

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING Peter Schwartzman**Feel safe? What contributes to our security?**

Have you noticed that everything is being done for the sake of "security" these days? People wanting to go to the top of the St. Louis Gateway Arch must endure a long "security" line just to get into another long line for purchasing tickets. Anyone taking a flight post-9/11 knows that airport arrival times have been moved up considerably and passengers now must be prepared to have their personhood inspected before boarding. Yet, aren't these mere inconveniences given the potential risks involved? (At least, this is what the authorities want us to think.)

Definitely more troubling, however, are all the new invasive powers delegated to the U.S. government and its agents. Under the USA PATRIOT Act (its acronym being, Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act) which was passed at the end of 2001, a set of sweeping provisions now provide governmental leaders and agencies—such as the Attorney General, the FBI, and the CIA—a new series of powers to inspect, surveil, interrogate, and detain citizens and citizen groups. These changes in the authorities granted to the U.S. government definitely have far reaching effects on our lives. Among the more dangerous implications of these extensions of power include the affirmation that our collective security lies almost exclusively in the prevention of "suicide" bombers and other "fundamentalist"-driven terrorist attacks. Unfortunately, defining security in this way and thereby relegating other risks to our security to the margins (at best) has fateful repercussions. As long as we continue to ignore other threats to our security, we will continue to increase their likelihood of occurring as well as the costs when they do occur. If we truly want to be secure, we better begin to take a broader look at the global and ecological dimensions of our problems in addition to any concerns we may have about terrorist activity.

So what could we possibly have to fear more than terrorists? Given the mainstream media's insatiable appetite for reportage on terrorists and insurgents and little else (other than Michael Jackson or steroid use among swinging millionaires), it is not at all surprising that many Americans are deathly afraid of future terrorist activity, particularly on U.S. soil. But when enough of us become sufficiently consumed with fear, and one fear alone, we begin to lose perspective on the broader range of concerns that impact us. For some perspective on this, consider how many Americans died in the past year because of terrorist activities? The number is perhaps one or two thousand, with almost all of them in Iraq—a country which the United States military invaded in March 2003. And as terrible as every one of these deaths was, when we compare the number to other numbers of horrific, preventable death, we are forced to reexamine our overemphasis on terrorist-driven fatalities. Consider, how many Americans died in the past year from automobile accidents? The number was over 40,000 in both 2000 and 2001 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). How many Americans died prematurely last year because of emissions related to power plants? Scientists at the Harvard School of Public Health estimate the number to be ~15,000 (which is only one-fourth of the total number of premature deaths due to fine particle emissions in this country alone) (Wilson & Spengler). And, most significantly, how many people die each year due to "maternal and perinatal conditions, nutritional deficiencies, and communicable diseases" (all of which are largely preventable with basic education and health care)? The answer is a ghastly

18.3 million (Worldwatch). This data all seem to suggest that there are more important concerns than terrorism.

Oh, I hear the skeptics among you saying something like, "Well, though few Americans have died due to terrorist activities over the past 10 years (relative to other preventable causes), it is the likelihood that many more will die if we don't put a stop to them." Perhaps this is a legitimate concern. But so is the concern (and, in some cases, the certainty) that continued environmental and ecological degradation will bring considerable harm in the future. For example, there is every reason to be uneasy that the individual as well as collective effects of future changes in the areas of climate, land use, air quality, poverty, media control, and disease will drive huge losses of life and do irreparable damage to the planet Earth. Let's examine the dangers present in few of these areas as a means to consider a new and improved way of defining security—one that gets us away from our current myopia. (Worldwatch's most recent publication, *State of the World 2005: Redefining Global Security*, explores this question in more detail than provided here; it is, thus, highly recommended to those that require edification on or a more cogent presentation of what follows.)

Climate change over the next 100 years isn't certain but, as we have recently seen, neither are election exit polls nor military "victory" speeches. Most predictions, which are driven by the best science of the day, indicate that global warming will occur and consequently, sea levels will rise, water borne diseases will spread and ecosystems will be forced to shift geographically or perish. There is a good deal of uncertainty about how much warming will occur but the predictions that suggest very low levels of warming are just as likely as ones that suggest very high levels of warming. Cynics point to this scientific uncertainty as reason for promoting "do-nothing" attitudes. Yet, in my mind, uncertainties suggest just the opposite. That is, it is precisely because we know so little about the changes that are likely combined with the strong sense that humans are changing climate forcing agents dramatically (i.e., carbon dioxide and methane buildup in the atmosphere) that should compel us to take precautions now. Fortunately, most of the world recognizes this, and just last week the Kyoto Protocol (the first significant international agreement to cut back on climate altering emissions) took effect despite the United States being the lone industrialized nation (of any relevance) to refuse. Part of our nation's reluctance to participate in Kyoto stems from our sense that we will not be greatly affected by climate change or that we will be able to adapt to it, but herein lies one of our country's greatest weaknesses—an inability to see beyond our individual position of strength and power. Let's say we, in the U.S., can withstand the brunt of the climate change's onslaught. Most parts of the world won't. Where will this leave us? In a safer world? Hardly. The other nations of the world obviously recognize better how their individual security is tied up in the security of everyone.

Land use changes are worthy of our concern as well. Globally, tropical forests are being decimated, largely because of unsustainable management driven by poverty and development pressures. These forests are not only home to the bulk of the world's species but also are major producers of oxygen, major climate buffers (via their absorption of carbon dioxide), tremendous erosion inhibitors, home to many unique and surviving indigenous tribes, and genetic libraries for future cures

to many human ailments. So, in short, the continued burning and rapacious destruction of the rainforests will destroy many of the things that our species, as well as millions of others, rely on for survival.

Poverty cannot continue in a world that will be peaceful either. When people become destitute they become desperate. With few or any other options, many of these poverty-stricken people "choose" ecologically-unsound or, worse, violent paths to provide sustenance for themselves and their families. An honest look at the diamond and cell-phone industries reveals how much blood is shed in Africa so that we, in the developed world, can "be forever" and "feel connected." And despite attempts to eradicate poverty by big multinational organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, a recent study performed by the International Labour Organization found that an astounding "three quarters of the world's workers live in circumstances of economic insecurity" (Worldwatch). The idealistic notions of development as proclaimed by Harry S. Truman in his 1949 inaugural address have not been realized. Rather than "democratic fair dealing" being the cornerstone of global development, its antithesis—namely, the "the exploitation for foreign profit"—has been the guiding principal for much of the resource extraction and economic assistance that has taken place since Truman's oration (Athanasios). Thus, a true eradication of poverty, which is absolutely necessary for the global security that we all cherish, must be attained through different means. It must be focused on redirecting some of the developed world's surplus wealth to provide food, basic health care, and education to the world's people. Unfortunately, despite the U.S. government's claims to the contrary, the U.S. spends so little of its gross national income on peaceful development assistance—in percentage terms, far less than most other industrialized nations. It is time all of us took a close look at this reality and challenged our political representatives to jump start the shift from militaristic aid to peaceful aid. To continue with our current "development" policy is to guarantee more bloodshed and growing animosity and resentment towards us from the world's masses—certainly not peaceful ends in any stretch of the imagination.

We need to be very concerned about the consolidation of the media as well. Too many of the primary news sources (be they television, newspaper, magazines, or radio stations) are now owned by a few, extremely rich and extremely influential power brokers who have very clear cut agendas that demand increased and, seemingly, unlimited profits and further control of our minds and pocket books. To see a visual diagram of how many media sources are owned by the top ten conglomerates, go to: <<http://www.thenation.com/special/bigten.html>>. The reason we don't see news stories about the health of the environment in the mainstream media isn't because such stories don't exist. To be dissuaded of this terribly misguided illusion, all one has to do on any given day is visit one of many environmental news agencies (such as the Environmental News Network (www.enn.com)) which is chock-full of serious developments the world over. Clearly, the masses are being duped into repeatedly hearing what salespeople (i.e., the advertisers that pay—and, thus, exert undue influence on—our media outlets) want you to hear rather than what is important to our security. We have to break this vicious arrangement if we are to be secure.

No discussion of security can be

complete without a look at militarism. Our nation currently operates under two seriously flawed assumptions or beliefs, both which has incredible implications for our security. First, the U.S. government is guided by the idea that the best way to prevent violence is to perpetrate and proliferate it in such a manner that all enemies are either eliminated or so weakened that they cannot do harm. (Not surprisingly, this same ideology drives much of modern agriculture today with its persistent pesticides, genetically-modified organisms, and antibiotic-saturated meats.) Violence breeds more violence with no end in sight. Iraq today is but one example of this. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this very well and it is something of which we constantly need reminding. Second, the U.S. government believes that it can be the world's key superpower and policeman. A basic look at demographics (which shows the U.S. population now making up less than 5% of the world's population) suggests that we are not a nation capable of such a calling. If the Iraqi invasion and occupation teach us anything, it should convince us that the U.S. is not able to supply the people power necessary to control strategic areas of the planet. Consider that nearly \$1,000,000,000,000 (one trillion) are spent each year on militarism (with the U.S. government (through taxation) spending the lion's share of this amount). Even a fraction of this money would save millions of lives. Less than 4% of this amount (\$38 billion dollars), if spent to increase basic health care to the citizens of the world's poorest, would save an estimated 8 million lives annually (Worldwatch). When one considers how much is spent on militarism (and how little it accomplishes), we should be ashamed to spend more so flippantly and wastefully. Might there be a better way to deal with enemies (or "pests") rather than kill or bludgeon them? Let's hope we immediately dedicate ourselves to peaceful coexistence rather than mutual annihilation.

In the year 2000, some 300,000 people worldwide were killed in armed conflicts, "as many people die each and every month because of contaminated water and lack of adequate sanitation" (Worldwatch). This statistic alone suggests that terrorism shouldn't be our greatest fear or challenge. Life as we know it is changing very rapidly on the planet. If we don't begin to penetrate deeper into the true sources of our security (i.e., food, health care, education, habitat preservation, climate stability) soon, we are bound to continue to ignore the things that truly make us who and what we are. Perhaps one day, once we take a fresh and holistic look at our security, we can rest assured knowing that we are on the right track to ensuring a peaceful, harmonious, and smiley existence for ourselves and the rest of humanity.

Works Cited:

Athanasios, T. (1996) *Divided Planet: The Ecology of Rich and Poor*. Little, Brown & Company, 385 pp.

Wilson, R. & J.D. Spengler. (1996) *Particles in Our Air: Concentrations and Health Effects*. Harvard Univ. Press, 259 pp.

World Watch Institute. (2005) *State of the World 2005: Redefining Global Security*. W.W. Norton.

Peter Schwartzman is associate professor and chair of the Environmental Studies Program at Knox College. He is a research climatologist with peer-reviewed publications in the area of climate change and human population growth. He is currently writing two books which will attempt to communicate environmental understanding to a broad audience.