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Distorted statistics foment hatred

By Jim Taylor

Wednesday morning, a man with a gun killed a soldier on ceremonial duty at the national cenotaph in Ottawa. Minutes later, the man ran into the parliament buildings. Where, in a flurry of gunshots, he died.

A recording by a *Globe and Mail* reporter caught the gunfire. It was over in seconds. But the sounds echoed through parliament's old stone hallways much longer.

Echoes do that.

A thunderclap actually lasts only as long as the lightning flash; the echoes rumble around the hills for minutes. Echoes reverberate even longer in memory. Post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD is, basically, an echo that refuses to fade away.

Listening to eight hours of news coverage from Ottawa, I felt that I was hearing more echoes than insight.

Apparently no one saw it coming. Not CSIS, the Canadian security Intelligence Service. Not the police. Not the government.

The government had planned to introduce new anti-terrorist legislation in parliament that same day.

CSIS told a parliamentary committee that it had some 130 "radicalized" young men under surveillance, including the driver who ran down two armed forces personnel on Monday in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu. But it lacked funds to track every potential terrorist.

Echoes... after the act....

Venomous e-mail

By some coincidence, the day before the Ottawa attack, I received an e-mail that seemed to anticipate events. It listed 16 violent acts, from the assassination of Bobby Kennedy in 1968, through both bombings of the World

Trade Centre, to the bombing at the Boston Marathon last year. All committed by Muslim males.

I suspect that e-mail had circulated on the Internet for some time, because it didn't include the ritual beheadings in Iraq.

The unidentified writer -- like the assassins in the desert, such persons prefer to hide behind the balaclava of anonymity -- thought his litany justified racial profiling. To solve the problem; go after young male Muslims.

Statistics can be so easily distorted to suit one's own prejudices.

One could equally argue that 80 per cent of all U.S. murders, about 12,000 a year, are committed by Christians. That 100 per cent of institutional torture in the U.S. was done by federal employees. That most U.S. neonaticides -- killing or abandoning babies during their first 24 hours after birth -- come from mothers under the age of 25.

Would those statistics justify surveillance of all Christians? Monitoring all federal employees? Banning pregnancies in women under 25?

The writer of the anti-Muslim e-mail also chose not to mention 190 incidents of violence during the 1990s by right-wing militias like Timothy McVeigh's. Or that lynch mobs such as the Ku Klux Klan were 100 per cent non-Muslim.

Because that wouldn't suit his biases.

Essentially, the e-mail invited security services to treat young Muslim males the way many U.S. police forces have treated young black males. And we know how well that has worked to reduce tensions. Even President Obama has told of experiencing harassment simply because he was black and male.

Thugs who shoot each other

I am very much afraid that anti-Muslim sentiments will flourish in the aftermath of last week's attacks. Both men were described as recent converts to Islam, and therefore suspect. I think Crawford Killian described them more accurately, in *The Tyee*, as "nutcases, choosing Islam as a flag of convenience for their internal demons...alienated for whatever reason from their society, with no more political significance than the thugs who shoot each other for control of the B.C. drug trade."

Indeed, these deaths appear to be just as targeted as gangland killings. The St-Jean-sur-Richelieu driver waited two hours for his victims to come out. The Ottawa gunman picked a reservist at a symbolic site, the War Memorial.

Perhaps there's a reason soldiers were picked. As international journalist Glenn Greenwald wrote, "If you want to be a country that spends

more than a decade proclaiming itself at war and bringing violence to others, then you should expect that violence will sometimes be directed at you as well.”

I’m afraid Stephen Harper will toughen his proposed anti-terrorist legislation to permit, even encourage, intelligence forces to set up databases and sting operations to trap “radicalized” Muslims. Police will start shooting Muslims on sight, as they have young blacks. CSIS agents will lurk in grocery stores to observe who buys Halal foods – an actual suggestion from a “radicalization” conference a few years ago.

And we, the citizens of Canada, will find ourselves giving up more and more of our rights and freedoms – of speech, of religion, of movement – as we chase the U.S. into the Homeland Security quagmire.

As Green party leader Elizabeth May wrote, while still locked-down in the parliament buildings, “We must ensure that this appalling act of violence is not used to justify a disproportionate response. ... These kinds of events open the door to a loss of democracy. ... Once we surrender rights it is very difficult to restore them.”

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YOUR TURN

Last week’s column about the Ebola virus, and our panicky reaction to it, brought a variety of responses.

John Hatchard, for example, takes a contrary view, referring to “a growing number of articles claiming that this Ebola outbreak is a ploy to set up a global health system totally dominated by Big Pharma, one in which ‘a patient would have no choice about whether to accept a diagnosis or take a drug or a vaccine. The watchword will be: compliance.’ The financial returns would be enormous. (Bill Gates has come to that conclusion too and is investing heavily on vaccination programs.)”

Nenke Jongkind commented on the figures I quoted about the deaths from other diseases, compared to Ebola: “These facts amaze me also. I did not know the exact numbers but continue to be nonplussed by the amount of ink and airtime one Ebola death and two stricken health care workers achieve

when these other statistics appear to be acceptable.”

Nenke also questioned my use of a capital letter for “Ebola” rather than just “ebola.” I use the capital only because the Canadian Press’s style book calls for it. I expect that rule to change.

Bob Stoddard linked fears of the Ebola virus to a broader social trend: “The irrational fear of Ebola in the U.S. resonates with those who harbor fear of many things, near and far. Some reasons for generating fear are obvious. For one, generating fear by the public media helps companies sell ‘news’. And another is the industrial-financial-military complex that needs to portray ‘an enemy of the decade’ to support military production and sales. But, as FDR said ‘the only thing we have to fear is fear itself’. For some persons, it seems that the Other is always out there and is to be feared.”

Fran Ota wrote, “Two things about the Ebola issue have made me really angry.

“First, the absolute panic here in North America, when a couple of cases reach our shores, as if every plane, or ship is carrying people infected with the virus. Then there are those who try to use Ebola as a political or religious tool to frighten people. No attempt to find out rationally how it is spread, just panic. I’ve had to chastise friends on other social media for spreading misinformation, and in my mind deliberately fanning the flames of irrational fear.

“Second, the absolute ignorance of the Ebola crisis in West Africa. Ebola has been around in that part of the world since the 1970s, but for many it’s as if the disease just became real, because it now affects us in some way. There have been 4500 deaths from Ebola, only one of those in the US, none in Canada. You noted deaths from the flu, and in fact D68, a new strain of flu, is far more dangerous here than Ebola.”

Isabel Gibson continued a similar theme: “As many have noted, our perceptions of risk are not entirely rational -- if they were, we’d have different ‘social-interaction protocols’ during flu season, refusing to shake hands, for example, much as people did during the outbreak of Spanish influenza during and after WWI. Instead, we seem to become accustomed to risks our society and way of living have ‘institutionalized’, and hyper-sensitive to risks that suddenly intrude from outside.

“As for the protocols, as you correctly note, all they can ever do is reduce risk -- not eliminate it. We live such protected lives here that I think our

risk-reduction expectations have become unrealistic. I'd say we have to keep pushing for better, but not become frantic or indignant when things continue to go wrong despite our efforts."

My daughter Sharon brought the fears close to home: "We have had Ebola on our minds here. Katherine (my Ethiopian granddaughter) and her fellow 10-11 year old friends have been obsessing about it for weeks. For Katherine, there is the geography issue, being from Africa. She wonders if it could spread like HIV, across the whole continent affecting the peoples of her birth country. But that is minor compared to her absolute paranoia about Ebola coming to Canada.

"For our family, that fear is actually real. It was only five years ago that I contracted H1N1 while doing consulting work in an office tower in downtown Edmonton. We were able to track the source to a worker who had returned from a holiday with his family in Mexico. The remarkable thing was that I never had direct exposure to him, never went into his office, never spoke to him. I must have touched the wrong door handle... Exhaustion, low immunity, motherhood, whatever, led to double pneumonia and a week in isolation in hospital. Despite coughing all over my kids, they didn't get sick. I guess their infancy in pre-adoption squalor built some immunity.

"Is there reason to be paranoid? By definition, yes. Our border workers and our health care workers must be vigilant to the edge of paranoia. But at home, to be honest, I am still more concerned about the flu. And we *will* be getting our flu shots."

James West reacted to my mention of checklists: "A rabbi once remarked that the sign of the cross reminded him of his own ritual: spectacles, testicles, watch, and wallet. We aging men have similar checklists!"

TECHNICAL STUFF

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
