

Did Trickle-down Complacency Lead to the White House Breach?



Last week, there was a troubling incident at the White House when a man with a knife (later identified as Omar J. Gonzalez) climbed the fence and actually made his way inside the presidential residence before he was apprehended by the Secret Service.

The news generated a plethora of jokes from late-night comedians and people on the Internet. Someone even created a tongue-in-cheek petition on whitehouse.gov, arguing that the jumper deserved the right to actually live the White House since the president is allowing hundreds of thousands of Central Americans, who illegally jumped across our nation's border, to stay in this country.

Though there's certainly nothing wrong with political humor, I think we sometimes let it distract us from the seriousness that certain events and issues deserve. What happened at the White House, for example, was a pretty big deal. At a time when our country is going to war against an Islamic terrorist group that has taken over sections of two Middle Eastern countries, beheaded two of our citizens, and vowed attacks on American soil, some guy with a weapon was able to leap a fence and actually get inside the home of our president.

What if this guy had a gun, or worse yet, was wearing a suicide vest? After all, an arsenal of weapons was later found in his car. What if President Obama and his family were home

at the time, instead of having just left on a trip?

Two years ago, my family went on vacation to Washington, DC. It was the first time I had ever gone there, and we took a tour of the White House. There were a few things that really stuck out about the experience. First of all, I was surprised by how small the building was. On television and in the movies, the White House always looks larger than life. It's not. In fact, it doesn't take much time at all to walk from one end of the building to the other. The same goes for the North Lawn that separates the White House from Pennsylvania Avenue. It's a large lawn by normal standards, but you'd expect there to be more buffer space between the general public and the leader of the free world.

Still, the expectation is that highly-trained, strategically-placed Secret Service agents and White House security personnel are more than prepared to quickly and efficiently take down anyone they deem as a threat. The fact that it didn't happen with last week's fence jumper – at least within an acceptable proximity – is unnerving to me because I can't help but suspect that the ultimate cause of the delayed action was something we were warned of repeatedly following the 9/11 attacks: An underlying sense of complacency.

Our country recently recognized the 13th anniversary of 9/11, and it was heartening to read and hear the phrase "Never Forget" mentioned time after time on that day. Unfortunately, I worry that many of us have indeed forgotten. I'm not talking about the attacks themselves; no one will ever forget those. I'm talking about the reality that we live in an extremely dangerous world – one where many people hate us so much that they would eagerly give their lives to kill us by the thousands.

Over time, I feel as though our nation has in a way become a victim of its own success. Terrorists haven't been able to pull off another massive attack on our homeland, in large part

because our military has fought them abroad and our intelligence agencies have detected plots early enough to prevent them from coming to fruition. Somewhere along the way, this perceived sense of finality has led our war-weary culture into buying the notion that the War on Terror has run its course, and that the fight just isn't worth fighting anymore. We've become comfortable again; complacent when it comes to the international threats that exist.

Many of our leaders in Washington (in conjunction with public sentiment) have downplayed the threat in recent years, and have prioritized 'ending' conflicts over 'winning' them. It's that philosophy that led to the terrorist group ISIS spreading out of control in Iraq – a country that was declared less than three years ago by our president to be “sovereign, stable, and self-reliant”. It's that philosophy that led to us having to return to the Middle East to begin bombing campaigns in Syria.

When that culture of complacency rises all the way to the top, it's perhaps not all that difficult to understand how it could also trickle down to the men and women assigned to *protect* those at the top. It would perhaps explain the slow response-time to a pretty large man, in broad daylight, jumping a fence and running toward the White House. Of course, I hope I'm wrong about that. I have a lot of respect for the Secret Service, even after all of the scandals they've been dealing with over the past few years. Their job is one of nobility, dedication and vital importance. One would hope they'd be immune to societal indifference.

In dangerous times, complacency is a dangerous thing. Our culture can sometimes get by without recognizing that, but those tasked with protecting the American way of life can not be part of that culture.