

Can we coexist? Refusing to be motivated by the politics of fear: Refusing to be motivated by the politics of fear

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Five years into the “war on terror,” are Americans any safer? Thankfully, there has been no major terrorist attack on American soil post-9/11, and that probably is not for terrorists’ lack of effort—as we were reminded by the plot, foiled in mid-August, to blow up passenger planes over the Atlantic Ocean.

But some of the things the U.S. has done have clearly made matters worse. The cochairs of the 9/11 Commission said recently that the Iraq war has been a diversion that has kept the country from taking the specific security measures the commission recommended. The U.S. has also failed to reach out to the Muslim world in enough positive ways. One government official has said that for every terrorist killed anywhere in the world, three more are cropping up.

We should ponder whether *war* is the appropriate way of construing the conflict. As the U.S. has learned in Iraq, war tends to unleash forces that neither side can control. Call it the law of unintended consequences. In an attempt to alter the balance of power in the Middle East and remake the region by toppling Saddam Hussein and occupying Iraq, the U.S. has managed to further radicalize the region. It has fueled the idea that there is a conflict of civilizations—just what Osama bin Ladin and al-Queda wanted in the first place.

When someone has a grievance, it’s wise to investigate the aggrieved party’s perspective and, without capitulating, try to do something to address the grievance. The concept of a “war on terror” simply assumes that those who don’t agree with us must be eliminated.

The resurgence of fundamentalist Islam is not going to go away anytime soon. We can neither eliminate it by sheer force nor impose our will on it. The question the West faces with radical Islam is much like the one it faced during the half-century cold war with communism: How can we find ways to coexist, to make it more likely that children on both sides will have a chance for a peaceful future?

In seeking such coexistence, Christians should refuse to be motivated by the politics of fear. We should be a nonanxious presence in a world of conflict and fear.

Taking the long view, our motto should be those words of wisdom put down by St. Teresa of Ávila in another troubled time: "Let nothing disturb thee, nothing affright thee."