

THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

National Security and the 2016 Election

Arriving in the era of the so-called Islamic State, the next presidential contest will focus on foreign policy. And only one candidate so far has any experience.

By Robert Kuttner

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You may recall a campus slogan from another era, "Hey, hey. Ho, ho. Western civ. has got to go." That was at Stanford University in 1987, part of a wave of demands to limit traditional courses featuring dead white males, in favor of cultural pluralism. Sure enough, many colleges a generation later have more varied courses.

Today, however, there are people out there who feel that western civilization really does have to go -- not the courses but the thing itself. And they seem to be gaining.

Call me sentimental, call me privileged, but I have a certain fondness for western civilization. Let me count the ways.

I like the rule of law. I like the Enlightenment sensibility that a wide variety of religions and viewpoints must be accommodated. I like the connection of free speech and free inquiry to the scientific method -- giving reason, logic and evidence priority over faith. I like letting political opposition flourish without fear of life and limb.

These were radical ideas -- they still are -- and to the Islamic State they are intolerable ones.

I like not just the political democracy, but the fact that over the centuries the values of western civ have allowed democracy to be expanded to formerly excluded groups -- women, the descendants of slaves, religious minorities -- despite the resistance of elites. It was the values of western civ, after all, that accommodated those demands for a broader college curriculum, rather than cutting off the hands of the protestors in the name of some received wisdom.

I say all this, knowing that western civ has often not lived up to its promise. Indeed, some of the very people who most fervently oppose radical Islam are trashing the values of western civ -- the science deniers; the democracy destroyers; those who would make America a theocracy; the haters.

Yet with all of its failings and the oddity of some of its alleged champions, the Enlightenment is looking better and better. The alternatives now on the march around the world are hideous. At least, that's how most Americans see it.

So, like it or not, the 2016 presidential election will be about national security. And most Americans and most voters will be very fearful of the threat that the Islamic State represents, and confused about how we should respond.

In its lifetime, the United States has faced countless threats, and it has overreacted to many. Often in the 20th century, the U.S. government acted as an agent of U.S. corporate interests, wrapping them in the broader rhetoric of the Cold War. And the Cold War itself led to policies that were often excessive and self-defeating, not the least of which was Vietnam.

That said, the Islamic State is a true threat, and one that presents difficult if not impossible choices. It is hydra-headed. Lop off one leader and 10 others appear.

The threat of al-Qaeda and the Taliban was easy compared to this new one. These organizations actually had a command structure that could be monitored and disrupted.

The Islamic State and kindred groups represent a throwback to barbarism, yet because of the broad unrest of hundreds of millions of people, their cause has appeal on the ground. And the West has precious few allies in the region that can plausibly serve as either ideological or military counterweights.

Even if the West had the stomach for ground warfare in a war of civilizations, it is not clear where the theatres of operation would be. There is potentially a band that stretches all the way from Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria, through Libya and Somalia, into the region of Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, that is vulnerable to the most brutal sort of Islamist fundamentalism.

There are three broad strands of thinking on how the United States ought to respond. One is basically isolationist. Let them stew in their own juices. My wife taught me a terrific Polish proverb that translates, "Not my circus, not my monkeys."

There are some conservatives who espouse this view, such as Rand Paul and the Cato Institute, some lefties like Noam Chomsky who think this retribution is the West's just dessert for its past sins, as well as such centrist foreign policy scholars as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt.

I am a little queasy about such views because I find the prospect of the Islamic State taking over much of the world frightening. Even if you write off the fates of hundreds of millions of people (half them women by the way), the march of the Islamic State really does increase the chances of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of people who don't mind blowing up the world, because they are certain that they are bound for glory.

The second strand of thinking might be called Wilsonian. The U.S., in this view, has a duty to intervene because of the need to bring true Enlightenment democracy to regions that are otherwise vulnerable to the appeal of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Well, based on the events of the past 15 years, good luck to that.

The third viewpoint we might call realpolitik. It argues that the West needs to act against the threat of the Islamic State, even if that means getting into bed with some unsavory people -- the very people whose dominance in the region helped seed the unrest that led to fundamentalist Islam. Are we to say that the Saudi monarchy is the lesser evil? How about Bashar al-Assad?

There have been times in American history when we sided with lesser evils against greater ones, our wartime alliance with Stalin against Hitler being the epic case. Henry Kissinger, the ultimate foreign policy realist, persuaded Richard Nixon to embrace Red China as a counterweight to the USSR, back in an era when China really was ferociously communist as well as brutal.

The problem is that President Obama has vacillated between wanting to be Wilson and wanting to be Kissinger. Whatever the policy, it needs to be coherent. So we will go into the 2016 election with the electorate feeling very uneasy about our national security, and with Democrats somewhat on the defensive.

Normally, that would help the Republicans. Except that no Republican first-tier presidential candidate has foreign policy experience.

Let's see. Chris Christie can see the World Trade Center from his window. Scott Walker led wars -- on unions and on the University of Wisconsin. Marco Rubio sees national security through the prism of immigration and Cuba. And Jeb Bush has only the proxy foreign policy expertise of his family connections -- which did not perform so well.

Which brings us to Hillary Clinton. On the plus side, she was Secretary of State. On the minus side, she was Secretary of State.

She is also female, which some retrograde voters associate with weak -- and she has bent over backwards to be the most hawkish of the Democrats, a posture that could wear better than expected as more threats unfold. But whatever you think of her views, Clinton does have more national security chops than anyone else in the field.

There are other forms of security, of course. One is economic security. By all rights, this election should be about ordinary Americans getting shafted, about the rules being rigged, about the One Percent getting all the gains.

If those phrases sound familiar, this is the fervent hope of admirers of Elizabeth Warren. It would be fitting if 2016 were about the economy, stupid, as the 1992 election was. But in those triumphalist days, the foreign policy scene was relatively calm.

Pocketbook issues can and should be brought to bear. Warren can help assure that, whether or not she chooses to run. The economy is a travesty, and this should be Warren's moment. Even so, 2016 is likely to be an audition for the role of commander-in-chief.

Note, however, that neither Barack Obama nor George W. Bush, nor for that matter Bill Clinton nor Ronald Reagan had foreign policy experience. The first George Bush did, and he couldn't win re-election.

So yes, national security will be front and center in 2016 -- and it's anybody's guess how that will play out.