

Homegrown extremism: preaching in daytona beach

by [Jeffrey DeYoe](#) in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

Daytona Beach—it's the home of NASCAR, Spring Break, Bike Week, and the self-proclaimed "most famous beach in the world." The city has an interesting mix of natives with deep southern roots and northerners, many from New York City, who have come to the sun, sand and surf for retirement, or who came early because they did not want to wait for retirement. It is a mix that has nurtured a "live and let live" philosophy of community life. As a result, the Daytona Beach area has become a microcosm of world cultures, where every major religion is represented.

Shortly after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, news of a Daytona Beach connection to the terrorists began to hit the headlines. The FBI came to town and searched the residence of a possible suspect. Agents also went to the city's renowned aeronautics college, Embry-Riddle University, because one of the alleged hijackers attended it. Stories came out about three men of Middle Eastern descent bragging in a local strip club on the night before the attack that there would be bloodshed the next day. It was reported that an abandoned car, allegedly belonging to a possible hijacker, was found with a picture of Osama bin Laden taped on the inside of the windshield. While the FBI investigation did in fact take place, it is not certain which stories are apocryphal and which are not.

On September 16, citizens filled the churches for worship. As newspapers reported and a meeting of a local ministerial association made clear, some congregations hosted very pastoral worship services, others put on patriotic rallies. Some sermons struggled honestly with the clash people felt over what Jesus says about loving our enemies. Others issued unapologetic calls to arms. Some spoke about a God who feels our pain and seeks to journey with us through it, while others asserted that the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center were God's punishment for our wickedness, and still others that it was the work of Satan.

Some of the most intriguing preachers were those who combined the latter two themes into one sermon, claiming both that God had wrought this disaster and that Osama bin Laden is a Satan who must be destroyed. This begs the question. If God wanted this done, and Osama bin Laden has done it, should we not seek him out and shake his hand? After all, how can we argue with what God has appointed? Didn't Jonah teach us anything? Maybe we built those twin towers too high and we had to be shown once again that we are not God (although four decades seems a long time for God to wait—some of the builders have been dead for a while).

Regardless of the wide diversity in what was preached, however, the representative Christian view offered by the local newspaper came from the worship service at First Baptist Church. More than 2,000 people there heard the preacher say that when caught, the perpetrators should be executed on the spot. He then called for "massive and disproportionate retaliation" upon any nation that harbors these terrorists. The reporter observed that this comment was met with amens and hallelujahs. The preacher also implied that the true culprits were those who removed prayer from the public schools. He said that America needed to regain its spiritual backbone, and warned President Bush not to send our children into a land war. Putting the comments about disproportionate retaliation and not conducting a land war together, one had to wonder: Did he not just say that we should drop the bomb?

I wondered, too, if the reporter and most of the newspaper readers that morning figured the preacher knew what he was talking about, and that what he urged is what Jesus would do. The terrorists seem to have been motivated by a terrifying religious extremism. Here was our homegrown kind.