

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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Terrorism is Not the Enemy

In the midst of a contentious, often bitter presidential campaign there is one thing on which the two major candidates agree. They agree we are in the midst of a war against terrorism. They differ on how that war is being conducted, on whether the United States was properly prepared to follow-up on its initial victory in Iraq, and on a host of related issues. But on the fact that three years ago on a fateful, clear September day we were attacked and forced into a war against terrorism President Bush and John Kerry stand as one.

Yet on this point I believe both are wrong. On 9/11 we were attacked by Al Qaeda operatives under the leadership of Osama bin Laden. Terrorism is the tactic or method they used to attack the United States, but the enemy—those who attacked us and forced our response—remains Al Qaeda. Terrorism did not attack us; Al Qaeda did.

This distinction may seem to most to be a pedantic distinction only an academic could love. But it is a vital distinction that has enormous practical consequences.

Terrorism is a tactic that seeks to wear down a foe by using indiscriminate killing of civilians in an attempt not to weaken a nation's military capacity, but to undermine its will to resist, its legitimacy in the eyes of its own population, and its economic and social stability.

As such, terrorism is not merely a present-day phenomenon. It was used as far back as the first century, when Jewish Zealots used it in their struggle against Roman occupiers. It is being used by many movements against their foes in today's world, from Hezbollah in its struggle against Israel to Chechen separatists against Russia.

Terrorism is an especially abhorrent evil and, due to its indiscriminate use of violence, in no way meets the traditional requirements of justifiable warfare. Hijacking civilian airliners and using them as guided

missiles to kill thousands of men, women, and children, or taking school children and their parents hostage and killing hundreds of them, are acts that seem to arise from depths of hell itself.

But that does not make terrorism itself the enemy. Terrorism is but the particularly despicable tool of Al Qaeda and other loosely allied radical Islamic groups, who today would destroy the entire western world if they could.

The reason why this distinction is crucial is that a "war against terrorism" is inevitably an unlimited, open-ended war. A Christian understanding of evil in this broken, sinful world leads one to expect that terrorism in one form or another will always be with us. We have no reason to expect that in this present age there will not always be certain evil persons or movements who are willing to use the tactics of terror to gain their ends. To think that we can rid our world of terror is supported neither by historical experience nor Christian thought.

Thus by committing ourselves to a "war against terrorism" we are committing ourselves to something with amorphous, ill-defined aims, which in turn means there will be few benchmarks to judge successes and failures or even standards by which to judge the appropriateness of our actions and tactics.

On the other hand, if we would identify the Al Qaeda network and its allied groups as the enemy with whom we are in conflict, we would limit and focus our aims. This, in turn, would make it easier to hold our decision-makers accountable this election year, since we could judge the appropriateness and outcomes of the actions to which they commit our military and intelligence forces in the light of those more limited, focused aims.

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