

Fear, loathing and rationality

Your head may know you are not in danger but try telling your gut.

NONFICTION

Risk: The Science And Politics Of Fear

By Dan Gardner

Virgin Books, 368pp, \$49.90

Reviewed by Claire Scobie

THE terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, recalibrated our world. Almost 3000 people lost their lives. Hundreds of thousands more lost friends and family. "Never in the history of the species had there been such a communal experience," writes Dan Gardner in his exposition of how humans respond to risk. The post-September 11 shudders that rippled through American society would have one unforeseeable impact: a year-long aversion to domestic flying. As a result of switching from planes to cars, America's death toll on roads soared by more than 1500. Those lives, Gardner says, were stolen by fear.

To argue his case, Gardner uses the work of Paul Slovic, a psychology professor at the University of Oregon and one of the pioneers of risk-perception research. Simply put, we have two

systems of thought: feeling v reason or gut v head. Gut reacts and fears; head calculates and considers. Through numerous experiments, psychologists have shown that gut is predisposed to innumerable biases. So while we think we're responding rationally to a problem, often we're not.

By unpacking the "war on terror" myth and crunching the statistics, Gardner reveals that the risk of dying from international terrorism for any American or any other resident of a Western country is "infinitesimal". Between 1968 and 2007, there were 10,119 terrorist incidents worldwide, leading to an average annual death toll of 379. "September 11 was out of line with everything before or since."

For gut, however, those horrific images of the twin towers collapsing in flames "remain as a permanent reference", writes Gardner, a journalist for the *Ottawa Citizen*. "Simply mention the word terrorism and they roar back." It doesn't matter that the actual chance of dying in the attacks was 0.00106 per cent or 1 in 93,000. "Americans are still more worried about being killed by terrorism than they were just after 9/11."

Gardner puts this down to two factors: humans are still governed

by the Stone Age instinct-led brain and a "mammoth feedback loop" perpetuated by the media, self-serving politicians, opportunistic business, Hollywood and a "popular perception" of terrorism's "grave and growing menace". Of course this narrative, which thrives on irrational dread and paranoia, fuels a lucrative security industry, filling the coffers of lobbyists, advertisers and anti-terrorism experts.

Some sociologists trace the beginning of the West's obsession with risk and safety to the 1970s - when the media mushroomed and the "information flood waters started to rise". Take the pharmaceutical industry, which pathologises normal biological and social variations -

conditions such as hair loss and shyness - so people buy dubious products from drug companies.

Or the media, which thrives on stoking gut's fears with graphic images and dramatic stories. Quoting research on BBC news programs that "measured the number of people who have to die from a given condition to merit a story", Gardner shows that 8571 people died from smoking for each story about smoking studied. "By contrast it took only 0.33 deaths from mad cow disease to merit a story on BBC news."

At times, this makes for grim reading and Gardner does bang on a bit. Where one example or psychological experiment would

suffice, he gives three. His absolutes - "At home, children are forbidden from playing alone outdoors, as all generations did before" - can make you distrust some of the good stuff. But his research and engaging style, underpinned by a very timely message, are ultimately compelling.

And there's the irony of it. Today we in the West face far fewer risks than at any time in history. "We are the healthiest, wealthiest [and] longest-lived people," Gardner writes. Yet "we are increasingly afraid". His answer is not to dismiss the threat from terrorism. Rather, to learn ways to fight back against the terror and those who promote it for their own ends - not just terrorists.



Illustration: Richard Collins