



Naming the Enemy

By Thomas Donnelly

The report of the 9/11 Commission should help strengthen American resolve in the war on terror. The report brings greater clarity to the enemy and threats we face, as well as to the methods by which the United States can strengthen national security through a "forward strategy of freedom" in the greater Middle East.

Skimming through the 567 pages of the final report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States is a lot to ask of a reporter on deadline, so it is no surprise that one of the massive tome's most useful sections is not getting much initial attention.

Lurking 361 pages in is Chapter 12, which addresses perhaps the most important question of all: what to do?

This is the panel's discussion of the requirements for a strategy to fight and win the global war on terrorism. Most crucially, it begins with a correct understanding of what this war is, something that still eludes many of us.

Defining the Enemy and the Battlefield

"The enemy is not just 'terrorism,' some generic evil," the report says, observing that such "vagueness blurs strategy." Rather, the "catastrophic threat" is more specific: it is "*Islamist terrorism*"—the italics are the commissioners'.

This is to call the enemy by its true name, something that politically correct Americans have trouble facing. The panel does not mean that Muslims are the enemy, but that

the Islamic world faces a political crisis, a civil war.

The report argues forcefully that there are "few tolerant or secular Muslim democracies [to] provide alternative models for the future," and that Osama bin Laden is the face of a radical response to that failure of political legitimacy.

This is an enemy "that is gathering, and will menace Americans and American interests long after Usama bin Laden and his cohorts are killed and captured."

Having correctly identified the problem, the commissioners propose an answer that sounds remarkably like the so-called Bush Doctrine.

Although the report is full of recommendations about how to better defend America at home, its discussion of strategy makes clear that the decisive theater of operations is the greater Middle East. In other words, defense must be complemented by essentially offensive operations.

Militarily, this means denying sanctuary to the terrorists, building upon successes, particularly in Pakistan, but continuing elsewhere.

Indeed, the report almost perfectly outlines the battlefield: the border regions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Arabian Peninsula and the nearby Horn of Africa, Southeast Asia, West Africa and—perhaps, the most important sanctuary of all—"European cities with expatriate Muslim communities, especially cities in central and eastern Europe where security forces and border controls are less effective."

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As the panel notes quite well in several extended passages and details, the September 11 plotters exploited “relatively lax internal security environments” in Western countries, and especially in Germany.

At the same time, the report is curiously mute in making military recommendations. Patrolling, even in a limited way, such a vast swath of the planet—let alone creating the plans and ability to respond in a crisis—is a task well beyond the current American armed forces. They are simply too small and lack many of the necessary capabilities.

Ideological and Tactical Challenges

The commissioners rightly stress that the political challenges—and, first and foremost, the ideological challenge—of winning this war are even greater. One of the report’s keenest insights is that we must “defend our ideals abroad vigorously. . . . If the United States does not act aggressively to define itself in the Islamic world, the extremists will gladly do the job for us.”

This imperative leads the commission to a strongly worded defense of the Bush Doctrine’s insistence on liberalizing and democratizing the region: “Where Muslim governments, even those who are friends, do not respect these principles, the United States must stand for a better future.” We must prefer freedom to a false stability.

Nor does the panel obfuscate what this means for even our closest “friends” in the Middle East. For

example, the report states directly that the problematic relationship with Saudi Arabia “must be confronted openly” and must be “a relationship about more than oil.” It should include a shared commitment to political reform, something that makes the Saudi royal family very nervous.

The one potential weakness in the panel’s strategy is that it shares the abiding American faith—and it is a matter of faith rather than reason—in a “coalition strategy” involving “several multilateral institutions.”

Of course, the war on radical Islam will require coalitions, and over time these must be built of more than ad-hoc alliances with the momentarily willing. But we must accept that, for the foreseeable future, most of our friends are unwilling, unable, and unconvinced of the need to transform the politics of the Islamic world.

Alas, the number of nations willing to confront the extremists is small. This is a fight that depends, in these crucial moments, on American strength and strength of will.

The work of the commission should help restore that will; the panelists strove to “look backward in order to look forward,” and in this they have succeeded admirably.

The strength of Americans—of our democracy—comes in large measure from our own willingness to seek the truth and confront it, and through the commission we have relived every excruciating moment of September 11, 2001. The experience also has shown us our enemies, and, let us hope, put us on a path toward victory.

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