

Didn't the French Flag Look Good Behind All Those Facebook Profile Photos?

November 20, 2015
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Twelve hours after the Paris bombings last Friday, a 23 year-old shouted “Allaouakbar” from his car with a throat-cutting gesture, in front of a police station in Noailles, France. It's hard to forgive that level of stupidity, but you may not guess what it earned him: one year in prison.

I relate this because my media streams are overflowing with signs of sympathy for France this week, and as a French citizen, I don't know what to do with them. The last time this happened, the #JeSuisCharlie hashtag served as a free ticket for the political class to pass a handful of new laws. One of those forbids *apologie du terrorisme* and helps us imprison harmless idiots with a warped sense of humor. Another law put governmental recording devices in every French internet access provider network. And finally we allowed French secret services to eavesdrop on any foreign Internet traffic worldwide, with no judicial supervision. Those laws were

voted in rushed procedures and against the advice of Reporters without Borders and Amnesty International — so I am scared when I think of what's coming *now*.

The problem is that tragedies make governing considerably easier. There's that thrilling sense of gravity and emergency; a chance to stand up, to tell the French they have to be strong; there's operation Cool-Sounding-Name that involves very fast French-built fighter jets, new plans, exceptional measures.

Those addicted to that kind of thrill cannot to resist the hunger: before the dust settles, incredible ideas can be implemented with little resistance: new immigration policies, increased police powers (another name for decreased magistrate powers), emergency censorship of the web, you name it. Is this finally time for a governmental Ministry of Authority, as proposed by a presidential hopeful this summer? And hey, gunmen just stormed the Bataclan, it must a good time for an urgent reform to the Constitution... right?

Power-thirsty leaders are a good thing. I am not wishing for a team of selfless ministers, but for intelligent counter-powers against which to pit them: zealous, unmovable magistrates, and thoughtful, opinionated law-makers. I want a grueling battle for every power extension; but instead, the French flag flying everywhere (damn does it look good on the Sydney Opera), the ceremonies, the tremolo declarations all seem to shrink terrorism down to a simple matter of an escalation of executive powers. With no clear recipient and with no strings attached, the signs of sympathy serve as some kind of a blank check, which some are eager to cash in.

As I mourn, I fear for the privacy of our Internet traffic, for our ability to read and write free of state surveil-

lance, and for our ability to un-vote the knee-jerk laws rushed to parliament this week. Perhaps the mark of discussions about tough topics is that it's hard to express disagreement without appearing to side with the criminals. I did not take part in our national minute of silence. But as you read this you stand in a building named after an engineer who was also a member of the Nazi party; so you must surely have a sense of nuance.

All I am hoping for is for a two-way relationship. If you show sympathy for the French, hold us also accountable for it, lest we slip on the road towards executive never-neverland – that place where debates are easy, wars are winnable, and where nobody listens to the lyrics of *La Marseillaise*.

