
Awareness: The Key to Personal Security

By

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Citizens of the United States, who live or travel overseas, are often viable targets for potential terrorist actions. Just by being classified as "American," such people, whether they be military or civilian, are often considered *soft*, or easy targets by many extremist organizations. The United States has been regarded as a *superpower* since World War II. Inherent in the responsibilities of a *superpower*, as perceived by the U.S., are the requirements to assume a world-wide leadership role and to provide support to developing nations. Many of these nations were rebuilding after WWII or gaining newly found independence from the colonialism that was prevalent prior to the war. A result of these responsibilities has been the inevitable visibility that is associated with this type of extensive international involvement. This visibility has been directly, or indirectly, shared by those Americans that are either assigned abroad to support U.S. interests, or travel in order to appreciate the cultures of other regions of the world.

Americans, therefore, through association with their national heritage, accept the risks that go along with being citizens of a country of such profound international involvement. Over the past two decades these risks have included a number of incidents of terrorism directed against U.S. citizens. The primary targets of terrorist organizations have tended to be military, primarily because the presence of U.S. military is viewed by these extremist groups as the extension of United States power. With this in mind, the key to insuring a semblance of personal security throughout the world is for each U.S. citizen going overseas to be aware of the potential dangers associated with such travel and to prepare for possible actions that may be directed against Americans overseas.

How does someone gain such an awareness, and what can one do to decrease the risks associated with terrorism? The first requirement is to become familiar with the threat. It helps to understand the reasons that terrorists have become so visible over the past two decades and to realize that each region of the world can contain a terrorist or criminal element that may target Americans. Secondly, it is imperative that steps be taken to protect oneself from these potential threats. This is done by learning the basics of personal security.

A great amount of money has been spent, and is presently being programmed, for increased physical security of U.S. facilities overseas. However, dollar for dollar, one of the most effective and efficient means of providing security for Americans overseas is through the use of awareness education. By providing the individual training that increases the individual's basic awareness of a person's surroundings, a great step is made to *harden* that person against potential criminal or terrorist acts.

Generally, Americans have enjoyed a certain sense of freedom from potential terrorist acts. This is primarily due to the low terrorist threat environment that exists in the United States. Because of this inherent freedom from worry, many Americans have not been exposed to the need for basic personal security measures. This article is designed to present some general areas of knowledge that should be provided to the U.S. citizen who is traveling, or is a representative of the U.S. government in a foreign country. With a basic knowledge, and the utilization of such information, the U.S. citizen can become a less desirable target for criminals and terrorists. This can be accomplished with minimal expenditure of time and money. The returns are shown in personal confidence and a sense of security, which are extremely important to those people who live or travel overseas.

The fairly simple procedure of making oneself more cognizant of the immediate surroundings provides the initial building block for an effective personal security system. We often tend to go about our business with little regard for those subtle changes that take place around us. Do we notice things that are not necessarily normal in our areas of work, shopping, or play? If a portable fruit stand suddenly appeared across the street from your house, would you notice? Could you describe the vendor or the equipment? Would you notice the start and stop times of the vendor's business day? Depending on the location, this could be a radical change in the neighborhood. On the other hand, this situation could be a minor adjustment that is not easily associated with potential danger. What is important to the individual is that an effort be made to recognize the difference and to develop a sense of observation and information collection. By developing the ability to remember specific traits and activities that are occurring in the immediate surroundings, the opportunities for criminal and terrorist actions decrease, and their risk of failure increases.

Another key element of personal security—that of being unpredictable—is extremely important and is one of the hardest for Americans to overcome. Victim predictability is an essential element for terrorists in the selection and pursuit of a target. Routine and predictable patterns of behavior provide opportunities that offer the least amount of risk to the potential terrorist. If an individual blandly follows established patterns, day in and day out, the opportunities for actions against that person can easily be planned and executed. To overcome this seemingly inherent habit, one must take pains to vary one's daily activities and routes. A concerted effort to change one's time of departure from home and to alternate routes to work are imperative for a good personal security posture. This is not only important for the potential primary target, but also for the entire family. All members of a familial unit should practice the same personal security measures in order to provide adequate protection. The breaking of predictable patterns tends to make the potential or intended victim a difficult target. Therefore, the risks for the terrorist increase dramatically and thereby force the perpetrators to re-evaluate the benefits of a particular target.

The third major topic that must be considered in an awareness program for personal security is the visibility that goes with being American. It is normally not difficult to pick out an American in a foreign country. Americans often tend to stand out in other cultural environments for a variety of reasons. They may be obvious because of physical characteristics, language, body language, or clothing. It is not unusual to see an American in a foreign country who is dressed in blue jeans, cowboy boots, and a western belt with a large buckle inscribed with a massive "USA." Socially, the American is quite often fairly loud and assertive. These are not necessarily bad traits; however, they do tend to readily identify Americans, thereby making the criminal's or terrorist's job much easier. What is important to remember is that the safest method of projecting oneself in a foreign environment is to blend in and maintain a low profile. Learn the basic customs, develop an understanding of the language, and dress less obtrusively. Develop a rapport with the neighbors, who will often become an important source of information concerning changes in the neighborhood. Maintain a low residence profile. There is no need to advertise your address or affiliation. Display of the U.S. flag and the inclusion of rank and name on outside locations only provide good intelligence information for terrorists.

The simple procedures of *remaining vigilant*, *being unpredictable*, and *retaining a low profile* are the cornerstones to an effective personal security program. This triad is developed through *awareness*. Being aware of your living patterns and of those things which identify you as an American provide the basis for making you a less viable target of opportunity. It is far easier, and less risky for a criminal or terrorist to attack an unaware, unsuspecting victim than one who employs basic personal security fundamentals. Therefore, the softer the target, the more viable the chances of being a victim. Awareness hardens the target and diminishes the window of opportunity for the terrorist or criminal element.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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