Irony, fear and the sentimentality of terrorism

By [Debra Dean Murphy](#)
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It seems odd in this era of "pervasive cultural irony" ([David Foster Wallace](#))
that Americans are so prone to sentimentality. We have been schooled to be cool
with the shocking, the disgusting, the daring, the outrageous–to strike postures of
ironic detachment and to mask our true feelings by displaying their opposite:
indifference, say, for disappointment or amusement for anger. Having recently
attended a reading featuring the poetry and fiction of undergraduates, I submit as
anecdotal evidence a roomful of students and professors who winced not a whit
as bland and clinical *reportage* about post-adolescent sexual experimentation was
lauded as literary art. In such a setting the desire to know what the students
actually longed to say is met by what Wallace says is irony's always unspoken
answer: "How totally banal of you to ask what I really mean."

And then something happens like a terrorist bombing at the Boston marathon, and
our "hip fatigue" (Wallace again) snaps out of itself, turns on the TV, and gets with
the program. Our cynical knowingness meets our deep insecurity–our fear that we
are not safe, that the world is a precarious place and not simply the site onto which
we map our rebel cool.

And yet even this fear is out of proportion, a mismatch for what we can't turn away
from on our screens. Our exaggerated sense of the risk of terrorism leads us to [villify
whole ethnic groups.](#) It instills an unquestioning reverence for the nonsense that
comes out of so-called experts on terror in the corporate media. Americans are, as
Wallace notes, united more by common images than by common beliefs, and thus
the iconography of terrorism–video and still shots of the maimed and dead, of
airplanes slamming into towers, all played on an endless loop on TV–makes of us
fearful practitioners of American civil religion, the central tenet of which seems to be
that we are an exceptional people whose suffering is always exceptional and whose
public lamenting of our exceptional suffering must go on and on and on. (And on
some more).

More subtly, perhaps, this fear reveals that we might not know who we really are or what our lives are for. Are we fearful because the American dream (so central to American civil piety) turns out to be empty pomp, and pressure-cooker bombs going off in Boston remind us that our pressure-cooker lives have been seduced by a vacuous fantasy?

And then our ironic-gazing-turned-fearful-watching can't help but make us sentimental. Sentimentality is, of course, excess; it is, as [Flannery O'Connor](#) observed,

> a distortion of sentiment usually in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence, and that innocence, whenever it is overemphasized in the ordinary human condition, tends by some natural law to become its opposite.

The script for narrating every act of violence against the U.S. and its citizens since 9/11 (and arguably before) contains the dominant theme that we are the innocent, the bedeviled, the blameless put-upon. It is given voice by liberals and conservatives alike; it is codified in our laws; ritualized in our civil piety; inscribed, it would seem, on our very hearts.

And this distortion of sentiment, this overemphasis on innocence makes us the opposite of innocent. In little more than a decade our exaggerated fears have helped to produce and sanction a sophisticated weapons system by which a CIA official in a windowless, Washington office can launch a [drone attack](#) a world away and still make it home in time for dinner and his kid's soccer game.

But that's not terrorism. That can't be terrorism. Not in a world where we can't name our deepest fears and in which sentimentality infuses our piety, our [politics](#), and our very definition of terrorism: that it is only the dangerous fanatic, the disgruntled immigrant who shatters lives and rains down terror on the innocent.

In this era of pervasive cultural irony, how can we miss the irony in that?

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