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Doomsday Scenario: Chris Carter Foresaw 9/11

By ED MARTIN

JUNE 20, 2002 – Ever since September 11, and throughout the firestorm of its accusation-heavy aftermath, our political leaders have asserted that nobody ever could have imagined a terrorist act as horrific as the piloting of commercial airliners into crowded office buildings.

Perhaps they should talk to Chris Carter.

Carter, one of the more imaginative writers working in television, is the creator and executive producer of both Fox' former smash "The X-Files" and its spin-off, "The Lone Gunmen." The latter – a short-lived series that under-performed in the Nielsen ratings – premiered on March 4, 2001 with a storyline that now seems horrific in its familiarity: The halting of a terrorist plot to fly a passenger jet into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. To put it another way, six months before one of the darkest days in American history a broadcast entertainment series presented a fictional version of a scenario shockingly similar to the awful events of that day. For the record, the episode was not actually written by Carter, but by Vince Gilligan, John Shiban and Frank Spotnitz.

When a friend of mine brought this to my attention the other day I responded with disbelief. I had seen that pilot, and several other episodes of "Gunmen," early last year. So had many of my friends, in and out of the media. Yet, none of us picked up on this queasy coincidence last fall, or at any time since. This might be explained by the understanding that "Gunmen" was an unremarkable and, apparently, easily forgotten show. But that doesn't explain the utter absence of commentary on this circumstance by the traditionally

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thrill-seeking media. This seems to be collective amnesia of the highest order. If any outlets did indeed offer comment or reportage, the rest of the media, in a startling break from the ordinary, failed to immediately re-purpose that timely content.

The final act of the "Gunmen" pilot, which seemingly made no impact last year, now contains some of the most deeply disturbing images ever created for a scripted entertainment program. One of the Gunmen, John Byers, is actually aboard a crowded 747 that is under the control of a group of computer savvy terrorists who have accessed the plane's on-board navigation system and are steering it toward the towers. (The terrorists are on the ground, not in the plane.) In a sequence that now seems utterly unfathomable, Byers easily enters the cockpit to convey the troubling news and the pilots politely chastise him – until they realize that he is right and that someone else is indeed controlling the plane. Chillingly, much of the Manhattan skyline later becomes visible through the cockpit window – with the towers at dead center.

On the ground, Byers' two partners, also computer savvy, determine that the terrorists are steering the plane specifically toward the corner of Liberty and Washington Streets in lower Manhattan. They even access a detailed computerized flight path. With mere moments to spare, the Gunmen manage to override the terrorists, terminating their control of the plane. The pilots take over and pull the plane upward. As seen through the window of the cockpit, the airliner curves up the side of one of the towers. The plane is then shown skimming the top corner of the building, passing so closely that it scrapes a fence on its roof. It's a night flight, so the near miss seemingly goes unseen by everyone except Byers and the pilots.

The Gunmen, a crime fighting, government conspiracy-busting trio who were regulars on "The X-Files" and were unwisely killed off by Carter during one of that show's last episodes (eliminating possible appearances in upcoming "X-Files" feature films), determine that the terrorist group responsible was actually a faction of our own government. These malefactors were seeking to stimulate arms manufacturing in the lean years following the end of the Cold War by bringing down a plane in New York City and fomenting fears of terrorism.

Following the attacks of September 11, our government cobbled together a group of film and television writers and asked them to create fantastic terrorism scenarios, so that thought could be given to (and preparations made for?) possible responses to unthinkable horrors. A second look at this episode of "Gunmen" perhaps further justifies such action.

Might there be additional episodes of past and present television series that warrant such scrutiny during these increasingly unnerving times? How about the pilot of "Fox' "24," which reveals how a terrorist might skillfully blow a commercial airliner out of the sky and parachute herself to safety? ❑

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