



## You Bet Your Life

[Clifford D. May](#)

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Let's roll the dice. It's been more than four years since terrorists slipped past American intelligence, eluded law enforcement and slaughtered thousands of Americans on American soil.

Why haven't they managed to strike us here at home again? Who knows? Maybe it's nothing we've done. Maybe it's sheer luck. Maybe our luck will hold. So let's take a chance, OK?

Sure, there is a possibility that one reason we have not been hit lately is the Patriot Act -- the major legislative initiative of the post-9/11 era. It demolished the wall that had prevented intelligence and law enforcement from seeing -- much less connecting -- each other's dots. It allowed law enforcement to utilize against terrorism the same weapons they wield against organized crime. But aren't you more concerned about loan sharks than suicide bombers? Washington's policies should reflect your priorities.

Critics of the Patriot Act argue that it could-- at some point down the slippery slope -- lead to some nosy FBI agent discovering that you borrow Harlequin romance novels from your local library. One must suppose it was with that grim prospect in mind that Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid proudly declared last week: "We killed the Patriot Act!"

Thanks to leaks of classified information to The New York Times, we also now know that the National Security Agency has been monitoring al-Qaeda communications with Americans. How dare the NSA listen in on someone else's phone calls! How dare the President authorize such spying without first showing "probable cause" that the Americans contacted are themselves terrorists. How embarrassed we'd all be if the NSA listened in and heard nothing more than an al-Qaeda operative telling his New York broker to short oil futures. Is that any of our business?

Also: Over the past few years we've been slowly but surely capturing terrorists and squeezing them for information about how they organize their lethal business. Some people doubt this practice has produced valuable information. They're probably right, don't you think?

So now Congress will pass and the President will sign a law that prohibits not just torture – already illegal -- but anything that might be considered “degrading” to a terrorist. In the future, we won't coerce terrorists -- we'll just ask them, politely, to cooperate. They'll do that out of the kindness of their hearts. Like Saddam Hussein has done – look how helpful he's been, revealing what he did with all his Weapons of Mass Destruction.

We should withdraw from Iraq as quickly as possible, too. Henry Kissinger says that such a defeat “would shrivel U.S. credibility around the world. ... The respite from military efforts would be brief before even greater crises descended on us.” But Cindy Sheehan sees it differently. We might as well flip a coin.

Finally, it's time we asked: What was wrong with the policies we had in place before Sept. 11, 2001? Terrorism wasn't much of a problem in those days. Yes, there were attacks against Americans in Lebanon, Kenya, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia and off the coast of Yemen. But you're willing to accept that level of terrorism indefinitely, aren't you?

And, after the first bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, intelligence and law enforcement officials, using all the tools then available to them, were so effective that it took the terrorists almost a decade before they could finish the job they had started, reducing the twin towers to rubble. Who could ask for more than that?

About a half dozen people were killed in the 1993 attack. In 2001, close to 3,000 were incinerated or buried. So if we take all the precautions we took in the past, we can anticipate that next time -- well, you do the math. The point is, you'd prefer to lose a city or two rather than have our friends in Europe think we're a bunch of cowboys, wouldn't you?

Even if we accept the premise that our previous counterterrorism policies failed, is that any reason to abandon those policies – hurting the feelings of all those who crafted and implemented them?

If we get rid of the Patriot Act, if we stop targeting terrorists overseas and stop coercing those we capture to make them talk, if we make it more difficult for our spies to snoop, if we retreat from Iraq, leaving the battlefield to Saddam Hussein loyalists and al-Qaeda, we'll be taking a bit of a gamble, to be sure.

But isn't that what you want our leaders to do? Really, what do you have to lose?

