

NATIONAL REVIEW

Our First Reaction to Orlando Should Not Be Partisan

by Michael Tanner

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Last weekend's heinous terrorist attack on a gay nightclub in Florida was a tragedy, first and foremost for the victims and their families — whose pain and grief we can only imagine — for the city of Orlando, and for the LGBT community. But there was also something profoundly sad and disturbing about our reaction to it.

Before the dead and wounded had even been identified, Americans were already dividing into Team Red and Team Blue, busy assigning blame and pushing partisan political narratives. The fissures in this country now run so deep that we couldn't even take a moment to grieve as a united people.

So quick were we to try to score political points that we ignored whether they were even applicable to the tragedy at hand. The 49 murdered men and women were reduced to little more than props.

President Obama twisted himself into the usual verbal knots to avoid attaching the word “Islamic” to “terrorism” or “extremism,” but he did manage to put in his standard plug for gun control. His call for gun control was echoed by Democratic politicians from the presumptive presidential nominee to the local dog catcher. Connecticut senator Chris Murphy even managed to blame the deaths on Congress, saying that “Congress has become complicit in these murders by its total, unconscionable deafening silence.”

Some activists even used the massacre as an opportunity to attack Republicans over gay rights, blurring the distinction between a debate over bathroom use and mass murder.

Of course, no one was able to actually offer a realistic gun-control proposal that would have kept weapons out of the hands of Omar Mateen. He bought his guns in a gun store, not at a gun show or online. He passed a background check. He was, in fact, a security guard, licensed to carry a gun on his job. The latest Democratic talking point is that those on the terrorist watch list shouldn't be allowed to purchase guns. There are questions about the wildly inaccurate watch

list, and the number of people put on it mistakenly, but a bigger point in this case is that Mateen was not on the watch list. He had been investigated by the FBI, but the investigation had been closed, and he had been removed from the database. And, as for banning “assault weapons,” the designation is more or less cosmetic rather than functional. Besides, recall that France has severe restrictions on assault weapons, but the Bataclan attackers were able to acquire them anyway.

Republicans, meanwhile, had their own language problems, generally ignoring entirely that the attack was on a gay club and that most of the victims were gay. It might have been a little awkward to recall that just a few months ago, several GOP presidential candidates shared a stage with Pastor Kevin Swanson, who has said that gays should be put to death.

Republicans did have a lot to say, however, about “Islamic terrorism” and the president’s continued avoidance of the term. The president’s refusal to admit that Islamic terrorism is, well, Islamic terrorism is, of course, ridiculous. But too many of his opponents seem to think that saying the words is some sort of magic incantation that will make ISIS vanish.

Donald Trump, unsurprisingly, managed to make his first reaction to the attack about himself, tweeting a thank-you for “the congrats on being right on Islamic terrorism.” He then went on to tout his plan to ban Muslim immigration. Mateen, of course, was born in New York. That made no difference to Trump, who, echoing his description of the Indiana-born judge in the Trump University case as “a Mexican,” says that Mateen was “born an Afghan.”

Trump does deserve credit for acknowledging that the victims were targeted because of their sexual orientation, pointing out that it was an “assault on the ability of free people to live their lives, love who they want and express their identity.”

But the heart of Trump’s anti-terrorism plan remains a ban on Muslim travel. The exact nature of the ban, as with most Trump proposals, remains vague and tends to shift from day to day. At some points Trump has described it as a “temporary pause” in Muslim immigration. It might apply to all Muslims, or it might, as Trump said this week, apply only to those from countries with a “proven history of terrorism.” On other occasions, he has described it in far more sweeping terms, as prohibiting Muslims from entering the United States for any reason, including business, education, or tourism. Early on, Trump even suggested that it might apply to Muslim U.S. citizens who had left the country and tried to reenter.

Moreover, he continues to suggest that all Muslims are somehow complicit in the actions of this madman. But stereotyping and demonizing all Muslims is no more accurate or morally acceptable than stereotyping and demonizing all gun owners. The vast majority of American Muslims are peaceful and patriotic. They are police officers and firefighters, doctors, lawyers, and teachers. They serve in our armed forces. Four Muslim service members, among the 14 who have made the ultimate sacrifice since September 11, 2001, are buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Nearly all terrorism experts, generals, and other national-security professionals agree that assimilating Muslim Americans into the larger society is key to fighting terrorism. One reason that Europe is so much more at risk than we are is that European countries do such a poor job of assimilating Muslim immigrants. Those immigrants remain outsiders, a nation within a nation, alienated and easily radicalized. The United States, with some obvious failures, does a much better job of turning immigrants of all cultures, races, and religions into Americans. E Pluribus Unum. Out of Many, One.

If Trump's attacks on American Muslims were accepted by a majority of Americans, it would import Europe's failure to the United States, perpetuating the idea that Muslims cannot be real Americans. It would make the Muslim community here less, not more, likely to cooperate with law enforcement. It would breed suspicion and alienation. It would convince many Muslims, both here and around the world, that the U.S. really is at war with all Islam. It would lead to more self-radicalization. Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson said that any immigration ban based on religion would be "unwise and counterproductive," and former CIA chief General Michael Hayden called Trump's comments about Muslims "prejudice, simplistic, and frankly just wrong."

Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton had relatively little to say on the subject besides doubling down on gun control. She did suggest more surveillance, more restrictions on the Internet, and more powers for law enforcement and other government authorities. There was a Trumpian lack of specificity, but she left no doubt that she wasn't about to let things like civil liberties and constitutional rights stand in the way of looking tough.

As Representative Justin Amash (R., Mich.) noted, he has heard "Democrats and Republicans endorse violating the 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 6th, and 8th Amendments" in response to the attack. About the only thing we are missing is a call to quarter troops in our homes.

The unfortunate truth is that there is little we can do to prevent future lone-wolf terrorist attacks. There will be another one someday. Every day I drive into a city high on the terrorist target list. I work for an organization that just gave an award to Flemming Rose, the Danish journalist and editor who published the controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. I am aware of the threat. But it is also true that my odds of dying in a terrorist attack are about one in 20 million. My odds of dying in a car crash on the way to the office are roughly one in 37,000. If safety were all I cared about, I'd push for a ban on automobiles.

There are things more important than simple safety. Of course we shouldn't be heedless of risks. But I don't want to live in a country that is so traumatized and fearful that it becomes less open, less tolerant, less free than the America I have grown up in, the America I love.

That is ultimately what the terrorists want. And I for one refuse to be terrorized. I refuse to let the terrorists win.