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# Gene Healy: He's the president, not America's 'daddy'

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Despite her cutesy gal-talk and chatty pop-culture references, New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd is worth reading, if only because she often inadvertently encapsulates the worst ideas in contemporary politics.

"Americans are scared" after the failed Christmas bombing, MoDo proclaimed in her column Sunday. But by responding coolly, Barack Obama let a good crisis go to waste. He missed his "moment to be president," Dowd says, "to be the strong father who protects the home from invaders."

Could there be a more infantile conception of the chief executive's role?

National security is central to the president's job, of course. But no one -- whether liberal or conservative -- should think of the president as a national father-protector. That view treats the American people like children, and it practically begs for a dangerous concentration of executive power.

In years past, MoDo spared no venom for George W. Bush's expansive approach to presidential power. Like most liberals, she seemed to think that the influence of neoconservative ideologues was the only possible reason for that approach.

In his 2007 book "The Terror Presidency," however, former Bush official Jack Goldsmith explains that the Bush team's power grab was driven by their fear that the public would hold them "wholly responsible" for any terrorist strike. "Since the president would be blamed for the next homeland attack," he had to have the power "to do what he deemed necessary to stop it," even if that required ignoring valid statutes restricting torture and wiretapping.

Last year, some conservatives had second thoughts about unrestrained presidential surveillance when they saw the infamous Department of Homeland Security memo about monitoring states' rights activists and pro-lifers. They were right to worry, given how liberal presidents used to abuse their surveillance powers in the name of national security -- with JFK wiretapping conservative journalists and chief executive officers, and LBJ bugging his 1964 opponent Barry Goldwater's campaign plane.

Anyone who demands near-perfect protection from terrorism shouldn't be heard to complain about the erosion of civil liberties. Likewise, conservatives who sow panic about failed attacks should stop railing against Transportation Security Administration intrusiveness, because they're helping drive the process. Indeed, there's a hint of Dowd's Daddyism in GOP Rep. Peter King's suggestion that if the president would just talk tougher, bureaucratic systems would magically improve.

Terrorism's a sensitive subject, so let's be clear: I'm not suggesting that anyone who criticizes the federal government's handling of the underwear bomber has fallen prey to Daddyism.

There's nothing wrong with blaming Obama's DHS for significant mistakes that led to a harrowing near-miss. Nor am I counseling complacency about the terrorist threat.

But since terrorists seek overreaction, we deny them a victory when we keep our nerve. MoDo invokes "Star Trek" 's Spock to make the point that "it's not OK to be cool about national security."

It is something we need to be vigilant about, but if and when al Qaeda succeeds again, it won't prove our Constitution is a "suicide pact." We live in an open society of 300 million people and you can't eliminate risk without striking at that openness.

In his Jan. 1 column, neoconservative David Brooks -- of all people -- argued that "a mature nation" responds to terrorism with "a little resiliency, an awareness that human systems fail and bad things will happen and we don't have to lose our heads every time they do."

And the conservative Wall Street Journal recently published an op-ed arguing that the failed attack shows al Qaeda to be "incapacitated" and "hapless," dependent on "the sizable damage we inflict on ourselves" when we panic. The answer, per another recent WSJ piece, is "a little intelligence and a few drops of courage," and the recognition that "of all the risks we confront in America every day," terrorism is a comparatively minor one.

Does this represent the beginnings of an outbreak of good sense on the right? Let's hope so.

Republicans sometimes call themselves the "Daddy Party." But what the country needs now is an adult conversation about terrorism.

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