

## **“Winning the War of Ideas”**

**Daniel Yankelovich**

Our government has not yet grasped the reality that the war on terror is not simply a war of guns and tanks – it is also a war of ideas. With our awesome military might we are winning the military battles, but losing the peace. Al Qaeda recruits new terrorists in a climate in which even moderate Muslims see the United States as an enemy of Islam and an obstacle to their dreams. We cannot fight this battle with guns alone, and our attempts to do so are showing devastatingly poor results.

Our front-line enemy in the war of ideas is a mixed bag of clerics in mosques spread throughout the Muslim world, mostly in nations friendly to us such as Egypt, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Week after week, these clerics preach the doctrine that the United States is Islam’s great enemy. Our values, in their eyes, are offensive; our culture decadent. And most important, they denounce the United States as the main obstacle to realizing their vision of a just and vital Islamic society.

This doctrine entices young idealists to the inhumane vocation of suicide bombing, allowing Islamist radicals to replenish the ranks of terrorists faster than we can destroy them. Even more dangerously, it strikes a responsive chord with moderates who reject the terrorists’ methods but accept the basic proposition that the United States prevents them from realizing their vision.

In this struggle, the extremists cannot be reasoned with or mollified; it is Muslim moderates we must reach with a clear and unmistakable message. We are not their enemy. We are prepared to accept – even to advance – legitimate Islamist aspirations (though they may make us uncomfortable). There is no “clash of civilizations.” No fundamental obstacle blocks peaceful coexistence between us and the Muslim world.

Only the moderates in the Muslim world can contain the terrorists. To bring this message home to them we must do two things: shift our framework and mobilize the private sector.

Shifting our framework. A major obstacle in the war on terror has been our inability to understand the Muslim framework, especially our very different notions of the proper relation between church and state. Our tradition of separating church and state and the Islamist tradition of melding them means that manageable political differences get transformed into intractable religious disputes. We have to think ourselves into the Muslim framework; we cannot realistically expect Muslims to think themselves into ours.

From a Muslim perspective, many U.S. policies reveal us as an enemy to Islamist aspirations. We invade Muslim countries, depose their leaders and seek to impose our model of secular democracy. In Muslim eyes, our actions demonstrate an arrogant belief in the superiority of American values and civilization, a lack of respect for Islam and a willingness to humiliate Islam at every turn.

To counter this belief, we need invite Muslim moderates to sit with us in genuine dialogue where we re-examine every contention that divides us. We must bring to these dialogues our own profound belief in freedom, pluralism and a commitment to live and let live. Acknowledging that secular Jeffersonian democracy is not the only path to a just society, we must demonstrate our commitment to coexist peacefully with nations following a different path. Above all, we must communicate our belief that no one people has a monopoly on truth and that all must exercise humility in interpreting God's word.

Mobilizing the private sector. Our second task in the war of ideas is to abandon the premise that high-level government action must be the main agent of change. The virulent anti-Americanism that inspires and sustains terror does not originate at these levels and cannot be effectively fought there. Governments cannot affect what happens at the level of the individual mosque, and they lose legitimacy when they try.

Instead we need to mobilize the private sector, especially our religious institutions, to engage Muslims abroad in exploring our common religious and political heritage. A rich network of people-to-people interchanges exploring common ground and searching for ways of melding Muslim and Western forms of democracy can do much to change the climate of opinion in the Islamist world.

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