



GREG SCHNEIDERS

PR shares in blame for climate of fear that is gripping America

Are terrorist groups like al Qaeda a “major threat” to the American people? According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, 72% of Americans think so. Not surprising, since the Department of Homeland Security’s current “national threat level” is yellow, indicating a “significant risk of terrorist attack.” There should be a color-coded scale for the public hyping of terrorism set permanently at red.

Two well-researched Op-Eds on this subject appeared recently – one by Fareed Zakaria, *Newsweek*’s international editor, the other in *The Washington Post* by Glenn Carle, a 23-year veteran of the CIA’s Clandestine Service. Zakaria points to a new study on terrorism that, when deaths in Iraq are excluded, shows a 65% decline in global terrorist incidents and a 90% decline in deaths from terrorism since 2004. “Why have you not heard about studies like this?” he asks. “It does not fit into the narrative of fear that we have all accepted far too easily.”

Based on two decades’ work in anti-terrorism, Carle argues, “Osama bin Laden and his disciples are small men and secondary threats whose shadows are made large by our fears.” He contends that “this administration has heard what it wished to hear... thereby comforting (their) preconceptions and policy inclinations.”

Whether or not one holds the White House wholly or partially responsible for creating and maintaining this climate of fear, there is no doubt that it exists, uniquely so in the US. As I write this, I am returning from a two-week, five-country European vacation where I was not once asked to remove my shoes to board a plane or pass

through a security checkpoint, and where the attitude toward terrorism generally is serious, but not hysterical.

What is truly remarkable about this and worthy of our attention and concern as professional communicators is that this US public perception has been achieved entirely through means of communication and PR. Unlike economic fears – rising rapidly at present – the current public fear of terrorist attack is not based on any actual events in the US since 9/11. That’s a long time to sustain a climate of fear merely through the power of communication.

How has this been possible? It is surely attributable, in part, to the fact that there is no shortage of people inside and outside government with a vested interest in promoting fear. The “homeland security” industry is booming. Politicians who can project an image of being tough on terror have little reason to want the issue to recede in importance. Furthermore, there are very few voices on the other side of the issue. What public official or political candidate wants to risk appearing “soft” on terror?

But, there is reason for hope. Brave and authoritative commentators like Zakaria and Carle are beginning to speak up. And January will usher in a new Congress and a new administration less wedded to the “narrative of fear.” Maybe, soon, we will all remember that the greatest thing we have to fear is fear itself. ■

Greg Schneiders is a founding partner of Prime Group, a consultancy that specializes in helping clients understand, plan, and execute change. Greg@primegroupllc.com.