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How Blue Grass might approach terrorism
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—In 26 years of living on the same speck of rural America, I've felt threatened once.

Years ago, Melissa and I drove home very late on a Friday night and found a car in our front yard—a local Mom -- a stranger to us -- and her three young children. She asked to spend the night at our bed and breakfast.

We tried to beg off, since we were not primed and ready to receive. She said she didn't care. It came out quickly that she was fleeing her husband who was probably looking for her. She said he had guns and was drinking.

We took her in. We parked her car where it was hidden from the road.

She asked that we not call the sheriff for reasons that weren't exactly clear at the time, or even now.

I loaded a rifle and a shotgun. I told Melissa that if the husband came through the front gate and didn't stop after I warned him and told him to leave, she should shoot to kill if anything happened to me. I stayed up the rest of the night.

Things settled themselves the next day.

I'm not sure that we made the right decision. We were operating with limited intelligence, all the way around.

Apart from that episode, I've not given much thought to personal security in my farm county of 2,500 people.

Rural America is not free of crime. While rates here are generally lower than in metro areas, smaller places are subject to the same crime-inducing drivers as larger ones.

The kids who get into trouble -- and the adults, too -- almost always come from dysfunctional families. Some grievance, whether or not it's understood or articulated, is often in the mix. Alcohol and drugs, of course, always help individuals to do really stupid stuff.

Crime is tamped down here -- though not eliminated -- by community expectations and awareness. Our unspoken consensus assumes that we won't act criminally or endanger each other.

For our part, we keep an eye on individuals with grievances and problems. Sometimes interventions or punishments straighten them out; sometimes, not. Underlying factors -- poor parenting, lack of self-discipline, grievances -- are rarely solved.

We don't expect perfect behavior from everyone. We accept and anticipate a certain amount of failure, and when it occurs, local juries are not lenient.

I've not felt very threatened by terrorists of any stripe, either where I live or when I travel. I pay attention, but I know the risk of dieing from a terrorist taking down an airplane I'm on is smaller than the risk of dieing from a bee sting.

For more than 10 days, media have bombarded us with story after story about Abdul Farouk Abdulmutallab, a 23-year-old Nigerian rich kid, who tried to blow up his underpants while flying on Delta Flight 253 into Detroit on Christmas day. He failed to detonate about 80 grams of PETN, an explosive whose constituents and mixing directions are readily found on the Internet.

It appears that al Qaeda in Yemen trained him and sent him aloft.

Had he succeeded, more than 280 passengers and crew would have died.

Nonetheless, al Qaeda and its associates have harmed only a handful of individuals on American soil since 9/11. The worst incident was the November 5, 2009 Fort Hood shootings that claimed 13 and wounded 30.

That shooter, Major Nidal Malik Hassan, was a lonely, isolated, beleaguered man with grievances. He was a U.S. citizen and an increasingly anti-American Muslim.

The 9/11 jihadists, Abdulmutallab and Hassan gave multiple advance signals of their intentions. In each case, U.S. intelligence heard the warnings but failed to respond.

In Adbulmutallab's case, our intelligence agencies realized who he was during the flight...and decided to interview him after he landed. Apparently, they gave no heads-up to the pilot. One wonders.

It appears that our own turf-conscious agencies are to blame for letting jihadist crumbs slip through their own bureaucratic cracks. They do this again and again.

American life will be irreparably poorer if we allow these failures to produce a strip-search police state that ends the Fourth Amendment's "right of the

people to be secure in their persons...against unreasonable searches.” It is U.S. citizens who have this right, not citizens of other countries. Yet, hysteria and fear are moving us in this direction.

We have to accept that absolute security is unachievable, whether in an open democracy or in the most totalitarian dictatorship. Suicide bombers can easily be refocused away from any hardened access, like an airplane, to down-soft targets, such as railroad passengers, crowded streets, college football games, county fairs, concerts, restaurants, libraries, stores, post offices, workplaces and hundreds of other spots where we routinely gather.

We can protect ourselves better by being bureaucratically smarter rather than more bureaucratically repressive. Smarter is, of course, the harder path.

In my neighborhood, every eye is kept out for what’s going on. It’s neighborly surveillance--being aware, being ready. Community intelligence systems know who the troubled are. They get special attention. We look for those who by their words and actions have sent signals that we have received and understood. We are seldom surprised.

America, too, seems to identify terrorists by their words and actions—the way we do it around here in Blue Grass. This method succeeds—our intelligence agencies always have a file on those who undertake these missions. Whatever we’ve been doing to finger these people before they try to blow us up with their shoes and undergarments has worked.

We should not rationalize our persistent failure to intercept terrorists by telling Americans that our computers don’t talk to each other or that each agency is a silo where information goes up and down but does not flow among them. These explanations border on the criminal.

Were I al Qaeda, I would bleed America dry. I’d play hit and run, then stick out my tongue. I’d drive the big lug crazy with pinpricks. I’d provoke a military response wherever I could, because that builds resentment among Muslims everywhere. I’d tie up U.S. troops and money in places where most of the people don’t want us.

I’d send a patsy onto an airplane every six months, because I’d know that terrorist failure provokes almost as useful a reaction as success. I’d keep Americans scared, angry and frustrated, because the odds are that, in time, we will turn these emotions on ourselves.

Over the years, Melissa and I have learned about our community through observing, listening and interacting. We draw distinctions, we figure out differences. We’ve learned who to watch out for and who not to provoke.

We've learned when intervention makes sense and when it doesn't.

I think if a neighbor came to me and said that his son might be thinking about blowing up my house, I would do something to prevent that from happening before I found the kid lighting up on my front porch.

The intelligence we generate is capable of being used to stop terrorists before they get to airports. Strip searches and intrusive screening are approaches that shift the burden of prevention away from intelligence agencies and onto low-paid workers with wands.

Let's guess which choice will be made.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant who works with buyers and helps sellers with marketing plans. He is author of How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his weekly columns are posted.

Contact: Curtis Seltzer, Ph.D.
Land Consultant
1467 Wimer Mountain Road
Blue Grass, VA 24413-2307
540-474-3297
curtisseltzer@htcnet.org
www.curtis-seltzer.com