TORONTO STAR
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# Walkom: Terror talk feeds insecurity

Jun. 12, 2006. 05:38 AM

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The alleged Islamist terror plot marks a turning point for this country. Even though nothing happened, it creates the fear that, maybe, something could happen. It changes the way we see things.

This is not the first time Canada has seen itself threatened by terror. We have experienced actual terror attacks — like the 1985 Air-India bombing that killed 329 — which have been, in reality, far more serious.

But the arrest 10 days ago of 17 Muslim males involves something that is more significant than mere reality. It has the potential to change the way Canadians think about ourselves and the world. It is, in the broadest sense, an event that creates new mythologies.


STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR
Security was not quite as tight as it was on Saturday as 15 of the 17 people charged with terrorism related charges appear at the Court House in Brampton, June 6, 2006.



We have been on this terror path before. We started along it in 1970, when militant separatists from the Front de Libération du Québec kidnapped British diplomat James Cross and killed Pierre Laporte, a provincial cabinet minister.

That so-called FLQ crisis was a frantic moment, one in which the media and the population briefly lost all perspective, when fear transformed the desperate actions of a few dangerous men into the perception that insurrection threatened the existence of an entire country.

But that perception did not last. Not long after the federal government used its War Measures Act to round up, without charge, dozens of separatists in Quebec, conventional wisdom began to switch. By the late '70s, the entire episode was generally viewed as an embarrassment — a gross overreaction on the part of Ottawa.

To find a real analogy to the events of these past few days, we must look back to 1946 — to revelations of former Soviet cipher clerk Igor Gouzenko and the spectacular spy trials that rocked Canada.

These trials set the mood for the Cold War in Canada. They convinced most of the country that Canada was threatened by a vast conspiracy, spearheaded by Soviet agents who looked and acted like normal Canadians but who, in reality, were determined to subvert and destroy our way of life. They brought home the idea, already taking hold in the United States, that the free world was engaged in an existential struggle against evil.

"The crusading power of communism has been harnessed by a cold-blooded, calculating, victoriously powerful Slav empire," then external affairs minister Lester Pearson said in 1948. "Our frontier is now not even on the Rhine or rivers further east. It is wherever free men are struggling.... It may run though our own cities, or it may be on the crest of the remotest mountain."

To modern listeners, Pearson's unusually flamboyant rhetoric, even his gratuitous reference to ethnicity, may sound familiar. If "communism" were replaced with "Islam", "Slav empire" with "terrorist caliphate" and Germany with Afghanistan, his speech could have been given 10 days ago. And, in some ways, it was.

"As at other times in our history, we are a target because of who we are and how we live, our society, our diversity and our values — values such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law," Prime Minister Stephen Harper said after RCMP and other police officers swooped down on terror suspects.

These same words could have been uttered 60 years ago, when RCMP officers, in a massive operation, arrested 13 Canadians for allegedly passing state secrets to the Soviets.

Those arrests, too, were accompanied by blaring headlines. The 13, all civil servants, were held in solitary confinement, denied access to lawyers and vigorously interrogated.

Lights were left on day and night in their cells. They were barred from seeing family members.

Over the next two weeks, all 13 were brought before a two-man royal commission where — out of the public eye and without the benefit of counsel — they were again interrogated about what they knew and what they had done. They were then released, immediately rearrested and charged under either the Official Secrets Act or the Criminal Code.

Nine others, who had been named during the royal commission interrogations — including a sitting MP — were also arrested and charged.

As Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse explain in their 1994 book, *Cold War Canada*, the spy trials roiled Canada.

Newspapers printed extravagant accounts of the perceived threat (one *Winnipeg Free Press* story cited unnamed sources as saying that fully 1,700 Russian agents had infiltrated North America).

While Canada did not engage in the extremes of U.S. McCarthyism, those deemed to be leftists did find doors subtly, or sometimes not too subtly, closed to them.

Ottawa introduced loyalty tests to ensure those contaminated by alien ideology didn't infiltrate the civil service.

Suspected Reds were drummed out of trade unions. If the unions themselves were deemed Red, efforts were made to drum them out of the country.

According to one 1946 Gallup poll printed in the *Star*, the public was overwhelmingly on side with the government.

Yet in the end, the great spy scandal of 1946 never quite lived up to its billing. While real, it was not as terrifying as first suggested.

When the dust cleared, only half of the 22 arrested were convicted of anything. Three were convicted of breaking the Official Secrets Act; six more of conspiring to break the Official Secrets Act and two of trying to obtain false passports.

Writing in a recent edition of the *Canadian Historical Association Review*, Dominique Clément recounts the case of one woman, apparently traumatized by her two weeks in solitary confinement, who, at trial, refused counsel and simply kept repeating over and over again: "I did it. I did it." She got three years.

The most spectacular case involved Communist MP Fred Rose, who was convicted, sentenced to six years in jail and stripped of his Canadian citizenship for engaging in a conspiracy to pass on classified information about explosives to the Soviet Union.

As Marcuse and Whitaker point out, Rose was indeed involved in passing information that was technically secret. But he did so in 1943, when Canada was an ally of the Soviet Union.

In 1944, two years before Rose was arrested, the Canadian government decided to make this information freely available to the Soviets.

But in the end, the final disposition of these trials was irrelevant. The actual importance of the crimes, in terms of their real challenge to Canadian national security, didn't matter.

What mattered was that a mood was set. The arrests and subsequent trials defined the way that Canadians and their governments reacted to a certain class of people. The left itself fractured, as so-called moderates tried to distance themselves from those they perceived to be radicals.

The big scare was on. Except in 1946, the bogeymen were Reds, not Muslims.

*Additional articles by Thomas Walkom*