

16 Years after 9/11, Our Patriotism Remains 'Uninformed'

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An approach to jihadism rooted in "informed patriotism," a concept introduced by Ronald Reagan, would likely be more realistic and successful than one rooted in absolutism.

Sixteen years ago today, 2,977 innocent lives were lost in what became known as the "9/11 terror attacks." As my family mourns, we also awkwardly commemorate what we call our "second birthday" -- rather than a victim, my father was a survivor of the attacks. My father found himself just five floors below the impacted area of the South Tower of the World Trade Center when the second plane hit.

The view from my father's office on the 91st floor suggested anything but what his colleague called "a fire" -- the size of the chasm, the cascading documents, and, amid the papers, a human figure leaping into the air only to descend toward the street until out of sight.

As my father turned around, he saw that his office had cleared. He, like everyone else, walked -- not ran -- down the stairs. When the stairwell doors opened for the first time somewhere in the middle of the building, my father felt a loud shock just a few flights above him. Watching the news later that day from my grandparents' apartment, my father realized what he had heard -- and the melting steel frames and cracking concrete he had seen on his way down -- was the result of the second plane hitting his building.

Regardless of one's proximity to the events of 9/11, they had a palpable impact on our country, on our policies, and on our sense of who we are as a people. Entering adulthood with the memory of that day, it informed my decision to become a historian of Islam and to offer my expertise in the service of my country. It gave me what President Ronald Reagan called an "informed patriotism."

In his farewell address delivered from the Oval Office on January 11, 1989, Reagan warned that "the resurgence of national pride...won't count for much, and it won't last, unless it's grounded in thoughtfulness and knowledge." Rather, he said, "an informed patriotism is what we want...our spirit is back, but we haven't re-institutionalized it.

We've got to do a better job of getting across that America is freedom -- freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of enterprise. And freedom is special and rare. It's fragile; it needs protection."

In the 16 years since 9/11, we have found a new patriotism but have not yet channeled it in a thoughtful and meaningful manner in terms of understanding who we are and how we ought to engage with the world. Indeed, while we are acutely aware of the new threats -- particularly from jihadist terrorism -- our endless engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq and the increased rates of terrorist attacks suggest that we have not yet formulated a way to engage these issues.

Given our complex and dangerous world, we are tasked with finding a way forward that is grounded in "thoughtfulness and knowledge" and guided by a "re-institutionalized" spirit. In other words, an "informed patriotic strategy" for America to meet its threats.

The historian's approach is key here. In order to effectively apply an "informed patriotic strategy" we need to answer two historical questions: What is the history of a particular issue, and what is our history of dealing with that issue? By grappling with these questions, we get closer to understanding how our engagements contribute to our country's legacy in the world, and, conversely, how it might damage our legacy. Ultimately, as Reagan implied and as history shows, it is what we do that shapes who we become and what we will be capable of accomplishing.

Deploying patriotism to inform precision ensures that we not only win, but that we accurately calculate what we reap from victory, at what cost, and with what consequences. Answering these questions requires understanding issues through the correct contexts and using the right tools to address them.

An "informed patriotic strategy" can help address the issue of defeating ISIS and jihadist terrorism. Looking to the first of the two historical questions -- the history of jihadism -- we find that this includes ideas that stretch back well beyond the founding of the United States and well beyond the phenomenon of terrorism -- namely, to the 9th century. Theological questions of who is considered a Muslim, what it means to apply Islamic law and live as a Muslim, and whether or not Muslims should interact with non-Muslims lie at the core of the appeal of groups like ISIS. These discussions are not always violent and more often rely on interpretations of canonical religious texts -- in fact, as I've observed (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/inside-the-caliphates-classroom>), much of ISIS literature includes works on prayer and ritual observance. The aim for ISIS, then, and its definition of success, is to build its version of an "ideal Muslim (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/islamic-states-homo-jihadus>)" -- a project for which the U.S. and its partners have no natural entry point.

Facing this ideological challenge, the U.S. can reflect on its history of dealing with this issue -- what it has gotten right, what it can improve, and the costs it has incurred on its own strategic posture and readiness. Ridding ISIS of its territory, targeting its leadership, and showcasing its violations of human rights have indeed weakened the group. However, these tactics have not translated into victory because we have not correctly framed the problem -- namely, are we correct to focus on defeating "terrorism" or even "jihadist ideology?" What, then, should their defeat look like -- should we eliminate all existing and potential terrorists or rid the world of their propaganda? How we frame the question determines what strategy we will choose to address it, and the resources we will allocate to that task (and, by extension, the resources, attention, and training we divert from other priorities). What question we choose to answer will not only be a deciding factor in whether we win or lose, but will also affect how efficiently we use resources, how much attention we spend on an issue, and whether our policies will have long-term consequences.

Instead, as I've written elsewhere (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/terrorists-and-territory-what-jordan-can-teach-us-about-managing-jihadists>), we must answer the question of when and how jihadist groups pose security threats, and define the patterns and situations that produce those dynamics, so that we can adequately address the more attainable objective of neutralizing and preventing these groups from acquiring the ability to launch attacks

and communicate with a global network. This approach -- steeped in an understanding of what jihadism is, how we have addressed it in the past, and the lessons we ought to have learned -- ensures that the national security of our country and its allies and partners will be preserved in a sustainable manner. This might mean resigning ourselves to some degree of jihadist presence in the Middle East where we determine that they do not pose a significant threat to security, and then working with local partners to control and coerce these groups in order to prevent them from being effective and appealing.

The threats to global stability have evolved considerably in the 16 years since that horrific Tuesday morning in September. Although we can't predict the next war, nor point to the combination of factors that will produce it, an "informed patriotic strategy" ensures that the United States can chart its course, set its priorities, and calculate its costs in order to prudently and effectively respond to our country's next threat.

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