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A FEW TERRORIZING THOUGHTS

“If you reject the food, ignore the customs, fear the religion and avoid the people, you might better stay at home. You are like a pebble thrown into water; you become wet on the surface but you never become part of the water”

- James Michener

Well, aren't we having a special August? Talk about the other shoe dropping in our nation's capital. The news coming out of Washington would indicate that Immelda Marcos' entire closet has come tumbling out at once.

The good news is that no one has yet announced an organized bus tour including Monica Lewinsky's childhood home. Linda Tripp has not yet been selected to host a theme cruise to the Bahamas. But I have confidence in my industry. It didn't take Carnival Cruise Lines long to host the OJ Trial Theme cruise, although OJ didn't personally sail since he was heavily involved in finding the real murderers who are, evidently, holed up somewhere on one of our nation's premier golf courses.

It's enough to make you want to leave the country – but you can't do that, because we're back on the Holy War Hit Parade once again. There's a new villain with a smaller army than Saddam Hussein or Kernal Kindadaffy and the same cast of “tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it without raising any objection, without consulting my attorney, without taking out insurance, without once thinking of any moral or ethical implications, and without showering” followers.

In short, dear friends, the spigot of fear and intimidation has been turned on. And since we as a people, decided a while back that the world will pretty much have to come to us on our terms, we are frothing at the mouth for the opportunity to tell them other countries to stick their tourism where the sun don't shine. We'll vacation somewhere safe where our money is wanted. Can't you see a model of the Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas these days anyway? And isn't the shopping arcade in Caesar's Palace modeled after the Roman Forum? You think we need to visit the Pyramids when we can stay at the Luxor Hotel for seventy-nine bucks a night?

We know little of world politics, we barely handle the grammatical requirements of our own language, perish the thought that we would consider speaking another, and our knowledge of world geography is as awesome as our knowledge of the vast country to our north. Quick, name the current Canadian Prime Minister.

But we're going to react. The letters and the phone calls have started coming in. Is it safe to travel to Morocco? (Of course it isn't. You might get brushed to death by a Hermes scarf as a horde of French tourists passes you at close range in the market).

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Over the years I have observed an attitude that I refer to as the “over there” syndrome. It is either ok or not ok to go “over there”. For years the Greek islands and Turkish mainland have seen the ebb and flow of American tourism change rapidly based on political and military events taking place in the Middle East. Somehow, the geography gets tied together.

True, there is an advisory in effect at the moment; a “worldwide Caution” issued by the U.S. State Department on August 20th. The core paragraph reads as follows:

“In light of the recent U.S. military strikes against terrorist targets in Afghanistan and Sudan, and possible threats to Americans and American interests overseas, the department of State urges U.S. citizens traveling or residing abroad to review their security practices, to remain alert to the changing situation, and to exercise much greater caution than usual”.

Would someone tell me exactly what that means? Are they telling me I have to skip my afternoon in the food hall at Harrod’s and stay in my hotel room or are they saying that I am safer driving the family along the New Jersey Turnpike, stopping off to visit quaint Amish farms that charge \$4.48 a pound for peaches. Or maybe you’re just supposed to stay around for the summer in Chicago, visiting all the neighborhood events like Bridgeport’s Dees and Donts Festival.

Yesterday, I spoke to the State Department, primarily because it was easier getting them on the phone than the Microsoft Help Desk, and I offered to rewrite the State Department Advisory so it makes sense to those considering travel abroad in the next sixty days. They agreed, because I told them I still hadn’t dry-cleaned the suit I wore seventeen years ago when I shook hands with Bill Clinton at a Stuckey’s just off the Warm Springs exit of the Interstate. So here’s the first draft of the kind of State Department Advisory I’d like to see issued in the interest of truthful travel:

“In light of the fact that we just lobbed some cruise missiles at two countries called Sudan and Afghanistan, you might want to call off your holiday should you be scheduled to take a package tour to either place. Your State department is concerned about this area, primarily because it was us who armed the Afghani rebels in the first place (remember Dan Rather sneaking around the country at night in the top half of a bathrobe?) These guys are really fanatical. They believe in an afterlife and that what you do on earth determines what happens to you when you die. Really weird stuff.

They’ve threatened to take action against Americans all over the world. That’s why we want you to be extra cautious if you travel. Be even more cautious in your bathtub, because it is statistically much more likely that you will be killed there than you will by terrorist activity in the rest of the world. Even more dangerous is the ride to O’Hare Airport. You might think about walking instead of driving there.

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All Americans traveling abroad need to keep alert to the current political situation. So instead of just "reading" the Lifestyle and Sports section of USA Today on the plane overseas, try glancing at the first section as well. Or, consider purchasing a real newspaper.

Order Canadian flag patches to sew on the outside of your clothing. No one ever gets mad at Canada because the rest of the world knows even less about the place than we do.

Finally, be calm and remember one important fact. The worst period of terrorism directed towards Americans occurred during the early and mid eighties, punctuated by the TWA hijacking. While that was going on, the chance of an American tourist being injured by terrorism was computed as one in 65,000. The chance of an American adult male being attacked walking on the main street of Baltimore, Maryland after 10 p.m. was, that same year, estimated at one in a hundred."

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