



Keep Calm and Carry On, Stephen Harper

Doubling down on counterterrorism at home and abroad won't make Canada a safer place.

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The attack on the Canadian Parliament building on Wednesday raises familiar questions about how democratic leaders should respond to such events. The death of a Canadian soldier demands a respectful mourning, but the broader issue is how this event should be understood and how Canada's government and society should react. Will the attack be met with calm resolution -- as one might expect after a damaging flood, a destructive tornado, or a tragic fire -- or will the fact that the attack is an act of "terror" reinforce the paranoia and "clash of civilizations" worldview that has warped the West's response ever since 9/11?

When dealing with the possibility of terror attacks by homegrown copycats, a central problem is the impossibility of devising a 100 percent foolproof defense against any misguided extremist or a mentally disturbed person who decides to lash out with violence. As we know from the tragic history of [school shootings](#) and other [mass killings](#), modern societies are brimming with weapons of various kinds that can be used to wreak vengeance upon real or imagined enemies. Just as the most stringent building codes cannot prevent all fires or accidents, even the most vigilant law enforcement efforts cannot provide airtight protection against this danger.

With respect to international terrorism, this problem is complicated by the military role that Western countries have been playing in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, or Pakistan. As Glenn Greenwald argued in a heated but insightful [column](#), no country -- including lovable Canada -- can expect to use military force abroad without eventually provoking a backlash, even if only in the form of an isolated gunman or a gang of homegrown wannabe jihadists.

To explain one of the underlying causes of such occurrences is neither to justify nor to defend homegrown attackers; it is simply to remind everyone that such unfortunate events do not come out of nowhere. In many cases, they are a regrettable but predictable byproduct. Whether the actions we've taken that inspired these attacks were wise or misguided is a separate question, but the blowback powerful states experience needs to be understood as part of the price they pay for an active, interventionist foreign policy.

This basic reality also undercuts the illusion that the United States and its allies could run an ambitious but cost-free foreign policy: that it could use military force to shape the internal politics of various foreign countries without suffering any real harm. After 9/11, Americans were told they were attacked because terrorists "hate our freedoms," as if the history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East had nothing whatsoever to do with al Qaeda's motivations. Americans were told they could topple the Baath Party government in Baghdad and transform the entire country of Iraq without breaking a sweat; top U.S. officials predicted the occupation would "[pay for itself.](#)" But nobody in power told Americans that their overseas adventures might require some belt-tightening at home or even slightly higher taxes; instead, we'd just run some bigger budget deficits (and dump the bill on our descendants). The all-volunteer force compounded the problem by confining the human costs to those who had chosen to serve and who were for the most part not well-connected politically. When the human costs did begin to mount, governments [did their best](#) to conceal them from view, at least for a while.

Given the related assumption that foreign intervention will be welcomed by the entire local population of whichever country we happen to be bombing, we still tend to be shocked when some local elements rebel or when sympathizers elsewhere rally to our opponents' banner and try to enact some form of revenge. We shouldn't be surprised at all: No state can attack or occupy another country without pissing off a lot of people, even if the disaffected remain a minority. And a few of those people will try to hit us back here at home. Most who try will fail, either because they are incompetent or unlucky, or because our law enforcement and intelligence agencies work pretty well. But as the Ottawa attack reminds us, a handful of our opponents will occasionally succeed.

Fortunately, the [actual damage and danger they pose is minor](#) compared to many other dangers. Yet we still tend to speak and act as if they are a mortal threat. Earlier this year, Canada's minister of public safety, Steven Blaney, warned that terrorism was "the leading threat to Canada's national security." If that is really the case, then Canadians are very safe indeed.

Moreover, our reaction to these events seems to be costing us a lot more than the damage that terrorists are likely to do. The 9/11 attacks caused nearly 3,000 deaths and roughly [\\$60 billion in property damage](#), for example, but the U.S. reaction to it -- including the Iraq and Afghan wars -- cost more than \$3 trillion and more than 6,000 soldiers' lives (not to mention the much, much larger totals of dead Iraqis and Afghans). In the U.S. case, let's not forget the creation of a vast and bloated Department of Homeland Security; the expense, inconvenience, and sheer aggravation we all face in those TSA lines; an increasingly intrusive intelligence community that sees itself as [beyond public accountability](#); and a security establishment that does not hesitate to send special forces and drones to an ever-increasing series of countries -- even when the results in Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere are repeatedly disappointing.

And then a lone gunman opens fire in Canada. Even when the loss of life or damage is small -- thankfully -- each new terrorist incident tends to magnify public concern and is used to justify increasingly stringent counterterrorism measures.

So which way will Canada go? I don't know, but consider what Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper [had to say](#) the day after the attack on parliament:

But let there be no misunderstanding: we will not be intimidated. Canada will never be intimidated. In fact, this will lead us to strengthen our resolve and redouble our efforts, and those of our national security agencies, to take all necessary steps to identify and counter threats and keep Canada safe here at home. Just as it will lead us to strengthen our resolve and redouble our efforts to work with our allies around the world and fight against the terrorist organizations who brutalize those in other countries with the hope of bringing their savagery to our shores.

If Prime Minister Harper wanted to show real leadership and do his fellow citizens a real favor, therefore, he would have begun by simultaneously mourning the dead soldier's sacrifice and by putting that loss in perspective. It is perfectly OK to say that Canada "won't be intimidated," but he should have gone on to explain why. The real reason is that the actual threat Canada faces is far too small to intimidate a wealthy, powerful, and cohesive country. The occasional isolated gunman (or even a whole flock of them) isn't a truly mortal threat to the overwhelming majority of Canadians.

If Harper cares to be more than just an opportunistic politician, he might ask himself if following America's lead in the Middle East was such a smart idea. The six F-18 aircraft that Canada has assigned to the war on the Islamic State (IS) aren't going to tip the balance in that fight; the challenge we face isn't a shortage of tactical aircraft.

Canada's contribution is a purely symbolic gesture of alliance solidarity rather than a meaningful military contribution, and it is far from obvious that bombing IS militants is the right approach to defeating them anyway. No matter how awful we think this movement is, killing more Muslims just plays into the extremists' narrative about Western violence and oppression. It may actually strengthen their political appeal. If you want to defeat extremism over the longer term, you need to defeat and discredit their *ideas*. Needless to say, F-18s are not designed for that particular job.

If Prime Minister Harper is genuinely interested in helping make Canada more secure, a bit of reflection on the efficacy of Canada's response is in order. The issue isn't about whether our leaders are being "intimidated"; it is simply about the efficacy of their reflexive response. A responsible leader ought to consider whether intervening in the turbulent and far-reaching convulsions now roiling the Arab and Islamic world is going to improve that situation -- and make his or her fellow citizens safer. Or is military intervention likely to make those convulsions worse and increase the very slight risk that his or her country now faces?

Unfortunately, sensible considerations such as these tend to get lost in the patriotic bluster that typically follows violent and dramatic events, and the overly muscular responses that we're already seeing in Ottawa make it more likely they will happen again.