

Canadians must put the terrorist events of 9/11 six years ago in perspective

Next Tuesday will mark the day 24 Canadians were killed or were lost and presumed dead in the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York.

The question is what should we make of 9/11 six years later?

Not to trivialize those deaths or the nearly 3,000 Americans who died in the twin towers or aboard the four hijacked jets, but they need to be seen in perspective.

Here is one way of looking at it: In 2001, 2,781 Canadians were killed in car accidents and 221,121 injured, according to Transport Canada.

In the United States, there were more than 42,000 traffic deaths in 2001.

As a result, an argument can be made that there were 100 times more Canadians and 14 times more Americans killed in traffic accidents in 2001 than on 9/11 and that the terrorist threat has been blown out of proportion.

That is one view, here is another: 19th Century British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli said: "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics."

Statistical comparisons to traffic deaths, while interesting, don't put a proper perspective on the horrific events that were 9/11 in the United States; trauma to that nation the likes of which most Canadians can't understand.

I was born on Sept. 11.

On the morning of my birthday in 2001, I was horrified by the video of the second hijacked jet slamming into the South Tower of the World Trade Centre played over and over again on television.

I knew immediately that the world would be reordered and that it might not be for the better.

As always, history helps us to better understand the present and what the future might hold.

Some Baby Boomers of my generation will remember the school drills we had as youngsters during the Cold War.

We routinely got up from our desks as instructed by the principal's voice over the public address system and walked, not ran, calmly downstairs to the school's basement auditorium where, hopefully, we could survive a nuclear blast.

Even though television was in its relative infancy, we had all seen the black and white pictures – yes, black and white television pictures – of the mushroom cloud billowing over Hiroshima, the result of a United States nuclear bomb in 1945.

We asked our teachers how we would survive if the school crumbled and fell on us.

We all knew who the enemy was then: the Soviet Union, the Russians.

We all knew that the Russians had launched the first satellite Sputnik in 1957 and that they had missiles and nuclear weapons they could attack us with.

We watched American television shows in which the ethical question presented was whether it was appropriate to shoot neighbors attempting to break into your homemade bomb shelters during a nuclear attack.

We knew Canada was a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and that NATO protected us against the Russians.

We all knew that should North America ever be bombed by the Russians, the United States would respond with its nuclear weapons and that, caught in the middle, missiles and nuclear bombs would rain over Canada and that no one might survive.

Now *that* was terror.

That was why the Summit hockey series between Canada and Russia in 1972 was a monumental pitting of the forces of good against evil incarnate.

As we grew older, some of us learned that the principle behind NATO was that an attack against one member was an attack against all and that all NATO allies had a legal and moral obligation to fight back.

The Cold War ended in 1991 and many NATO countries, Canada included, cut back on their militaries, naively believing the world was more stable than in the past and that they could reap a "peace dividend".

Fast forward ten years to 9/11: We didn't immediately know who did it, but Canada's responsibility as a NATO ally was clear – we had to stand shoulder to shoulder with our American neighbors.

We learned later that Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda fundamentalist religious movement masterminded the 9/11 attacks and they were hosted by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

That is why the Canadian Forces are in Afghanistan today, as a NATO ally, and why they should remain there until the objectives of the internationally-agreed-upon Afghan Compact are achieved.

Canadians should not only remember the Canadians and Americans who died on 9/11, but also the news reports of November 13, 2002.

On that day, grainy pictures of bin Laden on Al-Jazeera television appeared under headlines declaring that Canada had been named as a legitimate target by Muslim nations waging jihad.

Now think of this: If al-Qaeda can obtain nuclear weapons of any size or type, it will use them against the west just as surely as its suicidal hijackers used airlines in 2001.

That is 9/11 in perspective six years on.

We Baby Boomers have lived with nuclear terrorism before: the big difference is that the Russians actually cared whether they lived or died.

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