

Can the French teach us a basic civics lesson about handling terrorism?

Written by The Conversation

We have now had time to digest the tragic events in Paris.

The press has made its predictable set of news cycles in the last two weeks. They have covered the actual events themselves. Then, in America, we moved to the historic rallies in the aftermath of the attack - and the issue of President Obama's absence.

What the American press clearly missed in that discussion was that nobody in France particularly cared about Obama's absence. What they loved was that John Kerry made a condolence speech directed to them in French.

This was quickly followed by the news of the escape of some of those who were involved, then the antiterrorism raids in Belgium, the publication of the latest edition of Charlie Hebdo and, more recently, the summit meetings intended to improve coordination and the arrest of possible collaborators.

What is particularly notable in the reporting, debates and discussion is the strikingly different tone on each side of the Atlantic. I was in Paris in those early days and witnessed some events first-hand. But I have been following the discussion in the media in France and the US since I returned to the US.

Frankly, we in the US don't look very good in this comparison.

Unity in being French

From day one, the French, despite their heightened anxiety, have stressed the importance of unity. Their politicians from the two main political parties have gone to great lengths to emphasize that "being French" is all that matters, regardless of whether you are a Muslim, a Jew or a subversive, secular cartoonist.

Invoking what is perennially called their "assimilationist" model of integration, France's Socialist

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President, Francois Hollande, vowed that his country will protect all religions, [saying](#) that Muslims are the main victims of fanaticism. France's police and military forces have been assigned to protect its synagogues, but also its mosques.

Having marched in solidarity in the Place de la Republique, Hollande was quick to give a speech at the Renaissance Forum of the Arab World Institute to demonstrate he stood behind what he said about national unity.

Prime Minister [Manuel Valls](#) has actively supported Hollande's message of unity. Valls suggested France simply cannot be France without its Jews. So the government must do everything it can to ensure they are – and they feel – safe. Yet in an even handed approach, he was [quick to stress](#) that that France is at war with terrorism, not with Islam. But the response is not just greater security. Much of the onus has been on education and urban development in the poorer sections of France's Muslim community.

The governing socialist party has not been alone in advancing the theme of unity, or of civil liberties.

When leading Conservative UMP (Union Pour Un Mouvement Populaire) politician Dominique de Villepin was asked what he thought of introducing Patriot Act style legislation, he responded that he didn't think it was a good idea. [He feared](#) it would endanger France's "moral compass."

This spirit of unity is probably best personified by Lassana Bathily, the Muslim Malian national who worked at the kosher supermarket that was attacked.

Bathily hid shoppers during the attack, was universally lauded, and then awarded French citizenship in a fast-track process. When interviewed, [he told reporters](#) that the Jewish staff there would kid him, asking when he was going to find a nice Jewish girlfriend.

Likewise, million of French of all shades and religions have marched in solidarity over the last two weeks. This included in Marseille, the city with the largest number of Muslims, where [thous
ands](#)

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took to the streets to voice their rejection of fanaticism.

Sure, Marine Le Pen, leader of France's National Front Party, has opportunistically used these events [to call](#) for a more strident foreign policy against Jihadists abroad and the re-imposition of border controls at home.

But what has been notable has been the way her views, and her party, have been sidelined. [A recent opinion poll](#) had the Socialists ahead (30%) of the National Front (28%) for the first time since September : Le Pen has not enjoyed the popular wave of nationalist support that many anticipated. France's political moderates, from the left and the right, have endorsed a greater public show of security, but defied all calls for sectarianism.

Plus ça change: polarized in the US

In contrast, the American media has continued to emphasize the politics of division, the politics of identity, the politics of "us versus them."

Some of this supposed reporting has been astoundingly inaccurate, inept and divisive. Steve Emerson, identified on Fox News as a terrorism expert, told the host Sean Hannity that, "there are no-go zones" throughout Europe ruled by Muslims. This is patently false and the news station had to retract and apologize for repeating the claim.

Indeed, Fox News have made such fools of themselves that they have had to issue a public apology. Meanwhile, the French have caricatured them on [Le Petit Journal](#) , their equivalent of Jon Stewart's Daily Show.

But even the far more subtle and sophisticated [New York Times](#) has published an endless stream of articles focusing on the theme of potential divisions between Muslims and the rest of France rather than the theme of solidarity.

What is so curious about this is that we Americans pride ourselves on being a "melting pot" for

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people of all races, religions and countries. Our politicians constantly tell us that America is a model. It is a shining light for the rest of the world. But you don't have to be a fan of France to recognize a sober reality. The French are handling their equivalent of 9/11 a lot differently – and some would argue better – than we have.

In the aftermath of 9/11 we constricted civil liberties at home. We rounded up and incarcerated Muslims. And we instituted surveillance programs. American Muslims were treated as the enemy of this country, as were people who supposedly looked like Muslims. It is easy now to recall the misplaced horror with which critics reacted to the idea of a mosque being located near the twin towers in New York. Those critics included respectable politicians who should have been a voice of moderation.

We also, of course, tortured foreign suspects, imprisoned them in Guantanamo (and still do) and prosecuted two wars. Some of these things have clearly changed. Some have improved. Many Americans regret some of our activities during this period, putting it down to some kind of national psychosis.

But the hangover from that period is clearly still with us. We see the events in France through the lens of our own experience. We focus on what we think should divide the French. We are, it would seem, incredulous that they don't share our propensity to look for a widespread subversive enemy within. That they prefer to treat this as a criminal, policing issue rather than the basis for a foreign war.

Of course, all this internal strife may yet come to pass.

The French have stepped up their military involvement in Iraq and Syria. And the moderating efforts of the center may not hold against the forces of division. But today, as things stand, it looks like the French can clearly teach us a thing or two about “standing together or falling apart.”

Simon Reich does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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