Political Fallout: Terrorism and Our National Political Conversation

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It was surreal, like a movie.

My father was a chaplain in the Air Force when it happened. We were living in Virginia, and he was called to the Pentagon the next day. His job was to take the family members of those killed to a morgue so they could identify the bodies. One man, who was there to see if his brother was dead, started singing hymns and praising God when he saw the burned building.

I remember when the members of Congress stood on the steps of Capitol Hill and sang “God Bless America.”

I was scheduled to go with my youth group on an evangelism trip to New York City the day after it happened. We decided to go anyway. Usually, when you share the gospel on the street, almost all the people tune you out. On that day, only one or two of us had anyone who wouldn’t talk to us.
On the fifth anniversary of September 11, my students reflected on the horror. Their memories varied. Some of them had personal connections to the terror or its aftermath, and others viewed the events through the prism of television images. Regardless of what tethered each of us to that day, we are still sorting through terror’s effects.

Threat levels, Guantanamo Bay, WMDs, al-Qaida, and bin Laden were terms once reserved for the ultra-informed, but they now invade our everyday language. September 11, 2001, has, it seems, changed the way we talk.

Terrorism has also changed our national political conversation. Congress’ unity, recalled by the one student, was short-lived. While terrorism has dominated our politics in the past five years, the issue has not produced a political consensus. The schism so apparent after the historic presidential election in 2000 has only grown. As of this writing, Republicans are still in control of the federal government, and Democrats, desperately hoping to unseat the GOP in 2006 and 2008, seem to speak past, and not to, one another.

We are fighting a War on Terror, but just as our leaders are unable to reach a consensus on terrorism, our nation is ambivalent about the war, which is far different from our past conflicts. We have not instituted a draft, nor have we organized our economy around the struggle. We have not celebrated our heroes in the same fashion as past generations, who were nourished on the daring leadership of MacArthur and Patton and the battlefield courage of Audie Murphy and Alvin York. To the popular mind, as embodied by media coverage, this war has had precious few heroes. The families of those who serve are left to celebrate alone the feats of the living and the sacrifices of the dead.

Politically, the impact of September 11 has been muddled. There are at least three reasons why this is the case.
First, terrorism has become prominent in an era of tight party competition. Since 1968, neither political party has been able to exercise control over our governmental system; we have had either divided government, where one party controls the presidency and another controls at least one house of Congress, or very slim margins of control. Republicans have not enlarged their majorities in Congress since they took control in 1994, so every subsequent election could be the one that shifts Congress from one party to another. This dynamic makes every topic explosive, and it discourages bipartisanship. Therefore, terrorism, immigration, energy, health care, and Social Security, all issues that require bold, comprehensive solutions, float in a turbulent political sea.

Second, America’s two political parties have become more polarized. There is growing evidence that Republicans and Democrats are more ideologically and spiritually divided than in the past. Historically, both parties have had sizable numbers of conservatives, moderates, and liberals. During the past quarter-century, however,

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Republicans have become more conservative and Democrats more liberal. At the same time, Democrats are more secular and Republicans more religious. Taken together, our two political parties are developing separate, and nearly opposing, views of the world.

Third, our nation (and its leaders) have not arrived at a collective understanding of terrorism. The past five years have witnessed extended arguments about the causes and consequences of the violence being perpetrated against us and our troops. Though we are in desperate need of answers, because of our inability to reach a national accord, we are left only with questions. Why do so many young men (and a few women) kill themselves in the hope of killing us? Does economic hopelessness motivate them or is it their faith? How do you treat nations that are sympathetic with, or directly aid, terrorists? Should our nation respond with war or with international law enforcement? Are we willing to give up some measure of our own liberties to combat terrorists?

These questions persist because instead of bringing unity, terrorism has revealed our differences. We cannot recognize our heroes because we cannot agree on the justice of their cause. We cannot agree on the role of Islam in terrorism because so many of us are unwilling to make religious and moral judgments about other faiths and cultures. We cannot determine our nation’s proper policy path.

In 2004, Cedarville University launched the Center for Political Studies (CPS) to articulate a biblical view of government through the study of politics, law, history, and public policy and to engage and influence American political culture. Students have opportunities to participate in innovative programs sponsored by the Center, including the Cedarville Roundtable, student research, and a summer scholars program.

This past spring, the CPS did a Webcast of on-campus lectures by Zakaria Fellah, a former U.N. representative and expert on terrorism. The Center also sponsored a spring Roundtable addressing the theme “Why Johnny Can’t Be Moral: Education and Virtue in America’s Democracy.”

The CPS is directed by Dr. Mark Caleb Smith, assistant professor of political science. To find out more, visit www.cedarville.edu/cps.
because we cannot agree on common standards of truth and falsehood, or even good and evil.

Our recent past and near future may seem bleak, but as believers, we cannot succumb to our times. Christians can speak truth in love in the hope of leading our fellow citizens to a better future. Our nation is in dire need of moral clarity as it attempts to define the roots of terrorism. At the same time, our values, both religious and political, ought to point us toward a proper and measured response.

Perhaps most critically, Christians must help Americans keep politics and terrorism in their proper perspective. No candidate’s victory or defeat has ever saved or lost a soul. Crafting the right policies will not revive a culture. Put differently, politics is not life and death, but terrorism could be. There is seemingly no limit to what terrorists might do to inflict harm on their victims. Instead of cowering in the fear of what might happen, Christians must rest in the sovereignty of God and take comfort and courage in the fact that His justice is eternal.

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