Terror

This week’s massacre of 32 innocent students and faculty members at Virginia Tech is utterly sickening. It is impossible to imagine the demons that would drive a person to commit such a heinous act. Our thoughts and prayers are with everyone who has been touched by this unspeakable horror.

Sadly, the shootings at Virginia Tech remind us all of what a dangerous world we live in today. Before the invention of gunpowder, people resolved grievances with hand-to-hand combat. Even as recently as 200 years ago, people who disagreed might settle their differences in a duel. In 1804, the Vice President of the United States, Aaron Burr, and the former Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton (best known today from his portrait on the $10 bill), exorcised their demons by fighting a duel. The result: just one death (Hamilton’s).

Today, science and technology have placed tremendous destructive power in virtually anyone’s hands. Unfortunately, there are some people who have no scruples about using such power, whether to vent their inner rage or to make a political “statement,” killing and wounding scores of unsuspecting innocents and often causing enormous property destruction as well.

Regrettably, we are getting accustomed to seeing examples of this on a regular basis, and in all parts of the world.

Often, the technology employed is not very advanced. Simple materials like potassium chlorate, a widely available bleach, and ammonium nitrate, a common fertilizer, were combined and detonated in a small truck in 1995, destroying the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, taking 168 innocent lives and injuring 800 more.

Moreover, firearms today are far more lethal than the six-shooters of old. Today’s semi-automatic pistols hold up to 15 rounds in a clip that can be emptied in a matter of seconds.

Unfortunately, science has made even more terrible power accessible to menacing characters such as Iran’s president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and North Korea’s “dear leader,” Kim Jong-il, either of whom may well be psychologically capable of unleashing it.

What has happened to “civilized” society?

In my lifetime, things have changed with dizzying rapidity. My generation struggled through World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and finally the collapse of the Soviet Union. At that point, everyone hoped we would finally enter a prolonged period of peace and prosperity.

About 25 years ago, I was awakened to some new and terrifying possibilities when, at a conference, I found myself seated at dinner with the then-director of the FBI, William Webster. I asked him what he felt was the biggest threat to peace and expected him to discuss Communism and the Soviet Union. (The USSR was then still in the hands of inveterate Cold Warriors, “glasnost” was an unheard-of concept, and the fall of the Berlin Wall lay seven years in the future.) However, Webster, who would later serve as director of the CIA, spoke instead of his concern about terrorism, which he felt would soon reach U.S. shores.

He was so right.

There are obviously many differences between the events at Virginia Tech and politically motivated terrorism, but I consider each to be just different points on the broad spectrum of violence as public “theater.” They are all examples of terror, plain and simple, no matter the size of the event or the motive behind it.

Terror can happen anywhere – in crowded cities, on peaceful campuses far from an urban center, and even in resort and tourist destinations. In recent years, we have seen attacks on hotels and resorts killing innocent visitors and workers in places as diverse as Indonesia (Bali – twice! – and Jakarta), Egypt (Sinai – three times!), Jordan (Amman), and Israel (Netanya). That’s today’s new reality.

As we mourn those slain at Virginia Tech and grieve for their families, we must rededicate ourselves to making sure that an act of terror does not strike in the areas where Outrigger and OHANA do business. It is time to make plans, review safety procedures, prepare for the unexpected, and – always! – be alert to things that appear out of the ordinary.