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ALT-RIGHT: OUTRIGHT WRONG

by Philip Baum

There is always news, and much of it is depressing. We have been saddened this year with the passing of sporting legends such as Muhammad Ali, Arnold Palmer and Johan Cruyff, as well as musical icons David Bowie, Prince and Leonard Cohen. Political leaders who were the newsmakers of the 20th Century have also made their exit – King Rama IX of Thailand (Bhumibol Adulyadej), Elie Wiesel, and, so much part of aviation security history, both Shimon Peres and Fidel Castro.

It has been a year of new challenges, some of which, such as the outbreak of the Zika virus in January, we, as individuals can do little about. However, 2016 has also been a momentous year from a geopolitical perspective and many are asking whether the lessons learned from World War II have, perhaps, been forgotten? Or, and arguably worse, intentionally disregarded? We seem to have become immune to human suffering and intent on going down a xenophobic, self-protectionist route. So much for multi-culturalism.

The human tragedy in Aleppo that is unfolding as I write makes for graphic television imagery, yet how many of us are actually doing something about it? We, as a society, respond similarly to the plight of the refugees risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean to European shores. Anybody who has visited Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia or Holocaust memorials and exhibits around the globe will have exited them with that feeling of frustration that people knew but did nothing, or even self-disgust that they were personally aware of the plight of people on distant shores, but failed to act. Out of sight, out of mind. And it is against that backdrop that we are seeing a surge in right-wing activism. We don't really want to see...

Many commentators have recognised the groundswell of angst in Western society, yet few acknowledged its scale until the anti-immigrant rhetoric of UKIP (the United Kingdom Independence Party) managed to win over more than 50% of the British electorate who actually voted and set the country on course for Brexit. The immediate rise in racial, anti-Semitic and homophobic incidents in the aftermath of the decision to 'Leave' was sickening.

Less than half a year later, an even greater seismic result emerged in the United States with the election of Donald Trump and Indiana Governor Mike Pence as its 45th president and 58th vice president. As Trump

"...as society polarises, the threat is exacerbated..."

vows to 'make America great again', the rest of the free world has looked on in abject horror at the thought of a seemingly misogynistic racist as its de-facto unelected leader. I am sure that there are a few readers who might have voted Republican, and I respect your exercising your democratic right to do so, but I have yet to meet a single European who is anything other than disgusted that Trump – a man who can even make jokes at a political rally about people with physical disabilities – will be entering the White House. "Great again": in whose eyes? Whilst I admit I am not optimistic, one hopes the reality of his taking on the awesome responsibility of being Commander-in-Chief may make the, as one commentator put it "imperfect candidate with a near-perfect message" temper the rhetoric and build bridges between nations and communities.

Eleven days after the US election, a meeting was held by the alt-right movement in Washington DC, in which its leader, Robert B. Spencer, spoke in a style one could only equate with Hitler at a Nazi rally. He ended with the words, "Hail Trump! Hail our people! Hail victory!", but it might as well have been 'Sieg Heil'. I urge you to watch a clip of excerpts of the meeting at www.youtube.com/watch?v=1o6-bi3jlxk posted by The Atlantic. Can we really continue to justify such freedom of speech?

The political landscape in Europe is indicative of a surge in right-wing activism. In Germany, the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) emerged, only three years ago, on an anti-Euro platform and morphed into an anti-immigrant party; more specifically, anti-Islamic with a proposal for banning the construction of mosques on German soil. Its leader, Frauke Petry, has even spoken of turning guns on people who try to enter Germany illegally. In France, the National Front, led by Marine Le Pen, is now a mainstream political party and many think that her chances in next year's presidential elections are quite 'good'. Le Pen has celebrated the success of both the Brexit and Trump election campaigns and is urging French voters to reject the EU and use the ballot box to vote to restrict immigration. General elections in both France and Germany in 2017 will be further barometers of the political winds of change.

Italy is also on course for a referendum of membership of the European Union, whilst in The Netherlands, the Party of Freedom is advocating the closure of Muslim schools and even the recording of the ethnicity of Dutch citizens. In Greece, Golden Dawn has, like the National Front in France, become a major player in the Greek parliament and, despite being branded by many as neo-Nazi and having many of its leaders arrested and charged with criminal activity, they continue to be gaining widespread support, exacerbated by the country's geographical location putting it on the frontline for handling trans-Mediterranean migrants.



“...values of democracy, freedom and respect for the law and the dignity of man, independent of origin, skin colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation or political views...”

In Austria, the Freedom Party’s Norbert Hoffer has just missed out on being elected the country’s President; in Sweden, the Sweden Democrats are plotting a course for exiting the EU; and the same is true in Slovakia where the People’s Party-Our Slovakia is also gaining ground with its anti-immigrant rhetoric. And worst of all, in Hungary, the Jobbik party – voted for by 1 in 5 of the electorate at the last elections – is now the third largest Hungarian party and is promulgating an anti-immigration, anti-EU, anti-Semitic, homophobic set of policies, whilst inciting venomous populist uprisings through its agenda of public protests and church-based speaking engagements.

One might argue that European politics have little to do with aviation security. I beg to differ. The long-desired clash of civilisations sought by many Islamic extremists is fast becoming a reality. As society polarises, the threat is exacerbated. As the West becomes less tolerant, minorities will be further excluded from society; the more they are marginalised, the greater the frustration for this generation and the increased disillusionment for the next. And that will play out in our airports and on board our aircraft.

Most supporters of the current mainstream political parties in Europe and Republicans and Democrats in the United States recognise that we cannot ignore the Islamic fundamentalist threat, potentially one intensified by returning fighters as Islamic State is being pushed back militarily. Yet to demonise an entire section of our society is a lesson which we should have learned is inherently, morally and practically wrong. Our greatest challenge, going into 2017, is to work out how we can better

integrate with one another – especially within our own industry where we can have a positive impact.

2016 was a taxing year for aviation: the attacks in Brussels and Istanbul, the bombing of Daallo Airlines out of Mogadishu, the loss of EgyptAir flight 804 (whatever the cause) and, most recently, the tragic crash of the LaMia flight en route from Bolivia to Colombia will all last long in our memories.

2017 will also be a challenge for us within the industry, but more so for our elected leaders who have the unenviable responsibility to protect the values previous generations have fought for. As Angela Merkel so eloquently put it after Trump’s election, “Germany and America are connected by values of democracy, freedom and respect for the law and the dignity of man, independent of origin, skin colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation or political views.” Hear, hear!

In that vein, I bid all our readers a healthy, happy, prosperous, safe and secure new year. ■

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You may well disagree with the views expressed in this Lead Editorial. We welcome your feedback and urge you to write to the Editor at editor@avsec.com expressing your opinion. We are happy to include such correspondence in our February 2017 issue.

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