"Americans refuse to be terrorized," declared President Barack Obama in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings. "Ultimately, that's what we'll remember from this week." Believe that, and I've got a bridge to sell you in Brooklyn.

The Boston bombings have provoked the most intense display of law enforcement and media coverage since the 9/11 attacks. Greater Boston was in full lockdown: "a ghost town," "a city in terror," "a war zone," screamed the headlines. Public transit was stopped, a no-fly zone proclaimed, people told to stay indoors, schools and universities closed, and hundreds of FBI agents pulled from other pressing investigations to focus exclusively on the case -- along with thousands upon thousands of other federal, state, and city agents equipped with heavy weapons and armored vehicles. It all came close to martial law, with all the tools of the security state mobilized to track down a pair of young immigrants with low-tech explosives and small arms who failed to reconcile their problems of identity and became suspected amateur terrorists.

Not that the events weren't shocking and brutal. But this law enforcement and media response, of course, is part of the overall U.S. reaction to terrorism since 9/11, when perhaps never in history have so few, armed with so few means, caused so much fear in so many. Indeed, as with the anarchists a century ago, last week's response is precisely the outsized reaction that sponsors of terrorism have always counted on in order to terrorize.

Nothing compares to the grief of parents whose child has been murdered like 8-year-old Martin Richard, except perhaps...
the collective grief of many parents, as for the 20 children killed in last December's school massacre in Newtown, Conn. Yet, despite the fact that the probability of a child, or anyone else in the United States, being killed by a terrorist bomb is vastly smaller than being killed by an unregistered handgun -- or even by an unregulated fertilizer plant -- U.S. politicians and the public seem likely to continue to support uncritically the extravagant measures associated with an irrational policy of "zero tolerance" for terrorism, as opposed to much-more-than-zero tolerance for nearly all other threats of violence. Given the millions of dollars already spent on the Boston bombing investigation and the trillions that the national response to terrorism has cost in little more than a decade, the public deserves a more reasoned response. We can never, ever be absolutely safe, no matter how much treasure we spend or how many civil liberties we sacrifice.

While there is always the chance that investigators will find foreign connections and broader plots beyond the doings of the two men suspected in the Boston bombing, our knowledge about terrorism suggests that what we already know about the April 15 bombing does not justify the disproportionate and overwrought response, including the "global security alert" U.S. authorities issued through Interpol for 190 countries. Even if the suspected Boston bombers prove to be part of a larger network of jihadi wannabes, as were the 2005 London subway suicide bombers, or had planned more operations before dying in a blaze of glory, as did the 2004 Madrid train bombers, these would-be knights under the prophet's banner could never alone wreak the havoc that our reaction to them does.

The brothers Tsarnaev, the suspected Boston bombers, have been described by neighbors, friends, and relatives as fairly normal young men -- regular Cambridge kinds. They left the Chechen conflict years ago and immigrated to the United States as asylum seekers under the U.S. government's refugee resettlement program. Tamerlan, the oldest, was married with a 3-year-old daughter. A former Golden Gloves heavyweight boxer who once thought of competing for the United States, he had been increasingly drawn to radical Islam in the last few years. In a photo essay about his fondness for boxing, he worried, "I don't have a single American friend; I don't understand them." He complained, "There are no values anymore," forsaking drinking because "God said no alcohol." Tamerlan's YouTube page posts videos of radical Islamic clerics from Chechnya and elsewhere haranguing the West as bombs explode in the background. In 2011, the FBI interviewed Tamerlan at Russia's request about connections to Chechen extremists, but the investigation found "no derogatory information." Although Russian forces withdrew from Chechnya in 2009, violence has persisted in neighboring Dagestan, where Tamerlan visited his father last year and perhaps linked up with jihadi instigators who motivated him to act. Like the father of 9/11 pilot bomber Mohamed Atta, Tamerlan's father claims his boy was framed and murdered. In his last reported phone communication, on Thursday, just hours before the police shootout began, he called his mother.

The younger brother, Dzhokhar, a sophomore at the University of Massachusetts in Dartmouth, played intramural soccer. On the day after the bombing he went to the dorms, worked out at the gym, and that night went to a party attended by some of his soccer buddies. Known to his friends as Jahar, he entered the university on a scholarship but lately had been failing his classes. He hung out with other students, had an easy relationship with the other young men and women, hardly ever talked politics, and was never pegged as an Islamist activist or sympathizer or even as particularly religious. Whereas relatives, friends, and teachers consistently describe Jahar as "always smiling," "with a heart of gold," acquaintances say Tamerlan never smiled and was aggressive. One cousin said he warned Jahar about being susceptible to the negative influence of the older brother he loved. In the last few months, Jahar's tweets began turning darker: "i won't run i'll just gun you all out #thugliving," "Do I look like that much of a softy ... little do these dogs know they're barking at a lion," "I killed Abe Lincoln during my two hour nap #intensedream." But declaring this wayward killer -- and a naturalized citizen, at that -- an enemy combatant borders on Orwellian.
Under sponsorship by the Defense Department, my multidisciplinary, multinational research team has been conducting field studies and analyses of the mental and social processes involved in radicalization at home and abroad. Our findings indicate that terrorist plotters against Western civilian populations tend not to be parts of sophisticated, foreign-based command-and-control organizations. Rather, they belong to loose, homegrown networks of family and friends who die not just for a cause, but for each other. Jihadists pretty much span the population's normal distribution: There are very few psychopaths and sociopaths, few brilliant thinkers and strategists. Jihadis today are mostly emerging adults in transitional stages of their lives -- students, immigrants, in search of jobs or companions -- who are especially prone to movements that promise a meaningful cause, camaraderie, adventure, and glory. Most have a secular education, becoming "born again" into the jihadi cause in their late teens or 20s. The path to radicalization can take years, months, or just days, depending on personal vulnerabilities and the influence of others. Occasionally there is a hookup with a relative, or a friend of a friend, who has some overseas connection to someone who can get them a bit of training and motivation to pack a bag of explosives or pull a trigger, but the Internet and social media are usually sufficient for radicalization and even operational preparation.

The result is not a hierarchic, centrally commanded terrorist movement but a decentralized, self-organizing, and constantly evolving complex of social networks based on contingent adaptations to changing events. These are no real "cells," but only clusters of mostly young men who motivate one another within "brotherhoods" of real and fictive kin. Often, in fact, there is an older brother figure, a dominant personality who mobilizes others in the group. But rarely is there an overriding authority or father figure. (Notably, for these transitional youth, there's often an absence of a real father).

Some of the most successful plots, such as the Madrid and London bombings, are so anarchic, fluid, and improbable that they succeeded in evading detection despite the fact that intelligence and law enforcement agencies had been following some of the actors for some time. Three key elements characterize the "organized anarchy" that typifies modern violent Islamic activism: Ultimate goals are vague and superficial (often no deeper than revenge against perceived injustice against Muslims around the world); modes of action are decided pragmatically on the basis of trial and error or based on the residue of learning from accidents of past experience; and those who join are not recruited but are locally linked self-seekers -- often from the same family, neighborhood, or Internet chat room -- whose connection to global jihad is more virtual than material. Al Qaeda and associates do not so much recruit as attract disaffected individuals who have already decided to embark on the path to violent extremism with the help of family, friends, or a few fellow travelers.

Like the young men who carried out the Madrid and London attacks, most homegrown jihadi plotters first hook up with the broad protest sentiment against "the global attack on Islam" before moving into a narrower parallel universe. They cut ties with former companions who they believe are too timid to act and cement bonds with those who are willing to strike. They emerge from their cocoon with strong commitment to strike and die if necessary, but without any clear contingency planning for what might happen after the initial attack.

For the first time in history, a massive, media-driven political awakening has been occurring -- spurred by the advent of the Internet, social media, and cable television -- that can, on the one hand, motivate universal respect for human rights while, on the other, enable, say, Muslims from Borneo to sacrifice themselves for Palestine, Afghanistan, or Chechnya (despite almost no contact or shared history for the last 50,000 years or so). When perceived global injustice resonates with frustrated personal aspirations, moral outrage gives universal meaning and provides the push to radicalization and violent action.

But the popular notion of a "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West is woefully misleading. Violent extremism
represents not the resurgence of traditional cultures, but their collapse, as young people unmoored from millennial traditions flail about in search of a social identity that gives personal significance. This is the dark side of globalization.

Take Faisal Shahzad, the would-be bomber of Times Square in 2010, or Maj. Nidal Hasan, who killed 13 fellow soldiers at Fort Hood in 2009. Both were apparently inspired by the online rhetoric of Anwar al-Awlaki, a former preacher at a Northern Virginia mosque who was killed by a U.S. drone in Yemen in 2011. Although many commentators leapt to the conclusion that Awlaki and his ilk deviously brainwashed and recruited Shahzad and Hassan, in fact they sought out the popular Internet preacher because they were already radicalized to the point of wanting further guidance to act. As Defense Department terrorism consultant Marc Sageman notes: "Just like you saw Major Hasan send 21 emails to al-Awlaki, who sends him two back, you have people seeking these guys and asking them for advice." More than 80 percent of plots in both Europe and the United States were concocted from the bottom up by mostly young people just hooking up with one another.

Especially for young men, mortal combat with a "band of brothers" in the service of a great cause is both the ultimate adventure and a road to esteem in the hearts of their peers. For many disaffected souls today, jihad is a heroic cause -- a promise that anyone from anywhere can make a mark against the most powerful country in the history of the world. But because would-be jihadists best thrive and act in small groups and among networks of family and friends -- not in large movements or armies -- their threat can only match their ambitions if fueled way beyond actual strength. And publicity is the oxygen that fires modern terrorism.

It is not by arraying "every element of our national power" against would-be jihadists and those who inspire them that violent extremism will be stopped, as Obama once declared. Although wide-ranging intelligence, good police work, and security preparedness (including by the military and law enforcement) is required to track and thwart the expansion of al Qaeda affiliates into the Arabian Peninsula, Syria (and perhaps Jordan), North Africa, and East Africa, this is insufficient. As 2012 U.S. presidential candidate Mitt Romney quipped, "We can't kill our way out of this mess." In the United States, there are many pockets of displaced immigrant and refugee young people with even more than the usual struggles of personal development. Young Somalis seem to be having particular difficulty, and a small few are moving to the path of violent jihad. This is a good time to think about how we relate to them, though there are probably more easy mistakes than easy solutions. But political attempts to relate these problems to the very different issue of illegal immigration only adds to the scaremongering.

We need to pay attention to what makes these young men want to die to kill, by listening to their families and friends, trying to engage them on the Internet, and seeing whom they idolize, how they organize, what bonds them, and what drives them. U.S. power won't stop the self-seeking, and preaching "moderate" Islam (or moderate anything) is hardly likely to sway young men in search of significance and glory. And even if every airplane passenger were to be scanned naked or every American city locked down, it would not stop young men from joining the jihad or concocting new ways of killing civilians.

Terrorists are directly responsible for violent acts, but only indirectly for the reaction that follows. Objectively, terrorist acts on even a 9/11 scale could never seriously harm American society; only our reaction can. By amplifying and connecting relatively sporadic terrorist acts into a generalized "war" or "assault on freedom," the somewhat marginal phenomenon of terrorism has become a primary preoccupation of the U.S. government and American people. In this sense, Osama bin Laden has been victorious beyond his wildest dreams -- not because of anything he has done, but because of how we have reacted to the episodic successes he inspires.
There are several ways to react to the political hype and media amplification of terrorism. Doing nothing and allowing this frenzied media environment to continue will only encourage future attacks; meanwhile, reporting that rushes to judgment and complements law enforcement's denial of Miranda rights will only erode confidence in the integrity and fairness of the American press and U.S. government institutions. Legal regulation of media, as in many other countries, may not be compatible with a free society and if tried would certainly provoke persistent opposition and deep outrage. For example, previous attempts by the British government to ban interviews with terrorists and their supporters backfired. As the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals noted in 2002, "Democracies die behind closed doors." Even noncoercive guidelines are likely to incite widespread resistance. As former New York Times Executive Editor A.M. Rosenthal put it: "The last thing in the world I want is guidelines. I don't want guidelines from the government ... or anyone else."

But voluntary self-restraint by the media, which is less intrusive and supported by many, is not only possible but manageable. (Venerable journalist Edward R. Murrow, informed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on the specifics of the Pearl Harbor attack, declined the scoop and didn't file his report until the administration could formulate a reasoned response.) Of course, "gentle censorship," like the initially successful attempts by George W. Bush's administration to prevent airing of bin Laden messages or talks with terrorists, can seriously hamper the flow of knowledge necessary for understanding what makes terrorists tick and how to thwart them.

The First Amendment enables the news media to watchdog the republic and help prevent government excesses and abuses so that a well-informed public can monitor and decide where government policy should go. Yet the media is increasingly less a public service devoted to this task than a competitive business that believes it best succeeds through sensation, which violence privileges. For example, the typical television news story has declined from an average of several minutes in the 1950s and 1960s to today's repeated sound bites -- often no more than a few seconds -- that sensationalize the spectacular. And despite the fact that one of the suspected Boston bombers is now dead and the other in custody, it can be argued that their terrorism succeeded through the spectacular theater of last week's events, capturing our attention and stoking our deepest fears.

We can break this real, if unplanned, alliance between terrorism and the media through better reporting for the social good, which may prove to be the best business strategy of all. When we practice restraint and show the resilience of people carrying on with their lives even in the face of atrocities like that in Boston, then terrorism fails.