

GOP presidential hopefuls need to learn about world

Randall W. Stone, Guest Essayist 1:08 p.m. EST December 30, 2015



(Photo: Getty Images)

The latest Republican presidential debate has been criticized and praised widely. But as a political science professor at a major university, what struck me most was the gulf between the world the candidates described and the world I teach my students about.

In the world of Republican candidates, the most important threat to the United States is terrorism, and the central challenge is to confront radical Islamists. International institutions are irrelevant to this world view, if they exist at all, and the primary instruments available to U.S. foreign policy are airstrikes and “boots on the ground.” The world that these candidates describe is a dangerous, scary place, and the threat to the United States is greater than has existed at any time since the Second World War. America is at war, they tell us, and Americans are afraid.

The world I share with my undergraduate students — based on the collective research and analysis of generations of scholars around the world — is more complex, and it contains far more potent threats than any posed by ISIS. This world is economically interdependent, and it faces global environmental challenges, rapid economic and technological change, and crumbling of the political order in poor countries. The best available responses to these challenges are

collaborative, and almost always involve international institutions. The Republican candidates could use a crash course on international relations.

Since none of them is likely to take such a course anytime soon, let me offer a quick introduction. First, what is a national security threat? A national security threat is a powerful organization that possesses the means, and is motivated by the desire, to attack our territory or that of our allies, to crush our military resistance, and to destroy us or deprive us of our independence. The United States has faced threats of this magnitude in the past. During World War II, the alliance of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan posed such a threat. The most fearsome threat the United States ever faced was that of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The Soviet Union had the conventional military capability to challenge the United States, and nuclear war was narrowly avoided several times. Since the end of the Cold War, no country has had the inclination or the capability to challenge the United States in this way, and for the first time in our history, we have faced a world that contains no fundamental national security threats.

Terrorism does not represent a threat to national security. Terrorism can cause civilian casualties and substantial damage, but it is not a strategy aimed at destroying states or subjugating their populations. It is a strategy for weak actors who are unable to employ more effective means of coercion, and who do not have substantial assets that could be targeted in retaliation. The terrorist's objective is to inspire fear in order to advertise a particular brand of political extremism. Consequently, terrorists typically choose targets to maximize the psychological impact of their attacks, rather than to maximize the damage that they cause.

Terrorism often succeeds in inspiring fear that is out of proportion to the actual risks that it poses. One of my former colleagues at the University of Rochester, John Mueller, calculated that the risk to an American citizen of being killed in a terrorist attack was lower than the risk of being struck by lightning — not once, but twice. Mortality from more mundane causes is much more likely: automobile accidents, hospital-acquired infections, or accidental discharge of firearms. Yet terrorism was the only international issue that received significant attention during the Republican presidential debate. This is self-defeating; it provides oxygen to fuel the flames that terrorism aims to kindle. New York Police Commissioner William Bratton explained his decision to dismiss a bomb threat that was not credible. “We cannot allow ourselves,” he argued, “to raise levels of fear.” Indeed, the most effective thing that terrorists are able to do is to make us fearful, and the only effective way to stop them is to stop being afraid. As Franklin D. Roosevelt famously argued in another context, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

International relations also involve more than just national security. The field pays increasing attention to international health and environmental challenges, and to the complex interdependencies of trade and finance in the 21st century. The slowing growth rate in China and the adoption of the Trans-Pacific Partnership have more important consequences for the average American than terrorism in the Middle East, and the most threatening global problems are ones that no nation can solve in isolation. The most important development in recent years was the adoption of the Paris Agreement on climate change, which passed almost unremarked in the Republican debate. President Obama, the candidates suggested, should have been paying more attention to terrorism.

In any case, whoever becomes president in 2017 will inherit a more complex world than his or her predecessors faced. Most of the problems that he or she confronts will not be amenable to military solutions, and in most cases the most effective available tools will be international organizations. Debates that narrow international relations to discussion of terrorism will be poor preparation for exerting effective leadership in such a world.

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