

The death of normal?

How will the Boston marathon bombing change the United States of America?

By: Andrew Purcell – April 21, 2013

In the days that followed, as letters laced with biological toxins arrived on Capitol Hill and a fertilizer plant in Texas exploded – albeit accidentally – levelling an entire neighbourhood, it seemed as if the country was in shock, startled to discover that terrorism was more than a word heard every night on the news, more than a reason to stand in line at the airport, more than a nightmare that happens somewhere else.

In any other week, the failure of a gun-control bill to pass Congress would have been front-page news. Barack Obama's administration had pushed for a law aimed at reducing gun violence, in the belief public opinion had shifted following the Newtown shooting. But even the weak compromise proposed by Democrats died on the floor of the Senate.

It is tempting to imagine a similar response to the carnage in Boston, in which partisan gridlock stalls legislation as the outrage slowly fades, but recent history suggests that the bombing's legacy will be felt by everyone who lives in or visits the US, in ways large and small. If there are two things most congressional Democrats and Republicans can agree on, they are that the gun lobby is unbeatable and national-security spending is sacrosanct.

The modern security state was born on September 11, 2001, but each subsequent attempt at a major attack has extended it. After Richard Reid tried to bring down a plane by igniting explosives hidden in his shoes, removing footwear became standard practice at airport security. After a plot to crash transatlantic flights using liquid explosives was uncovered in London, passengers were obliged to pack toiletries in small, transparent bags.

The Christmas Day bomber, Umar Abdulmutallab, sewed plastic explosives into his underpants, ushering in the current era of full body scans. He was also interrogated for hours without being read his rights, confirming that the US Justice Department had drawn up new legal guidelines that skirted around the previously required warning, familiar to anyone who has ever watched a cop show, that a suspect has the right to remain silent and to call a lawyer, and that his answers may be used against him in court. A federal law enforcement official confirmed that the Boston marathon 'bomber' Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was also questioned without a lawyer present, after the manhunt that ended late on Friday night.

"The reaction tends to be focused," said John Mueller, a Professor at Ohio State University and author of *Overblown: How Politicians And The Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, And Why We Believe Them*. "After the underwear bomber it was focused on not having any more underwear bombers. After the shoe bomber it was focused on not having any more shoe bombers. In this case, it's probably

going to be focused on immigration issues: 'How come these guys were allowed to get into the United States?' There's going to be some irrationality on that."

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, a terrorism expert at the Foundation for Defence of Democracies, agreed the impulse to prevent a recurrence may lead to bad policy decisions being made. "There's going to be a push. That always happens after a tragedy," he says. "We often push for massive changes to counter-terrorism policy when there is political demand, rather than out of good strategy."