

A Constructive Approach to Terrorism

William E. Halal

As the war in Iraq winds down, many people remain deeply concerned about the cost in lives, reactions against the U.S., and the struggle to rebuild this difficult country, even while the rebuilding of Afghanistan falters. Ridding the world of Saddam Hussein was a blessing, certainly, but terrorism could be contained far more effectively by combining our military strategy with a constructive approach that benefits both America and Islam.

I'm a Lebanese-American who came to this country as a child, and I'm also a scholar who studies globalization. So I understand the cultural gap that divides East and West, and I'm able to put the terrorism crisis in an historic context that suggests how it is likely to work out over time.

From a long-term perspective, this clash between the U.S and militant Moslems will have to be resolved as the Information Revolution continues to drive the world toward some type of unified order. And when the fighting and peace-making are over in a decade or two, we may be surprised to find that this crisis has forced both sides of the American-Islamic fault line into harmonious relations. After all, who would have imagined during World War II that the U.S. would soon consider Germany and Japan among its strongest allies?

The basic problem is that Islam has been in decline for a century while the U.S. ascended to global dominance. There are other causes, of course, such as authoritarian Islamic governments that stifle dissent and the clash over Israel. But the Islamic world is fertile ground for terror because poverty, poor education, powerlessness, and the other symptoms of decline breed a restless resentment.

As if this chasm between our global dominance and their loss of empire were not disturbing enough, we unwittingly offend Moslems because our lifestyle glorifies the very things these religious people (and our own Puritan ancestors) have long considered sinful: extravagant consumption, wanton sexuality, and a lust for money. One hundred Nobel Laureates recently warned that the world is facing a crisis of poverty and pollution, yet America is preoccupied with SUVs, greedy CEOs, and Britney. The most telling condemnation is that Americans like myself struggle to protect their children from our popular culture that is often likened to “a sewer.”

Yes, terrorism is an evil that must be rooted out and destroyed. But it is also a manifestation of vast global inequities that now pose the greatest challenge facing civilization. Our nation was traumatized by the deaths of 3000 people, yet 30,000 children die each day of hunger. Much of the world lacks clean water and health care. Imagine how these impoverished people must feel, knowing that we consume several times the global resources per person they do and that we produce corresponding amounts of pollution.

Little wonder that the world is caught in a love-hate relationship with the U.S. They admire our wealth and freedom – but they are bitter about our aloofness

from the struggles they agonize over and they distrust our intrusions into their affairs. Nelson Mandela spoke for many other world leaders when he called America “a threat to world peace.” Exaggerated, of course, but I don’t think we see ourselves as accurately as others do.

Crises usually present opportunities in disguise, and this great crisis offers unusually great opportunities. There seems to be a fortuitous match between the benefits both sides can gain by bridging the U.S.-Islamic divide.

One of the most powerful strategies we could pursue is to help Islam enter the modern world. Just as the West rehabilitated Germany with the Marshall Plan, the U.S. should launch a similar effort to help poor nations modernize. We could provide loans, transfer technology, and reduce trade barriers. Most importantly, we should encourage U.S.-Islamic business alliances. In addition to using military power to fight terrorism, why not unleash the great power of American business? Arabs possess a fine entrepreneurial tradition that could be harnessed to provide the swelling ranks of young Moslems an alternative to radicalization. A vibrant Middle-East economy would defuse the forces that promote terrorism, open up huge new markets for U.S. goods, and rejuvenate today’s sagging global economy.

Another powerful strategy would be to lead the world in solving the energy-environment problem. Our dependence on the Middle East for oil supports corrupt Islamic governments that foment terrorism, antagonizes fundamentalists, and puts us at the mercy of war mongers like Saddam Hussein. A national effort to develop hybrid and fuel-cell autos, wind and solar power, and energy efficiency could ease

our use of oil, reduce pollutants, and create a \$ 1 trillion clean energy industry. Rather than feel humiliated when seeing Colin Powell booed by global audiences, wouldn't it be good to enjoy the world's admiration for solving this nagging problem?

Our biggest payoff might be to recapture a sense of purpose. It's hard to see how Americans can enjoy healthy, secure lives continuing our indulgent overconsumption while most of the world suffers from scarcity. In contrast, think of how great it feels when the Nation is surmounting great challenges: World War II, the Moon Landing, and pulling together after September 11. The trashy content of our popular culture suggests that many Americans have far too much free time. I can think of no better remedy than directing all this energy to worthy causes.

It's going to take a lot of time and effort to work through the U.S.-Islamic crisis, and fighting terrorism will remain essential. But just as Germany's aggressive nature is now safely contained within a united Europe, this constructive approach to terrorism could help constrain the radical forces of Islam.

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