

# The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events  
impacting the world's financial markets*

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### **SOME THOUGHTS ON THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM**

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Like most Americans, I have spent considerable time during the past two months watching and reading news about the conflict that President Bush describes as a "war against terrorism."

On television, one sees "live reports" and "video transmissions" of a hot war in a place called Afghanistan. Kipling comes immediately to mind.

*When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,  
And the women come out to cut up what remains,  
Jest roll to your rifle and blowout your brains  
An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.*

But this is real. This isn't about the "Young British Soldier" of a hundred years ago. This is now. This is about American troops mustering in that unfortunate land. Delta Force, Rangers, Airborne, Special Ops. The blood-dimmed tide is loosed. Real bombs are dropping. Real people are dying.

Osama bin Laden's image appears on television. "Come here, Honey, look at this guy." A mass murderer. We are told that he lives in a cave and has lots of money. Oh, yeah, and he's devout also. He speaks calmly of killing Christians and Jews all over the world. He calls it a *jihad*, or holy war. He says he has nuclear weapons and may use them.

Scenes of Afghani women and children trudging along mountain trails and milling around refugee camps animate the news. We are told that if we don't feed them thousands will starve to death this winter. We are told that this is America's responsibility.

This is something quite new in warfare. It is customary for each side in a conflict to assume responsibility for the health and welfare of its own noncombatants. Charity on a mass scale

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typically follows, not precedes, victory. The misery of the enemy's "loved ones" traditionally has been considered to be an inducement for the enemy to quit fighting. The theory is that if soldiers are worried about their mothers, wives, and children they may lose enthusiasm for the fight. Some people say this would be ineffective against the Taliban soldiers because they don't care about their women and children. I don't believe this. But, then, what do I know?

In January 1871, German troops had been besieging Paris for three months when Bismarck met with French envoy Jules Favre to demand that the French surrender. Favre asked Bismarck if he was not afraid that his demands would make French resistance fiercer. Bismarck answered.

"Your resistance! . . . You have no right-please listen to me carefully-you have no right, before man and God, for the sake of so pitiable a thing as military renown, to give over to famine a town with a population of more than two millions! . . . Don't talk of resistance. In this case it is a crime!"

Favre surrendered on behalf of France. Then they dined. Bismarck's biographer Emil Ludwig notes that "all watch to see how much the envoy from the starving capital will eat."

One wonders if America's new approach to the age-old problem of how to treat the suffering women and children of enemy soldiers will be more effective than Bismarck's in shortening the war. I hope so. It is certainly more humane.

The television coverage moves to a calm, young, well-dressed reporter in a small town in New Jersey. He looks as if he should be covering the weather or discussing a local election. He is standing next to an ordinary looking mailbox that, he tells us, has been tainted with deadly anthrax spores. He speaks of how many Americans have died so far from the letters that polluted the U.S. mail, and how many more could die if the purveyor of the deadly weapons-grade powder is not captured.

Over a period of several weeks, all of this becomes strangely commonplace despite frequent warnings from "high government officials" that they have "credible information" which leads them to believe that more terrorist attacks are imminent. A parade of "terrorism experts" adds color to these warnings with a seemingly endless stream of possible new terrorist targets and tactics, each "scenario" more deadly and more frightening than the prior one. These nightmares don't materialize, but surprisingly, they seem plausible, even likely.

In short, we have, in living color, brought into our homes, compliments of modem technology, real-time images of conquest, war, famine, and plague. All that is missing are the four horsemen and their mounts, one white, one red, one black, and one pale.

Thoughts race through the mind and are quickly lost, replaced by new insights and new outrages. It is difficult to make sense of it all. How bad is it, really? Are we winning? Or are massive, horrible new terrorist attacks in our future? Will thousands more Americans die? Hundreds? Or is it over? And how would we know, even if it were?

No one can answer these questions with certainty, of course. But they must be considered. They must be addressed within some rational framework.

For starters, I think it is worth remembering when contemplating this amazing conflict that, despite what President Bush says, this is not a "war against terrorism." As my old friend Dan Pipes, who runs the Middle East Forum in Philadelphia, pointed out several weeks ago, terrorism is a weapon, a means of fighting. Terrorism is not an enemy anymore than bayonets or blitzkriegs are enemies.

This is more than semantics. In a 1946 essay entitled "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell argued that the "slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." So let's be clear about this. Let's avoid foolish thoughts. The enemy is not terrorism. The enemy is a group of individuals from a small number of Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and North African nations who are united in their hatred of the United States by a radical ideology.

This is important because it is possible to imagine a victory over such an enemy. It is much more difficult to hypothesize a victory against "terrorism." Terrorism, the weapon, is not going away. It won't be "defeated." Short of a nuclear attack, it is perhaps the only weapon left that can inflict real pain against a nation as militarily and economically powerful as the United States. Terrorism is to the United States in the 21st century what kryptonite is to Superman. Saddam Hussein may well be the last person in the world stupid enough to fight a conventional war against the United States, to, in effect, line up his tanks and wait patiently for America to line up its tanks.

It would be nice if the United States could indeed eliminate terrorism, or defeat it, as President Bush would put it. The French would have liked to have done the same to the English longbow after the Battle of Crecy in 1346. It was the one weapon that worked against the French armies. But they couldn't do it, as their defeat at Agincourt 69 years later demonstrated.

To suppose a U.S. victory over terrorism is to suppose an end to aggression against the United States. This is possible, of course. But I think it is unlikely. America will, like it or not, have enemies in the future. Indeed, if America stands in the future for the values it has stood for in the past, values such as freedom, the rule of the law, and the divine importance of the individual, it will have enemies. There will always be evil people in the world who oppose these concepts, and these people should be recognized by the United States not only as its enemies but the enemies of mankind.

So if the United States has enemies, it stands to reason that some of these enemies will attack it using terrorist, rather than conventional, tactics, meaning that they will target civilian populations with both threats and weapons. The threats will change the way Americans live. And the attacks will likely be occasionally successful in killing large numbers of American citizens. Modern technology makes it all easy. As was shown in Oklahoma, one man, with a little help from friends, can do a lot of damage.

I don't want to belabor the point here, but I think it is important when considering terrorism to understand that technological progress has played a key role in the modern manifestation of this ancient practice, proving once again that Prometheus' love for mankind did not come without cost to mankind.

Poison and knives were the original weapons of choice for terrorists, which limited the destruction that one man, or small group of men, could inflict. Gunpowder, which was introduced to the West early in the second millennium, upped the ante significantly. And then, in the 20th century, modern airplanes, a revolution in chemical and biological techniques, and finally, nuclear fission, made it possible for individuals, or small groups of individuals, to threaten and kill large numbers of civilians.

As regular readers know, I have always been fascinated by an observation made by Madame de Stael in her remarkable commentary on the influence of literature on society. This book, *De La Literature*, was published in 1800, in the wake of an extraordinary decade of revolution and terror, and immediately before the onset of the Napoleonic Wars, which would sink Europe even further into the abyss.

"Scientific progress," she said, "makes moral progress a necessity; for if man's power is increased, the checks that restrain him from abusing it must be strengthened."

Winston Churchill echoed de Stael's warning as he surveyed the disaster that World War II had made of his country and of Europe.

"Certain it is that while men are gathering knowledge and power with ever-increasing and measureless speed, their virtues and their wisdom have not shown any notable improvements as the centuries have rolled. The brain of a modern man does not differ in essentials from that of the human beings who fought and lived here millions of years ago. The nature of man has remained hitherto practically unchanged as the centuries have rolled. Under sufficient stress-starvation, terror, warlike passion, or even cold intellectual frenzy-the modern man we know so well will do the most terrible deeds. . . . We have the spectacle of the powers and weapons of man far outstripping the march of his intelligence; we have the march of his intelligence proceeding far more rapidly than the development of his nobility. We may find ourselves in the presence of the strength of civilization without its mercy."

So here we are in the first year of a new millennium. "Scientific progress," as Madame de Stael called it, has moved along at warp speed, year after year, century after century, and shows no signs of slowing down. Moral progress, on the other hand, has been static, as de Stael feared and Churchill expected. The result, although neither de Stael nor Churchill put it this way, is that the world becomes more dangerous each day, as evil men become increasingly well armed with highly sophisticated weapons.

So, victory over evil, and thus over terrorism, is not likely, no matter how much President Bush would like to believe the contrary. On the other hand, victory, of sorts, over that group that Dan Pipes calls "militant Islam," is not only possible, but, in my opinion, likely.

I say, victory "of sorts," because I don't expect proponents of a radical, militant, vehemently anti-West version of Islam to be eliminated from the world stage in the foreseeable future. Pipes estimates that sympathizers with militant Islam constitute between 10% and 15% of the 1 billion or so Muslims in the world. This is well over 100 million people, and, as I noted earlier, a single

terrorist can do a lot of damage today.

But I do believe that, over time, and with some effort, the threat that Osama bin Laden and militant Islam represent to the United States and its global interests can be minimized significantly. I cannot support this contention with facts and figures, of course. But I can defend it.

For starters, the war in Afghanistan appears to be going reasonably well. In "Mass Murder Makes Strange Bedfellows," an article I wrote almost six weeks ago, I said, "I think it soon will become apparent that the nation's war against terrorism is not likely to take 'years and years' or be nearly as bloody as many 'experts' have predicted." But even I didn't think that the Taliban forces would absquatulate southward so quickly.

This is meaningful because leaders of political and military movements with grandiose plans to take on an entire civilization need real estate; they need places to hide and to scheme. Bin Laden had very little space to begin with, and now it is shrinking even further. And this brings up an important point. Osama bin Laden is not a Hitler. Nor is he a Stalin, or a Mao Zedong. He is a man without a country. He has no large industrial base behind him, as Hitler did. Nor does he control the land mass and population of a Russia or a China.

History will, I believe, view him as more of a Che Guevara like figure, a spoiled revolutionary cult leader, rather than a founder or builder of a historically significant ideological movement. One successful terrorist attack, even one as big as the one on September II, does not a Hitler, or a Stalin, or a Mao make.

Yes, there are a huge number of fanatics who think of him as a great leader. But these people do not represent a majority of the population of any significant nation, and even if they did, they would, I believe, be unable, given their medieval views, to turn such a nation into even a second-rate 21st century power.

And, finally, I would argue that Osama bin Laden is a dead man. As I said in "The World Will Never Be the Same," he will most assuredly be hunted down and killed, just as President Bush has promised. He will be replaced, of course, but if his replacement follows too closely in his footsteps, he too will be hunted down and killed. In short, Osama and his followers are losers. They are dangerous losers, but losers just the same.

As for militant Islam, I think it will be increasingly isolated in the Arab world. Even those Muslim regimes that share Osama's hatred for the United States are unlikely to be eager to have him or his movement become too powerful within their borders. The press can speculate, for example, whether the Saudi royal family secretly aids and abets Osama's agenda and efforts, but there is little doubt that they don't want him to return home.

As President Bush has stated, a long, costly struggle lies ahead. Most likely, there will be some very dark days filled with bloodshed and tears. But I don't believe that Osama bin Laden and militant Islam will be either the downfall of the United States or its principal nemesis in the coming century.

History will, I think, record their brief hour of strutting and fretting upon the world stage as a wake-up call to a dangerous century. How the United States fares during this century will depend on whether it rises, clear-eyed and alert, to face this call with faith, determination, and courage, or whether it hits the snooze button.

This is also true, I believe, of the Muslim nations, for I think it is fair to say that bin Laden and his malignant distortion of Islam poses a greater threat to their prospects for a peaceful and prosperous century than they do to any other region of the world.

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