

Barack Obama, Donald Trump Closer Than You Think

The massacre in San Bernardino by an Islamist husband-and-wife terror team forces us to recognize, once again, that the United States has to choose between isolationism and internationalism in its foreign policy.

Put another way, it's a choice between disengaging from the world's most febrile regions, in the hope that doing so will put us out of harm's way and rein in our "imperial" instincts, or actively engaging on our own terms, in the expectation that we can effectively counter rogue regimes and terrorist groups.

This is where we get to a disturbing similarity between President Barack Obama and GOP presidential candidate Donald Trump. The reason? Both of them approach foreign policy from the vantage point of isolationism.

Take Obama first. A rare Oval Office address to the nation in the wake of the San Bernardino shooting manifestly failed to say anything we hadn't heard before—and never mind that the president stood before the camera with a 64-point disapproval rating on his handling of terrorism. After giving us a perfunctory lecture about Islamic State being the only threat in the Middle East (a complete falsehood), and after assuring us that a political solution to the Syrian civil war is still possible so long as we work with Vladimir Putin's Russia, Obama turned to the subject that really animates him: gun control.

Taken as a whole, the speech was an artless attempt to turn a debate about international policy into one about domestic issues. There was no explanation for the current predicament of the Middle East. Indeed, Iran, which has fueled the rise of Islamic State through its backing of the Bashar al-Assad

regime, wasn't even mentioned. Instead, we were told that preventing the denizens of a dubious "no fly" list from purchasing guns was the chief priority for our national security.

The problem for Obama is that while many Americans share the president's distaste for foreign engagements, they don't draw the same conclusions that he does. Once you start on the path of isolationism, and when you repeatedly tell your citizens that America can't be the "world's policeman," you encourage the sense that the outside world and the people who live in it can't be trusted.

Is it any wonder that a president who has regarded the trampling of the human rights of Muslims and non-Muslims in the Middle East with studied indifference has, as a result, failed to persuade many Americans that they should respect Islam as a faith?

It is this disconnect that Donald Trump has exploited.

As the quintessential fake tough guy, Trump's rhetoric about confronting Islamic radicalism should be taken with a fistful of salt. Like Obama, he ignores the wider problem of Iranian power, while his frankly embarrassing crush on Putin suggests that Trump too would cede strategic ground to the Russians.

Trump's extensive business interests in the slave labor economies of the Arab Gulf countries only bolsters this sense. As for Israel, his understanding of what binds America to the Jewish state is superficial enough to make any informed American Jew worry that a Trump administration would do little to repair the damage of the Obama years.

To further understand the company that Trump keeps on these vital questions, look across the Atlantic Ocean. In France, the far-right National Front party of Marine Le Pen has surged in recent local elections. In Poland and Hungary, right-wing nationalists are in government. Like Trump, they talk about

Muslims in crude and bigoted terms, but they don't exactly love Jews or Israel either. This isn't Obama's cuddly, progressive isolationism. It's a surly version of the same phenomenon, and its adherents believe that they have an inherent right to determine who does and doesn't belong within their borders.

That's why we are having a nonsensical debate about Islam and Islamists instead of a sensible one. Thanks to Obama, the notion of deploying special forces to secure a safe haven in Syria has evaporated, because he has turned opposition to the intervention of ground troops into a dogma. And thanks to Trump, Americans are being persuaded that discriminating against their fellow citizens on the grounds of religious belief, in flagrant violation of the Constitution, is a better option than using a limited number of ground troops to help turn the tide in the Middle East against the terrorists and their backers.

Thus do we compromise our values at home, by not effectively intervening abroad. The question is whether, a year from now, we will have a new incumbent heading into the White House with a much sharper understanding of what needs to be done.

At minimum, this requires an explicit acknowledgement of what it is that we are fighting, and why we are fighting it. And ironically, the best explanation I've seen has come from a member of the opposition Labour Party in the United Kingdom.

While Labour is now led by Jeremy Corbyn, a dinosaur of the far left, the party's internal fissures mean that he has a potential rival in Hilary Benn, who currently holds the foreign affairs portfolio. During the recent debate in the British parliament about extending airstrikes against Islamic State into Syria, Benn delivered a remarkable speech in which he identified the enemy in the Middle East as fascism.

"What we know about fascists is that they need to be

defeated,” Benn declared. “It’s why this entire house stood up against Hitler and Mussolini. It’s why our party has always stood up against the denial of human rights and for justice and my that we must now confront this evil. It is now time for us to do our bit in Syria.”

Remember, back in the 1930s, it took the violation of Czechoslovakia and Poland by Hitler to convince Europeans of the imperative of defeating the Axis powers. Neither Obama nor Trump, you can be sure, will draw any salient lessons from that stark fact. But the rest of us should. {eoa}

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