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This is a sobering book that will touch anyone who reads it. H.V. Savitch has researched and written about a topic that one wishes would go away. Unfortunately, there is little indication that it will. Cities in a Time of Terror is an analytical examination of the impact of urban terrorism on the large urban community. Clearly written, and based on the author’s long-term research, it is an original work that will be of interest to urbanists for years to come.

The book is divided into four major parts. Part one introduces the topic, provides a range of definitions of urban terrorism, and explains how it has evolved and created a climate of fear. The author builds on these definitions but adds the dimensions of territory, space, and logistics to them. It is in large cities where terrorists tend to concentrate their efforts to destabilize community (territory), cause damage in selected small areas (space), and find the means to cause mayhem (logistics). These cities are, at once, places that nurture them and provide their targets. His analysis of the ability of urban terrorists to create a climate of fear is most noteworthy. Any of us who have lived in large cities know that the quality of one’s life, at a basic level, is dependent upon predictability, stability, and safety in our surroundings. When these qualities are taken from us, our confidence in our community is shaken.

Most of us can relate to some small discomforting event that has impacted our lives such as a robbery at a nearby convenience store or a break-in attempt at the apartment next door. When these happened, we became concerned and perhaps more sensitized to our surroundings, but typically we still carried out our daily lives with little change. Urban terrorist events, on the other hand, are horrific and must be lived with every day. They do not go away. They become so overpowering that no one is untouched.

Part two focuses upon the geospatial elements of urban terrorism. Here the author clearly explains that large cities have qualities that simultaneously incubate terrorism and provide targets of interest. His sketches of the characteristics of places where terrorists are able to bond with peers, gain political support for their ideas, and find the logistical materials to carry out their activities are exemplary. These are places for recruitment, forming cells, manufacturing explosives, obtaining financing operations, forging documents, and creating safe havens. The author takes the reader through their haunts and nodes and provides us with a penetrating look at how terrorists and places connect.

The third part is an examination of the impact of surveillance on urban residents and their ability to adjust and adapt. How many of us feel discomfort when custom agents in a foreign country take an extra-long look at our passports or we have to be taken aside for a detailed luggage check? And how many of us resent or are angered by the body searches at airports; the ubiquitous cameras cataloging our entrances into public buildings; announcements of red alerts; and the fact that urban terrorists are so powerful that we require soldiers to patrol, for example, Penn Station? As much as we fidget, frown, and complain, we have accepted these intrusions into our private lives as the price of protection from urban terrorist activities. The author takes the reader through a detailed examination of how surveillance has altered our lives, how societies have recognized the need for it, and how many of the world’s large cities have constantly sought to balance governmental intrusion into a citizen’s life with the need for free movement and privacy. Concerning resiliency, the author notes that large cities can bounce back. Using New York, London, and Jerusalem as examples, among others, he explains that while the spirit of place is important, the response of government, particularly in creating a climate of collective action and the means of sustained regeneration, is important too.

His conclusions, as presented in part four, are far more of a summary of his findings than a call for change, or a warning to the reader of coming disasters. He presents his findings in a manner that
causes one to become more thoughtful and reflective than disturbed. He points out that urban terrorism in many large cities is a fact of life, that it is often nurtured in and targeted toward the very cities where terrorists live, and that it can create a consuming climate of fear. He ends with commentary on the power of cities to bounce back from terrorism. How we balance these intrusions with a loss of freedom and a sense of security is indeed a challenge.

If an underlying purpose of the book is to show how urban terrorism has become part of our daily lives, then the author has succeeded. In place after place, he has illuminated how it has affected us and what we have had to change to remain safe. We now accept, for example, public surveillance, jersey barriers and fences in front of public buildings, and the scanning of our bodies as a necessity for security. What was most surprising is how quickly and extensively we have accepted these changes. I am reminded that my children have never known a world without the horrors of, for example, the Munich Olympics, Oklahoma City, the World Trade Center, or the recent Mumbai attacks. To them, they are part of their life. To me, they represent a loss of freedom.

The book is comprehensive, clearly written, well-researched, and, above all, unique. It introduces a topic that, unfortunately, must be faced by all of us in the years to come. There were two areas in which I wish the author had provided more insight. First, there is too little about the impact of terrorism on smaller cities or whether these places need to reflect on potential harm. Second, the conclusions are too much of a summary. They represent an end far more than a platform from which further discussion could occur.

It is a good, thought-provoking book that will be of value to the reflective reader interested in how the world’s cities must adapt to the political, social, and cultural tensions that are embedded in them. It is not a “tools” book or one that offers “best practices” for security and protection. Nor is it a book that would cleanly fit in a law or place-making class. It could, however, be of benefit to a theory course where issues of freedom and restriction, socialization, understanding multiple publics, and the impact of culture on urban behavior are important. It offers glimpses of futures that are before our eyes and clearly require our attention.