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Reckon With Terrorism

By Matt A. Mayer

Americans love competition. We spend countless hours watching sporting events live and on television. In every sport, we have favorite teams whose colors we wear and whose lore we can recite by memory. We'll throw ourselves into Olympic events to cheer our countrymen in events we barely understand and certainly never think about outside of three weeks every four years. We will even arrange our lives around games so as not to miss a home football game.

The American DNA is encoded with a competitive gene that drives us to win. We celebrate and honor our winners, as we applaud, but quickly forget our losers. This mentality creates two labels for us: winners and losers. That duopoly applies to most aspects of our lives.

President Donald Trump smartly tapped into this quality on the campaign trail when he talked repeatedly about America not winning anymore and said he would usher in an era of winning. These claims appealed to our deep desire to be winners. He told Americans we would be the winners in trade deals, economic growth and war. Trump said we would destroy the Islamic State group and "radical Islamic terrorism."

When it comes to terrorism, though, what exactly would winning look like?

Can we realistically extinguish a radical belief system that has adherents living in countries across the world? Unlike a traditional nation-state enemy, decapitating the leadership of terrorist groups doesn't lead to a formal surrender; rather, it creates a vacuum into which a new breed of enemy zealously steps in.

The name of our enemy and of its leaders change, but the extremist ideology remains. From terrorist group leaders like Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri (al-Qaida), to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (al-Qaida in Iraq) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the Islamic State group) to Abu Mohammad al-Julani (Al-Nusra Front), we have been fighting radical Islamic terrorism since at least the Gold Mohur Hotel attack in Aden, Yemen, in December 1992. The 25th anniversary of that attack is just six months away. Despite the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the military activities in Yemen, Syria, Pakistan and other terrorist hotbeds; and the countless arrests and drone strikes of suspected terrorists, we appear no safer today than we did back in 1992.

With the massive refugee flows from the Middle East to Europe and the return of hundreds, if not thousands, of Islamic State group fighters who possess European

citizenship, the threat has moved from the distant shores of the Middle East and North Africa to our doorstep and, ever worse, inside our country. This unsettling possibility is heightened by the estimated 10,000 frustrated fighters sitting in Europe and America who wanted to go fight for the Islamic State group, but couldn't find a way. We see the handiwork of these enemy soldiers every few weeks in places like London and Manchester. A year ago, we saw it in Orlando at the Pulse nightclub.

After 25 years, it is reasonable to ask: When will it end?

After all, a child born in America in December 1992 will have grown up and become an adult in the time we've been fighting this war against radical Islamic terrorism. She grew up in the age of terrorism. She has become desensitized to the security measures and vigilance we all must succumb to and exercise when flying, entering buildings or attending events with large crowds. Will her child, too, endure a world in which random and senseless terrorist attacks change an amazing concert into a horrific scene of carnage and death?

America loves winning, but we must rightly ask whether this is a fight we can win. Even if our enemies only make up 1 percent of the Muslim population, with 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide, that tiny figure would equate to roughly 18,000,000 radical Islamic soldiers. We can continue to use a whack-a-mole strategy when it comes to their leaders, but we simply don't have the resources, capability and knowledge to identify and to neutralize every soldier and sympathizer of radical Islamic terrorism.

We must come to terms with the fact that we can never win a battle of attrition against such a large enemy, as new adherents routinely replace those we kill or jail. There is simply no basis to believe that our failure to defeat radical Islamic terrorists over the last 25 years will lead to a victory in the next 25 years.

The Cold War between capitalism and communism lasted 44 years. It is likely our war against radical Islamic terrorism is a permanent feature of life in the West for generations to come. We should never surrender to it, but we must come to terms with it and adjust our lives and society to it.

If our fight against radical Islamic terrorism has no end in sight, it raises vital questions we must address as a country. Do we continue to spend billions to trillions of dollars we don't have on security measures that likely do little to

reduce our risk? Do we need to recalibrate where we strike the balance between our security and our civil liberties? Can our military resources be conserved and better utilized by focusing on keeping our enemies out instead of fighting wars overseas against them? Do we accept a higher level of risk based upon a blunt and sobering cost-benefit analysis, as some argue?

These and other critical questions should become the policy focus of our elected officials and top strategists. If we cannot determine when it will all end, we must at least decide how we will live so as to uphold our core principles and guarantee that our children and grandchildren inherit the fullest franchise of the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

If we successfully figure out the how, we will win regardless of when victory over radical Islamic terrorists finally comes. If it ever does.

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