

LONDON BOMBS: A SUMMER OF TERROR


Introduction

Focus

In early July 2005, the city of London's fears of a terrorist attack became reality when four bombs exploded on the city's transit system, leaving 56 dead and over 700 injured. Two weeks later terrorists struck again, but this time the bombs did not detonate. This *News in Review* story looks at the summer of terror in London.

Further Research

To stay informed about developments in this story, consider visiting the official Web site of the British Broadcasting Corporation, www.bbc.co.uk and/or the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation at www.cbc.ca.

 Sections marked with this symbol indicate content suitable for younger viewers.

Operators at transit control in London, England, were monitoring the movement of train lines in London's famous Tube (subway) system when they noticed three almost simultaneous glitches at 8:50 a.m. on July 7, 2005. While these were cause for concern, operators felt that the glitches were simply power surges that had disabled a few trains. However, within minutes they realized that what had really knocked the trains out of commission were three explosions. Emergency services responded rapidly. No one wanted to believe that London was being attacked, but it certainly looked as though this was the case. Trains and train lines do not simply explode during standard operations. An hour later, there was no question that the city had become the target of terror as a bus traveling through Tavistock Square was ripped apart by another explosion. It took one hour to change London from a peaceful community to one enveloped by a cloud of horror.

The death toll for the July 7 bombings would reach 56 before investigators would make a chilling discovery: for the first time in Western Europe, suicide bombers had attacked a major city. Police initiated a massive investigation. But before they had put together a satisfactory theory of what had happened, the London transit system was struck again, this time on July 21—two weeks to the day after the previous attacks. Fortunately for thousands of commuters, the bombs failed to explode. Within a short period of time 14 suspects were rounded up and charged with a slew of terrorism offenses.

Meanwhile, another 39 suspects were

held without charges under British anti-terrorism legislation. By the end of July, London and the world stood in sombre shock as terrorism resurrected dormant fears and anxiety. Every person with a backpack or bag was receiving a suspicious look. After all, the bombers looked just like anyone else. If the goal of terrorism is to inspire fear, the bombers had certainly succeeded.

Investigators immediately suspected an Al Qaeda connection to the bombings. In fact, one group—calling themselves the Secret Organization of Al Qaeda in Europe—claimed responsibility for the bombings almost right away. Despite this claim, investigators were unable to establish a link between the bombings and the Al Qaeda terrorist network. However, by August 2005, a videotape made by Osama bin Laden's right-hand man was aired on the satellite TV station Al Jazeera. The message warned Britain that more bombings would follow if it did not change its foreign policy, particularly in relation to Iraq. On the same tape, one of the July 7 bombers appeared and vowed perpetual vengeance unless Britain changed its ways. Authorities shifted their attention back to the potential Al Qaeda connection.

The bombings put officials in London on high alert. The most comprehensive investigation in the history of Britain was launched and, within days of both bombings, police had a reasonably good idea of what had happened. On July 7, three men travelled from Leeds to Luton, where they met a fourth man and caught a commuter train to London. They transferred onto the Tube around

Did you know . . .

The London transit system's many cameras were originally installed to protect against Irish Republican Army (IRA) bombings.

8:30 at King's Cross station. Twenty minutes later, three bombs detonated, while the fourth went off an hour later on a London bus. On July 21, three men met at the Stockwell Tube station and spread out across the city from that location. Another caught the Tube at Westburne Grove. Within an hour, each of the men triggered the detonator for their respective bombs. While the detonators worked, the bombs failed to explode. The popping sound of the detonators made it clear what was going on, and people fled the trains for safety, including the four suspected bombers. Police began making arrests within a day. By July 29 they had all four of the suspected bombers in custody, including one who had fled the country to hide with relatives in Italy.

The investigations into the London attacks were initially successful for two reasons. First, police were able to comb over closed-circuit television (CCTV) images that allowed them to pinpoint the bombers' movements and to determine where and when they started their journeys. One of these images showed all four July 7 bombers entering the train station in Luton, and another series of images clearly showed the faces of the four July 21 suspects. Secondly,

several days after the July 7 attacks, police conducted several controlled explosions after finding unexploded devices in a car at the Luton train station. They were able to retrieve a number of other devices, giving them tremendous forensic evidence in their investigation. Combined with the four unexploded bombs from the July 21 bomb attempts and a fifth device discovered in a wooded area outside another station, the police had a wealth of evidence regarding the nature of the bombs and their deadly payload.

By the end of August 2005, police continued to aggressively conduct their investigation. The search for the mastermind behind the July 7 attacks was considered a high priority as was the sustained effort to convict those accused of the July 21 attacks. British Muslim clerics, active from the very beginning, continued to preach against terrorism, reinforcing the teaching of a *fatwa*, or edict, condemning terrorist acts. The mood could only be described as tense. The Muslim community worried about reprisals, the government called for calm, and police worried about when and where terrorists might strike next.

Analysis

1. Identify and explain the differences between the July 7 and July 21 attacks.
2. Who was responsible for the bombings?
3. Where did things stand by the end of August 2005?

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Video Review

As you watch the video presentation, answer the questions in the spaces provided.

1. How many suicide bombers were involved in the London attacks? _____
2. Approximately how many people died in the blasts? _____
3. How many subway trains were hit? _____ How many buses? _____
4. How did the British people and their leaders respond to the attacks?

5. What was the response of Britain's Muslim community?

6. How many hours of security camera video were available to police? _____
7. Where were the bombers from? _____
8. What happened exactly two weeks after the first attacks?

9. What was the result of the second series of attacks?

10. What terrible mistake was made by British forces?

11. What was the result of the second bombing investigation?

12. What new powers did British Prime Minister Blair seek to deal with the threat of extremism?

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Timeline of the Bombings

July 7

8:30 a.m. – Four men get off a train arriving from Luton at King’s Cross station and fan out across London’s transit system. Each carries an explosive device small enough to fit into the backpack he is carrying.

8:50 a.m. – Three bombs explode on London’s subway system, called the Tube.

- Bomb #1 – kills eight people; explodes on a train travelling from Liverpool station to Aldgate station
- Bomb #2 – kills 27 people; explodes on a train between King’s Cross and Russell Square
- Bomb #3 – kills seven people; explodes on a train departing from Edgware Road station

8:51 – 9:46 a.m. – Transport police begin their investigation. Emergency Services travel to each scene after reports of injuries. Initial reports indicate a possible collision between two trains, a power surge, the rupture of a power cable, and an overall power fault in the system. At this point, police have no idea that bombs have been detonated on subway trains. Passengers are diverted from the Tube and put on buses.

9:47 a.m. – A massive explosion blows the top off a double-decker bus in Tavistock Square, killing 14 people and injuring many others.

9:48 – 11:00 a.m. – Emergency services, already stretched thin by the incidents of the previous hour, make their way to Tavistock Square. Scotland Yard reports that it is responding to a “major incident” in central London, eventually updating their information to

tell people they are responding to multiple explosions in downtown London. All London hospitals are put on high alert as casualties begin to arrive. British Prime Minister Tony Blair is informed of the blasts while he is at the G8 meetings in Scotland, but initial information does not confirm that London has been struck by terrorists.

11:30 a.m. – Highway signs read “Avoid London. Area Closed. Turn on Radio.”

12:05 – 1:25 p.m. – Blair issues a statement confirming “a series of terrorist attacks in London.” He announces that he will leave for London immediately. He also states his intention to return to the meeting later in the day saying, “It is particularly barbaric that this has happened on a day when people are meeting to try to help the problems of poverty in Africa and the long-term problems of climate change and the environment” (CBC News Online, July 7, 2005). Just before his departure from Scotland by military helicopter, Blair and those in attendance at the G8 meeting issue a joint statement condemning terrorism.

1:30 p.m. – Hospitals report treating 190 people so far for injuries sustained in the bombings.

1:42 – 2:18 p.m. – Investigators reveal that traces of explosives have been found at all four sites.

3:33 p.m. – London Ambulance Services report that 45 people suffered serious injuries, such as third-degree burns and lost arms and legs, while over 300 suffered minor injuries.

Quote

“Whatever you do, however many you kill, you will fail.”
— London’s Mayor Ken Livingstone — not bowing to terrorist threats, *Toronto Star*, July 9, 2005

4:30 p.m. – London begins to mourn as the flag at Buckingham Palace is lowered to half-mast and other government agencies vow to follow suit.

9:05 p.m. – Prime Minister Blair returns to the G8 meetings in Scotland.
Tragedy casualties:
Deaths – 52 victims; 4 suicide bombers
Injuries – over 700

July 21

12:25 p.m. – The Shepherd’s Bush Tube station is evacuated following a bombing attempt.

12:30 p.m. – A bombing attempt is made on a train at Oval station. The station is evacuated and ambulances are sent to the scene to deal with potential casualties.

12:45 p.m. – Warren Street station is evacuated after passengers see white smoke emerging from a train car. Once again, ambulances are dispatched to the scene.

1:25 p.m. – London transportation officials shut down four subway lines.

1:30 p.m. – A fourth bomb attempt occurs on a double-decker bus on Hackney Road in east London.

3:45 p.m. – After receiving reports from police service personnel on the front lines, London Police Chief Ian Blair announces that everything is

“fully under control.” Terrorists had attempted to detonate four bombs on the public transit system, but none of the devices exploded. Later he tells the media that the intention of the bombers “must have been to kill.”

July 22

10:00 a.m. – Police follow a man onto a subway train at Stockwell Station and shoot him out of fear that he is a suicide bomber. Police reveal that the man refused to co-operate with their attempts to apprehend him. The station is quickly evacuated and closed.

3:30 p.m. – Police reveal that the shooting death of the man at Stockwell Station was directly related to their investigation of the previous day’s bombings. They also release CCTV images of the suspects and ask for the public’s assistance in apprehending the men.*

*Two important notes: The man police shot at Stockwell Station was an electrician from Brazil who was mistakenly identified as a potential suicide bomber (see “The Shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes,” page 15). Also, all four bombing suspects were arrested by the end of July with the CCTV images seen as playing a key role in finding the men, including one who had fled to Italy.

Activity

Using the timeline provided, rewrite the story of either the July 7 or July 21 attacks as if you were a newspaper reporter.

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The Investigation

Note

Although Madrid had been devastated in 2004 by a series of bombing attacks on trains, these were not suicide attacks where the bombers killed themselves as well as their targets. See *CBC News in Review*, May 2004, for more details.

The 7/7 Attacks

It was a well orchestrated and efficient operation. The July 7, 2005, bomb attacks on London's transit system laid claim to 56 lives and injured another 700. Early in the investigation, police were able to determine that the attacks were carried out by four suicide bombers, three of whom began their journey in the northern English city of Leeds. They rented a car, packed it with bombing material, and made their way south to Luton. They then parked their car, hooked up with a fourth conspirator, strapped on their bomb-laden backpacks, and boarded a commuter train for the 50-km trek to London. From King's Cross Station in London they fanned out to execute their plan.

The investigation into the July 7 bombings was aided to a great extent by the closed-circuit television (CCTV) system operating at the station in Luton and on the London Transit System. The CCTV images, combined with evidence gathered at each bombing site, allowed the police to draw one horrifying conclusion: for the first time in Western Europe, suicide bombers had struck a major city. Police were able to identify the four bombers quickly. They tracked their movements back to the train station in Luton and eventually all the way back to Leeds. In Luton, they found the rental car, and bomb experts found unexploded bombs in the vehicle. They were crude but powerful bombs; jars packed with explosive material (with nails on the perimeter) triggered by a simple detonator. Eventually police raided a number of homes in Leeds, using bomb experts to blast their way into one of the homes.

Police were able to unearth some valuable information over the course of the early investigation. All four bombing suspects were known associates and were practising Muslims. Three of the four were Britons of Pakistani descent who had visited Muslim schools in Pakistan in the year prior to the bombings. While two groups laid claim to the bombings, police were unable to tie any one group directly to the bombings. However, in August, a chilling videotape came to light with two messages. First, Ayman al-Zawahri, a senior lieutenant in Al Qaeda, issued a warning that London would be the target of more attacks because of its foreign policy directives, particularly in Iraq. Later, on the same tape, the ghostly figure of Sidique Khan, one of the July 7 bombers, warned that until there is an end to the "bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight" (BBC Online News – Timeline: London Bombing Developments). Speculation of an Al Qaeda link to the July 7 bombing took on renewed momentum around London. Police continued to search for the mastermind behind the July 7 attacks.

July 7 Suicide Bombing Suspects

Shehzad Tanweer – 22 years old

– Aldgate train bombing – killed 6

Sidique Khan – 30 years old

– Edgware train bombing – killed 7

Hasib Hussain – 18 years old

– Tavistock Square bombing – killed 13

Germaine Lindsey – 19 years old

– Russell Square train bombing – killed 26

Did you know . . .

One action that followed from the London bombings was the government of Pakistan's decision to expel all foreigners studying in *Madrassas*, (Islamic schools) from Pakistan. The President of Pakistan is a foe of terrorism and an ally of Great Britain.

All of the bombers' families expressed absolute shock that the men would perpetrate such a horrific crime. Germaine Lindsey, a Jamaican-born British resident, had recently converted to Islam and left behind a 15-month-old child and a pregnant wife.

The 7/21 Attacks

On July 21, two weeks to the day after the deadly attacks of early July, bombers struck again. Once again, three trains and one bus were targeted, but this time the bombs failed to explode. The July 21 bombing attempts were followed by a frenzy of police activity. The police knew from early reports exactly when the would-be bombers attempted to detonate their bombs and reviewed the CCTV footage based on this knowledge. By the next day police were able to release CCTV images of all four suspects and plead for the assistance of the public. Meanwhile, they had already begun surveillance operations around the homes of several of the suspects. In one instance, police mistakenly followed and killed a man they suspected of being one of the bombers. Police later admitted to their error and apologized to the family of Jean Charles de Menezes, promising an independent police inquiry into the man's death. Almost daily raids took place on homes in and around London. By July 29, police had apprehended the four bombing suspects and a number of other alleged co-conspirators.

To Consider

1. What role did CCTV images play in the investigation into the London attacks?
2. What led investigators to conclude that Al Qaeda may have been involved in the London bombings of July 7?
3. Why do you think the police feel the July 7 and July 21 incidents are unrelated? Do you agree? Explain.

July 21 Bombing Suspects

Ibrahim Muktar Said – 27 years old – accused in the attempted bus bombing on Hackney Road

Yassin Hassan Omar – 24 years old – accused of attempting to bomb a train on the Victoria Line near Warren Street

Ramzi Mohamed – 23 years old – accused of attempting to bomb a train near Oval station.

Hussain Osman – 27 years old – accused in the Shepherd's Bush bombing attempt. Osman fled Britain on July 26 and got as far as Rome, where he sought refuge with relatives. Police were able to trace his movements, and Osman was arrested by Italian police for extradition back to Britain.

Ten others were arrested on charges related to the bombings, and 39 others were detained under the Terrorism Act.

It is interesting to note that by late August 2005, British police felt that it was highly unlikely that the July 7 and the July 21 bombing were connected. That would mean that two independent terrorist groups were operating in and around London at the same time, and were prepared to execute their plans at about the same time. By the end of the summer, British investigators felt the trail going cold.

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An Eyewitness Account: July 7, 2005

Quote

"We are at war and I am a soldier."

— Sidique Khan,
London suicide
bomber videotaped
before his death,
Toronto Star,
September 2, 2005

Tanya Frenette is a Canadian who moved to London from Toronto in January 2005. She and her husband, Brad, had planned on staying in London for eight months before returning to Canada to give birth to their first child. This is an eyewitness account of what happened to Frenette on July 7, 2005. Please read the story and complete the activity that follows.

I was on the Tube at Edgware Road station on my way to work when we heard a loud bang. We were told it was a power failure and had to evacuate the Tube station.

Being relatively new to the city, I went outside, not knowing where I was or how to get to my work. But I grabbed a Tube map on the way out of the station and saw a bus that was headed in the general direction I needed to go. I figured I could walk from the bus's destination, at least.

I got on the bus and we travelled for a while. The bus was diverted and stopped moving. The driver said he wasn't moving until he got directions for where to go.

I was on the bus for about 30-40 minutes. I borrowed someone's mobile so that I could call the temp agency to tell them that I was going to be late. All of a sudden there was an explosion behind my bus.

The bus 25 feet behind us exploded. My bus leapt off the ground from the impact.

I was sitting in the middle of the last row of the bus, so I spun around and I saw the roof blow off. I saw a few people in the top part of the bus, their hair blowing from the explosion, and then the roof came crashing down on top of them.

It was the scariest thing I've ever seen. Everyone started screaming and running for the exit. I was one of the last people to get off.

A woman named Jane grabbed my arm and asked me if I was OK. She saw that I was pregnant and wanted to help me get to safety. We stepped off the bus together and I looked to my left at the bus that had just exploded.

There was a single man just sitting there at the top in the front, and he was just looking straight ahead. There was debris and smoke everywhere and people were screaming and running in all directions.

Nobody knew how the bus blew up or where it came from.

I stopped to stare. Jane grabbed my arm and asked me what I was doing. She led me around the corner, about 10 feet away. She didn't want me to get caught up in the flow of people.

She walked me straight into a house called Mary Ward House, where the people inside took care of us—gave us water and tea and biscuits, calmed us down and let us use their phones, bathrooms, etc.

They were extraordinary people who took care of six of us— three who had been on the bus—for about five hours. We weren't allowed to leave the building or the area, so we all just stayed inside and tried our best to get a hold of everyone that we could.

Even though the phones weren't working—same with the Internet and the mobile networks—I was able to finally get through to my husband Brad so that he knew I was OK and where I was.

The police weren't letting anyone in or out of the area. Brad walked across London to get to me, but could not get past the police.

The two Irish men who ran Mary Ward House left their wives with the others and went with me to talk the police into letting me pass. They went with me so I could meet Brad. It was very sweet of them.

They met Brad and we all talked for a while. They were very, very generous and nice and I couldn't have been luckier.

This was the most bizarre experience. All of us inside the safe house were so upset all morning, not knowing what had really happened. We were all sitting around a small radio trying to get whatever news we could.

On the way home, there was an eerie, bizarre feeling in the air as a mass of people walked home. There were a few buses, but nobody was in any rush to get on. And it was quiet.

Nobody was talking.

Thursday is something I will never forget. I couldn't sleep last night. The baby kicked for about two and a half hours yesterday.

I feel deeply for all the people who were affected by this directly. I'm so very sorry for all those who lost someone.

Source: www.cbc.ca/news/background/london_bombing/survivor_story.html

Activity

Imagine you were there in London that day. Tell the story of the day's events from the perspective of one of the following people: Brad, Jane or one of the Irish men running the Mary Ward House.

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The Shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes

Quote

“What sort of society are we living in where we execute suspects?”
— Harriet Wistrich, lawyer for the Menezes family, *Toronto Star*, August 18, 2005

On the morning of July 22, 2005, London was buzzing with rumors and speculation as news spread that the police had shot and killed a man suspected in the July 21 bomb attempts on the city’s transit system. Initial reports claimed that the man was wearing a thick coat and that he jumped over a subway turnstile to elude police. He was then pursued onto a train where police shot him repeatedly in the head, fearing that he had a bomb strapped to his torso. In an effort to separate fact from fiction, London Police Chief Ian Blair reported to the media later in the day that, “The man was challenged and refused to obey police instructions.” He went on to say that the shooting death was “directly linked” to the investigation into the subway bombing attempts of July 21.

Despite eyewitness accounts of a “South Asian”-looking man fleeing police in a heavily padded jacket with wires coming out from under some of the material, Ian Blair delivered some shocking news early the next day. The man police shot was named Jean Charles de Menezes. He was a 27-year-old electrician in England on a work visa from Brazil who police mistakenly pursued and killed in relation to the July 21 bombing attempts. The police and the British government apologized for the error, directly appealing to Menezes’ family and the government of Brazil. However, shortly after the shooting, many people wondered if an apology was enough.

Family and friends of Menezes began to pressure the British government to hold a full public inquiry into the young man’s death. The government resisted calls for an inquiry, but did let the

family know that the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) would look into the incident. Soon, leaked evidence began to emerge from the IPCC investigation that could only be described as shocking. Apparently, Menezes left his Tulse Hill apartment that morning and was identified by an undercover officer on the ground as a person of interest. He thought the man matched a description of one of the suspects in the July 21 bombing attempts but told investigators later that he could not provide video confirmation of the suspect because he had to go to the washroom. By the time investigators “confirmed” the identity of the man who left the Tulse Hill apartment complex, the suspect had already boarded a bus bound for the Stockwell Street station.

Undercover police followed the man, and when he got off the bus 15 minutes later they watched him go into the subway station. Apparently, CCTV images revealed that Menezes was wearing a light denim jacket and that he was walking at a normal pace. He walked through the turnstiles and made his way to a waiting train. When he saw the train waiting on the platform, he began to run because he didn’t want to miss his train. He boarded the train and sat down facing the platform. Three undercover police officers followed Menezes, vaulting over the turnstiles and running down the stairs after him. When the officers began shouting at him, Menezes stood up. At that point, the three officers grabbed him, pushed him back into his seat, and fired 11 shots. Seven of the bullets went into the young man’s head, one into his shoulder and three other bullets missed him.

It was only later that officers learned that they had killed an innocent man.

The case of Jean Charles de Menezes reveals quite a bit about the emotional climate of London on the day following the July 21 bombing attempt. The police were hyper-vigilant, looking to apprehend suspects and prevent future suicide bombings. When they identified Menezes as one of the July 21 bombing suspects, they made it their priority to follow the London police anti-terror policy to shoot potential bombing suspects first and ask questions later. In a climate like this, it is no surprise that people get hurt and, in the case of Menezes, killed. As far as the discrepancies in the early reports surfacing out of the investigation—the heavy coat, jumping over turnstiles to evade police, and a refusal to co-operate with the police—it soon became clear that eyewitnesses were having difficulty distinguishing between Menezes and undercover police. CCTV images confirmed that Menezes was not wearing a heavy coat, was not acting strangely, and he did not try to evade the police. Meanwhile, the police were described as being in “hot pursuit” of the suspect and immediately pounced on Menezes once they got close enough. Eyewitnesses later recanted some of their testimony. One said that he must have seen an undercover police officer jumping over the turnstiles and confused him for the person whom officers were pursuing.

The case also reveals the impact of the media on the images and ideas people remember when events are reported. Most people know that Jean Charles de Menezes was mistakenly shot by police the day after the July 21 bombing attempts. However, the police never sincerely sought to set the record straight. In their admission to mistakenly killing the young Brazilian, they did not refute incorrect information that was being either propagated by them (“The man was challenged and refused to obey police instructions”) or put forward by eyewitnesses (the suspect was wearing a bulky coat). Instead they issued a brief apology, noting that the police were doing their job “in very, very difficult circumstances.” They did not refute the idea that Menezes was running from police that day in an unreasonably bulky coat. First impressions leave lasting impressions, and some wonder if, despite the outcome of the IPCC inquiry, people will always remember the image of a man fleeing the police, jumping the turnstiles at the Stockwell Street station, and trying to dodge arrest by jumping onto a subway train. It appears that these images are far from the truth. The results of the IPCC investigations will be made public in December 2005.

Sources: (BBC News Online, “Power struggle over Tube inquiry,” August 18, 2005; BBC News Online, “Police shooting – the discrepancies,” August 17, 2005; CBC News Online, –“British police shot Brazilian eight times,” July 25, 2005)

Inquiry

1. How does the police version of events differ from what evidence from the IPCC indicates?
2. The family of Menezes would like a public inquiry into his death. Should the British government hold a public inquiry into the case?
3. Do you think the British Police should have had a right “to shoot to kill” in this crisis? Explain.

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Analysis

Shortly after the London bombings, James Hrynyshyn wrote this analysis for CBC News Online. He examines media efforts to get Muslim spiritual leaders, called imams, to denounce terrorism. Read the article and complete the questions that follow.

Of Guns and Gods By James Hrynyshyn

Canadian and American imams just issued a fatwa condemning extremism as contrary to the teachings of Islam. Then they were hauled before impatient radio and television hosts to explain just which passages of the Qu'ran are being taken out of context by the suicide bombers. It's enough to make a good agnostic wince in empathy. When was the last time a Catholic cleric was asked to justify the IRA on CNN?

And yet, there's something familiar about the whole affair. It's not an analogy I take much pleasure in raising, but the parallels are too obvious. I refer to the tired old slogan of the National Rifle Association: Guns don't kill people, people kill people.

Rifles and shotguns are not inherently evil, they just make it much easier to kill by removing the need for personal contact and considered reflection. Similarly, the great monotheistic religions all preach love while offering justification for actions without appeal to the concerns of the individual or rationality.

The comparison may seem like a stretch, but from where I sit, in the western foothills of North Carolina, the constitutional right to bear arms has achieved a status not unlike a tenet of one of the major monotheistic religions. And just as those who embrace gun culture must take some degree of responsibility for the body counts that accompany the prevalence of weapons in civil society, so must the faithful address the dangers that follow dogma.

I'm not suggesting that all Muslims should apologize for last month's bombings in London or the events of

September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington. Neither should all Christians assume a share of the blame from the horrors of the Crusades and the Inquisition. What I would like to see, however, is a more skeptical approach by all peoples of faith to the role of scriptures in their lives, an approach that emphasizes the mythic and figurative value of the texts.

To be fair, the brave scholars who agreed to appear on network newscasts over the past weeks to defend Islam were among the most patient interviewees to grace the airwaves. *The Globe and Mail* reported that the imams who issued the fatwa and called the suicide bombers "evil" and an "enemy of Islam" were "prodded to go further," presumably by journalists. CNN and MSNBC ran simultaneous tag-team interrogations. A week later, a usually genteel National Public Radio host persistently demanded similar concessions of his Muslim guest.

All subjects went to great lengths to emphasize that the words of Muhammad explicitly condemn violence against innocents. "Whoever kills a person [unjustly] . . . it is as though he has killed all mankind," says the Prophet. More than once, it was pointed out that the first and most common passage in the Qu'ran is "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate."

That would seem to be quite clear. Yet every week, young Muslims are compelled by some twisted version of Islam to blow themselves and countless others to tiny pieces in the name of Allah. The second amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the one that guarantees the right to bear arms, is no less explicit about the need to regulate that right. It begins with "A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state . . ." There it is, the introductory

clause of the right to bear arms calls for serious regulation. Clear and simple. And yet, at least four million Americans object so strongly to the notion of gun control that they pay dues each year to the NRA.

The problem is that the bigger pictures are anything but clear. The Qu’ran also calls on Muslims to “make war upon such of those to whom the scriptures have been given as believe not in Allah . . .” The second amendment to the U.S. Constitution concludes with “the right to bear arms shall not be infringed.” Members of Al Qaeda ignore the Qu’ran’s call for compassion; the Web site of the far-right group Independent Americans ignores the historical context in which their Constitution was drafted and quotes only the second half of the second amendment.

The demonization of Islam demonstrated by the media of late is not only insulting and counterproductive, it misses the point. Arguing over the meaning of ambiguous scripture lends legitimacy to whatever interpretation appeals to the disenfranchised and ignorant.

The failure of Americans to agree on the meaning of a single sentence in a charter of rights makes it clear that the search for a common interpretation of scripture is pointless. What we should be doing instead is challenging the very idea of sacred texts and unquestioning faith. No one ever launched a jihad of doubt.

Source: www.cbc.ca/news/viewpoint/vp_hrynyshyn/

Activity

Copy the following chart into your notebook. Use Hrynyshyn’s analysis to determine whether the merits of a call for Muslim condemnation of terrorism and the U.S. call for the right to bear arms are reasonable given the consequences of such a call.

Treatment of Muslims		The American Right to Bear Arms	
Reasonable concerns	Unreasonable demands	Reasonable concerns	Unreasonable demands
Effects of reasonable concerns	Effects of unreasonable demands	Effects of reasonable concerns	Effects of unreasonable demands

Conclusions

Based on your analysis, is it reasonable for the media to demand that Muslim imams condemn terrorism? Is it reasonable for the members of the National Rifle Association in the United States to maintain a right to bear arms?

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Planning Activity

Did you know . . .

According to one CIA report in 2001, Al Qaeda had already trained at least 5 000 militants and created cells in 50 countries.

Imagine that you are a world leader who is forced to respond to the deadly consequences of a terrorist attack. Read the following statement made by British Prime Minister Tony Blair shortly after the attacks on London and then write your own response following the guidelines listed below.

“It is important . . . that those engaged in terrorism realize that our determination to defend our values and our way of life is greater than their determination to cause death and destruction to innocent people in a desire to impose extremism on the world.

“Whatever they do it is our determination that they will never succeed in destroying what we hold dear in this country and in other civilized nations throughout the world.”

— Prime Minister of Britain, Tony Blair, July 7, 2005, BBC News Online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4661627.stm>

Within weeks Blair and his government began drafting legislation to:

- deport foreigners involved in extremism while in Britain
- make justifying or glorifying terrorism illegal
- refuse asylum to anyone who is in any way involved in terrorism
- give police the ability to hold terror suspects for a longer period of time without pressing charges
- make a list of preachers and clerics who are propagating terrorism and ensure that they are banned from entering Britain

This is a brief account of the British government’s response to the London attacks. How do you think the Canadian government would respond? How should the Canadian government respond?

Your Task

- Write a statement to the media denouncing terrorism.
- Make a plan to deal with terrorist threats directed toward Canada.

Caution: In the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing in the United States, investigators and the media immediately suspected Islamic extremists. As it turned out, the building was bombed by men from the heartland of the U.S. This could be an opportunity to consider that terrorism in itself is not religious or racial. Terrorism is the use of force to bring attention to a group’s agenda. Terrorism is about inspiring horror and provoking a response from opponents of the group. Terrorism can take on many shapes and forms, and, despite claims of religious motivation, every religion in the world condemns the taking of innocent life.