



Strength in humour

By John Robson

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Now that we've observed a day of solemn remembrance of the war dead, the wounded, all who faced the horrors of combat or stood on guard, let us recall the noble cause of liberty under law they bravely served, and contemplate how desperately we still need such courage and resolve in a menacing world. Then let's have a good belly laugh.

No, I haven't taken leave of my so-called senses reading newspaper stories about Iran and Saudi Arabia seeking seats on the UN's marquee women's rights organization. Nor am I simply recommending that we laugh in the face of death, sneer at doom, and chuckle at catastrophe ... though sometimes that seems the best plan when petrified by the spinelessness of the West facing mortal perils. Rather, I'm suggesting we all fight back by watching that Volkswagen Polo ad on You-Tube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ad4fagTyaM4.

Go ahead. It's only 22 seconds, and I promise they'll be well spent. I'm not being frivolous here. Or rather, I'm being seriously frivolous. For those of you ill at ease with the Interwebs, the ad shows a grim-looking character in one of those black-and-white scarves silly campus progressives think stand for global justice, coming out of his apartment, getting into his car, driving past innocent Westerners having normal days, parking outside a cafe, pulling out a detonator as we glimpse his suicide vest, then pushing the button only to have the resulting explosion entirely contained within the car, after which the slogan "Polo. Small but tough" appears on the screen.

Wait, some may say. There's nothing funny about terrorism. It's deadly serious.

It kills and maims and leaves devastated kin and friends. It can paralyse societies.

I assure you I know all this, and support the most vigorous possible efforts to make terrorists become dead. But humour is not a frivolous pastime, an empty hobby for fools and children, to be put aside when serious things happen. It is a way of seeing the world that illuminates faster than poetry and gives much better light. It draws the most essential connections in the most unmistakable form.

Laughter is the most potent political weapon in a democracy because once people see what is funny about a candidate or office-holder, that person's career is finished ... unless he or she sees it too.

Ronald Reagan, for instance, drove many people mad because he was not only seriously right-wing, he told better Ronald Reagan jokes than almost anyone else, like confessing during a crisis to "burning the mid-day oil".

Because he got the jokes about his supposed laziness, and enjoyed them, people knew he understood his failings and was on some sort of guard against them.

Contrast Jimmy Carter, dour, petulant failed president and post-presidential embarrassment.

Now consider Islamist terrorists of the sort plainly lampooned by Volkswagen to sell cars.

Their attitude was perfectly captured by Ayatollah Khomeini's dictum "There is no humour in Islam"; which I consider not merely blasphemy but a serious political weakness. Islamists might snicker at our agonies but they cannot really laugh at us because they do not understand us. And they absolutely cannot laugh at themselves because they do not understand themselves either. They are blinded by hatred and we can see.

Communist regimes had the same problem, by the way. The Soviet system generated endless subversive jokes, but its official pronouncements were not just humourless in their critique of the West, they were entirely unaware of their own chronic tone of self-parody that made them instantly, memorably and indelibly unbelievable to all but malevolent halfwits.

I repeat: I know that terrorists kill and maim and traumatize and bereave. But I also know they are for the most part stunningly inept.

Be glad those who hate us are so stupid they fail to overwhelm our often pitifully feeble security measures.

And rejoice, also, that in a free society a grave national security blunder triggers not just sombrely indignant prose but editorial cartoons, comedians' rants and YouTube videos that make us laugh because they are so true, and show us what is wrong and how to fix it.

Islamists never do that. If you haven't seen it, go online, find Patrick Henry's It's in the Koran; song spoofing radical Islamist haters, and consider whether, despite everything, we will triumph because we can write this sort of song and they cannot.

Now think again of the war dead, the solemn Vimy monument, those cemeteries in Normandy, Ottawa's tomb of the unknown soldier.

And remember that our soldiers fought, and fight, so we may be free, to speak truth to power and laugh without fear.

There is humour in the West, inexhaustible, joyful and mighty. We mock anyone and anything. We joke and we see. So go ahead.

Watch the ad and laugh freely.

John Robson appears weekly.

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