

'Terror Returns'- but When Did It Go Away?

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"TERROR RETURNS" ran across USA Today's front page ([4/16/13](#)) in inch-high letters.

Below, the [story](#) it referred to had a smaller headline: "That Post-9/11 Quiet? It's Over."

[Rick Hampson](#) and Chuck Raasch's story began:

The blasts on Boylston Street were felt across the nation, shaking and sometimes shattering a fragile hope-formed slowly in the years since 2001—that maybe it won't happen here.

Not again.

Then it did.

But what happened in Boston that hasn't happened since September 11? All we really can say with confidence so far is that somebody tried to kill a large group of people; as USA Today ([12/19/12](#)) itself has reported, such mass slayings are alarmingly common in the United States, with 774 people killed in 156 incidents between 2006 and 2010. "Mass Killings Occur in USA Once Every Two Weeks," the headline pointed out.

✘ If one makes the assumption that the slaughter in Boston was politically motivated, and therefore meets the [definition of terrorism](#), it's still far from unique in post-September 11 America. The Southern Poverty Law Center has a lengthy [list](#) of right-wing terrorism incidents since the Oklahoma City bombing, more than half of which occurred since September 2001; Wikipedia has a [list](#) that's less extensive but more ideologically diverse. Among the incidents that you would hope that reporters covering a possible terrorism incident ought to recall:

- The [anthrax letters](#) that killed five people in late 2001.
- The two people shot at the El Al ticket counter at the Los Angeles Airport in July 2002.
- The Beltway sniper attacks that killed 10 people in the D.C. area in October 2002.
- The shootings at the Knoxville Unitarian Universalist Church that left two dead (killed by a gunman who explained that he "wanted to kill...every Democrat in the Senate & House, the 100 people in Bernard Goldberg's book [*100 People Who Are Screwing Up America*]" -FAIR Blog, [3/11/10](#)).
- The assassination of [George Tiller](#) in May 2009.
- The [crashing of a plane](#) into the IRS office in Austin, Texas, in February 2010, killing two (including the pilot).
- The Times Square bombing in May 2010.
- The [attempted bombing](#) of the Martin Luther King Day parade in Spokane,

Washington, in 2011.

- The Sikh temple massacre in Wisconsin, which killed six in August 2012.

This is just a small sampling of the violent political incidents since September 11. It's hard to see how you could have a hope, however fragile, that terrorism "won't happen here"—unless you weren't paying attention.

[Scott Shane](#) in the New York Times ([4/16/13](#)), meanwhile, didn't seem to be paying attention to what he was writing in the same story when he wrote:

The bombing of the Boston Marathon on Monday was the end of more than a decade in which the United States was strikingly free of terrorist attacks, in part because of far more aggressive law enforcement tactics in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Both this lead and the headline, "Bombings End Decade Without Terror in U.S.," were contradicted by the body of the piece, which quotes a terrorism expert as saying that "the post-9/11 decade saw about 40 percent fewer attacks in the United States than the decade before the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington." Sixty percent as much terrorism does not make for a "decade without terror," obviously, nor does it make the United States "strikingly free of terrorist attacks."

The headline and story were later re-edited to make them less inaccurate; now its "Bombings End Decade of Strikingly Few Successful Terrorism Attacks in U.S." and "the end of more than a decade in which the United States experienced strikingly few terrorist attacks." But it's still not clear what Boston would be the "end" of; if terrorist "success" is measured in body counts, the anthrax letters, the beltway snipers and the Sikh temple massacre were all more "successful."

The fact that journalists assigned to cover this story could fail to remember that political violence has been part of the United States landscape for the past decade and more is testament to a narrow definition that dismisses right-wing domestic violence as [not really terrorism](#)—and to a will to believe, for partisan or psychological reasons, that George W. Bush "[kept us safe](#)" after 9/11. The reality is not so comforting.

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