King hearings: A polarized flop

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The biggest problem with the King hearings into domestic radicalization is that from the beginning their purpose has not been clear. Is there anyone in the Muslim community or the government in denial that radicalization of some Muslim Americans is a security problem? No.

Are there any rational people who believe that disparaging the Muslim American community and blaming it collectively for the acts of a few will improve this problem? No again.

There would have been nothing wrong if King had accurately defined the radicalization problem as a dangerous ideology that, thankfully, affects relatively few Muslim Americans, and called hearings to explore ways Muslim Americans, non-Muslim Americans and law enforcement could work together to address this problem. Had he done this, the hearings could have been a productive exercise, as were prior hearings run by Senator Joe Lieberman and former U.S. Representative Jane Harman.

But in the months leading up to the hearings, Rep. King clung to his often expressed views that radicalization is pervasive among Muslim Americans, and that the community was not cooperating with law enforcement with sufficient vigor. This led to the extreme polarization of the entire event, with the messiness of the culture wars evident in American society playing itself out between Democrats and Republicans in the hearing room, for all the world to watch.

What a mess. Let’s hope the 1.2 billion Muslim around the world -- many of whom are laying their lives on the line for democracy -- didn’t pay much attention to this spectacle.

To his credit, King backed away from giving a platform to the true haters of Islam, like Robert Spencer and Bridgette Gabrielle, who have made a career, and plenty of money, spreading ignorance and fear among an American populace which seems all too receptive to their nonsense.
He was left trying to coax support for his perspective from a panel of witnesses that either directly contradicted him or provided scant support for his views.

The star witness, an Arizona doctor who speaks eloquently about problems with modern Islam, but apparently has no following, clearly stated that no Muslim American he knows would fail to report an imminent terrorist plot to authorities.

The father of a radicalized Muslim who murdered a U.S. serviceman blamed his son’s radicalization on unnamed sources in a Tennessee mosque. But he exonerated himself from any culpability, claiming that he was unaware that his son harbored radical, violent views. One was left wondering how, if a parent can’t see radicalization in his own son, unrelated Muslim community members are expected to identify it and notify authorities.

The only panelist in a position of authority to speak about Muslim cooperation with law enforcement, Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca, rejected everything King had to say.

Ironically, if you ignore the claptrap emanating from many committee members and focus on what the panelists had to say, some useful lessons emerge:

- Radicalization is a dangerous phenomenon that hardly any Muslim Americans tolerate;
- There is cooperation between Muslim Americans and law enforcement, but more work needs to be done in this area so all Muslims (especially those from isolated immigrant communities) feel comfortable coming forward with information; and,
- Intolerance toward Muslim Americans is both un-American and likely to undermine our counterterrorism efforts.

Perhaps, now that King has had his opportunity to vent, future hearings can draw from these lessons and develop ideas to address the radicalization problem in a productive fashion. More political theater, like we saw on March 9, is certainly not in the national interest.

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