

Return of 'Fortress America'

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Republican Rep. Tom Cotton (Ark.) suggests that the terrorist group ISIS is colluding with Mexican drug cartels to attack Arkansans, despite repeated statements by top counterterrorism officials that they know of no active ISIS plots against the US. Former Massachusetts Sen. Scott Brown (R), while on the campaign trail in New Hampshire, suggests we should close the U.S.-Mexico border because of the Ebola risk—even though Mexico has zero reported cases of Ebola. In California and Arizona, Republicans are repeating the ISIS-across-the-Mexico-border link, calling for greater border security.

Normally, these attacks would be a waste of time and money. None of the threats that the Republicans feature so prominently are a direct menace to the overwhelming majority of Americans, who are far more likely to die of a lightning strike than in a terrorist attack or by contracting Ebola. And as voters, Americans pay scant attention to national security, with fewer than 10 percent naming such issues as their top priorities, instead focusing on pocketbook or social issues.

So while these Republican attacks do little to illuminate these serious policy issues, they do reveal some important things about the GOP that voters should remember on Election Day.

First, Republicans are bringing the same kinds of distortion and exaggeration to national security threats that campaigns typically use on relative trivialities, like a senator's attendance at committee hearings. Journalistic fact-checkers should not have to slap the wrists of candidates when they comment on matters as weighty as Ebola and ISIS, but these ads are so preposterous that they must be debunked.

Second, Republican attacks ads on terrorism show their willingness to pick a partisan fight where one doesn't exist.

Broad majorities in both parties supported the legislation in Congress endorsing the president's plan to arm the Syrian rebels against ISIS. No one in either party is seriously suggesting a course of action on the ground in Syria or against Ebola that differs from what the president has taken. The idea that Sens. Mark Pryor (D-Ark.) or Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) are outliers in their views about these matters is laughable.

Finally, these ads suggest that Republicans' only prescription for dealing with these threats seems to be to wall off the country. The return of this Fortress America attitude shows the simplicity of this thinking. It does not live up to America's leadership role in the international community. It does not acknowledge America's unique capabilities to address these threats. And most importantly, it does not recognize that the growth and health of our economy requires us to engage the world.

This return to Fortress America thinking stands at odds with the Republican Party's proudest internationalist traditions. The party of "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," has become the party of "Mr. Obama, make this wall higher." It shows a preference for rejecting American leadership on the global stage that is necessary for the world's sole hyper-power. And it shows an unwillingness to think through pragmatic solutions to the hard problems our nation faces.

As another American president once said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Fear makes it impossible to think rationally about solutions to the problems we face.

Republicans would have Americans curled up in a ball, behind locked doors with the shades drawn. But America is a greater nation than that. Time and again, Americans have risen to the challenge. We have found cures for diseases, defeated the Nazis and Communism, and sent the leader of al Qaeda to the bottom of the sea.

While President Obama has, at times, had a hard time articulating his foreign policy vision, his administration has developed an international coalition to attack ISIS without

deploying American ground troops. He has sent some of our best medical professionals to help stop the spread of Ebola in Africa so that it doesn't reach our shores. He has used airstrikes in Syria to attack an al Qaeda cell that was actively plotting attacks here at home.

As voters enter the ballot boxes, they should think through who is proposing that America lead and who is suggesting that Americans cower in fear of threat, both real and concocted for political gain.

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