

The real 'war' on terrorism: Greivances that must be taken seriously

From the Editors in the [August 24, 2004](#) issue

What the 9/11 Commission accomplished is a minor miracle in this era of partisan politics. Operating on the premise that it is better to fix the problem than to fix the blame, the bipartisan panel issued a unanimous report analyzing the failure of the U.S. to prevent the 9/11 attacks and recommending steps to forestall future acts of terrorism.

So far the debate over the commission's recommendations has focused largely on the failures of pre-9/11 intelligence and the need to reorganize government agencies. But these are largely tactical matters. Strategically, the commission made it clear that to win the war against terrorism—if indeed “war” is even the correct term—the West in general and the U.S. in particular must engage in a larger effort. It must find ways to alter the hearts and minds of Muslims around the world.

That's a formidable task. In a poll taken in Muslim countries like Indonesia, Jordan, Pakistan, Morocco and Palestine following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the majority of people expressed more confidence in Osama bin Laden as a world leader than in either George W. Bush or Tony Blair.

In the spirit of not criticizing past or present administrations, the commission did not name the Iraq war or the U.S. manner of supporting Israel as major obstacles to winning the hearts and minds of Muslims and Arabs. But it did recognize that many Muslims who don't support terrorism nevertheless have contempt for the U.S. because of the preemptive war on Iraq, the continued presence of American troops and businesses in Iraq, and the seemingly unconditional U.S. support for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's policies toward the Palestinians.

The commission also recognized that poor states led by repressive regimes are breeding grounds for terrorists. Consider that the combined gross domestic product

of the 22 nations belonging to the Arab League is less than the GDP of Spain. The commission suggests that the West has to offer Muslims hope for the future through aid that provides both economic and educational opportunities.

Conventional wisdom declares that governments should never negotiate with terrorists. Such policies may blind us to another kind of wisdom: that even terrorists and their families share with us a common humanity. (Actually, in countries such as Colombia, the Philippines, Spain, Nepal and Sri Lanka, on-the-ground mediators know that backdoor conversations with terrorists are possible.)

The commission rightly reminds political leaders to address the forces that make people feel powerless and desperate. What a difference it would make in the struggle against terrorism if the grievances of the Muslim world were taken seriously.