February 24, 2017

DEFEATING RADICAL ISLAM

Pray for our government to be effective in countering radical Islamic extremists and terrorists.

Who is the enemy? It’s been over 15 years since Sept. 11, 2001, and this fundamental question still rattles around. Prominent answers have included evildoers, violent extremists, terrorists, Muslims, and Islamists.

As an example of how not to answer this question, the Obama administration convened a Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Working Group in 2010 and included participants who turned up such gems as: “Jihad as holy war is a European invention,” the caliphate’s return is “inevitable,” Shariah (Islamic law) is “misunderstood,” and “Islamic terrorism is a contradiction in terms because terrorism is not Islamic by definition.” The result? The group produced propaganda helpful to the (unnamed) enemy.

In contrast, then-candidate Donald Trump gave a robust speech in August 2016 on how he, as president, would “Make America Safe Again.” In it, he pledged that “one of my first acts as president will be to establish a commission on radical Islam.” Note: he said radical Islam, not some euphemism like violent extremism.

The goal of that commission, he said, “will be to identify and explain to the American public the core convictions and beliefs of radical Islam, to identify the warning signs of radicalization, and to expose the networks in our society that support radicalization.” The commission “will include reformist voices in the Muslim community” with the goal to “develop new protocols for local police officers, federal investigators, and immigration screeners.”

On Feb. 2, Reuters reported that, consistent with the August statement, the Trump administration “wants to revamp and rename” the Obama administration’s old CVE effort to focus solely on Islamism. Symbolic of this change, the name Countering Violent Extremism will be changed to “Countering Radical Islamic Extremism” (or a near equivalent).

To make the most of this historic opportunity, the Middle East Forum has crafted a comprehensive plan for a White House Commission on Radical Islam for the administration to use. Here’s a summary of how we see the commission working and having an impact:

Structure. To be successful, all its members must be selected by the president. Too many commissions have included contrasting ideologies and agendas, grinding out sausagelike self-conflicting reports that displease the administration and end up discarded. Also, learning from the struggles of the Tower Commission, which lacked sufficient powers, and the precedent of the Three Mile Island Commission, which actually had them, the commission needs the power to subpoena documents, compel testimony and grant immunity.
Personnel. The commission should include a mix of experts on political violence and radical Islam, as well as elected officials, representatives of law enforcement, the military, the intelligence and diplomatic communities, technology specialists, Muslim reformers (as the president insisted), and victims of radical Islam. It should also include liaisons to those who ultimately will implement the commission’s recommendations: secretaries of the departments of state, defense, and homeland security, the attorney general, and the CIA director.

Mandate. The commission should expand on President Trump’s commitment to explain the core convictions of Islamists (i.e., the full and severe application of Shariah) to expose their networks, and develop new protocols for law enforcement. In addition, it should examine where Islamists get their resources and how these can be cut off; figure out how to deny them use of the internet; offer changes to immigration practices; and assess how political correctness impedes an honest appraisal of radical Islam.

Implementation. For the commission’s work to be relevant, it must coordinate with federal agencies to gather data and craft recommendations, draft executive orders and legislation, provide supporting documents, prepare requests for proposals, outline memos to state and local governments, recommend personnel, and work out budgets. Finally, the commission should be prepared that its reports may be used as evidence in criminal proceedings, such as was the case several times in the past (e.g., the Warren, Rogers, and Tower commissions).

The overall goal of the White House Commission on Radical Islam should be to bring the American people together around a common understanding of the enemy’s nature, how that enemy can be defeated, and specifics to accomplish this objective.

Perhaps this will start the long-delayed process of winning a war that has already gone on far too long. The United States has all the economic and military advantages; it lacks only a policy and a strategy, which the new administration, relying on a first-rate commission, can finally supply. (Contributors: Daniel Pipes and Christopher C. Hull for The Washington Times - Daniel Pipes (@DanielPipes) is president of the Middle East Forum. Christopher C. Hull (@ChristopherHull) is president of Issue Management, Inc.)

Through you we push back our enemies; through your name we trample our foes. (Ps. 44:5)

HOW THE MARKET CAN FIX HEALTH CARE

Pray for our leaders who are studying what to do about our health care system. May wise changes to Obamacare address and alleviate the problems in health care.

Republicans agree that Obamacare has failed and must be repealed. But they can’t agree on the replacement “plan.”

The one thing they shouldn’t do is devise another grand scheme like the Obama “plan.” The answer is not a new and better Big Government “plan.” Instead, the president and Congress should take specific actions to free the market so patients and providers can create a health care system that serves everyone.

When President Barack Obama proposed his federal takeover of the health care system, he was right about one thing: American medical care was a mess. Government provided half the funding, created incentives for cost-plus care, and pushed insurance onto employers. While care cost more than it should for many, some people didn’t have access to the treatment they needed.
But instead of seeking to empower patients by giving them greater control over their own futures and more opportunities to find the best care possible in the marketplace, the president and Democrats in Congress took medical decisions away from the public and transferred them to Washington.

Unsurprisingly, that approach didn’t work. Insurers, mandated to discard actuarial principles in order to cover patients with serious pre-existing conditions, were forced to offer one-size-fits-all policies to cover everything from falling hair to sex change procedures. No wonder the cost of health insurance spiked. People got stuck paying for “benefits” they didn’t want.

Washington’s coverage mandates forced companies to cancel health insurance plans that employees had relied on for years. Patients were lucky to find replacements, and usually ended up paying a lot more for a lot less. Having coverage did not mean having access to care.

Young, healthy people who were supposed to sign up in greater numbers and pay a lot more to subsidize their well-off elders, understandably chose not to do so.

Insurance companies were stuck serving a sicker population, causing them to lose money and drop plans. The promises of Obamacare proved to be false.

Republicans correctly believe the misguided law must be repealed. But what to replace it with, they ask.

The answer is nothing. At least, not in the sense of another comprehensive government program to set insurance requirements, mandate coverage, fix outcomes, and the like. Misguided government intervention created the health care mess we’ve got. It’s time we allow economic incentives and free market principles to solve the problem.

The solution is to free the market to innovate and experiment, to find the best way to provide quality coverage for less cost. For example, health insurers should have a national marketplace. Let people buy medical plans across state lines like every other kind of insurance. And bar states from imposing special interest coverage mandates that raise health insurance premiums for everyone.

Moreover, employees, not employers, should control their health insurance coverage. After all, none of us expects our company to buy us homeowners or auto insurance. The tax deduction could be shifted to individuals from businesses, or eliminated entirely with an equivalent individual income tax cut. Tax-free contributions to health savings accounts would enable people to finance the level of risk they’d be comfortable with.

The market today doesn’t have the flexibility to offer an answer, so government must get out of the way and encourage the private sector to do so. Those of limited means could be subsidized through vouchers to purchase their own private insurance. State high-risk pools could provide access to care for people with chronic or pre-existing conditions.

Medicaid needs to focus on the poor who have nowhere else to turn. Reform should emphasize allowing the states to provide better care for their most needy citizens without interference or mandates from Washington. States that do the best job will serve as models for others. Doctors who reject Washington’s cut-rate reimbursement rates need to be encouraged to re-enter the Medicare and Medicaid patient markets.

None of these measures constitutes a “plan” as such. Instead they each address a particular problem. In some cases they eliminate regulatory and tax barriers. In others they repair bad government incentives. In some instances they reward employers and providers of care to fill health care gaps.
The emphasis should be on addressing the individual problems in a coordinated manner. A workable reform requires targeted fixes designed to work interdependently, instead of one big "plan" requiring so many political compromises and tradeoffs that it would be doomed from the start.

It’s particularly important to get the principles and language right. We need to change the way policymakers think. Centralized government solutions don’t work regardless of who designs them.

We also need to change people’s expectations. The government should be the backstop for those without other options, not the protector of first resort.

The disaster called Obamacare provides an important reminder that we ignore at our peril. It is a fact that even the most well-intentioned programs designed by politicians and run by federal bureaucrats do not work. We can’t afford to ignore the lessons we’ve learned.

Instead, we need to restore and build on market principles that we know work, emphasizing the pragmatic over the ideological, and adapting to reality, not the world we wish existed.

People are suffering, so Congress needs to “fix” health care now. But not by repeating Obamacare’s ham-handed approach. Instead, policymakers should adopt a collection of logical steps to enable the marketplace to innovate and meet the diverse health care needs of the American people. (Contributor: By Ken Blackwell for The Washington Times - Ken Blackwell is a senior fellow at the American Civil Rights Union and the Family Research Council. He was a senior domestic policy adviser to the Trump transition team.)

*Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed. (Pr. 15:22)*

**AMERICA’S DECLINING ECONOMIC FREEDOM**

Pray for the Trump Administration to adopt and pursue policies that increase economic freedom in the U.S.

Its official title is “2017 Index of Economic Freedom.” But you could also call it “President Obama’s Report Card.”

At least when it comes to the United States. The index contains scores and ranks for almost every country, after all. And the news for the rest of the world, on balance, is good. Economic freedom is up again. Many countries have taken steps to ensure greater liberty for their citizens to make, spend and invest their money as they see fit. But not the United States.

Economic freedom isn’t the same as political freedom (though the two often go hand in hand). I’m not talking about free speech; I’m talking about how free are we to earn without being overtaxed and overregulated. How hard it is to start a business and keep it running. How much our government spends. How easily we can trade with other countries.

Our economic liberty has a profound effect on our daily lives. It influences how much money we make, what kind of work we do, how high prices and unemployment are — even what kind of appliances we can buy.

So where does the United States fall on this year’s index? Our global ranking is No. 17, with a score of 75.1 (on a 0-100 scale, with 100 being the freest).
On the list of 180 countries graded in the 2017 index, that's not bad. But that’s 10 slots below where we finished in 2008. Indeed, the United States was once a regular top-10 finisher when the index was first published in 1995. Now we’ve been eclipsed by the United Arab Emirates, a newcomer to the global top 10.

We're not even the freest economy in the Americas. Canada and Chile beat us out this year — again.

Before looking at why, let’s consider how the index editors determine the scores. Each country is evaluated in four broad areas:

• Rule of law. Are property rights protected through an effective and honest judicial system? How widespread is corruption — bribery, extortion, graft, etc.?

• Limited government. Are taxes high or low? Is government spending kept under control, or is it growing unchecked?

• Regualtory efficiency. Are businesses able to operate without burdensome and redundant regulations? Are individuals able to work where and how much they want? Is inflation in check? Are prices stable?

• Open markets: Can goods be traded freely? Are there tariffs, quota or other restrictions? Can individuals invest their money where and how they see fit? Is there an open banking environment that encourages competition?

Let’s look at how the U.S. fares on these measures:

• Rule of law: Our judiciary functions independently and predictably, but the protection of property rights has been uneven. The Pew Research Center reported in late 2015 that only 19 percent of the public trusts the government all or most of the time.

• Government size: Here’s where we really lag freer economies. Our top individual income tax rate is 39.6 percent. The top corporate tax rate is among the world’s highest: 35 percent. Government spending at all levels amounts to about 38.3 percent of gross domestic product (roughly $30,000 per household). Spending keeps rising, and government keep growing.

• Regulatory efficiency: The number of federal regulations has increased substantially, raising total annual compliance costs to more than $100 billion in just seven years. (Thanks, President Obama.) Ballooning deficits are fueled by federal welfare programs, farm subsidies, “green” energy programs, corporate welfare and other special-interest spending.

• Open markets: The average applied tariff rate is 1.4 percent. Over one-third of all land is owned by government. The overall financial sector remains competitive, but the banking sector is hampered by such federal interference as the Dodd-Frank legislation.

The U.S. economy is remarkably resilient, but it needs help. Fortunately, the Trump administration has promised a sharp break with the regulatory, tax and trade policies of recent years.

Regaining our place among the top 10 economies won’t be easy, but it can be done. And the sooner, the better. Your move, President Trump. (Contributor: By Ed Feulner for The Washington Times - Ed Feulner is founder of the Heritage Foundation (heritage.org).

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. (Rom. 4:4 ESV)