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# Voices on Campus: Linden MacIntyre

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# VOICES ON CAMPUS

## Linden MacIntyre

*On October 30, 2014, acclaimed Canadian journalist and award-winning novelist Linden MacIntyre visited BSU to deliver the Canadian Studies Program's Distinguished Canadian Annual Address. Widely revered for his investigative work on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's signature weekly television newsmagazine The Fifth Estate, MacIntyre tackled a wide variety of controversial subjects from capital punishment to police ethics to terrorism over a 50-year career. His talk came only days after two separate home-grown terror episodes had taken place in Quebec and Ontario, when two recent converts to radical Islam attacked and killed Canadian soldiers Patrice Vincent and Nathan Cirillo. What follows is an excerpted version of MacIntyre's address.*

For quite a while, I have been troubled by the inability or the unwillingness of the media, and TV in particular, to contribute much by way of understanding what “terrorism” really means. The word has become a political epithet. And it seems to justify any action in the cause of enhancing our security. So all behavior designated by politicians or cops as “terrorism” blends into a single, paranoid impression. Terrorists are out to get us. They hate our freedom. They hate our prosperity, our lovely lifestyle. And they must be stopped, by any means. The mass media have proven more effective at spreading and amplifying this unhelpful notion, often manufactured to serve political agendas, than in confronting the most important part of the famous media equation, the “why.” When there is a crisis, we put most of the emphasis on the who, the what, the where, and the when—all important details. But we avoid the why. The why takes too much time and brain power. It gets in the way of the news media imperative to be first.

I remember the first time that I felt overwhelmed by the why of a story that I was witnessing and trying to report on television. It was in late September 1982 in Beirut, Lebanon. I happened to be in the region for a story about the Palestinian diaspora when I was dispatched to Beirut to cover a massacre that had just occurred in two

adjacent refugee camps called Sabra and Shatila. It was over by the time I got there, but I was able to cover the gruesome aftermath. You can easily imagine the images, the stink, the flies, and the carnage... It was worse than I expected. But there was one image that, for years afterward, I couldn't get out of my mind. It was a certain



*Photo Credit: cbc.ca*

expression on the faces of a group of boys who were standing near me as we watched the recovery of a dead family from a little hut that had been blown up by the killers. The expression was one of cold, silent fury. And I remember thinking: this violence didn't start here, and it will not end here. This is part of a continuum, an epic tragedy.

That day I learned, as best I could, the what, the how, the when. And I was able to give a general impression of the why. The massacre was by a Christian militia group backed up by the Israeli Army. The victims were Palestinian civilians—women, kids and old men. It was an act of revenge for atrocities by Palestinian fighters in a Christian village called Damour, south of Beirut, which had been an act of revenge for atrocities by Christian fighters in a refugee camp called Karantina, which had been an act of revenge for an act of revenge, et cetera. The scale of the Sabra-Shatila Massacre was huge. Estimates ranged from 800 to more than 2,000... Certainly, all parties would now step back, see the absurdity of what they were involved in. But ... they didn't and the civil war went on for 18 more years.

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## Terror and its Legacies

Unimaginable horror often produces optimism. World War I, the “war to end all wars,” the Holocaust, 9/11: nothing like that could ever happen again. And we always hope that the optimists and the guardians of national security are right when they make that proclamation: “never again.” But I suppose after years of experiencing the reality, I wouldn’t bet on it. And here’s why: the reality that I saw etched in the expressions on the faces of those boys at Sabra and Shatila. They would have known the dead people... They were witnesses and survivors, and perhaps

Especially Canada. There’s a complacency in Canada bordering on smugness that we are immune from the violence of our time. Canada is a country [that was] founded on the ideals of conciliation, compromise and consensus. [W]e feel good about that... compromise and common sense [have given] us a special role to play in world affairs. But times have changed... There are now millions of Canadians whose lives have been scarred, directly or indirectly, by violence. They are refugees and migrants from violent places. Canada for 13 years has been at war in Afghanistan and we recently signed on

lot, one shot with an old hunting rifle as he stood on guard ceremonially at the National War Memorial in Ottawa. Now, I’ve had experience with covering violent conflict including terrorism, and not just Sabra and Shatila. Twenty years ago, I helped prepare an hour-long documentary called “Seeds of Terror.” I’ve done provocative, even speculative stories about the Bush wars in the Gulf in ’91 and ’03. I was part of a team that documented the radicalization of one of the 9/11 hijackers Ziad Jarrah who, until a couple of years before September the 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, had been a drinking, dancing, easygoing party animal. I was part of a major examination of Islamist violence in Europe by the CBC and PBS Frontline, the Bombings in Madrid and London, and the phenomenon called “home-grown terror.” [T]here isn’t anything theological about [this] modern phenomenon; it’s reactionary, a response to psychotic feelings of exclusion among people who are probably excluded because they are unbalanced and extreme by nature... [The home-grown acts in Canada were] not the beginning of an insurrection, but a crime; a crime that has become more common but still an act of deviant behavior by a misfit.

The violence we call terrorism is a kind of invasive weed with roots deep in the soil of history. Modern technology creates the alarming possibility that these roots can now link up and spread unpredictably, compromising

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the most profound and lasting consequences of violence are the changes that occur in the hearts and minds of survivors. [They] would live in grief and outrage, and would be altered by it. Many of them driven mad by it. They would take the madness everywhere they went for the remainder of their lives and they would pass it on to their children, and their children’s children.

What I saw in the stern, young faces of those boys, most of them not much more than 12 years old, [was] a warning signal: the consequences of violence migrate in time and space, and are felt in distant places throughout time. And given the violence of the twentieth century... it isn’t hard to understand why so many bad things happen unexpectedly in the new millennium and in unlikely places, like Canada.

to a strange campaign of violence in Iraq and Syria. We have been, and are, part of a violent response to violence, and we can’t expect not to be infected by the consequences.

[In Canada, in October 2014, twice in the space of three days] two crazy guys killed two unsuspecting soldiers—one in a deliberate hit-and-run in a parking

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vulnerable minds, and that there is a predictable continuum from disillusionment to alienation to piety to fanaticism to murder.

## Fearism

[We] are facing two insuperable realities each time we are faced with what we now impulsively call terrorism. The first is that people tend not to want to do a lot of thinking in a crisis. We want information, and we want reassurance that we are safe, that this is a particular situation that can be attributed to an evil individual or group, and that the situation is under control and exceptional. The second is a bit more complex and it is pure speculation on my part...I came to the opinion...in the months after 9/11 that while that project was without a doubt a terrorist attack in every sense, it revealed something terribly disturbing about public vulnerability. I began to suspect in the aftermath of 9/11 that the new laws and the security establishment, the orange



*Photo Credit: Caitlin Seddon*

power. To advance an ideological thought becomes hard to resist. I don't think it's unduly speculative to suggest that when people are afraid, they are inclined to suspend the admirable quality of skepticism. We are inclined to do what our leaders tell us to do in times of

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and red alerts, the intolerable paranoia in airports and other public places, that the other side of the coin of terrorism is a sinister reality called "fearism."

Fearism is an impulse to take political and commercial advantage of the circumstances created by an act of terrorism: public confusion, volatile feelings of vulnerability, systemic fear. To consolidate that in that moment. To consolidate political and economic

peril. People in positions of leadership take on almost infallible qualities in a time of crisis. Anybody with a headset or a T-shirt or traffic pylon, a badge or gun or title becomes a figure of authority... For politicians in a democracy, it's awfully tempting to take advantage of this momentary suspension of our critical faculties, our instinct to become followers, and to accept restrictions on our freedom in the name of freedom, our willingness to buy into propositions that would be absurd and intolerable

at any other time. And the mass media play into this, it troubles me to say, because we become unwitting conduits for the fear that spreads among us. We become political facilitators, transforming rational and conscientious individuals into reactionary units in a frightened biomass. Given that, and the heat of the moment, people are screaming for information, even if it's just fantasy or gossip. The media will struggle to oblige, and to make a lot of advertising money in the process.

In times of war, we necessarily accept the intolerable on a temporary basis. Conscription, censorship, rationing—emotional manipulation through systemic propaganda, all sorts of stuff that would make Hobbes and Orwell grin and nod their heads in their respective graveyards. But this normal phenomenon becomes an enduring problem when we allow the imperatives of crisis to become embedded in our minds and in our laws. Historically, as a crisis wanes, we seem to regain our senses and perspective.

We should be very careful that the seeds of terror planted in a violent century don't blossom in the future as tentacles of tyranny... I have often in the course of my career as a reporter, a career that has exposed me to a lot of conflict, violence, and sometimes terror, been inspired by a line from the great American politician, Franklin Roosevelt. Everybody knows the line from Roosevelt's First Inaugural Address in 1933. It's one of those simple insights always worth remembering and repeating. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

And I would add that the best antidote for fear, the only antidote, in fact, is reason.