

9/11: THE DAY THE WORLD CHANGED

Robin V. Sears

On the fifth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, contributing writer Robin Sears suggests that for each generation there is a day that changes the world, and that the world long lives with the consequences of that day. In the post-9/11 world, he suggests, democracies are waging an uneven struggle against Islamic terrorism, a ruthless movement that attacks civilians, then hides among them. Canada, slow to respond to the events of September 11, 2001, now finds itself dealing with the possibility of homegrown terror cells amid our own Muslim population, and the challenges that it poses both for securing the safety of our citizens and for ensuring an open and tolerant society.

Cinq ans après les attentats du 11 septembre, notre collaborateur Robin Sears observe que chaque génération connaît une journée « où tout bascule », et que le monde se ressentira longtemps des conséquences de ce jour de septembre 2001. Depuis cette date, les démocraties mènent une lutte inégale contre le terrorisme islamique, mouvement impitoyable qui s'attaque aux civils pour ensuite se fondre parmi eux. Le Canada ayant tardé à réagir aux événements, il doit aujourd'hui envisager que des cellules terroristes puissent naître parmi sa propre population, et relever les défis qui s'ensuivent aussi bien pour la sécurité de ses citoyens que le maintien d'une société ouverte et tolérante.

To each generation comes at least one day which changes their world: Sarajevo, Black Friday, Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima. For mine it was a cold fall day in November 1963. Bouncing down St. Clair Avenue in Toronto with friends, having finished exams and feeling pleased with ourselves and life, we were stunned by an older teen with the impossible news from Dallas. Our world did change that day, and the shocks and blows that rained down through the years that followed all seemed to have been foretold on that grey Friday afternoon.

For the generation coming of age in the new century, their day was a sparkling September morning, after which September sky took on a new meaning. An event so horrific, so unanticipated and so stunning in the depths of the human depravity it represented that it was days before most of us could begin to digest what had happened. Some resolutely refused to “get it.”

Waiting in an airport security line two days later, I watched first with bemusement and then with rage as a British Airways purser of a certain age remonstrated with a security inspector over his seizure of her enormous sterling silver corkscrew. “You insufferable young man, I have been carrying this on flights with me for 20 years. How dare you be so impertinent! Give it back!” she bellowed like a poor

Hollywood parody of an English dowager. The young airport security person was deferential but resolute. Finally, an American businessman lunged out of the crowd and shouted, “Lady, have you been on another planet?! The world has changed!” Impatient in line, we sighed in relief, and then in angst, as the implication of his reality check sunk in.

Official Canada needed a reality check for the first few days too. A senior Foreign Affairs bureaucrat, recently returned from dealing with Americans at a very senior level, expressed his astonishment at the paralysis and denial of the Chrétien government in the early days. “It was as if they thought this was some sort of flood or natural disaster. That all we had to do was calculate how many blankets as opposed to tents to load on the planes.” It was John Manley’s one brief shining moment on the national stage. He conveyed sympathy and horror in public and raged at officials and colleagues in private, until slowly it dawned on Ottawa that the world had turned.

Ordinary Canadians, with the exception of the liberal urban upper middle class, got it immediately. Their outpouring of solidarity and determination had to be channelled by the cynics in political Ottawa, lest it get out of control. So events on Parliament Hill and New York were dutifully arranged, to

allow the government of Canada to appear to be leading rather than following its electorate. Not many Americans with an eye on Canada were fooled by the governmental disconnect, however.

When I bumped into the American ambassador to an important Asian country that week, we greeted each other with tears and embarrassed male hugs. After a few minutes, he asked with genuine bewilderment, “Why doesn’t the Canadian government understand that we are now in a new era? What don’t they get?” My humiliation was poorly covered by an incoherent response.

It sometimes takes years to recognize the days that change the world. There had after all been lots of anarchist assassinations before and after Sarajevo. The crash of the stock market was a “once a decade” event from which everyone recovered reasonably quickly—until 1929. Even Hiroshima, while an instant horror, did not reveal for decades how it would change military engagement forever. Islamic terrorists had successfully killed hundreds of civilians several times before, but the scale and audacity of 9/11 made it an epochal event with no close comparison, instantly.

Even now, it is hard to understand those who could not see.

Some weeks after the event, Janice Gross Stein, of the University of Toronto’s Munk Centre — Canada’s grandmotherly security guru, whose gentle smile and demeanour conceal a razor-sharp analytic mind and equally hard-edged views — said that after she recovered from her horror, anger and sadness, she was left with a feeling of great loss for her students. She recalled how strange and then electrifying it had been to teach the generation between the fall of the Berlin Wall in December of 1989 and that day in September. “I had to explain to them the burden of war, endured or simply apprehended. I

struggled to give them a sense of the feeling of imminent peril that most of humanity had lived with since before time. At first I was a little jealous, and then I was uplifted, by their incredulity about such a permanently dangerous world. And then, in one day, it ended.”

When the veil is lifted on a new world and we pass into an era with different rules and expectations, it quickly becomes hard to remember what life was like before. To someone who awoke in Canada in 2006, from a coma that began in the summer five years before, it would be hard to explain why we lock citizens up without trial for years. Why

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They would have awoken to a world where discussion of the start of the Third World War is greeted not as the ravings of millenarian loons but as the subject for serious academics to debate on the BBC. They would be baffled that most of us simply twitch between irritation at the impertinence at the invasions of pri-

vacy and gratitude that someone is trying to relieve some of our fears.

We watch the arrest of the children of hyphenated Canadians, teenagers from suburban Canada, apprehended trying to live adolescent male jihadi video game fantasies, and we struggle to understand how and why, and who to blame. And we see the blood, and the grief, and the helplessness of the survivors in one more soon-forgotten attack, and we become numb.

We find our commitment to a colour-blind society — one that is judgmental about no one’s culture, that is respectful of even those ethnic traditions we find strange and medieval — torn by the blog ravings of young Muslim women praying for the suicide deaths of their own children.

These are indeed strange and painful days for democrats in what we curiously still call the West.

For even those most skeptical about the power of redemption, there are lessons in these world-changing days that are impossible to deny. Sarajevo launched the world’s most savage and mindless war as its first impact, but it also led directly to the first — albeit ill-fated and ill-conceived — attempt to build a foundation for peace: the League of Nations. Hiroshima first begat a chilling escalation in our ability to destroy the planet, before it

was the trigger for real nuclear disarmament and for multilateral control of the power to inflict nuclear horror. The collapse of the Berlin Wall delivered its redemptive message of freedom immediately. Though some still yearn for the geopolitical calm and the “balance of terror” the Wall symbolized, its destruction unlocked waves of mostly successful struggles for freedom and democracy in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and even Africa.

Sometimes the redemptive lesson of these generational events is more elusive. The legacy of November 22,



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In a day of infamy that changed the world, the second plane flies into the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001. The tragic legacy of 9/11, writes Robin Sears, is that terrorists used “the power and political impact of modern technology deployed to kill thousands of civilians instantly.”

1963, is still the political effectiveness of assassination, made more chillingly powerful in recent years by the addition of suicide.

Still we may hope that “in our sleep,” as Aeschylus put it — and as Robert Kennedy pleaded with angry mourners to recall, on the occasion of the second bitter assassination of our generation, the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. — “pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart. And in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us, by the awful grace of God.”

Perhaps, too, we may hope that grace grants us the wisdom to understand the legacy of that awful September morning as more than a bloody and resolute response to terror, though that must remain.

If JFK’s death inspired a new generation of political assassins, 9/11 has bequeathed an even more devastating legacy, the power and political impact

of modern technology deployed to kill thousands of civilians instantly. There is a direct line between the “success” of the World Trade Center attacks and the murder of hundreds of Iraqi Shiites at the Imam Ali mosque this spring, an attack which is still reverberating in the downward spiral of sectarian killing.

The jihadis who celebrated their audacious attack on American power were all Sunni, and mostly middle-class Saudis. To this day, al-Qaeda attacks its Shiite competitors for terrorist supremacy with vigour. Yet the original structure and leadership that was al-Qaeda is now a feeble shell. It is a powerful irony for the 85 percent anti-Shia Islamic world that today it is Shiite zealotry that is the beacon of hope for their own angry Arab street.

Iran, that strange fusion of military dictatorship, racism and theocracy, is the key beneficiary of the terrible succubus born five years ago. The mullahs and their military partners have

perfected the combination of state power and religious terrorism. So far, Iran has succeeded in hiding behind a veil of denial as it has nurtured the world’s most deadly networks of terror in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. (Syria is their ghoulis headwaiter, ferrying orders between the chefs in the Tehran kitchen and customers in Gaza and south Lebanon.)

The leadership of the “moderate” Arab world took a different message from 9/11: they were potential targets of terror themselves. Regimes across the region, from Libya to Saudi Arabia, began to see Osama Bin Laden, the Iranian proxies and their imitators in Madrid and London through a lens similar to ours. Sadly, until now, we and they are on the losing side of this 21st century innovation in war.

Israel has once again been sucked into that swamp called Lebanon. This

chapter has painfully revealed that we now face a new form of war. The Israeli invaders in 1982 were met by Lebanese and Palestinian guerrillas armed with rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machine guns and "Stalin's pipe organ" — truck-mounted Katyusha rockets — all relatively simple weapons for a modern army to overwhelm.

Today's Israeli strategists face an enemy with the most modern communications, tracking and monitoring capability; missiles mounted in the back of an SUV whose range made Haifa an easy target; and a network of tunnels, barracks and missile caches hidden under dozens of mosques, schools and hospitals. More challenging than this increased military sophistication is that Hezbollah can still play by the rules of nonstate terror while Israel is held morally accountable for every accidental civilian death.

On this grim fifth anniversary, then, this is the legacy of that day: two wars being fought, in the current jargon "asymmetrically," by opponents who use the grim iconography of 9/11 as their favourite recruiting tools. The developed world struggles to find the right balance, in their own societies, between security and freedom. Citizens in Madrid, Mumbai or Jakarta see their government incapable of protecting them from terror. They watch an imperial power incapable of defeating what started out as a trivial rebirth of an insurgency in one country, Afghanistan, and being pummeled daily by a more serious challenger in another, Iraq.

It's hard, therefore, to summon much optimism about the triumph of

democratic values, let alone a victory in the "war on terror." And yet it was hard to believe Olaf Palme, Sweden's most famous prime minister, when he would declare with quiet confidence in the darkest days of racist violence and the bloody civil wars in southern Africa, "This will end in victory for the anti-apartheid movement and their regional allies sooner than anyone believes." Within five years, Nelson Mandela had begun his miraculous transformation of that shattered part of Africa.

Meeting Mikhail Gorbachev in the spring of 1985, shortly after his accession to power, a group of visitors were stunned to hear him concede in private that the days of military rivalry were over, that the Soviet Union would become a successful economic rival to the West or it would fail. He gambled and lost within only five years as well.

When we look back, the world wars that consumed the last century and even the collapse of Communism seem inevitable. Some claim that this nightmare of terror was preordained, even deserved. But, of course, that is only the delusion of hindsight. Until the day that the North Korean regime collapses into history, no one will have predicted the moment. No CIA country briefing will have forewarned of the bloody insurrection that will inevitably drive another Middle East kingdom from power.

Anniversaries cause one to look forward as well as back, to muse about five years hence. So we may hope that one day soon an Iranian leader with the moral authority of a Mandela will

emerge. We may pray for a Palestinian leader with the wisdom of a Rabin, and the guts of an Arafat, willing to fight for peace. Least improbably, we may hope for a return to simple competence in the White House. Any one of these would transform this generation's horizons.

Then perhaps we might hope for a less humiliating leadership of what Tom Friedman has dubbed "the world of order," allies genuinely committed to making the values of our liberal democracies as resonant to ordinary people in Arabic and in Farsi as we claim they are to us. We might hope that the world of chaos and disorder unleashed from the caves of Afghanistan five years ago, that those thousands now sucked into an ideology more horrific than all those of the 20th century do not prevail. That the 19th century dream of a brotherhood of man can be welded to a contemporary vision of a safer, fairer, interdependent world. That the witness of our living those values, not merely our technology's power to inflict ever higher levels of terror, points the way to that victory.

It seems improbable to even dream of such a transformation from the vantage point of 2006, but despair is the handmaiden of disorder and defeat. Hope is not a strategy, as the saying goes. Hope, harnessed to such a vision of a better century, with the formidable resources and capacity available to its natural allies, could be.

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