



America: Home of the wimps?

Candidates who engage in fearmongering over terrorism are not being presidential

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Listening to Republican presidential candidates on Tuesday night, you would think that America has become a nation of wimps, cowering in fear for no good reason over a murderous band of Middle Easterners with little power to harm us.

Polls show strong support for Donald Trump, who wants to spy on mosques and ban all Muslims from entering the country. Ben Carson fears a Muslim president would follow Sharia, unaware of the most basic principles of our Constitution. Sen. Ted Cruz spreads sophisticated versions of the same un-American rhetoric and calls President Barack Obama “an apologist” for terrorists during appearances on conspiracy theorist Glenn Beck’s show.

All three, along with the other Republican candidates, say if elected they will protect us from “radical Islamic terrorists.” But the reality is that their vile comments threaten America far more than those they attack.

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is a pipsqueak. It has no capacity to occupy a single inch of American soil and never will. It is no military threat to America or Europe. All it can do is recruit foolish people to harry us with violent crimes that have no military significance.

Yet under the influence of such political hyperventilating, Americans express their fears to journalists and pollsters about this mouse that cannot even roar. Their anxiety is as ludicrous as the plot of the 1959 Peter Sellers farce about the fictional Duchy of Grand Fenwick invading Manhattan so that, by surrendering, it could get American aid for its wine industry.

ISIL'S chief recruiter

Trump's remarks inciting hatred of Muslims (and Mexicans) have made him ISIL's chief recruitment officer. ISIL has no better friend than Trump, though his ignorance and narcissism blind him to this awful reality.

ISIL markets the idea that Islam is under attack, persuading people long on zeal and short on good sense to embrace its apocalyptic fantasies that the end is near. ISIL is an enemy not just of America and the West, but also of any Muslims who do not hew to its vision of religious piety, itself a murderous apostasy that offends the Prophet Muhammad and his teachings.

Carson, Cruz and others help ISIL by encouraging the idea that America and its allies are at war with Islam, something that George W. Bush and Obama frequently emphasized is not the case.

Now the leading Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, has joined in. At a town hall last week in Waterloo, Iowa, after the massacre in San Bernardino, California, she pandered, saying, "It's OK, it's OK to be afraid."

No, it is not OK to be afraid. And shame on her for saying that, lending credence to the modern Know-Nothings in the Republican Party.

Being afraid is what ISIL, the remnants of Al-Qaeda and their murderous friends want. What they cannot withstand are smart responses that degrade their capacity and demonstrate American distaste for government violence beyond the minimum necessary in response.

What we should fear are pandering politicians. We should be anxious when politicians promise safety at the price of trashing our Constitution, our values and our history.

Anyone who has read the writings of Osama bin Laden and his ideological spawn knows that their objective is to get America to destroy itself by getting into endless land wars in the Middle East.

One in 110 million

So let's get some perspective and separate the deadly and evil stunts of ISIL supporters from the actual risks we face: Our chances of being killed in a terrorist attack are one in four million if you go all the way back to 1995, which would include the Oklahoma City bombing by a right-wing American fanatic.

If you count just the years after 9/11 the odds drop to one in 110 million, Professors John Mueller and Mark Stewart show in their brand new book "Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism."

Since 9/11 attacks by the far right have killed 48 Americans, compared to 45 in attacks by people claiming to be jihadists, reports compiled by the New America Foundation show.

And what of Christian, Jewish and Hindu fanatics? How about the many murders at Planned Parenthood clinics by people who claim to be Christians seeking to impose their ideology on everyone else? Or what of the Jewish Defense League, whose leaders Irv Rubin and Earl Krugel plotted in November 2001 to kill Representative Daryl Issa, a California Republican of Arab descent. Years earlier the Rand Corporation think tank warned that “for more than a decade, the Jewish Defense League (JDL) has been one of the most active terrorist groups in the United States.”

More broadly, homicides claimed 16,121 American lives in 2013, with 70 percent of the victims shot to death, the federal Centers for Disease Control reported. So far this year 12,662 Americans have been shot to death.

In this century tornadoes have killed 49 Americans per year in this century if you ignore the 553 deaths in 2011, which raises the average to 84.

Lightning killed 26 Americans this year, which is more than the 14 victims of the San Bernardino mass murder and the five killed in Chattanooga last July.

Yes, tornadoes and lightning have proven far more deadly than impotent ISIL, but you wouldn't know that from the exaggerated fear-mongering from our presidential candidates.

Leadership

Contrast that with what our leaders said in the past in far more worrying circumstances.

On the night of 9/11, in a national television address, President George W. Bush said, “Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America.”

More than a half century ago, when a nuclear-armed Soviet Union was an actual military threat, a new president spoke with determination about preserving liberty. In his 1961 inaugural address, John F Kennedy said “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

That was not a call to arms, but to smarts. And key to those smarts was showing that freedom comes not from the barrel of a gun, but from a determination of each of us to protect the liberties of everyone else, especially those whose views we dislike.

In 1933, when the worst economic collapse in our history ravaged the nation, Franklin D. Roosevelt took office saying that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advances.”

Where are the leaders today who will appeal to our best instincts? Who among the presidential wannabes operates from the position of strength that our national anthem declares in all four

stanzas, written when a foreign Army had occupied the nation's capital and was advancing on Baltimore?

We need leaders who will encourage us to stand firm, act smartly and promise that we will remain "the land of the free and the home of the brave."