

## **Vaclav Smil on Terrorism, and the Hierarchy of Catastrophe**

### **Vaclav Smil's new work assesses the threat of terrorism and war in the context of other global threats.**

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The contemporary historian Vaclav Smil has written a major new work on the world's greatest threats, "Global Catastrophes and Trends" (MIT Press 2008), which assesses the threat of terrorism and war in the context of other global threats. Smil is a major global energy analyst, the author of a key textbook on the subject and numerous specialty papers, and the author of 20 significant works in his field, many of which are large overviews and summaries of a vast specialized literatures, from oil supplies to resource wars to the earth's chemical and biological processes. So this book has been greeted by the New York Review of Books and others as a major new entrant in a field marked by overstatement, hysteria, and poor analysis.

Because he wants us to appreciate the complexity and unreliability of any assessment of such a magnitude, Smil makes readers wait until page 245, eight pages from the finale, before ranking threats of "fatal discontinuities." He ranks them in order of risk, which he defines as probability/fatality, as the following: megawars, influenza, volcanoes, tsunamis, and asteroids. Smil actually considers global warming to be one of the biggest threats, but he doesn't count it as a fatal discontinuity because its effects would be gradual and dispersed and not easily tied to its causes. Terrorism isn't on the list because it affects so few people (unless it triggers a megawar, in which case it's no longer terrorism per se).

Smil considers terrorism in a larger discussion of violent conflicts. Only a few very big wars change the direction of human development and history, WWI, WWII, the American Civil War, and the Taiping war (1851-1864) -- which I had barely remembered from school, but which was significant for ending the royal order and killing 20 million Chinese, more than the total death toll of WWI. Great wars have killed about 95 million over the last 200 years. They occur about once every 35 years, and from this Smil concludes the probability of another great war at 20 percent over the next 50 years, which Smil notes is 1 - 2 orders of magnitude (OM) higher than global natural disasters.

Smil notes that the greatest episodes of human violence occurred outside of war -- Stalin and Mao's combined killing of 70 million people between 1929 and 1953 in Russia and 1949 and 1976 in China -- as these nations created modern albeit Communist states. In the 200 years before 1980, the number of wars increased each decade, a remarkable pattern, and these wars became of an increasingly short duration. But the 1990s may have been a

turning point. Between 1992 and 2003, armed conflicts declined by 40 percent, and wars with more than 1,000 battle deaths dropped by 80 percent, a remarkable and hugely positive trend reversal. There is debate over whether this is momentary or a sign of a new trend.

Major researchers have concluded that wars are largely random and unpredictable even if they are understandable and explainable *ex post facto*. Warring nations, in the words of one of them, "bang against one another with no more plan or principle than molecules in overheated gas." But other theorists say that rising global interdependence is behind the decline of wars, "greatly reducing the density and the pressure of the gas," writes Smil, extending the metaphor. Still, Smil notes, history is full of "fatal discontinuities," among them Napoleon, Hitler, Putin, and Chavez, all back-benching military officials who nobody expected to transform their countries.

Meanwhile, nuclear war remains a grave threat, but one that has been declining, even with the threat of nuclear terrorism, which Smil considers quite low. The greatest risks were during the Cold War, in particular the Cuban Missile Crisis. Deterrence still works.

Smil cites Rappaport's work arguing that we are the fourth wave of terrorism's development. The first three had no impact on states. Smil says terrorism is "rising to the level of globally transformative events" but notes, like Audrey Cronin in "The End of Terrorism", that most terrorist acts have no impacts on the states whose legitimacy they are aimed at undermining. Czarist Russia collapsed under its own weight, not due to terrorist assassinations. Decolonization was driven by colonizers (and public sentiment back home), not by the glamorous terrorist attacks *à la* "Battle of Algiers." Or, as Smil lays out later, if the U.S. continues to decline it will be because of our underinvestment in health, education, lethargy, and sloth, not bin Laden. Terrorism often backfires, as Smil argues it did for PLO, and as Cronin argues it did for Al Qaeda, where Arab and Muslim public opinion has turned strongly against it in the last five years.

All this and yet Smil argues that 9/11 "changed everything" because of the shock of the experience on Americans and the symbolism, but he never says what that "everything" is and later seems to dismiss such a conclusion as hyperbole. Indeed, while 9/11 may have been justification and motivation for invading Iraq, it is analytically suspect to say that "terrorism caused" the U.S. to invade Iraq. A President Gore almost certainly would not have done so. Events like that are stochastic, having multiple, complex, unpredictable, and random factors.

Like Cronin, Smil says the war on terrorism can't be won and shouldn't be thought of as a war but rather an assault on a network of violent extremists. Smil recognizes that terrorism is motivated to undermine state legitimacy and like Cronin takes this to its logical conclusion to question the widespread fear that terrorists would attack our information networks, poison our water or food supplies, explode dirty bombs, or release pathogens. Given how easy it is to bomb largely unguarded electrical towers and chemical plants, how come no terrorists ever do so? It's not because they can't. It wouldn't be hard for them to do. A more plausible reason they don't is that it's not very spectacular and might increase rather than decrease the legitimacy of the state. In other words, a small attack that kills a few civilians but doesn't disrupt daily life would backfire symbolically. Against peak oilers and other catastrophists who imagine that one small snap of our delicate modern system will result in pandemonium, Smil points to the the 2003 New York city blackout -- a result of an antiquated transmission system -- which couldn't stop trading on Wall Street, nor disrupt life in hospitals. The crime rate in the city actually dropped as people went outside to enjoy a clear view of the stars.

In 40 years terrorism killed only 34,000 people in contrast to the 20 million who die each year in car accidents. Because so few people die from terrorist attacks it cannot be seen as a catastrophic threat outside of nuclear terrorism or the chance that states will over-react to it. Smil notes that pulling off major terrorists events is exceedingly difficult, and not just of the nuclear bomb building variety. Only 12 people died when Japanese terrorists tried to gas thousands with nerve gas in subways in 1995. Trying to spread a flu virus might kill lots more people, but it's not very spectacular and would likely be squashed by an effective public health campaign. If we want to stop killer diseases we should increase funding to stop the ones we have now, which have been unleashed by nature, or by ourselves (e.g. mad cow) not any terrorist group.

Smil acknowledges that none of these facts and figures matter to scared populations like America's post-9/11, in part because most can't get away from the horror and fear to confront the extremeley low probability that they will ever be impacted personally by terrorism (or their children by kidnapping, for example). Smil states that, given this, we can start to see the campaign against terrorism not as a war but an on-going effort like the one against organized crime. While our own research shows that American voters don't like this approach, since they see terrorists as different from mafia figures, willing to kill civilians and die, and requiring of soldiers not cops, his advocacy for such a counter-terrorism approach is consonant with the consensus of counter-terrorism officials.

Overall, Smil does not offer much new to the debate, but his sweeping portrait of old and new threats puts terrorist acts in the larger context of increasing public security, their

questionable efficacy, declining and smaller wars, and the threat of over-reaction. As such it is heads and shoulders above the usual hysterical approach to terrorism and other long-term threats we have to manage and, ultimately, live with.

[http://thebreakthrough.org/blog/2009/10/vaclav\\_smil\\_on\\_terrorism\\_and\\_t.shtml](http://thebreakthrough.org/blog/2009/10/vaclav_smil_on_terrorism_and_t.shtml)