The Message from Boston
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America has grown up. Public reaction to the Boston Marathon bombings and the identity of the perpetrators reveals a very different nation from the one reflected in the traumatized and occasionally hysterical responses to the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. The magnitude of the two attacks was, of course, very different – thousands were killed and major national landmarks destroyed in 2001, whereas the Boston bombing killed three people and injured roughly 260. Still, it was the first major attack on the United States since 2001, and the contrast between now and then is instructive.

Consider the social-media buzz within minutes of the bombing. The New York Post, a tabloid, emitted a stream of sensational reportage claiming that 12 people had been killed and that a Saudi national was “under guard” at a Boston hospital. Veteran reporters and columnists immediately countered with questions about the Post’s sources and the lack of confirmation for what it was reporting. Kerri Miller of Minnesota Public Radio tweeted that she had covered the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, which was first reported as a gas explosion, then as an attack by foreign terrorists, and finally as the work of domestic extremists.

This caution and restraint stemmed directly from a collective awareness of the many innocent Muslim-Americans who suffered from Americans’ ignorance and wrath following the 2001 attacks. Indeed, equally striking was the number of pundits who suggested that the Boston bombing was homegrown, more similar to the Oklahoma City attack or the mass shooting last December of first graders in Newtown, Connecticut, than to the 2001 plot. The America of 2013, unlike the America of 2001, is willing to recognize its own pathologies before looking for enemies abroad.

Moreover, even amid the shock and grief fueled by images of the bombing and the many victims with shattered, shredded limbs, Americans found at least a little bandwidth to comprehend that bombs are still a feature of daily life in Iraq and Syria. Today’s America is one that recognizes that it is not the world’s only country, and by no means the worst off.

Many commentators remarked on Americans’ resilience, and that of Bostonians in particular. Much like Londoners after the attacks on their public-transport system in July 2005, Boston’s citizens were determined to prove that life goes on. American flags flew at half-mast; President Barack Obama addressed the nation; the country mourned with the families of the victims and with the young athletes who will never run again. But even amid a massive police manhunt and a citywide lockdown, planners were already focusing on ensuring that next year’s marathon will redeem the tragedy of this one.

Likewise, when it became clear that the bombing suspects, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, were Chechens who had emigrated from the Russian province of Dagestan, the reaction – at least among regular participants in public debate – was far more nuanced than a decade ago. Back
then, Fareed Zakaria’s cover story for Newsweek – entitled “The Politics of Rage: Why Do They Hate Us?” – painted a broad-brush portrait of Muslim youth in the Middle East raging against brutal and oppressive dictatorships funded and supported by the US government. Zakaria was right in many ways, but he had to bring his readers up to speed on six decades of history in a few short pages.

By contrast, David Remnick, the editor of The New Yorker, weighed in with a piece on the Tsarnaev brothers that opened with Stalin’s banishment of the Chechen people “from their homeland in the northern Caucasus to Central Asia and the Siberian wastes.” Remnick’s lead-in was intended not to introduce a summary account of the brutal and violent history of the Chechen people, but to frame a detailed account of the specific history of the Tsarnaev family.

Remnick included a series of tweets from the younger brother, Dzhokhar, only 19, beginning with a message from March 12, 2012 (“a decade in America already – I want out”). In Remnick’s words, the tweets show “a young man’s thoughts: his jokes, his resentments, his prejudices, his faith, his desires.” Even amid Americans’ anger and grief at the senselessness of what the Tsarnaev brothers did, we can see them not as faceless embodiments of Islamic rage, but as individuals, as human – even as sad.

The ability to distinguish individual features from the mass, to reach nuanced judgments, and to control initial impulses of rage and revenge are hallmarks of maturity in societies and people alike. But America has also grown up in another way, learning to choose transparency over secrecy, and to rely on the power of its citizens.

After September 11, 2001, the security expert Stephen E. Flynn called on the government to “engage the American people in the enterprise of managing threats to the nation.” A decade later, the FBI immediately called on all who attended the Boston Marathon to send photos and videos of the area around the finish line – anything that could help investigators identify the bombers. The resulting flood of information enabled the authorities to identify the two suspects far sooner than would have been possible had they relied on traditional police methods.

The US of 2013 is both more reflective than it was a decade ago and more consciously connected to the world. The result is a citizenry that is less likely to interpret events, even attacks, in simplistic and often counter-productive us-versus-them terms.

The cancer of violence is all too often found within the US, fed in part by the same inequality, alienation, lack of opportunity, and fervent search for absolute truth that we discern abroad. The brutal repression of Chechnya, violent Islamic extremism, an American cult of violence, immigrants’ dashed dreams, and plenty of other factors still to be uncovered create a complex pattern of risk that is difficult to unravel and even harder to minimize. But seeing it clearly is an important first step.