

# The Coalition Trap

Can the United States win a war on terrorism while winking at some terrorists and cozying up to nations that support them? Can the United States effectively fight terrorism and reward terrorism at the same time? You shouldn't have to ponder those questions very long. The certain answer is no.

But the Bush administration isn't certain. In its effort to build the broadest possible coalition of nations in support of the narrow objective of destroying Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda terror network in Afghanistan, the administration now runs a real risk of making so many compromises with terrorists and their sponsors that the fundamental goals of President Bush's war on terrorism will be sacrificed.

Consider the compromises with terrorism the United States has already made. Under the secretary of state's direction, the Bush administration has been actively courting Iran. Now Iran has been the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism for over two decades. It supports the Hezbollah terror organization, with a long and bloody record of terrorist actions against Israel and Americans. Whatever openings may come in Iran under the more moderate President Khatami, the men who hold real power in Tehran still sponsor terrorism as a key tool of Iranian foreign policy. And Khatami himself still supports Hezbollah. That is why, in the effort to woo Iran, the Bush administration has, incredibly, decided to soft-pedal any criticism of—let alone take any action against—Hezbollah. When the White House released the list of terrorist bank accounts it intended to freeze, accounts related to Hezbollah (among others) were absent. Can one plausibly claim to be fighting a war against terrorism if Hezbollah is off the target list?

There's more. This past week the Bush administration backed a mission to Iran by British foreign secretary Jack Straw. Among the messages Straw delivered to the Iranians was this: "I understand that one of the factors which helps breed terrorism is the anger which many people in this region feel at events over the years in Palestine [sic]." You may have thought that the only people who think the September 11 attack was related to lack of progress in the peace process are American college professors and European intellectuals. As the *New York Times's* Thomas Friedman and others have pointed out, Osama bin Laden and his gang don't give a hoot about the peace process.

But now, amazingly, the Bush administration, driven by the secretary of state's coalition-building strategy, has linked the September 11 attack with the peace process. President Bush's declaration this past week that he favors a Palestinian state was designed to firm up wavering Arab support, such as it is, for the war on terrorism. We doubt it will have much effect on Arab leaders, who are with us or against us for reasons largely unrelated to the peace process. It certainly will have no effect on the Iranians, as Jack Straw learned when the Iranians rebuffed his overture.

But let's assume that the message was really designed to appease the so-called "Arab street." Will it? No. In fact, it will have the opposite effect. Just think for a moment about the message the president, at the secretary of state's direction, was really (if inadvertently) sending: Terrorism works. Prior to September 11, Bush had said not a word about a Palestinian state. After September 11, he was declaring it his vision. To the Arabs and Palestinians who danced and cheered as the twin towers fell, Bush's statement told them they were right to celebrate. Kill enough Americans, and the Americans give ground. Bush's statement last week was thus not a blow against terrorism. It was a reward for terrorism. It tends to make bin Laden a hero to the Arab masses, and it will teach a generation of radical Arabs that progress in the war against Israel and the West can be achieved through the killing of Americans.

How could the president have blundered in this way? We fear that his understandable admiration for Secretary of State Powell, the man, has clouded his judgment about Powell the strategist. But Powell has made bad strategic judgments before, the most egregious being his well-documented effort to avoid going to war against Iraq in 1990, and his insistence on leaving Saddam Hussein in power in 1991. Then, too, Powell was preoccupied with coalitions, resistant to the use of American military might, and hostile to regime change. Of course then, Americans had not been attacked. Now that they have, our most basic strategic imperatives should be obvious: We must severely punish the aggression against America, and we must either deter or destroy other enemies considering or planning such acts. Moral clarity is indispensable to the strategic clarity needed to pursue a successful war against terrorism of the sort the president outlined.

This does not mean allies, diplomacy, and deal-making

are unimportant. Quite the contrary. They are crucial to an overall strategy for fighting terrorism. But for the secretary of state, the coalition has now become the strategy. And so, in pursuit of the coalition, we have averted our eyes from Iranian-backed terrorism. In pursuit of the coalition, we have allowed our Arab allies to conclude that we will not target Iraq, even though Saddam Hussein's development of weapons of mass destruction may soon pose an even greater threat than bin Laden. In pursuit of the coalition, we have encouraged Palestinians and Arab radicals to believe that terrorism works.

It does not have to be this way. For one thing, who can imagine that this form of appeasement really buys the United States anything? Saudi Arabia appears every bit as ambivalent about letting the United States use Saudi bases to launch attacks on the Taliban as before Bush proffered his commitment to a Palestinian state. Iran will do nothing to aid the United States against bin Laden and the Taliban, except what it perceives to be in its own interest. Saddam Hussein will not reward American reticence with anything but savagery, as soon as he has the first opportunity. In short, there is no evidence that Powell's compromises have bought us anything we could not have gained without them.

What's more, the United States has coalition partners whose allegiance does not require us to embrace terrorism in order to fight terrorism. Our strongest and most reliable partners are of course in Europe. Ironically, the Bush administration has been far less assiduous in courting our European allies than it has been in appeasing radical Arabs and Iranians. And then there is Israel, the only nation in the Middle East with whom we share a common culture and a common commitment to liberal democracy, and with whom we have now been joined as a common victim of radical Islamic terrorism. Yet as we seek to embrace the terrorist sponsors in Tehran, we treat our Israeli ally as a dangerous nuisance.

Thus our president, following Powell's guidance, last week made this extraordinary statement: "We are fully committed to working with both sides [Israel and the Palestinian Authority] to bring the level of terror down to an acceptable level for both." An "acceptable level of ter-

ror" for both terrorists and their victims! Now there's a goal for the war on terrorism. But the *reductio ad absurdum* of this policy was reached later in the week, as the United States was pressuring Israel not to break off talks, despite the continuation of Palestinian terrorism. To do so, the *New York Times* reported, would "risk the appearance of undermining Mr. Bush's war on terrorism." So that is the logic of the present situation: One of our allies must turn a blind eye to terror for the sake of a coalition with terror-supporting states in the pursuit of the war on terrorism. This is the level of incoherence to which the secretary of state has led the president. This moral and strategic incoherence risks undermining the president's—and America's—war on terrorism.

We are often told not to worry, that some compromises have to be made now in order to get bin Laden, but that we are only in Phase One of this war on terrorism. Later we can, presumably, turn on the people with whom we have made the compromises, and can break whatever promises we have made to our Arab friends. We can then fulfill President Bush's promise to go after all the terrorists who threaten us and the states that sponsor them.

But the world doesn't work that way. Once having promised not to go after Iraq, we are not going to turn on a dime and launch an attack. Once having compromised with Iranian-backed terrorism, we will not pivot and get serious about stopping it. If Powell's policy prevails, there will be no Phase Two. If he succeeds in enmeshing America in a coalition of the wicked, the war against terrorism will be brief, limited, and ineffectual. It will fail.

It need not fail. The broad struggle against terrorism and the states that sponsor it—the struggle the president promised the American people we would wage—is eminently winnable, and eminently worth winning. All the evidence suggests the American people will support doing what it takes. What they need and deserve is leadership that recognizes that the events of September 11, and the threat of worse disasters ahead, require a real break from the old ways of doing business. What we need now is not timidity disguised as prudence, but boldness commensurate with the mission and the moment.

—Robert Kagan and William Kristol