Terror Begins at Home

Fearmongering politicians are scoring cheap political points at the expense of the American people.

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Jostling before the midterms has begun, and so too has the GOP's ritualistic hazing of Democrats on national security. At every turn Republicans are hammering the Obama administration for "capitulating" in the fight against terrorism. But their macho rhetoric actually sends a message of weakness: we can't try Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in the same civilian courts that have convicted dozens of other international terrorists because Al Qaeda might attack New York. (When since 9/11 has New York not been a target of Al Qaeda?) Our criminal-justice system can't deal with a failed underwear bomber. The GOP assault may be smart politics, but in the long run it damages U.S. security by undermining our confidence and resiliency in the face of certain attacks to come.

By contrast, much of the current administration's antiterror policy seems aimed at strengthening the American spirit in the face of a diffuse but determined enemy. After Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to bring down Northwest Flight 253 on Christmas Day, President Obama waited 72 hours before appearing in front of the cameras to make a statement. Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.) immediately cruised the cable circuit lambasting Obama for his lapse in "leadership" in the wake of what he claimed could have been "one of the greatest tragedies in the history of our country." The president should have stepped forward "to give a sense of confidence to the country." But it was precisely the president's deliberate restraint that conveyed confidence, not King's hysterical overreaction. When Obama did address the public, his response was measured and proportionate. "This incident," he said, "demonstrates that an alert and courageous citizenry are far more resilient than an isolated extremist."

Those words may have been dismissed as boilerplate, but Obama aides tell me they reflected a core conviction of the president's. In fact, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano has also made encouraging "resiliency"—in government institutions as well as people—a priority. In surprisingly blunt language, the recently released Quadrennial Homeland Security Review says Americans will need to be "psychologically prepared to withstand" terrorism and other disasters, "and grow stronger over time."

The next time a prophet of doom warns of impending disaster, think how our behavior compares with that of other countries that have been attacked since 9/11. After the 7/7 attack on the London Underground, which killed 52 people, Londoners, recalling their pluck during the Blitz, gamely showed up en masse the next morning for their daily commute. The Israelis make a point of rebuilding blown-up cafés in a matter of days after an attack; similarly, they return to targeted bus lines the day after a bombing. The message is clear: we're not going to let terrorists break our spirit. Had America rebuilt the Twin Towers in the first years after 9/11, they would be standing tall today as symbols of defiance. Instead, when I drive by Ground Zero, still a gaping pit, I wonder how we would react if New York were hit again.

Even the administration's emphasis on resiliency isn't enough on its own, says homeland-security
expert Stephen Flynn, who has done more than anyone to promote the concept. "The hard part is converting the rhetoric into reality," he says, complaining that the White House has not put forward the necessary funds to train ordinary citizens to handle disasters and terror attacks.

Americans are historically a tough lot. But the policies and rhetoric of the Bush-Cheney years, which set the tone for the current GOP attacks, are infantilizing: be very afraid, we're told, and let the government take care of you. The tough-guy bluster has led to a permanent state of anxiety—and a slew of counterproductive policies, from harsh visa restrictions to waterboarding. Our politicians rail about apocalyptic threats while TSA officers pat down toddlers at the airport. The irony is that many potentially lethal terror attacks—from United Flight 93 to Richard Reid to the underwear bomber—have been foiled by regular citizens. The aim of terrorists is to make people feel powerless and afraid. Unfortunately, not every plot will be foiled. But if that's the standard we and our leaders set for ourselves, we are doomed to perpetuate dumb policies that flow from irrational fears. Just what the terrorists want.