

## Commentary

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# Despite world's reminders, we still don't know terrorism

Now that the anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001, has passed, it may be reverent to say something that I hope will not be taken the wrong way. Two years later, America needs to get back in touch with reality.



Someone asked me recently why folk songs are so bleak and morbid. This is a typically modern American question. The answer goes some-

thing like this. Well, Woody Guthrie wrote "Deportees" because migrant or illegal-immigrant workers die in grim ways. They still do: suffocating in box cars, broiled to death in semi trailers, even burning to death in fields, all in Texas, all in the past year.

Guthrie wrote "Ludlow Massacre" because big corporations can deal ruthlessly with workers. They are doing it now by sending so many American jobs overseas. Houston urban blues poet Juke Boy Bonner in the 1960s wrote "Lyons Avenue" to warn people away from an area of urban violence where "if you go there green, it might be the last time you're ever seen." Such places exist in all our big cities. Elizabeth Cotten wrote "Shake

Sugaree" because many needy people still do have all they own "down in pawn." And U2 performs "Sunday, Bloody, Sunday" because terrorism leads to the slaughter of innocents, as in Northern Ireland.

Most Americans read or watch reports about suicide bombings in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, but those atrocities are far away, and the daily terror that goes with them does not grip our lives. For most of us, 9/11 has become a way of vicariously tapping powerful emotions of sympathy and fear and anger. But, again for most of us, it is all safe and distant and already, by American standards, long ago.

One group of Americans does feel the real effects of real terrorism. Our soldiers and aid workers who are dealing with terrorist violence daily in Iraq. They are there because 9/11 has us so frightened that we believe still unsubstantiated claims that Iraq was a main player in terrorism. Well, it is a terrorist battleground now.

Distant atrocities can be visited on Web sites such as [www.ipc.gov.ps/](http://www.ipc.gov.ps/) (the Palestinian Authority National Information Service). It has photos and lamentably long lists of what it calls "martyrs." These lists serve as gruesome reminders of the human cost of

violence. But they also serve the sinister political purpose of inspiring young people to strap bombs to their bodies and blow themselves up or less gloriously to confront armed security forces with bottles, rocks, petrol bombs and the occasional hand grenade, until those forces decide they have to open fire with rubber bullets in self-defense or in the name of riot control.

A passage from a markedly pro-Palestinian account of what goes on in areas such as Gaza quotes a father saying that if he did agree with suicide bombings, he could never tell his children so. But suicide bombers are glorified as martyrs by the powers that be, even as those powers issue public statements condemning all attacks on civilians.

Meanwhile back home, thousands of University of Texas employees, students and visitors drive daily on and off the campus with security checks that are not appreciably different than they were on Sept. 11, 2001. And the checking goes on only between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m.

It is fortunate for us that terrorists only work during business hours, and none has decided to work in Texas. Of

course, my wife noticed on a recent flight back from London that all early arriving passengers were being put through the time-consuming personal security check, so that the airline could meet its quota without clogging things up by having to inspect passengers who arrived later with the main group. If we really understood and felt terrorism, we would not be running security checks only so long as they remain convenient.

We do not know what terrorism is. We have one big symbol of it. Elsewhere, as I write, terrorism is fearing that the young boy bicycling past you may blast himself into his own imagined eternal reward and take you and your children with him. It is fearing to sit down in the local cafe with your neighbor or to visit a shopping center with your husband. It is second-guessing whether you should ride a public bus today to visit your grandmother. It is not buzzing in the delivery man because he looks suspicious. And it is being suspicious of anyone who looks Arabic or Irish Catholic or Basque.

Let us then count our blessings and try to see things as they are.

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