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Here we go again. When will we learn?

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By Charles R. Church

In March 2012, I wrote a column titled “The real path to triumph over terrorists.” The essay spoke of the unanimous verdict of Obama’s key counterterrorism players (some of whom started their vital work during the Bush years): We would be hit again by terrorists in our homeland. As Herman Kahn wrote in his famous, “On Thermonuclear War” in 1960: “The aggressor has to find only one crucial weakness; the defender has to find them all, and in advance.”

I cited examples to support this thesis: the Underwear Bomber and the Times Square Bomber, both of whom failed in their attacks only through ineptitude. Since then, we have witnessed the Boston Marathon attack by the Tsarnaev brothers, and now the terrible San Bernardino shootings. We live in chaotic times, dangerous times, in which worldwide media outlets ensure that we will know every scary detail nearly in real time. Resilience — among all our citizenry, and throughout our government — is our best defense, not the panic and reckless (and not infrequently unlawful) actions we took after 9/11, such as: creating secret CIA black sites to interrogate with torture; broad-based detention without end of not just enemies, but of people who never harmed us, for whom we often paid bounties; military commissions to mete out inferior justice, if it can be called justice at all. The list goes on.

If one were to judge which path we will take — resilience, or the opposite way — after this latest attack and based on what certain Republican presidential candidates have been telling our country, then she/he must believe that, once again, we may yield to our fears and our basest instincts. (I single out the Republican candidates because I think they are smart, high achievers who very shrewdly calculate that voters are frightened, so they want to hear tough talk to ease their apprehensions. And for those not frightened enough, the candidates stoke their fears. Yet, should the toughest talker be elected and keep her/his promises, then we must expect a rerun of the Bush-Cheney excesses).

The candidates’ statements clinch the point, while sowing fear along the way:

- “The other thing with the terrorists is you have to take out their families. ... When they say they don’t care about their lives, you have to take out their families.” (Trump).
- “[T]his whole concept of boots on the ground ... we’ve got a phobia about boots on the

ground. ...” (Carson). (Whenever I hear this notion being bandied about, I think it’s high time that we restore the draft. Let’s see whether the politicians are so enthusiastic about exposing their children, or children’s children, to death, maiming and PTSD to further their “solution.”)

- [I]f a center for the developmentally disabled in San Bernardino ... is now a target for terrorists, that means everywhere in America is a target for those terrorists....” (Christie)
- I would “carpet bomb ISIS into oblivion...” We’ll find out if “sand can glow in the dark.” (Cruz).
- We must impose a temporary ban on Muslims entering the U.S. until the government can “figure out what is going on.” (Trump). (Al Qaeda’s branch in Somalia, al Shabaab, featured this call for a ban in a recruitment video, according to turn-of-the-year news reports).
- It’s “not even a close call” that the Middle East was more secure “when Gaddafi and Hussein were dictators” of Iraq and Libya. (Cruz).
- We need to “[p]ut Putin back in his little box where he belongs.” (Carson)
- “[T]he front line with ISIS isn’t just in Iraq and Syria, it’s in Kennedy Airport and the Rio Grande. ...” (Cruz).
- “I do want a wall. Walls do work, you just have to speak to the folks in Israel. ...” (Trump).
- “[I]n terms of leadership (Vladimir Putin) is getting an ‘A.’” (Trump). (Gail Collins reported in the New York Times on Jan. 2, 2016, that Trump defended his admiration on a talk show by stating: “Our country does plenty of killing.”)
- Promising to subject America’s enemies to harsh interrogation practices, namely torture, a candidate added this big talk: “These terrorists get a one-way ticket to Guantanamo, where we’re going to find out everything they know.” (Rubio).

For those who care about our traditions and values, these are indeed terrifying times, but for reasons quite apart from the armed conflicts blossoming in the world. It’s the chance that one of these tough talkers might become president which truly frightens us. We’ve been down this road before. Let’s not go there again.

Salisbury’s Charles R. Church is a human rights lawyer who, as a senior fellow at the Center for Policy and Research, Seton Hall Law, recently spent a week at Guantanamo, serving as an observer/journalist at pretrial proceedings for the 9/11 case.

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