



On national security, we are our own worst enemy

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When it comes to America's national security — and slipping national identity — “we have met the enemy and he is us.” This satirical mutation of Admiral Oliver Hazard Perry's, “We have met the enemy and they are ours,” was a popular critique of the Vietnam War. It is again appropriate, only now as a warning for America's future.

We, Americans, are jeopardizing our national security. First, too many have embraced a victim mindset. Second, Americans lack resilience. Third, individual academic skills, on average, lag behind those of other countries.

Too many Americans see themselves as victims, which historically speaking is decidedly un-American. Throughout last year's presidential campaign, Donald Trump successfully peddled a message of victimization, assuring Americans that he alone could fix all of their problems. Mexico, Japan and China, he claimed, had taken advantage of them and stolen their jobs. Americans were in perpetual danger of being murdered by ISIS and illegal aliens. And, militarily, we just didn't win anymore. All three claims were absurd, yet tens of millions embraced them as true.

Instead, Americans should be embracing the good news. America has the world's largest economy and the median income is 530 percent higher than the global average. Americans are safer now than at any period since the early 1960's. FBI data show that murders, regardless of source, and violent crime are at their lowest sustained rates in more than 50 years. And, America remains the dominant military power. The U.S. isn't losing any military contests, although it is true that military force cannot compel Afghan or Iraqi security forces to fight bravely or cajole their political leaders to govern competently.

Why do Americans' perceptions diverge so far from reality?

Sociologists at UCLA and West Virginia University argue that a “victimhood culture” is emerging in America, supplanting the previous honor and dignity cultures. In the victimhood culture, people display “high sensitivity to slight, have a tendency to handle conflicts through

complaints to third parties, and seek to cultivate an image of being victims who deserve assistance.”

Power has been transferred. In an honor culture, you have the power. If *you* have a problem, *you* fix it. However, in a victim culture, individuals cede their power, relying instead on “hypersensitivity and fragility” to catalyze others to affect change on their behalf.

This runs contrary to America’s founding principles. A belief in individual liberty and a restrained government underpinned the framing of the Constitution and the forming of the republic. A population that increasingly sees itself as the victim perversely gives up its liberty in the vain hope an ever-enlarging government will maintain it for them.

Americans also lack resilience. The American Psychiatric Association and other scholars estimate Americans suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder at a rate 74 percent higher than the global average. The warning signs appear even more ominous for tomorrow’s leaders, who are today’s college students. More than half of them disclose feeling hopeless and 10 percent say they seriously considered suicide in the past year. In response, faculty report feeling pressure to “not challenge students too much.”

This lack of resilience has translated into unhealthy behaviors. Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development indicate nearly four in 10 Americans are obese, placing the U.S. dead last out of all 35 member states.

Americans have also taken refuge in drugs. Most recently, the chairwoman of the Federal Reserve linked the opioid addiction rates to declining labor force participation, particularly among prime-age workers. Businesses have trouble finding Americans who can pass a basic pre-employment drug test.

Finally, Americans fall short in the core skills needed to compete in a global economy. High school students place below average in mathematics and around average in science and reading as compared to their international counterparts. Domestically, the average score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test dropped substantially over the second half of the 20th century, until the scores were “recentered” so that the 1990 average — 424 verbal and 478 math — was returned to the Greatest Generation’s average of 500 for both.

In short, today’s Americans are rather un-American by historical standards. As a result, America’s national security is at risk. The victim mindset increases demands of the government and the national debt swells to “unsustainable,” in the words of the Congressional Budget Office. Future defense spending becomes constrained. The victim mindset also intensifies feelings of being harmed by others, raising the risk the U.S. will use force to redress those perceived wrongs. Finally, as American capabilities decline, performance among our national security policy makers and military personnel will also diminish, with faulty decision-making and decreased war fighting prowess following close behind.

These trends can’t continue without ever more dire consequences for the nation. Americans need to step up their performance, shore up their resilience and abandon the victim mindset. We can’t be un-American indefinitely and still remain America.

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