

We build `em, but they don't come.

By Michael Ball

Rice. Anthrax. What's the difference?

Well this past Valentine's Day, in Boston, a handful of white grain leaking out of an envelope shut down the downtown tourist mall, Faneuil Hall, for the day. Rather, the locals chose safety over courage and wariness over reason.

This should not be remarkable in a land where Army surplus gas masks and plastic drop cloths have become the symbols and means of hopes for health. From Boise to San Diego to Hot Springs, Americans seem convinced that their city or town or farm is precisely the place that terrorists will strike.

The difference is that much of the nation is new to this knowledge – that they so represent the U.S.A. that they are the obvious targets. In contrast, Boston has been waiting for centuries. This is only the newest enemy to not yet attack.

We Bostonians have maintained ceaseless vigilance in particular since the destruction of the World Trade Towers. On Saturday, September 22, 2001, at 7:30 a.m., Boston's Haymarket was pretty quiet. So was the City Hall area, except for a shrill revivalist preaching the electronically amplified need to come to God, and quickly.

Whether it was defiance or just the need for some produce that came in colors that that same God intends, I was there. Quite a few regulars skipped that ritual. The *Globe* reported the next day that both locals and tourists were wary of downtown after the warning of U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft. Acting Governor Jane Swift and Mayor Tom Menino got the calls. Then later Friday and Saturday, everybody backpedaled. Nah, nobody really wanted to terrorize Boston, and no, there wasn't anything ominous about September 22, our governor and mayor said.

Well, in the Haymarket stalls, there were jalapeños the size of professional wrestlers' thumbs and the navel oranges are back in season. Having only been here 22 years, I know I'll never seem like a native. I just can't get the hang of knowing THEY are coming for us.

With Logan Airport as a launching pad for incredible horror a short time ago, who could blame our politicians for caution and a bit of Chicken Little (or Attorney General Little) paranoia? Then again, this is quintessential Bostonian melodrama brought into the moment.

Our local plotters and loudmouths helped foment the Revolutionary War and several initial skirmishes took place in and around Boston. In 1776, the British forces destroyed the crude fort at what is now Castle Island. Then for some inexplicable reason, the action moved to places like New York, New Jersey, Virginia and of all places, South Carolina, where the major battles were fought and the future of the new nation determined.

Yet, no fools we, Boston was ready by the War of 1812. We built Fort Lee near Salem, in case Boston was invaded. We made a real fort on Castle Island, in case Boston was invaded. But it wasn't.

We were ready by the Civil War, with the massively armed Fort Warren to guard the harbor, in case Boston was invaded. That made a nifty prison for Confederates and spies, complete with at least one ghost. But Boston wasn't attacked.

Never mind. We were ready for the Spanish-American War, the Great War, World War II, Korea. Fort Warren was ever ready for the invasion and the attack. Surely its mere presence must have dissuaded the hordes. Its guns were fired and foundations cracked – with practice volleys only, but still no invading armies or navies arrived or even approached.

In 1958, the MDC took over the fort for less military purposes. The Harbor Islands have more recently become a national park. How shall we protect ourselves from a sea assault now?

The last invaders allegedly were sea serpents locals claim to have seen off Castle Island in 1818. That created quite a stir, but no recorded damage. Perhaps those were just the scouts or perhaps just the famous Cape Ann monsters taking a vacation.

Yet, Bostonians know full well that our Hub, our City on the Hill, is the envy of the nation and the world. If the enemy sweeps down upon us, this would be the place for them to seek, would it not?

We have waited long for invasions that have not come, but we have been as ready as the Englishman who always has his broolly, knowing the dangers of his environment. If we are wrong and not the A list of cities to attack, we should certainly be grateful in good fortune rather than insulted by exclusion. We should not think of ourselves as the wallflower, rather more like Dylan Thomas' Bessie Bighead in *Under Milk Wood*. She was the hired help who put her posy on the grave of Gomer Owen, "who kissed her once by the pig sty when she wasn't looking and never kissed her again although she was looking all the time."

-30-

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