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The earliest attempts to counter and suppress pirates and raiders were undertaken by navies and armed merchant vessels, which were, in the latter case, fighting for survival. Pirates and raiders, such as the famous Vikings, carried out coastal raids, as well as attacking ships. Assaults from the sea led to the inland movement of many shore settlements, to the construction of fortifications, and to the creation of early-warning systems of watchtowers. Raiders were vulnerable to ambush, cut off from escape and exposing their landing vessels to possible capture and destruction.

Pirate tactics changed with technology and the skills of the hunters. In general, and for a long period in the history of piracy, pirates held the upper hand in terms of ships, vessel ordnance, and individual weapons. However, as navies became more proficient, the end result was that pirates in most cases avoided confrontation with naval vessels.

Over the centuries nonviolent measures to combat piracy were employed, with varying degrees of success. These attempts included antipiracy agreements of the type forged during the Middle Ages by the Cinque Ports (a group of harbor towns on England’s southeast coast) and by the Hanseatic League (city-states on the North Sea and the Baltic). Essentially, these agreements served to deter pirates from one member of the alliance from attacking vessels of another member, state, or port. They also contained provisions that prohibited merchants, and others, from acting as fences.

As the author points out, notwithstanding nonviolent measures, the best defenses against seagoing criminals have proved to be a combination of a strong, prevailing naval presence and stable governments ashore that are willing and able to deny safe havens.

The author devotes the final part of the book to modern piracy and pirate hunting. He mentions as part of the discussion the piracy that was widespread on the South China Sea in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the more virulent form now present off Somalia. Little sets out many of the difficulties encountered there, what is being done to protect ships transiting the area, and finally, provides suggestions for steps that might be taken to deal with the problem more aggressively.

In summary, Benerson Little has produced a good book that readers with an interest in maritime history and affairs will enjoy.

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For a searching and all too often dismaying account of the homeland-security industry that has emerged after 9/11, look no farther. Mueller and Stewart’s chief task is to apply cold analysis to the costs and benefits of homeland-security expenditures. The question, they argue, is not “Does the expense reduce the threat?” but “Is the size of the threat reduction worth the expense?” Their answer is a resounding no. First, Mueller and Stewart demonstrate that individuals tend to exaggerate greatly the probability of a terrorist attack. They then present evidence, for example, that the risk of dying...
from a terrorist attack between 2002 and 2007 was one in 1.8 billion. They offer a more transparent model that takes into account the probabilities of attack, potential losses, and the like.

Mueller and Stewart’s discussion of the relative benefits of low-cost security measures is engaging. They argue that many of the far less expensive and less imposing measures are more effective. A RAND study claims that suspicious-package reporting reduces the risks to shopping malls 60 percent, while costly searching of bags manages only 15 percent. Also, since 9/11 many of the few attempted terrorist attacks in the United States have been prevented by tip-offs and informants. Both the shoe bomber in 2001 and the underwear bomber in 2009 were stopped by fast-acting airline passengers. In addition, the public’s pre-9/11 complacency is most likely gone for good, and that is a rarely discussed but valuable (and free) benefit for homeland security.

In perhaps their most provocative, but not unconvincing, chapter, Mueller and Stewart offer several premises that should form the foundation of homeland security. They argue that the number of potential targets is infinite, while the number and competence of terrorists are extremely small. (Risa Brooks has an excellent International Security article on the second issue.) If you protect one target, it is easy for terrorists to move to another. Subways cannot be truly protected without shutting them down.

Mueller and Stewart argue that political considerations play a major role in determining politicians’ major incentive to “play it safe” and exaggerate the terrorist threat, at no cost to themselves. When George W. Bush stated, correctly, that the war on terror could not be won but that the threat could be reduced, his Democratic opponents pounced on this reasonable statement, asking what would have happened if Reagan had felt the same about communism.

The book concludes with a discussion of politicians’ responsibility to communicate risks accurately. The striking and unfortunate dissimilarity between the national-security and the medical professions struck me as I read this.

This book is serious and approachable, an important contribution. If it became the dominant mantra in Washington, we all would probably be exactly as safe as we are now, while spending a lot less.

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Noble, Dennis L. The U.S. Coast Guard’s War on Human Smuggling. Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2011. 297pp. $29.95

Of the eleven missions of the U.S. Coast Guard today, none is more fraught with human drama, tragedy, and the capacity to touch the soul than the interdiction of the smuggling of illegal migrant workers into the United States. Dennis Noble, long a chronicler of the history of the Coast Guard, sets out this story from the perspective of those who dare to enter the United States illegally and of the men and women of the Coast Guard who respond to the challenge. That the story unfolds at sea only enhances the urgency of the tale. Noble centers on the unique stories surrounding the migrant flows from Cuba (in the Fidel Castro era), Haiti (since the fall of the despot President Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier), and mainland China. A constant thread that