

Recalling 9-11: Between values, violence - Orlando Sentinel, The (FL) - September 11, 2012 - page A13

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With all the suffering and destruction of 9-11 in 2001, when the United States was brutally attacked, the results also produced a peaceable possibility. Even the French Le Monde newspaper gushed with a sympathetic headline, "We are all Americans."

Then-president George W. Bush liked to talk of "political capital," and the U.S. had it in abundance, a potential resource for tackling the roots of those hatreds, to isolate and humiliate the terrorists, to build a more constructive basis for resolving tensions in the Middle East.

Led by that same president, the U.S. took another path, fighting fire with fire, seeking revenge on Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaida terrorists, and declaring an endless war on terror, directed at the hiding terrorists, and then expanded with another war.

The pre-emptive war on Iraq toppled a brutal dictator, Saddam Hussein, but made the problems of 9-11 worse. If you have a fire in your house, you do not fight that fire with fire, but with water. That water for fighting fire was readily available right after 9-11, in the wide sympathy for the U.S. that could have served as our political capital.

By fighting the fire of terror with the fire of war, we helped raise the profile of terror, as if it were an equal player on the world stage with the U.S. and not just a band of international criminals with minority support even within the Muslim world. By declaring war on terror, the U.S. declared war not on a nation or even strictly speaking on a particular ideology; we declared war on a tactic, the methods of a few al-Qaida true believers on suicide missions. Declaring war on these methods was like declaring war on jet planes, tanks or amphibious landings.

Today, especially among young people, the war on terror and all its sorry consequences have become not only our shared history, but also the norm, as if it constitutes all that could have happened. But it was a choice. And we still have the choice for isolating and humiliating terror without wholesale war, a chance to ask the citizens around those terrorists: Do you want more brutality or a more constructive future?

The U.S. can foster peace and the majorities that crave it rather than just fight the bad guys, a posture that in the end makes us look like bad guys, too."