America's Great Disconnect
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National Public Radio has its critics and its champions. It’s likely, however, amidst NPR’s controversial firing of Juan Williams for commenting about Muslims on Fox News, that the champions are going to be busy for a while defending NPR’s cavalier action. For in truth, Williams told the truth as he saw it, and in doing so his words resonated with millions of Americans. And NPR fired him for telling the truth.

The ham-handed, even arrogant conduct of NPR management here is a tempting target. But NPR is but a small symptom of a much larger problem in contemporary American public policy today. And that is the large and increasing disconnect between political elites and the American public regarding Muslims and the Muslim religion.

Elites from Obama down know or think they know that the Muslim religion is not innately violent or warlike and that Muslims themselves are peace-loving peoples. And so we see regular pronouncements from both government and non-government elites to that point. President Obama assures us that “radical Muslims” are few, while “moderate Muslims” constitute the “vast majority” of the world’s one billion Muslims. He says moderate Muslims and Americans possess “shared values and common aspirations.”

Nor is this simply a liberal Democratic phenomenon. Republican elites back to the Bush administration echoed much of what Democratic elites are now saying. As far back as 2002, for example, President Bush stated, "Ours is a war not against a religion, not against the Muslim faith. But ours is a war against individuals who absolutely hate what America stands for.” Even earlier, he insisted that "terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself. The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them."

The elite message has been clear and consistent. Muslims are not the problem; radical terrorists hijacking their own faith are the problem. Islam the religion is in fact not violent; it’s the Islamic terrorists who are.

The difficulty is that regular “Joe Six-Pack” Americans see a different reality. The country was attacked by violent Muslims and is daily threatened by warlike Muslims. Since 9/11, most attackers or would-be attackers have been Muslim, most major threats have been issued by Muslims, and most plotters or alleged plotters have been Muslim. America has waged two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan against Muslim countries and is waging a third “secret war” in Pakistan against another.

That is the reality most Americans experience. And so, as Juan Williams pointed out, when he and other Americans see Muslims boarding a plane, yes, they get a little nervous.

Now there is an important point here, one Williams himself made in subsequent interviews after he was fired. The concern about Muslims is irrational. No terrorist, even a stupid one (and there are more than a few of them), is going to “dress up” Muslim to blow up a plane. More to the point, the vast majority of Muslims are
not terrorists.

Sadly, average Americans have really been left to shift for themselves on this point. Moderate Muslims have largely been AWOL in aggressively condemning the extremists among their co-religionists. Moreover, some of them have used questionable judgment telling their story. The dubious decision to locate a mosque near ground zero, albeit a legal right, showed an almost complete lack of common sense and sensibility about American public opinion.

Meanwhile, American political leaders, both Democratic and Republican, have been largely ineffective explaining to Americans much about the Muslim faith, or in using much common sense themselves. President Obama, for example, recently displayed some poor judgment by weighing in on the ground zero mosques plans, uninvited and unrequited.

The consequence here—and the Juan Williams fiasco illustrates the point—is a huge disconnect between American political elites and most Americans. Moderate Muslims have a job to do here and they haven’t done it very well. They have allowed the radicals to monopolize the public discourse to such an extent that millions of Americans will respond to Williams’s plight with a sympathetic “me too.”

But American political elites have been equally guilty of mouthing politically correct shibboleths about Islam, rather than tackling the tougher task of explaining how terrorists have perverted Islam for their own religious and political purposes.

It’s time for American elites, both governmental and non-governmental, to realize they have largely been talking to themselves about the Muslim threat. Most Americans simply don’t believe what they have been told or don’t know what to believe.

This not so incidentally is exactly what the terrorists expect, and we aren’t disappointing them. Clearly it’s time for us to be honest with ourselves just as Juan Williams was with himself. NPR can’t fire everybody.

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