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As the second anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks has approached, I've wondered why so many of my fellow Americans don't seem to have much of a sense of proportion about that day, its aftermath, or other world events.

That point was brought home to me by the *Oregonian's* decision to publish an editorial cartoon by Chip Bok of the *Akron Beacon Journal* lampooning the supposed *laissez-faire* attitude of French citizens toward the deaths caused by Europe's recent heat wave. In the same edition of the paper (30 August), an article on page A6 briefly mentions that the estimated death toll in France is well over 11,000 -- approaching 4 times the number of people killed in the attacks of September 11.

In the U.S., people with no connection to that day's events — people who'd never been to New York or the District of Columbia or Pennsylvania and knew no one killed, injured, or affected — wept. People around the world sent their condolences. Politicians, pundits, and just about everyone else in the country has uttered some variation on the phrase: "It changed everything." We've sent American troops to topple two regimes and battle terrorism worldwide, changed how we travel, what we worry about, and how we view our Constitutional freedoms because of that day. Terrorists killed roughly 1 out of every 80,000 people in the U.S. on 9/11.

In France, 1 out of every 5,000 citizens died from heat during August. A comparable toll in the United States would have been around 50,000 dead. Apparently, someone at the *Oregonian* thinks that we'd find that amusing. Certainly, Chip Bok did.

The French wouldn't go along with the Bush Administration's plans to invade Iraq and they became the designated scapegoat for war supporters, despite the fact that the French were on the same side of the debate as every other major world power except Great Britain. They became just another country whose misfortunes Americans could ignore or mock. When one of Bok's characters responds "French toast" to the question "What do you call your papa?", we're supposed to chuckle and move on to reading the rest of the Commentary page. On the other hand, when a smaller proportion of people in the U.S. die, we expect the world to feel our pain.

The 9/11 deaths were caused by human action, not weather, but the fact that Bok and the *Oregonian* feel that makes what's happened in France a laughing matter instead of a solemn tragedy is appalling. If we as a country will snicker about thousands of elderly women and men dying alone in their apartments simply because America loves to hate the French this year, how sincere do we seem to others when we say we're in Iraq to make Iraqi lives better? (Estimates of 10,000 civilians killed by coalition forces out of a population of about 19,000,000 bring that ratio to 1:1,900.) The United States shares a lot of history and culture with France; can we convince anyone that we have anything but selfish interest in the welfare of nations and people with whom we have less in common, if we'll laugh at the deaths of French grandmothers?

It's not as if this is a matter of free speech. Bok isn't the *Oregonian's* editorial columnist. Nobody would have had to prevent his cartoon from running by pulling it after it had been submitted. It ran with a totally unrelated column from the *Washington Post* about American and French political wrangling over international forces entering Iraq. Someone likely pulled this cartoon off of the wire services and -- perhaps because it was the only France-related item that day, maybe because they thought it was a hoot -- slapped it onto the page to go with the column.

Just in case anyone's feeling superior thinking Americans cope with the heat so much better than the French, how we'd never let that many elderly people succumb to the heat alone in their apartments, let's go back to

1995. In one week that July, over 700 people died during a heat wave in the Chicago area. Bodies were stacked in refrigeration trailers donated by meatpackers outside the medical examiner's offices.

I wonder if the *Oregonian* would have published the cartoon if Bok had used the same setup for someone whose "papa" had perished at the World Trade Center or the Pentagon on 9/11 instead of a 'decadent' French heat wave. What would the punch line have been for that one?