

Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy
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What should we do? How do we solve the current terrorist crisis?

LEVINE: You'll remember when the Iranians took our captives hostage, the embassy people in Tehran. Iran had a consulate in Houston, as I remember, and there were demonstrations in front of it. The demonstrators marched, you know "do something, bomb them" kind of stuff. But what was interesting was there was one demonstrator who carried a huge picture. And guess who's picture he was carrying; John Wayne. The message was that John Wayne wouldn't tolerate this for a minute, he'd go in with guns blazing. And there is in a sense a little bit of that in us. We like to think of ourselves as the sheriff, coming in and cleaning up the act. And so the John Wayne reflexive syndrome, if you will, is one possibility.

Another, I suppose, is to be a little bit more modest in our aims and in our claims. I think that we may have made a mistake to promise that we will some how eliminate terrorism. We're not going to be able to do it. Whatever we do has to be the fruit of considerable reason and calculation and so on, and preparation, taking into consideration at least some of the sensibilities of people in the area. We can't respond to everybody's agenda. Everybody who we have asked to join us has an agenda of his own, and each of them wants something from us in exchange. Well, some of which we can take, and some we cannot.

Perhaps in this case, as sort of a larger sense of moral worth, people are saying "what are we doing hobnobbing with these corrupt dictatorships and these nasty people?" General Musharaf is certainly no angel. He didn't take power through the ballot box, and so on. We're dealing with a corrupt regime in Saudi Arabia, etcetera, etcetera. We're hugging the Emir of Kuwait, and getting in bed with the Sultan of Oman, and so on. In a sense all of these nasty people. Well, we do what is politically expedient under the circumstances. And I think we are pursuing, like it or not, a kind of real politic. And I think that is what we need to pursue. A sense of where our interest lies, a sense of not doing things too hastily in an area where haste is almost always rewarded by failure. And so I think the more deliberation we have, the more intelligently we go about it.

And certainly if we can get a good number of allies in the pursuit of known terrorists, if we can take security measures that don't also denigrate our basic liberties, then I think we will be moving in the right direction. Complete victory I think is out of the question, but I think we can do a good deal to make ourselves feel safer and perhaps strike at some of the more important terrorist formations in the world. But we have to do it intelligently and carefully.

PARIKH: On a personal note, in 1992, when the fundamentalist Hindus demolished a mosque in India, I was in India. And it was a very terrible feeling to feel like somehow, because of your religion, you were complicit in that act. I wasn't ashamed of being Hindu, but I was ashamed of being grouped with those Hindus, or that I could be grouped with those Hindus. And I think one of the things we haven't done very well is separate the people who carry out these acts from the people who don't.

There are 1.2 billion Muslims on this planet, most of them aren't even Arab. They're not involved in this, they don't like it, they don't support it. I think we need to do a better job of helping them separate themselves from this kind of activity. There are an awful lot of people who don't go along with this. And, coming back to the question on how we make terrorism less attractive, you're doing it for your own people. They have to reject you first. And however militarily successful we are, if we don't improve along those lines then there will be more people to replace them. There are always people who are willing to replace them, that's the problem with rooting out terrorism.

The second thing that I would like to do is really get rid of the phrase "Islamic Terrorist." We didn't call McVeigh a Christian terrorist or a militia terrorist, we called him a sociopath. "Islamic terrorist" is not a helpful term, or "Muslim terrorist" even, because it associates in peoples' minds Islam with terrorism. And it's like a mental laziness, where you start forgetting all of the Muslim non-terrorists. These people are terrorists first, whatever they are after that is kind of immaterial. You're not going to stop them by understanding Islam, but you might be able to stop people who aren't terrorists by understanding Islam. You may stop them from giving tacit support, or not-so-tacit support.

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