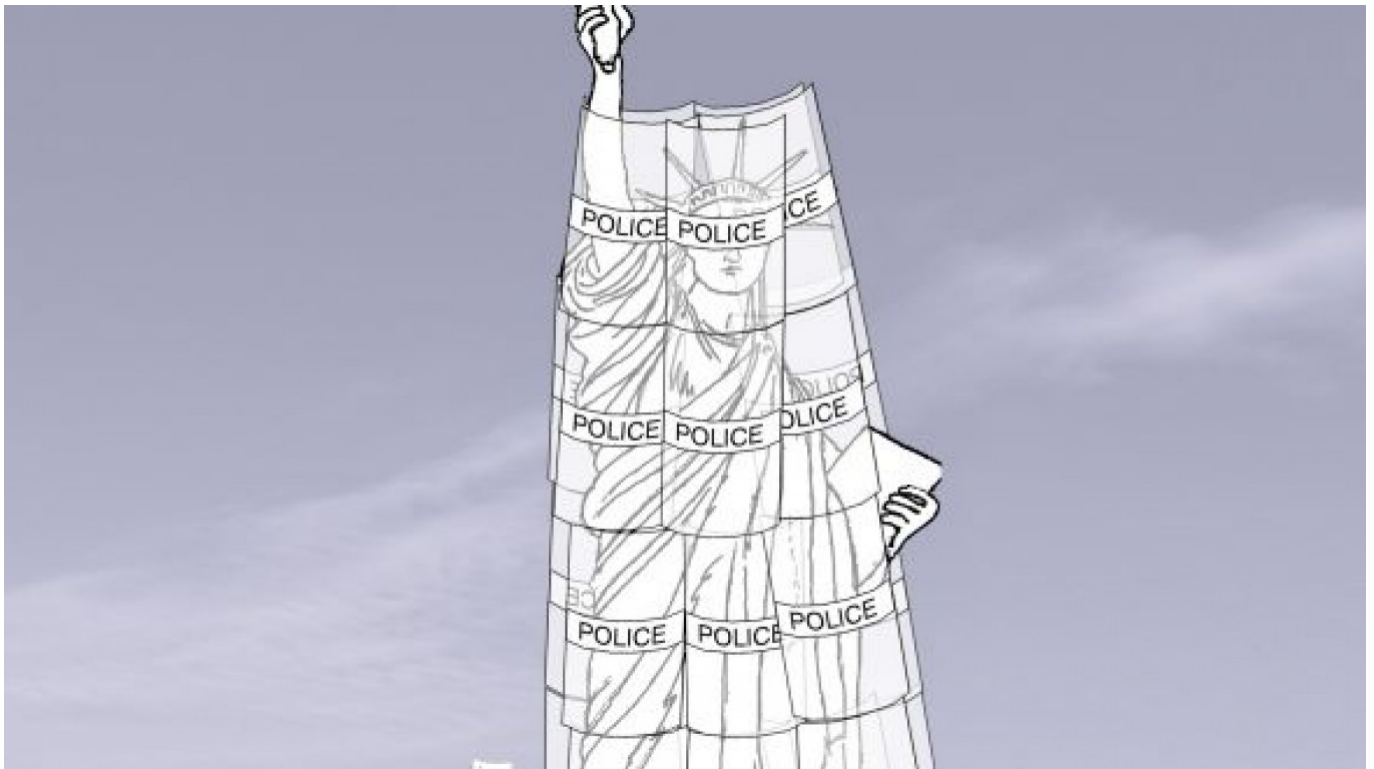


Tsarnaev Brothers and America's Enemy Within

By [Ian Buruma](#)

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To learn more about the Tsarnaev brothers, better known as "the Boston bombers," we can dig into their family histories in strife-torn Dagestan, or examine, once again, the lethal appeal of Islamist radicalism. But I doubt that this would be enlightening.

The elder brother, Tamerlan, who died in a gun battle with the police, appears to fit perfectly the profile of what the German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger calls "the radical loser." And his younger brother, Dzhokhar, recovering from gunshot wounds in a Boston hospital while waiting to be put on trial for his life, seems to have been a pathetic follower who acted less out of deep conviction than out of fraternal love.

The radical loser is the kind of young man who feels victimized by an unfeeling, uncaring world. That sour sense of rejection, felt by many confused youths, turns for some into a fierce desire for vengeance. Like Samson in the temple of Gaza, he wishes to destroy himself in a public act of violence, taking as many people as possible with him.

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Anything can trigger this final act: a lover's rejection, a job application denied. In the case of Tamerlan, a talented boxer, he was denied the chance to become a champion because he was not yet a U.S. citizen. Radical Islamism offered him a ready-made cause to die for.

More interesting, and in a way far more disturbing, has been the reaction in the U.S. to the Boston bombings, which killed three people and injured 264. Even after Tamerlan had died, and Dzhokhar, already wounded, was the only known fugitive, the Boston authorities decided to close down the entire city. Public transport was halted, trains to and from the city were stopped, shops and business closed, and citizens were told to stay home. Until the surviving bomber was found, Boston was reduced to a ghost town.

If two troubled young men with homemade bombs cobbled together from fertilizer and pressure cookers can have this effect on a major U.S. city, one can imagine how tempting their example must now be to other radical losers, not to mention radical groups. It shows how vulnerable a modern city can be when its leaders lose their nerve.

The authorities' overblown reaction — and that of much of the press — was all the odder for having occurred just as the U.S. Senate was voting down a bill that would have made it harder for known killers and mentally disturbed people to buy guns, or for private individuals to acquire weapons normally used only in warfare.

It seems as though Americans can tolerate a society in which schoolchildren and other innocents are regularly murdered by deranged men with weapons bought on the open market but erupt in collective hysteria when the killings are committed by people labeled as "terrorists."

This may reflect what people are accustomed to. The Spanish had grown so inured to acts of violence from Basque separatists that the murder of 191 people in Madrid by Islamist extremists in 2004 was met with remarkable sang-froid. When 52 people were killed in a suicide bombing on the London Underground the following year, the British, too, reacted with relative calm, having lived through years of Irish terrorist violence in the 1970s. Like the Spanish, they were used to it. Americans, despite the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, are not.

Worse than that, a number of Republican senators, including such luminaries as John McCain, called for stripping Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who is a U.S. citizen, of his legal rights and placing him before a military tribunal as an "enemy combatant," as though the 19-year-old college student were a soldier in a war against the U.S.

Exaggerated fear of outside enemies has always been part of the U.S. political landscape.

The "nation of immigrants" was traditionally regarded as a refuge from danger. The evil outside world should not be able to touch the Land of the Free. When it does — Pearl Harbor or 9/11 — all hell breaks loose.

Another factor may be the need for a common enemy in a country whose citizens come from so many different cultures and traditions. Besieged by Communists or Islamists, people feel a sense of belonging. Defense of the nation against dangerous outsiders — and their domestic agents, whether real or imagined — provides a powerful bond.

Such bonds can be useful, even necessary, in times of war. But the politics of fear poses a danger to the U.S. itself. The aim of political terrorist groups, such as al-Qaida, is to provoke retaliation and maximize publicity for their cause. As common criminals, such groups' members would not achieve this goal. But by claiming to be soldiers at war with the world's biggest military power, they gain sympathy, as well as recruits, among the radical losers and the disaffected.

Former President George W. Bush once explained terrorism as the expression of hatred for American freedom. But when terrorism results in torture of prisoners, ever more police surveillance and official threats to U.S. citizens' legal rights — or, for that matter, when a crime committed by two young immigrants causes an entire city to be shut down — Americans' government is harming their freedom more than any terrorist could ever hope to do.

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