

OPINIONS

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Terrorists on trial: Make humiliation, not war

As Americans move from stunned horror to cleanup and preparation for retaliation, we need to make sure we hit the right target.

Some fanatical, amoral group has committed mass murder in Lower Manhattan and Northern Virginia. At first we all wanted to know "why?" Now we need to answer "what next?"

We know very little about the people who hijacked the planes that became guided missiles directed at our high-profile economic and military establishments and at our national pride. But we can be certain that anyone willing to give up his own life while committing such a crime must have been reckless to a degree few of us can imagine.

This is at the heart of the elusiveness of the terrorist threat: Not only is the enemy without country and with cooperators dispersed throughout the world, but also they are animated by a reckless outlook that

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makes them effectively impervious to danger.

Recklessness has a power that sheer military power cannot easily conquer. We learned that lesson in Vietnam when American use of staggering firepower could not stop the Viet Cong. An elusive, low-tech enemy, especially if highly motivated ideologically, can easily slip below radar and inflict terrible wounds, even when not making steps toward military conquest in the conventional sense.

If the United States used massive military might against the current terrorist threats, the cure would be worse than the disease. Surely, many civilians would be killed; it would not be easy to kill the real enemies; and the next images of destruction would show America as the aggressor on a par in many minds with the terrorists.

Worse even than all these moral and political problems, the tactic would be a military failure, because it would encourage still more recklessness. If thousands are killed in various Middle Eastern countries, what would it do to stop a few dozen morally deranged, fanatical hijackers with knives or some other weapon from taking down the Sears Tower, the Golden Gate Bridge, or

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Although to most Americans the dastardly deeds of Sept. 11 were a strike out of the blue, to citizens of the Middle East they are a much more high-profile version of daily life. There has been colonial occupation, dictatorship, protracted war, refugee flight, and terrorist fear for generations — often with American support.

Indeed, the long-standing Arab-Israeli conflict is at the ideological ground zero motivating these terrorist fanatics. U.S. efforts both to take firm sides and to broker peace have made few strides toward peace, especially toward lessening the cancer of terrorism that infects the Middle East, especially Israel.

The enormity of last week's event presents an unprecedented opportunity to break through that deadlock. With the moral authority that comes from being badly bloodied, the United States can turn from serving as the helpful broker to being the insistent heavy, demanding settlement that will resolve the impasse.

President Bush is fond of using the image of political capital. We now have a rare, precious, and short-lasting outpouring of world emotional capital for doing something dramatic to root out the motivating source of this fanaticism.

In this climate, it can even be a no-fault settlement. Without blaming either side, the United States, with almost every other nation, can insist on coming to terms that will pull out the rug from future attempts to recruit suicide pilots.

The United States can go still further to squeeze some good from all these evil events. Much more effective than massive retaliation would be a massive world court. Now that this horrible deed has focused world attention, an unprecedented worldwide alliance can work

together to hunt down these criminals and bring them to justice.

Making war on fanatics will simply make them more fanatical. But presenting them in public trial will embarrass them and anyone else who would be tempted to join them. There should be a world court, with prosecutors from many nations, lurid images of their crimes, and publicity bigger than for the Olympics.

Better yet, set the court in the Middle East, to make clear that the source of this fanaticism is to be recognized and corrected. If going to court seems like a slight act for such an enormous crime, remember the way the presidential election was settled. For all the follies that came with the post-election election, at least it was a shift in power that came without bloodshed.

This is a war for the hearts and minds of world citizens, especially for those who might contemplate doing something like this again.

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during the Vietnam War, when we hypocritically combined it with huge military destruction. This time, we need to kill

the terror with humiliation, not more bloodshed, to make it really work and help us re-establish our national security on solid ground.

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