

THE BATTLE FOR OUR COMMON FUTURE

Michael Chertoff

Over the past year, the American public has been treated to a chorus of critics and skeptics who have downplayed the seriousness of the threats we face in the post-September 11th world. Former government officials like Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski have accused the Bush administration of hyping the War on Terror in order to promote a culture of fear. Others deny that we are at war at all.

But based upon the words and deeds of the terrorists themselves, we are very much at war. In 1998, Osama bin Laden made an open declaration of war that ended with the command “to kill the Americans and their allies—civilian and military, in any country where it is possible to do it.” In the decade that has followed, bin Laden and his cohorts have done precisely that, plotting against the entire global system of security, safety and prosperity.

Their efforts belie the scope of the current struggle. We are at war with an ideology that is every bit as fanatical and ruthless as that of fascism or communism. Spread by a sinister network of cult-like entities that spans the world, this fanatical worldview sanctifies the torture and slaughter of innocents; it denies the dignity and humanity of its opponents; and it includes among those it targets mainstream Muslims who dare to reject its pseudo-religious message of intolerance and bigotry. From New York to London, from Madrid to Jerusalem, from Baghdad to Bali, this barbarous ideology has torn through nations, carving a bloody trail of death and destruction, leaving orphans and widows in its wake on nearly every continent.



THE HONORABLE MICHAEL CHERTOFF is the U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security. This article is adapted from Secretary Chertoff's October 17, 2007, address before Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, the site of Winston Churchill's famous 1946 “Iron Curtain” speech.

These extremists have proven themselves quite capable of waging the war that they have declared. They have been helped in part by 21st century technology, which has provided even small groups with enormous capability for destruction and damage. Radicals affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Taliban or other similar extremist groups—from North Africa to Iraq and South Asia—are fighting for, and sometimes achieving, control of territory that they use to train, assemble advanced weaponry, and perform experiments to develop ever deadlier ways of killing their enemies, and over which they impose their own vision of repressive law and seek to dominate local life.

We are fighting a battle not only of armaments, but of ideas. And therein lies our greatest strength.

And finally, through atrocities like the 9/11 bombings, the radicals have demonstrated that they are quite capable of visiting consequences upon us every bit commensurate with war. Their goal is clear; what our enemies want is “a dialogue with bullets and the ideals of assassination, bombing and destruction.” These, of course, are not my words; they are from an al-Qaeda training manual.

The nature of our enemies and the ideological threat that we face brings to mind Winston Churchill’s famous dictum, uttered in 1946 in reference to a different threat, the Soviet Union, but equally applicable here: “There is nothing they admire so much as strength, and there is nothing for which they have less respect than for weakness.”

Simply put, this is how ideological fanatics view the world. Whether it is Adolf Hitler or Josef Stalin, Osama bin Laden or President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, for every fanatic, weakness is provocation. That is why we must never fool ourselves into thinking that submissiveness is a path to peace.

The United States has heeded this counsel. Following 9/11, President Bush took decisive action, striking back against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, deploying our intelligence assets across the globe, capturing or killing terrorists on nearly every continent, and partnering with our allies on shared intelligence against this common menace. Without such steps, the United States would have doubtless faced other, equally devastating attacks over the past six years.

But there is another element in this struggle that is as important as strength: resolve. In his day, Ronald Reagan counseled that the United States should be “[n]ot warlike, not bellicose, not expansionist—but firm and principled in resisting those who would devour territory and put the soul in bondage.”

Today, we can heed this advice by preventing our foes from attaining two monumental goals that they seek to achieve.

The first is the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, chief among them nuclear weapons. Simply put, we cannot allow such a capability ever to pass into the hands of a global network of terror. For bin Laden and his fellow travelers are at war not just with America or the West, but with the values and principles, the habits and institutions of modern civilization. These extremist ideologues aim to destroy the modern world by unleashing the tools of modern technology in the service