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**A
Civilized
Way to
Fight
Terror**

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It might seem like a contradiction to pose the question of how the United States can deal with international terror in a civilized way, but there are many nonviolent things that can be done short of, or alongside, violent responses. To understand what these might be, we must first recognize the nature of the main actor: the United States.

America the Exceptional

In a unipolar world, in which the United States has lone superpower status on the political, financial, and military levels, much more is expected of America than of any other country. As the world leader, the United States has both a kind of authority as well as a level of responsibility toward the rest of the world that no other actor has. Consequently, U.S. actions, and nonactions, carry much more weight than the actions of other countries. The country's leading status makes

everything it does shine brighter than do actions of other countries and sets such actions as reference points, especially for countries in the third world that look up to the United States, even as they criticize it from time to time.

In short, America is exceptional; hence, its words have exceptional impact. What America says or even hints at has wide-ranging effects the world over. This means that with the information age in which we are living, the United States can no longer hide from the rest of the world what it says and does in America. As a result of twenty-four-hour live television, beamed nearly everywhere, every utterance of the U.S. president, his spokespersons, or people in his cabinet and his party can be heard, read, and analyzed within seconds. Statements can no longer be packaged only for a local or ethnic audience. Everyone can hear and read everything within the public discourse.

This consequent need for consistency is essential not only in the content of statements but also in the mood and style of their delivery. A smile, a frown, as well as noteworthy body language can often be interpreted and explained differently from what is intended. So it is not enough for U.S. officials to guard what they say; they need to take an active stance in following up and correcting, if need be, how their views are interpreted the world over.

The authority and power of the words spoken by U.S. officials carry great responsibility. This responsibility requires a greater degree of care about how words might be interpreted and what they might mean in different cultures. When President Bush used the word crusade to describe the U.S. campaign against terrorism, the word took on a life of its own. In the Arab world, the term was translated as "Christian war." The modern American usage of the word as a mere campaign was totally missing. It took some time for the correction to be

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made and even longer for many in the Arab and Muslim worlds to accept that what was meant was not a religious war but rather a campaign against terrorism.

Words, Values, and Double Standards

Although words are important, values are an even more important reference point. America has taken on the positive image not only of a successful, powerful, and rich country but also of a country based on great values. The United States stands for the best things people everywhere can hope for. The U.S. Constitution, the First Amendment, and the respect for individual rights are values beyond dispute virtually the world over. These are not just words on paper; for every American, these values are experienced every day in every state of the union.

Unfortunately, however, that is sometimes as far as it goes. Once outside the United States or when dealing with foreign policy, these values are often replaced with a variety of other considerations. People who have not lived in America, especially those who have been on the receiving end of certain realpolitik-oriented U.S. foreign policies, have little appreciation of what America stands for.

For years, people in the Middle East have been exposed to what seems to them a Janus-faced U.S. foreign policy. Human rights, the great Wilsonian concept of the people's right to self-determination, seems to stop when the subjects of discussion are Palestinians. But this has been the case for some years, so why is antipathy to the United States so high in the Arab world today? What has the United States done recently to trigger this unprecedented response?

Although these are important questions, the answers are not necessarily in any specific action by the United States, but

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rather in the fact that people around the world have much more access in real time, and in full Technicolor, to acts, events, and pronouncements of American officials regarding foreign policy issues. The spread of satellite television, for example, has meant that stories about, say, the human suffering of Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation enter the sitting rooms of hundreds of millions of people every day. When top U.S. officials defend or justify or merely look away from human rights violations in third world countries, few people can go back and think of the rosy picture of America as the defender of rights and the protector of freedoms.

When Vice President Cheney told Fox television that the United States "understands" Israel's need to assassinate top Palestinian officials, his statement was widely broadcast all over the Arab and Muslim world. To have a senior U.S. official understand the use of U.S. Apache helicopters by an ally in an offensive attack was hard to fathom. Some Arab commentators noted that even Timothy McVeigh was entitled to a trial, while in Palestine, Israeli generals are allowed to act as judge, jury, and executioner, with full support from the world's greatest champion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

The double standard that is seen to be part of U.S. policy mystifies people in the Arab world. They cannot see how such policies can be based on U.S. national interests, let alone U.S. values, if these policies lead to 1.3 billion Muslims being alienated from the United States. Most people know that a country's foreign policy cannot be based solely on values, but where is the interest of the United States in such a result? This question leads many to conclude that the power of domestic groups to influence external policies that are not in the best national interest of the United States must be the explanation.

Most Arabs and Muslims cannot imagine that U.S. sym-

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pathy for Israel is based on genuine concern with Israel's security dilemma and its being an outpost of democracy in an otherwise authoritarian region. Their view of Israel has been shaped by a very different historical prism, which many assume America must share because it is so obvious to them. The result is that most Arabs and Muslims have become unsure of whether they are America's friend or foe, and they are prone to explaining U.S. policy behaviors in ways that most Americans, in turn, judge to be peculiar, if not conspiratorial, in nature.

Whatever the reasons for Arab and Muslim attitudes, the public attacks by many of America's own Arab allies against American policy in the Levant and in Iraq have not satisfied a population that daily witnesses what it defines as humiliation against fellow Arabs and Muslims. This is partly because Arab governments have proved themselves completely inept at doing anything about it.

Shortly after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, President Bush spoke to the American people calling what happened an attack against America's values. He ended by saying, "We go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world." For Americans living in the United States, these words sounded true and genuine. But for many around the world, these values have not been translated in U.S. foreign policy; these words were empty rhetoric.

The values that America stands for are the envy of well-informed human beings living in authoritarian countries around the world. Those who have lived in America and who have experienced that great country try their best to tell people around the world about it. They do so hoping that these values can be emulated in their own countries. Those who only see the results of American foreign policy, however,

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often attack such efforts by pointing to the apparent contradiction between values preached and practices observed.

In the past, the U.S. government was often able to get away with this contradiction. Although accused of not doing enough by some right-wing circles in America, friendly Arab countries would protect the U.S. image, and their government-controlled media would ensure that America's policies were defended. But globalization, which has been a main vehicle of America's recent economic and political successes, has also brought with it media instruments (Internet and satellites) that circumvent government-controlled media and allow people freer access to the reality of U.S. foreign policy. Is it possible that the very instruments of its own success now haunt America? Preaching democracy, human rights, and transparency while supporting despots around the world weakens the U.S. position tremendously.

Within international agencies, this same issue also arises. In 2000, when the U.S. delegation walked out of the UN World Conference against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa, many around the world felt that America had allowed its policy to be hijacked by a single country, and for clearly domestic reasons. A world leader like the United States is expected to have a much more tolerant attitude and to understand that being on top means that it is more likely to be criticized than others. If the United States wants to defeat terrorism, it will have to tolerate indignities it might not otherwise tolerate.

Against Hopelessness

Although terrorism has different shapes and versions, the most dangerous kind is based on religious conviction. This danger is multiplied when one's mortal life is seen as being

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worthless, while the eternal life promised by religious leaders seems so grand. To counter such religious zealotry, various levels of responses are needed. Proper religious education and preaching are extremely important in this case. It is also critical to provide young people with alternative examples of religious leaders who can combine spiritual knowledge with a realistic and moderate view of life and world events.

Media geared toward the community where terrorism is based are critical. What is needed is not alternative media through public diplomacy channels, because people in the region will not trust it. Instead, local, indigenous media must be influenced. Although it might be more difficult to get a message into these media outlets, any success with such media can have beneficial long-term effects. Influencing local media should not be limited to news. Drama, soap operas, game shows, and children's programs provide many opportunities that are rarely used to effect change in attitudes.

Public opinion is not restricted to media, of course. Positive role models are needed to encourage young people. For example, sports heroes and music stars can be tapped to give messages of tolerance and moderation.

After all, terrorism does not fall from the sky. It needs a fertile environment in which to develop. Terrorism is not a virtual reality but a real act that requires flesh-and-blood individuals to carry it out. A true search for the causes that drive people to act in such a violent way is a necessary first step in understanding and dealing with this threat. Such an attempt ought not be done in a heavy-handed, arrogant manner, but rather with a genuine interest in understanding those affected. Such empathy is a prerequisite to a true understanding of the underlying causes; without it, we will be unable to tackle those causes in an effective way.

Finally, to tackle these worldwide problems, one must

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come down to the level of the individuals who are involved. Understanding that terrorism is the weapon of the weak and helpless is a step toward understanding what drives people to carry out such inhumane acts, even at the cost of their own lives. A psychological profile of those carrying out acts of terrorism clearly shows the extremely high level of frustration and helplessness they felt. When a person's own life becomes so worthless and when the hope of a future disappears, individuals have little care or concern for the lives of others.

Therefore, the best ways to combat terrorism are to change the atmosphere in which it grows and to replace the sense of hopelessness that so many young people experience with a vision for a better tomorrow. Naturally, lip service is not enough. People need to see that realistic and genuine visions are being followed in such a way that they can be convinced that their lives will likely improve. Public diplomacy can be an adjunct to such a process but never a substitute for it.