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MONDAY, AUGUST 02, 2004

Feeding Paranoia

by Michael in New York on [8/02/2004 09:17:00 AM](#)

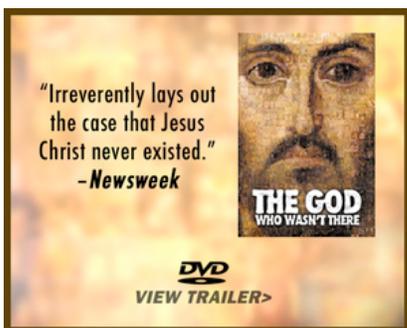
WTF, as John would say. A front page story in the New York Times today highlights **credible threats against major financial institutions** in the U.S. Halfway through the article, the writer says:

"Several episodes in the United States have recently drawn scrutiny from counterterrorism officials, including the apprehension of a Pakistani woman in Texas with a suspicious passport as well as reports from passengers on a recent flight to Los Angeles about odd activity by a group of Syrian musicians. But officials said that neither of these incidents was a direct factor in the decision to go to Code Orange."

Ohmigosh! A casual reader would believe these troubling events indicate terrorists are all over the U.S. getting ready to strike. Run for the hills!

But just a few days ago, the New York Times did a lengthy story about the Syrian musicians, making clear it was a case of **cultural misperceptions**, that the men had been thoroughly questioned and interviewed by three federal agencies and the LAPD and found to be exactly who they claimed to be. So how did a false alarm morph into one of a string of disturbing incidents, much less one that the author tells us was not "a direct factor" in the decision to go to Code Orange? Huh? Why would a panicky investigation of musicians that proved to be nothing at all be any factor at all?

It's irresponsible to investigate an incident, report that it was nothing at all, but then include it in a list of disturbing events that *might* have contributed to the high alert the article has warned us about. If the NYT needs to retract its earlier article, it should. Otherwise, this seemingly banal paragraph is misleading and dangerous. More dangerous, in fact, than those musicians. Of course, this doesn't call into question the report of heightened alert -- it calls into questions the NYT's coverage of that alert and how it conflates false alarms into incidents of concern.



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