arguing that you should choose between National Security and Individual Privacy based on which best protects citizens from harm.

## Value Link: Purpose of Government

The reason we tolerate the inefficiency and coercion of government is that it’s the best way to protect ourselves from common harm, like being burgled in the night. Since government was created for that purpose, harm to citizens is the only way to get a good view on the resolution.

# Contention 1: National Security Does Not Prevent Harm

To be clear, when I say National Security I’m specifically referencing the conflict in the resolution. I have nothing against Humvees and M4s. I take issue with the paranoia surrounding the word “terrorism.”

Of course, terrorism can never be completely exterminated. But for the last decade—long after the War on Terror completed any reasonable objective—terrorism has managed to live on as one of the most vivacious urban myths of our time. We have convinced ourselves that in spite of all evidence that terrorism is still a major threat.

I know that this defies conventional wisdom, so I’m about to back up this claim with several statistics.

In March 2011, Harper’s Index noted:

“Number of American civilians who died worldwide in terrorist attacks last year: 8 — Minimum number who died after being struck by lightning: 29.”

So thunderstorms are three times more dangerous than terrorists. But you don’t see America declaring a War on Lightning, or getting into intense presidential debates about lightning, or spending trillions of dollars fighting back against lightning.

We don’t focus on terrorism because it’s rational, but because it’s scary and because Western media is so eager to cooperate with radical Islamist propaganda that tells us to be afraid. Yes, there have been terrorist attacks in recent years—but the deaths of other, more mundane victims are just as tragic, tens of thousands of times more common, and get zero press coverage.

Here are some other things that are more likely to kill you than terrorism.

* According to an investigation by the Hearst media corporation, you are 25,000 times more likely to be killed because your doctor made a mistake in the hospital.[[1]](#footnote-2) But there is no War on Doctors.
* According to the CDC, you are 4500 times more like to poison yourself with your own prescription drugs.[[2]](#footnote-3) But there is no War on Medicine.
* According to the National Safety Council,[[3]](#footnote-4) you are 1600 times more likely to die by falling than terrorism—often from a stupid mistake like not stabilizing your ladder while decorating your home for the holidays. There’s a millennia’s worth of terrorist attacks from falling every year, but no one thinks we should stop the bloodbath by calling for a War on Christmas Lights.

I want to make absolutely sure that this myth is dispelled. Let me give you just a few more statistics and then I promise I’ll stop.

Continuing to use National Safety Council data, here are three things that are actually as dangerous as terrorism:

1. One, getting trapped in an airtight space like a walk-in freezer.
2. Two, being bitten by a non-poisonous bug.
3. Three, accidentally setting your pajamas on fire.

In the year 2016, waging a War on Terror is the international equivalent of lying in bed at night, hearing a rustling sound in the next room, and throwing a grenade at it.

# Contention 2: Privacy Prevents Harm

If you tilt at windmills, you’ll be knocked off your horse. If you wage a War on Terror more than a decade after winning it, you’ll find yourself living in a global security state.

Tom Engelhardt is an international affairs expert and a professor at University of California, Berkeley. He has written several books about American wars and culture. In October 2014, he wrote a lengthy and brilliant article in *The Nation* titled “No, ISIS Is Not A Threat to the US.” This excerpt is a little long, but every word of it is insightful.

“Terror as the preeminent danger to our American world now courses through the societal bloodstream, helped along by regular infusions of fear from the usual panic-meisters. On that set of emotions, an unparalleled global security state has been built (and funded), as well as a military that, in terms of its destructive power, leaves the rest of the world in the dust. In the process, and in the name of protecting Americans from the supposedly near-apocalyptic dangers posed by the original Al Qaeda and its various wannabe successors, a new version of America has come into being—one increasingly willing to bulldoze the most basic liberties, invested in the spread of blanket secrecy over government actions, committed to wholesale surveillance and dedicated to a full-scale loss of privacy. You can repeat until you’re blue in the face that the dangers of scattered terror outfits are vanishingly small in the “homeland,” when compared to almost any other danger in American life. It won’t matter, not once the terror-mongers go to work.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

The article concludes:

﻿“Terror-phobia, after all, leaves you feeling helpless and in need of protection. The only reasonable response to it is support for whatever actions your government takes to keep you ‘safe.’ Amid the waves of fear and continual headlines about terror plots, we, the people, have now largely been relegated to the role of so many frightened spectators when it comes to our government and its actions. Welcome to the Terrordome.”

Having your privacy invaded is harmful. It’s not as bad as death, but it’s worse than losing all your progress in Candy Crush. If you don’t like the idea of someone following you around for 24 uninterrupted hours, you agree that privacy has some value.

So the decision in the resolution is simple. Do we use a massive surveillance network to deprive our citizens of privacy so we can protect them from the monsters under the bed, or do we leave them in peace? The answer, of course, is the latter.

Just about everything in your bathroom—your toothpaste, makeup, hairbrush, curling iron, etc—are orders of magnitude more dangerous than terrorism. We don’t need to wage a global war and treat the rights of American citizens as collateral damage. It’s time to focus on the real threat—the national security state.

I want to close with a quick reminder: when you put on pajamas, stay away from open flames. Thank you.

verty

1. 200,000 deaths from preventable medical error. Katherine Harmon, “Deaths from avoidable medical error more than double in past decade, investigation shows,” Scientific American, August 10, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. 36,500 deaths from prescription drug poisoning, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db81.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. National Safety Council estimates based on 2000 data from National Center for Health Statistics and US Census Bureau. More recent reports have similar or larger statistics in all cited categories but cost $85+. National Safety Council, “The most common causes of death due to injury in the United States,” Mongabay.com, accessed December 23, 2015 <http://danger.mongabay.com/injury_death.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Tom Engelhardt, “No, ISIS Is Not A Threat to the US,” The Nation, October 7 2014. <http://www.thenation.com/article/no-isis-not-threat-us/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)