

Protecting Cultural Monuments Against Terrorism: A Comment

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This is a preprint of an article whose final and definitive form will be published in DEFENCE AND PEACE ECONOMICS [copyright Taylor & Francis]. DEFENCE AND PEACE ECONOMICS is available online at: <http://journalsonline.tandf.co.uk/>

Frey and Rohner (2007) propose that governments credibly commit to reconstruction of cultural monuments, as this would deter terrorist attacks on monuments. We contend that precommitment will serve primarily to redirect terrorist attacks toward non-replicable targets, possibly leading to loss of human life and physical capital at the expense of protecting monuments. The cost savings from lowering onsite security are minimal, thus funds would need to be redirected from other governmental activities to protect monuments.

Keywords: Terrorism; Culture; Monuments; Counter-terrorism; Deterrence

JEL Codes: D74, H56, Z10

THEORETICAL CONCERNS: DIVERSION OF ACTIVITY AND TRADEOFFS

Frey and Rohner (2007, hereafter F&R) are concerned with the targeting by terrorists of “cultural monuments,” defined as “the most important buildings representing a nation's cultural identity.” They argue that a government commitment to rapid reconstruction of any monuments that are destroyed will discourage attacks:

If terrorists expect the national monument to be rebuilt, they are less likely to attack it in the first place, as they would like to make a long-lasting symbolic impact. In this way, a credible and firm commitment by a government to reconstruct a monument, should it be destroyed, can deter terrorists from attacking, implying that reconstruction is not needed. ... Using a simple game-theoretic model, [the present contribution shows] that, by firmly committing themselves to the reconstruction of icons that are destroyed, the government reduces the terrorist threat. (Frey and Rohner 2007, pp. 247, 251)

F&R do not discuss the possibility that, were a reconstructionist policy to be implemented, terrorists might simply redirect their efforts toward other targets, including human beings or productive resources. Redirection of attacks away from cultural monuments could have serious negative consequences for the attacked country, although it may reduce the terrorists’ utility.

We grant that terrorists derive utility from media attention, as indicated in the literature referenced by F&R, including work of their own (e.g. Rohner and Frey 2007). However, attacks on "cultural monuments" are not the only possible means of attracting media attention. Terror attacks that kill many people or render large amounts of physical capital useless will attract great media attention regardless of whether the attacks leave a significant visible reminder.¹ Some terrorist acts, such as the attacks on cultural monuments highlighted by F&R, may produce only the visible-reminder effect; other attacks may produce mass killings or destruction but no lasting visible reminder.

There do exist potential targets, such as prominent skyscrapers, the targeting of which may yield both the visible-reminder and mass-destruction effects. For example, the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 produced a visually stunning, memorable image as well as massive destruction of human life and property. Skyscrapers are also unlikely to be rebuilt exactly as they previously stood for various reasons. A primary reason is the advances in technology since the original construction; it would make little sense to rebuild the World Trade Center using the technology of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Given that terrorists have many satisfactory non-“cultural monument” targets from which to choose, we believe that F&R’s proposed reconstructionist policy will do next to nothing to reduce the frequency of attacks.² Even if funding were set aside not only for reconstruction of unoccupied cultural monuments but also for all prominent buildings and skyscrapers (an expensive undertaking, as will be discussed below), the resulting terrorist response may still be suboptimal from the perspective of the attacked country. If somehow all replicable targets were made secure (whether through F&R’s proposal, increased security, or other measures), terrorists could readily shift their attention to high-value non-replicable targets – that is, to human beings. Thus it is the case that second-best targets from the terrorists’ perspective *may also be less preferable from the perspective of citizens of the attacked country*.

In direct opposition to F&R, then, we hold that a wise policy would *not* seek to make “cultural monuments” relatively less attractive (*qua* targets for terrorists) than prominent skyscrapers or any other target that is filled with human beings. Here we find ourselves in significant agreement with Congleton (2002):

The losses from terrorist acts clearly can be reduced by ‘encouraging’ less-destructive terrorist methods—say, blowing up a symbolic structure, such as the Washington Monument, rather than destroying a building occupied by thousands of people, such as the World Trade Center. (p. 54)

ADDITIONAL CONCERNS: LACK OF ATTACKS AND COST SAVINGS

A serious impediment to any thorough evaluation of the reconstructionist proposal is the paucity of historical terrorist plots that fit the F&R model. Plots that are amenable to deterrence by a reconstructionist policy must, by definition, be terrorist plots that seek to physically and visibly damage cultural monuments. F&R claim that “there have been several attempted attacks on cultural monuments in the recent past,” listing four terror threats in support of this claim. However, there is little evidence that any of these four plots were aimed at causing visible physical damage to the monuments themselves.

The first threat mentioned by F&R was a plot to set off explosives in a Christmas market near (but not inside) the Strasbourg Cathedral in France in 2000; this plot was thwarted by French and German police work (Von Derschau 2004). The second is a 2002 failed plot to attack the Eiffel Tower in Paris; the exact nature of the plot is uncertain as the plot was at a “vague planning stage” when it was foiled, but court evidence indicates that a gas or other chemical attack was planned (Lichfield 2006; Smith 2006). The third is a 2005 plot against St. Peter's Basilica in Rome; we have not been able to find any report of this plot. The fourth is a 2005 plot to attack the House of Commons in London; like the 2002 Eiffel Tower plot, this plot was a gas attack not intended to damage the building itself. The plot was uncovered by British police and MI5 decoding emails, with the help of an informant (Leppard and Winnett 2005).

Other examples of planned-but-unsuccessful cultural-monument attacks may of course exist; certainly some examples may be kept secret by authorities for security reasons,

though perhaps not many as authorities often make public statements about thwarted plots.³ Our research efforts do strongly suggest, however, that there have been very few successful terrorist attacks aimed at the physical destruction of monuments.⁴

It should be noted that F&R argue for the reconstructionist policy partially on the basis of cost savings. They claim that many governments have sought “maximum protection” in their onsite security for monuments, and that substitution into investment in reconstruction planning would enable governments to reduce onsite security measures to an “optimal” level. (p. 246) However, F&R provide no formal support for the assertion that current investment in onsite security is above an optimal level, and (as shown above) each of the monument-directed plots they mention were foiled not by onsite security but rather by intelligence work.

The savings from reducing onsite monument security are likely to be minimal. In the United States, the agency with the primary responsibility of protecting cultural monuments is the U.S. Park Police. In fiscal year 2007, the Park Police had a total budget of \$85 million (U.S. Department of the Interior 2008, p. 29). Even if this entire amount were dedicated to monument security and all of it was to be saved, the savings would be much less than necessary to cover the cost of F&R’s proposal. Overall U.S. military spending has certainly gone up since September 11, 2001, as F&R indicate, but the military is not charged specifically with the protection of cultural monuments; it is difficult to believe that the U.S. would invest less in national defense if only it had no cultural monuments within its borders.

Costs of reconstruction are difficult to estimate, but F&R cite a figure for the World

Trade Center of \$21.6 billion (Bram et al. 2002). Of course, the World Trade Center was just one of the many prominent buildings and skyscrapers in the United States. New York alone has nearly 50 skyscrapers of at least 200 meters (about 50 stories).⁵ For the government to pledge funds for the exact replication of even just a few of the most prominent buildings in the country would not only be quite expensive, it may well mean that funds would have to be diverted from other anti-terror activities, either intelligence or general defense funding. As the examples of foiled attacks above indicate, intelligence is often the means through which attacks are prevented. The total intelligence budget in the U.S. for FY 2007 was \$43.5 billion (Director of National Intelligence 2007). This is certainly not a small sum, but it is less than the cost of committing to reconstruct a few skyscrapers.

CONCLUSION

Our discussion implies that a policy of reconstruction for cultural monuments would result in very little if any outright deterrent effect on the terrorist threat; it is far more likely that terrorist activity would be redirected against non-replicable targets such as skyscrapers. We thus find cause for normative concern with regard to the advocacy of a reconstructionist policy. If determined terrorists become convinced that attacks on symbolic structures are futile, they will pursue alternate and perhaps more deadly means of attracting media attention. The policy of deterrence proposed by Frey and Rohner would produce little reduction in terrorist activity, potentially more lives lost, and diversion of scarce resources from activities which may actually be reducing the threat of terrorism.

* Jason Briggeman thanks the George Mason University Department of Economics for its support. Jeremy Horpedahl thanks the Mercatus Center at George Mason University for financial support. A version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Public Choice Society, San Antonio Texas, March 2008.

¹ The number of deaths does not need to be very high to generate significant media attention, such as in the 2001 anthrax attacks; as Cowen (2006) has argued, creating a "spectacle" or "an easy-to-remember story line" through attacks can also generate media attention for terrorists.

² Technically, of course, it is an empirical question as to whether the introduction of a reconstruction policy would cause terrorist substitution into attacks on non-replicable targets or cause no such substitution and thus simply reduce the number of total attacks. The question is difficult to answer conclusively via appeals to historical experience, but it may be best approached by thinking about the relative attractiveness to terrorists of various plots. Imagine, for example, a terrorist organization with the operational capacity to bring down a large structure in New York City. Could the leaders of such an organization rationally expect far greater media attention from destroying the Statue of Liberty than from destroying the Empire State Building? In light of the incredible media attention directed to the destruction of the World Trade Center, we find it difficult to believe that empirical work would show this to be a plausible result. There is also the historical fact that on September 11, 2001, terrorists endowed with that capacity did not target the Statue of Liberty and the Washington Monument.

³ The Federal Bureau of Investigation often releases details of such plots. A sample can be

seen by searching for “foiled” at <http://search.fbi.gov/>.

⁴ The Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism's “Terrorism Knowledge Base” includes a few examples of monuments that were targeted by terrorists: a statue of Pontius Pilate by an anti-clerical group in France (1983); a statue of Harry Truman by the Khristos Kasimis Revolution Group in Greece (1986); a statue of Douglas MacArthur by the New People's Army in the Philippines (1988); and a statue of Abraham Lincoln by leftist guerrillas in Chile (1992). The National Counterterrorism Center's “Worldwide Incidents Tracking System” also has about six similar examples of minor statues and monuments destroyed between 2004 and 2007.

⁵ A list of skyscrapers in New York (and many other cities) can be found at <http://skyscraperpage.com/cities/?cityID=8&statusID=1>.

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