

Executive Memorandum

No. 1019
January 31, 2007



Published by The Heritage Foundation

Nine Essential Points for Talking About the War on Terrorism

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Americans hear conflicting messages about how to think and talk about terrorism. As a result, the message of freedom and justice is often muted or muddled. Americans can do better. There are core ideas that should serve as a taproot for a consensus on how to understand and describe the enemy—and ultimately how to defeat them. Specifically, we should:

1. Remember that winning the long war is all about winning the struggle of ideas. Such an effort requires (1) understanding the enemy, (2) delegitimizing its view of the world, (3) offering a credible alternative, and (4) demonstrating the will to prevail in the long war. Americans have a role to play in all four tasks. Using the right words and ideas can help to speed the course to victory.

2. Reject calls for appeasement. Believing that concessions will stem transnational terrorism would be a grave mistake. Osama bin Laden, for example, has promoted attacks by arguing that the West is a “paper tiger” with little stomach for prevailing in a long war. Appeasement would only reinforce this belief. One act of appeasement is the failure to call this conflict “war.” Terrorists believe that they are at war with us. From their perspective, our failure to acknowledge this fact is an act of cowardice and

weakness. Refusing to recognize that we are at war only encourages the enemy to be more warlike.

3. Acknowledge that there is no single enemy. Various terrorist networks pose different

kinds of local, regional, and global threats. For instance, while al-Qaeda is the most well known of the terrorist groups, many different terrorist networks are at work around the world, including terrorist groups in the Indian subcontinent, which have carried out attacks in India and Pakistan, and Hezbollah, which has killed hun-

dreds of Americans and struck in Europe and Latin America as well as in the Middle East. The distinct threats posed by different terrorist groups require a differentiated U.S. policy custom-made for each group, not a one-size-fits-all approach. Wars and words should be used to divide, weaken, and defeat terrorist groups.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/em1019.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies
of the
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
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Washington, DC 20002-4999
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4. Understand that poverty is not the “root cause” of terrorism. Many poor countries do not produce terrorists. In fact, many terrorists come from middle-class backgrounds and were indoctrinated and trained in Western Europe. Terrorists purport that violence is an appropriate way to solve societal ills. Discrediting that belief is the first and most essential task in addressing the root causes of terrorism. At the same time, the U.S. and its allies need to offer alternatives to terrorism that are real, credible, and achievable means of making people free, safe, and prosperous.

5. Accept that a Palestinian–Israeli peace deal will not defuse the terrorist threat. An enduring peace is clearly in the interest of all peoples in the Middle East, but terrorists are opposed to Israel’s very existence as a sovereign state, not simply to making peace with it. Additionally, many use the conflict as an excuse to push their own political agendas or to condone escalating violence. Their arguments only obscure the reality that a Palestinian–Israeli accord will not stop transnational terrorism.

6. Acknowledge that elections alone will not bring freedom and democracy—the long-term political antidotes to terrorism. Elections alone are not democracy; they are the promise of democracy. Achieving peace and freedom takes years of effort and commitment. As the U.S. has relearned from Iraq’s difficult transition to a democratic society, free and fair elections do not guarantee freedom from terrorist attacks. Democracy comes from building the institutions that foster a resilient civil society, including freedom from corruption, upholding human rights, protecting freedom of the press and religious practice, and ensuring equality of opportunity.

7. Avoid religious terminology that terrorists use to justify their actions. Terrorists use religious terminology to legitimize their inexcusable acts. For instance, they use the word “jihad,” which is derived from the Arabic word *jehada* and literally means “to strive,” to justify what they claim is a “holy war.” Using “jihad” or any other religious term to describe terrorists and their actions only helps to

legitimize an ideology that the war on terrorism seeks to defeat. Terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda advocate a totalitarian Islamic ideology that manipulates religious words and ideas but does not represent traditional Islam. Many terrorists have never received legitimate religious educations.

8. Remind audiences that many terrorist groups are revolutionary organizations that seek to impose their totalitarian ideology on Muslims, as well as non-Muslims, through violence. Although Osama bin Laden seeks to provoke a clash of civilizations, he also promotes a clash within Islamic civilization. Al-Qaeda has killed many thousands more Muslims than non-Muslims. Muslims have a major stake in defeating al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups because they are among the chief victims of its attacks and pay a heavy price when forced to live under terrorist regimes.

9. Not give up on moderate Muslims. Many Muslims reject terrorism, even in countries where the official rhetoric seems disturbingly warlike. Many Islamic scholars argue that terrorism—the intentional murder of innocents to achieve political goals—is completely illegitimate. In some cases, moderate voices receive little notice in Western media. In other instances, individuals are fearful to speak out too loudly because of the threat from terrorists and their supporters. The U.S. should encourage Muslim political, religious, and social leaders to denounce terrorism and cooperate in defeating terrorist groups.

Conclusion. Winning the war on terrorism will require understanding the enemy, delegitimizing its view of the world, offering a credible alternative, and demonstrating the will to prevail in the long war. Using the right words and ideas can help to speed the course to victory.

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Further Reading

“The War of Ideas,” Chap. 7, in James Jay Carafano and Paul Rosenzweig, *Winning the Long War: Lessons from the Cold War for Defeating Terrorism and Preserving Liberty* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2005), pp. 173–197, at www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/the-long-war-ch7.cfm.