

## In light of Boston bombings, who is an American?

Pat Perriello | Apr. 23, 2013 NCR Today

The recent bombing in Boston has touched off some predictable discussions in at least two areas. The first is whether or not [Dzhokhar Tsarnaev should be tried](#) [1] as an enemy combatant.

Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham and others believe the defendant should be declared an enemy combatant. Because the acts he is accused of were inspired by radical Islam, Graham believes Tsarnaev would qualify for such a designation. He also believes this is the only way necessary intelligence can be gathered to avoid future terrorist attacks. He believes it will require a significant period of time to gather the information, which could not be done simply by using the public safety exception to the Miranda rights.

The second issue involves whether or not the [Senate should go through with](#) [2] the immigration reform bill in light of the Boston bombing.

Republican Sens. Rand Paul of Kentucky and Charles Grassley of Iowa say the comprehensive immigration bill should be delayed or changed because of the Boston bombing and the fact that those accused in the attacks were foreigners. Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas believes the immigration bill should now be taken up piecemeal, perhaps eliminating a path to citizenship altogether.

As indicated by White House Press Secretary Jay Carney, it is clear in U.S. law that an American citizen cannot be tried in a military court. Carney also pointed out that hundreds of terrorists have successfully been tried in our federal court system.

My sense is that it is something about those who are foreign or different that causes some people to believe they should be treated differently. Yet Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is an American citizen. When Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, was arrested, I heard no clamor for treating him as an enemy combatant. However, wasn't the danger just as great that other people may have been involved and that other acts of terror may have been planned or may have even been imminent? Despite his horrendous acts, was McVeigh somehow more American than Tsarnaev, even though Tsarnaev had already been in the country for more than 10 years and had, in fact, grown up as an American?

Democratic Sen. Chuck Schumer suggested that some senators were using the Boston bombings as an excuse to delay the immigration bill. Once again, the issue of being foreign comes up. The two suspects emigrated from Russia, which perhaps suggests we need to at least be careful about letting anybody in our country from the outside. Yet we are mourning a Chinese student, Lu Lingzi, a foreigner who lost her life enjoying the American tradition of the Boston Marathon.

As we confront the reality of the horrible bombing in Boston, we also know that another American citizen, Paul Kevin Curtis from Mississippi, is accused of sending letters containing the poison ricin to the president of the United States and a United States senator. Is that an act of war? Should he be charged as an enemy combatant?

The immigration bill in question is also totally unrelated to any Islamic fundamentalist issue. We are talking

about the status of millions of people who are already in our country. These are people who came here to work and earn a living for their families. Providing them with legal status will actually make us safer by enabling us to know who these individuals are, where they came from, and what they are doing in our country.

Who, then, is an American? My dad arrived from Italy at the age of 16. He opened a shoe shop near Pittsburgh and owned a restaurant in West Virginia. He was an American because he was accepted by the good people of Pennsylvania and West Virginia. His accent, foreign-sounding name and lack of familiarity with the American culture did not deter the community from accepting him.

It's pretty clear that there are good citizens and bad citizens. There are people from other countries who can and do contribute tremendously to our way of life. There are others who do us harm or are nonproductive. We cannot weed out all the bad people from our midst. We cannot identify every individual who may do us harm. We also cannot wall ourselves off from the rest of the world when the global community of the 21st century is all around us.

We can be very thankful for the way law enforcement worked in Boston during these tragic events. I was extremely impressed with the coordination of all federal, state and local agencies involved. It seems we have finally gotten our act together to share and utilize information as necessary to get the job done. There was no indication of territoriality throughout the effort. We can be proud of the way our government operated.

We, of course, need to continue to be vigilant and utilize every legal means to keep us safe, knowing that there are no guarantees. Yet we must also continue to be true to ourselves, our Constitution, and our faith in the family of man. The diversity of Americans has enriched the country. Whether we see it as a melting pot, a salad bowl or a rainbow coalition, we are all Americans. The people of Boston who stood strong against the evils of the bombing were of every race, nationality and faith. They were all Americans.

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**Links:**

[1] [http://www.politico.com/politico44/2013/04/white-house-dzhokar-tsarnaev-not-an-enemy-combatant-162298.html?hp=15\\_b3](http://www.politico.com/politico44/2013/04/white-house-dzhokar-tsarnaev-not-an-enemy-combatant-162298.html?hp=15_b3)

[2] [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/23/us/politics/senators-at-immigration-hearing-clash-over-boston-bombings.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/23/us/politics/senators-at-immigration-hearing-clash-over-boston-bombings.html?_r=0)