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Rolling Back Radical Islam

RALPH PETERS

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You cannot win a war if you do not fight, and you cannot win a peace through inattention. In peace and war, the American response to the violent extremism that so damages the Islamic world has been as halting and reactive as it has been reluctant. We simply do not want to get involved more deeply than “necessary.” But Muslim extremists are determined to remain involved with us.

We are not at war with Islam. But the most radical elements within the Muslim world are convinced that they are at war with us. Our fight is with the few, but our struggle must be with the many. For decades we have downplayed—or simply ignored—the hate-filled speech directed toward us, the monstrous lessons taught by extremists to children, and the duplicity of so many states we insisted were our friends. But nations do not have friends—at best, they have allies with a confluence of interests. We imagine a will to support our endeavors where there is only a pursuit of advantage. And we deal with cynical, corrupt old men who know which words to say to soothe our diplomats, while the future lies with the discontented young, to whom the poison of blame is always delicious.

Hatred taught to the young seems an ineradicable cancer of the human condition. And the accusations leveled against us by terrified, embittered men fall upon the ears of those anxious for someone to blame for the ruin of their societies, for the local extermination of opportunity, and for the poverty guaranteed by the brute corruption of their compatriots and the selfish choices of their own leaders. Above all, those futureless masses yearn to excuse their profound individual inadequacies and to explain away the prison walls their beliefs have made of their lives.

In late spring 2002, headlines claimed that intelligence leads should have alerted President Bush to impending terrorist attacks prior to 11 September 2001. But a few tips from FBI field offices are easily lost in the colossal noise of government, their value clear only—ruefully so—in retrospect. Though important tactically, those memos were as nothing compared to the countless warnings we had been given as a strategic drama played out openly before us—while we willfully

shut our eyes—for the last quarter of a century. Islamic extremists never made a secret of their general intent and often were specific in their threats. The tragedies of 9/11 were not so much the result of an intelligence failure as of a collective failure to face the reality confronting us.

Throughout much of the 1990s, intelligence personnel were not quite forbidden to consider religion as a strategic factor, but the issue was considered soft and nebulous—as well as potentially embarrassing in those years of epidemic political correctness. Now, of course, religion may be discussed in intelligence circles, if bracketed with careful disclaimers noting that all religions have problems and that we are not bigoted toward any one religion. But what if a great world religion is bigoted toward us? Might we, even now, just wish the hatred and prejudice away?

The time has come for a modest degree of honesty. The good news is that the Islamic world, on its populous, decisive frontiers, is far more hopeful than we might suspect in the wake of recent events. While we must deal with fanatical, soulless killers in the present, Islam's future is undecided. The door to a brighter tomorrow has not closed—far from it—and millions of Muslims are willing to keep that door open, despite the threats of a legion of fanatics. A struggle of immense proportions and immeasurable importance is under way for the soul of Islam, a mighty contest to decide between a humane, tolerant, and progressive faith, and a hangman's vision of a punitive God and a humankind defined by prohibitions. And we have not even noticed.

We have been looking in the wrong direction, because that is where we have been conditioned to look. This great battle—this war for the future of one of the world's great religions (and, certainly, its most restive and unfinished)—is not being fought in the Arab homelands, which insist upon our attention with the temper of spoiled children, distracting us from better prospects elsewhere. The contest between competing Muslim visions, between those who would turn back the clock and those who believe they must embrace the future, has already been lost in the sands of Arabia. Fortunately, the Arab homelands are far less critical than our policymakers and strategists unthinkingly believe.

Blinded by oil and riveted by the Arab-Israeli conflict, leaders and legislators alike have failed to reexamine their thinking for the past 40 years. Now we must change our beliefs and our behaviors. It is time to write off the Arab homelands of Islam as lost. They are as incapable of constructive change as they are un-

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willing even to consider liberal transformations. They have been left behind by history and their response has been to blame everyone but themselves—and to sponsor terror (sometimes casually, but often officially). Much of the Arab world has withdrawn into a fortress of intolerance and self-righteousness as psychologically comfortable as it is practically destructive. They are, through their own fault, as close to hopeless as any societies and cultures upon this earth.

Of course, we need not call back our ambassadors from the Middle East, nor could we cease dealing with the oil states entirely. But it is time to shift our focus and our energies, to recognize, belatedly, that Islam's center of gravity lies far from Riyadh or Cairo, that it is in fact a complex series of centers of gravity, each more hopeful than the Arab homelands. On its frontiers, from Detroit to Jakarta, Islam is a vivid, dynamic, vibrant, effervescent religion of changing shape and gorgeous potential. But Islam's local identities are far from decided in its struggling borderlands, and, in times of tumult, any religion can turn toward the darkness as easily as toward the light.

We should make no mistake: This struggle between religious forms, between prescriptive, repressive doctrine and the sublime adventure of faith, is one of the two great strategic issues of our time—along with the redefinition of the socio-economic roles of women, their transition from being the property of men to being equal partners with men (which is the most profound social development in human history).

The United States will never be the decisive factor in the struggle for the future of Islam. That role is reserved for Muslims themselves. But we can play a far more constructive role than we have yet done—usually on the margins, but sometimes from within unfinished societies. Until now, we have not even bothered to participate.

Our focus on the Middle East has been so exclusive that we have come to see Islam largely through an Arab prism. But the Islam of the Middle East is as fixed, as unreflective, and ultimately as brittle as concrete. We have forgotten that Islam is the youngest of the world's great religions, that it is still very much a work-in-progress on its vast frontiers, and that its forms are at least as various as the myriad confessions and sects of Christendom.

Driven by the ferocity of events, we have begun to react militarily to the violence in Islam's borderlands, from the Caucasus to the Philippines, as well as in that eternal frontier state, Afghanistan. And much more military engagement will be necessary in the future. But our military can address only the problems of the moment, problems rooted in yesterday. We must begin to examine the dilemmas and opportunities of each new day with greater interest, so that we may help (to the degree we can) struggling societies discover paths to a more peaceful, cooperative tomorrow. Whatever we do or fail to do, our military will be busy throughout the lifetimes of anyone reading these freshly printed lines. Success will never be final, but always a matter of degree—though, sometimes, of high

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degree: the difference between a bloody contest of civilizations and the routine ebb and flow of lesser conflicts.

Our lack of involvement—indeed, our lack of interest—in Islam’s efforts to define its character for the 21st century and beyond has abandoned the field to our mortal enemies. Over the past few decades, Middle Eastern oil wealth has been used by the most restrictive, oppressive states to export a regressive, ferociously intolerant and anti-Western form of Islam to mosques and *madrassas* abroad, from the immigrant quarters of London to the back-country of Indonesia. When we noticed anything at all, we dismissed it as no more than an annoyance, our attitude drifting between the Pollyanna notion that everyone is entitled to his or her own form of religion (no matter if it preaches hatred and praises mass murder) and the “serious” policymaker’s view that religion is a tertiary issue, far less instructive and meaningful than GDP numbers or arms deals.

But no other factor is as important as belief in this disturbed and dangerous world. The ease with which today’s Americans of diverse faiths interact in social settings has allowed us to forget that our ancestors, in their homelands, massacred one another over the contents of the communion cup, or slaughtered Jews and called it God’s desire, or delivered their faith to their colonies with Bibles and breech-loading rifles. Some even brought their hatreds to our shores, but America conquered their bigotries over the generations—although even we have not vanquished intolerance completely. Still, for most contemporary Americans, religion has become as comfortable as it remains comforting. But human history is largely a violent contest of gods and the men who served them, and our age is the latest, intense serial in a saga that shaped our earliest myths and may predate the oldest scraps of folklore.

Religious intolerance always returns in times of doubt and disorder. Our age of immense possibilities is simultaneously one of the breakdown of old orders, of failure in those cultures whose formulae for social organization do not allow effective competition with the world’s leading economic and cultural powers, and of the extreme fanaticism that fear of change sparks in the human heart. Fundamentalist terrorism has not arisen despite the progress the world has made, but because of it.

In times of tumult, men and women cling to what they know. They seek simple answers to daunting complexities. And religious extremists around the

world, in every major religion, have been delighted to provide those simple answers. It does not matter if those answers are true, so long as they shift blame from the believer's shoulders and promise punishment to enemies, real or imagined. Throughout history, from the days of Jewish rebels against Rome and Islam's early and recurrent fractures, through 16th-century Spanish Catholicism alarmed at the advent of alternate paths to salvation, to 19th-century Protestantism startled by Charles Darwin, religions under siege invariably have responded by returning to doctrinal rigor and insisting upon the damnation of nonbelievers. Each major religion has known its share of threats to its philosophical and practical integrity. Our age happens to be a losing era for Islam, when its functionality as a mundane organizing tool has decayed in much of the world—just as European Christianity had done by the beginning of the 16th century.

Islam certainly is not hateful in its essence—but a disproportionate number of its current adherents need to hate to avoid the agony of self-knowledge. The basic problem is daunting: We face a failing civilization in the Middle East. But if we have the least spark of wisdom, we will do all that we can to ensure the failure does not spread from cultures that have made socioeconomic suicide pacts with themselves to lands that still might adapt to the demands of the modern and post-modern worlds.

Religions change, because men change them. Fundamentalists insist upon an ahistorical stasis, but evolution in the architecture of faith has always been essential to, and reflective of, human progress. Certainty is comforting, but a religion's capacity for adaptive behavior unleashes the energies necessary to renew both the faith and the society in which it flourishes. On its frontiers, Islam remains capable of the changes necessary to make it, once again, a healthy, luminous faith whose followers can compete globally on its own terms. But the hard men from that religion's ancient homelands are determined to frustrate every exploratory effort they can. The Muslim extremist diaspora from the Middle East has one consistent message: Return to the past, for that is what God wants. Beware, no matter his faith, of the man who presumes to tell you what God wants.

It cannot be accomplished, of course, this longed-for return to a golden age of sanctity and success that is nine parts myth and, at most, one part history. But the bloody-handed terrorists and their mentors are determined to pay any price to frustrate those Muslims who believe that God is capable of smiling, or that it is possible to change the earth without challenging Heaven.

Our strategic blunder has been to attempt to work outward from Islam's inner sanctum. But the greatest—in fact, the only—chance we have to positively influence this struggle over the future of Islam lies in precisely the opposite approach: We must realign our efforts to work inward from the edges. Our assets and our energies should be spent where change is still possible or already under way, not squandered where opposition to all that we value has hardened implacably.

We have not even gotten the numbers right. In terms both of population density and potential productivity, wealth, and power, Islam's center of gravity lies to the east of Afghanistan, not to the west. The world's most populous "Muslim" countries stretch far to the east of the Indus River: Indonesia, India, Bangladesh . . . Pakistan . . . and other regional states, such as Malaysia, make this the real cockpit of crisis. And, thus far, the view on the ground is more encouraging than baleful news reporting would have it.

While Pakistan has been wracked with phenomenal corruption and suffers from a ravaged education system that opened the door for the pernicious expansion of fundamentalist religious schools, and even though its economy is in exemplary shambles, that most-endangered state still has not strayed irretrievably into the extremist camp. It may—*may*—even have turned a corner toward some fitful progress. But the path to economic, social, and cultural health will be long and steep and, together with impoverished, hard-luck Bangladesh (once governed from Islamabad), Pakistan remains the least promising of the region's states. Elsewhere, the picture is much brighter, if only we had the clarity of vision to appreciate the plodding reality behind the sensational headlines.

India and Indonesia are the two countries with the largest Muslim populations (despite India's Hindu majority, more than 15 percent of its billion people are Muslims, outnumbering the Islamic population of Pakistan). Each state presents a reason for hope, though in rather different ways. While Islam's frontiers include states as diverse and dispersed as Nigeria and Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, the pseudo-state of Kosova, and Turkey, the most powerful determinants of the future course of Islam will probably be the success or failure of modernizing forces in Indonesia and India. And, frankly, we haven't a clue about the on-the-ground reality in either country.

First, India. Currently, militants tolerated (if no longer actively sponsored) by Pakistan have staged yet another cross-border massacre in Indian-ruled Kashmir. New Delhi is pondering retaliation, despite US anxieties over the effects another Indo-Pakistani conflict (perhaps with a nuclear exchange) would have on our war against terror. Recently, we saw another gruesome flare-up of interfaith violence within India, as aggressive Hindu fundamentalists got an unpleasant surprise in the northwestern Indian state of Gujarat when Muslims responded to their hooliganism by burning them alive in a railway passenger car. The Hindu response was to massacre hundreds of Muslims across the state. So we are left with the impression, intensified by the media's interest only in blood, disaster, and suffering on the subcontinent, that India remains locked in a hopeless struggle between Hindus and Muslims, both within and beyond its borders. The overarching reality is more complex, and far more encouraging.

Recurring violence between Hindus and Muslims within India is undeniably a serious problem. Widespread pogroms a decade ago killed Muslims by the thousands, as well as hundreds of Hindus. The founding of India and Pakistan was anointed with the blood of at least half a million Muslims and Hindus. But to

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gain an objective picture of the situation, we first need to consider the broad, enduring trends within multi-confessional India, and not merely the anomalies within those trends: In fact, the frequency and intensity of interfaith violence has decreased impressively over the past half century—despite the resurgence of virulent Hindu fundamentalism among a small minority of India’s citizens. Then we need to consider the numbers. With Muslims composing almost a fifth of its billion people, and given the poverty that still afflicts as much as four-fifths of India’s population, India looks more like a success story than a failure when it comes to tolerance. We may deplore the intermittent violence and death when it occurs, but today’s India is, to a far greater degree, the story of the dog that didn’t bark, of the hundreds of millions of Hindus and Muslims (as well as those of other faiths) who do *not* kill each other and who, despite seductive prejudices, work together as Indians first, whether in the government, in the military, or in business.

Overwhelmingly, India’s Muslims have accepted an Indian identity. Islamic extremism has not made nearly the inroads it has across the border in Pakistan or even next door in Bangladesh. Indian Muslims realize, for the most part, that their faith cannot express itself in acts of aggression without paying a high price, and that reasonable accommodation is much to their advantage. For all its merciless corruption, India is a rule-of-law state, displaying surprising religious diversity within its government and armed forces. All this seems to have encouraged a more flexible, markedly more tolerant form of Islam. One should not paint the picture in pious, stained-glass hues—and some would argue that Muslim docility is the result of repression—but there is something to be said for a country where a Muslim can enjoy a beer in public, where the murder of a compromised woman by her relatives is not accepted as business as usual, and where local pogroms shock citizens throughout the country.

In a way, the situation of Muslims in India resembles that of Muslims in the United States (of which more below): Under competitive pressures, the religion adapts and evolves, no matter how fiercely an older generation digs in its heels or how appealing the radical pitch may be to the disoriented young. Despite the nagging violence that reappears like outbreaks of plague, the competitive aspects of Hinduism may, inadvertently, be doing more to keep Islam healthy than all the mosques between the Atlas and the Hindu Kush. States in which a single, repressive confession reigns are ill-equipped for change, while multi-confessional states, if governed by law, enjoy the dynamism sparked by com-

petitive pressures. Where there is more than one religious option, no religion can afford to underperform.

India matters to the United States for a host of reasons, from the inevitability of a strategic compact between our two raucously democratic states—despite the inane bickering of the past, for which both sides bear their share of blame—to the long-term economic and human potential of the subcontinent. But the unremarked importance of a developing state in which Muslims live productively and equitably alongside citizens of other confessions may prove of the first importance. Above all, the Islamic world needs success stories to compete with its myths of persecution at the hands of others. Afghanistan, if only we are wise enough to commit adequate resources to its reconstruction, could surprise the world by becoming one small success story. But a deeper socioeconomic harmonization of Islam with other faiths in India would provide a beacon for all the lands lapped by the Indian Ocean and adjacent waters where Islam has come ashore.

The importance—and promise—of Indonesia is even greater than that of India as regards the future of Islam. Of all the many countries I have visited, none has been so grossly misrepresented in the media. If Indonesia shows up at all on our television screens or in our newspapers and journals the story likely will warn of Islamic terrorists. Even a very fine *New York Times* reporter, covering this nation of 200 million Muslims on a fly-through, wrote only of the dangers Muslims in Indonesia pose to the West, not of the promise of Indonesia's Islamic alternatives.

The truth is that Indonesian Islam poses no danger whatsoever to the United States or to its citizens—or to anyone else, except Muslim extremists. The radical fundamentalists and sponsors of terror in Indonesia are a small fraction of believers. The danger—real, if slight—comes not from the syncretic, humane, tolerant, homegrown forms of Islam. The danger comes from models of Islam exported from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, and insinuated into Indonesia through infusions of cash, missionaries, and hateful propaganda, by the building of mosques and *madrassas* where secular schools and clinics are badly needed, and through bribes—bribery seeming to be Indonesia's national sport. Yet, as one friend put it, the unhappiest investors in the world are not those Americans whose fortunes burst with the dot.com bubble, but the Saudis who spent millions upon millions to bring extreme fundamentalism to Indonesia. As they do with everyone else, in matters of business or of belief, the Indonesians took the money, then did whatever they wanted to do. In a phrase well-known to regional hands and frustrated businessmen alike, “The Indonesians just won't stay bought.”

You can go to showcase fundamentalist schools in Solo, in central Java, and hear all the denunciations of the West you can absorb between lunch and dinner. Terrorists, both Indonesians and deadly vagabonds from abroad, certainly use Indonesia as a base. Within Indonesia's sprawling territories (more than 17,000 islands, of which over 6,000 are inhabited to some degree), there are, undoubtedly, terrorist hideouts and training camps. And homegrown extremists

have sparked or intensified civil strife in Ambon, Sulawesi, the Moluccas, Kalimantan, Aceh, etc., etc.

Yet, except for Aceh, where a long-term separatist struggle continues, the root causes of most of the interfaith violence in Indonesia have been struggles over the control of territory, local power, and economic benefits, all triggered by government-sponsored internal migration from overpopulated, Muslim Java to less-developed islands where Islam was either a new or a minority faith. Extremists, both Muslim and Christian, have used these struggles to their own ends. But in Jogjakarta, the old cultural capital of Muslim Java, the elite and the middle class send their children to Christian-run schools for a better education, they use Christian-sponsored hospitals because of the higher-quality care, and they have far more interest in Britney Spears than in Osama bin Laden.

This is not a metaphorical statement—while I was recently in Indonesia, Miss Spears got far more air-time than Osama did, which made me wonder whether Mr. bin Laden doesn't have a point concerning the cultural brutality of the West. Now, hard-headed politicians may dismiss the Cult of Britney (and of bare-midriff blondes in general, for whom one cannot help feeling a certain admiration), but a society in which the girls and women have been watching Christina Aguilera's displays of life-affirming exuberance on video is unlikely ever to sign up for the whole fundamentalist package. Indeed, when confronted with the word "fundamentalist," the young women of Indonesia tend to concentrate on the first three letters.

Islam came to Indonesia approximately eight centuries ago, through trade, not conquest, but gathered force only about 500 years back, its sudden appeal contemporary with the Reformation in Europe. Hinduism and Buddhism (and animist folk religions, which persist indestructibly as part of Indonesian Islam) had longer reigns in the archipelago than Islam has yet enjoyed, and Indonesians have always taken a "wear what fits" attitude toward the Muslim faith. On Java, Indonesia's indisputable heartland, the mystical, questioning Sufi form of Islam shaped the faith early on, and although the coastal regions grew cosmopolitan with international trade, inland Java and the interior of the other great islands long were isolated from the world, allowing Islam to digest, rather than fully suppress, the multiple forms of local belief.

Technically speaking, Indonesia may contain almost 200 million Muslims, but less than 20 percent of them—and that is a generous estimate—would begin to pass muster with the strict mullahs of the Middle East. Even Muslims who describe themselves as devout include a range of superstitions and religious borrowings in their practices, from a belief in saints and shrines (anathema to strict Sunni Islam) to the conviction in rural parts of Sulawesi that transvestites have an inside track with Allah. And then there is the Indonesian fondness for an occasional beer. One woman showing me about described her female employer (none of this sounds terribly Middle Eastern, does it?) as a "most devoted Muslim, very strict," then added approvingly, "she doesn't pray during the day or

wear religious clothing, and she likes to drink a little bit, but she is really a very good Muslim.”

This is not intended to belittle the devotion of Indonesians. On the contrary, they are often profoundly religious (nowhere more so than on Hindu Bali, though). But they have adapted Islam to their own culture, rather than adapting their culture to Islam. Certainly, some Indonesians are more conservative in their beliefs than others. But despite the inevitable outbreaks of violence that punctuate every history and the increasing popularity of making the Haj to Mecca (a combination pilgrimage, holiday, and shopping trip for those with whom I spoke), Indonesians tend to take a live-and-let-live attitude toward faith. It is enormously frustrating to the extremists.

There long have been efforts to “clean up” Islam in the archipelago, with reports dating back centuries of the execution of Sufis who preached a curiously Lutheran doctrine of salvation through faith alone, then went on to scorn prayers, religious doctrine, and mosque visits as inconsequential compared to the faith within one’s heart. In the 19th century, as steamships made the journey to Mecca cheaper, swifter, and safer, ever more islanders made the Haj (today they travel by chartered jet, after riding to their local airport in convoys of buses). While Aceh always had a Sunni bent and enduring ties to the Arabian Peninsula—including a school and hostel maintained in Mecca for visiting scholars—this new exposure to the Islam of the religion’s ancient homelands inspired a minority of Sumatrans, Javanese, and others to attempt to reform their religion at home. The movement gained some force early in the 20th century, and remains very much alive today under the Muhammadiyah banner, whose followers number somewhere under 20 percent of the Islamic population.

But even these “fundamentalists” had a strong progressive wing that believed in education and argued that Islam was not incompatible with progress. While the numerous Muhammadiyah schools and universities the visitor sees scattered about today have campuses full of girls in conservative dress (though not veiled), the real point is that they have campuses full of girls. And the curricula are far more progressive than anything in the Arab homelands. Indonesian higher education is not competitive with Western university programs, but whether religious or state-sponsored, it beats an education that focuses exclusively on the Koran and its medieval commentators.

One enduring image of Indonesia is from a small “supermarket” on the dusty edge of Solo. The young cashier wore a mini-skirt that wasted no fabric on modesty, while the girl bagging groceries wore demure Islamic garb, including the local head scarf that resembles the hair covering worn by German women at the turn of the 15th century. The two girls were friends, and there was no tension in their interaction. While Indonesia remains a male-chauvinist society, the opportunities afforded to women have dramatically outpaced anything in the Middle East—and this is a country with a popular, elected female president. The extreme liberality of divorce laws harms families and women alike, but there is a

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spirit of independence and spunk among the younger, better-educated generation of Indonesian women that makes a striking, positive contrast to Turkey (another “Muslim” country for which one is hopeful in the long term).

Indonesia faces a long list of challenges, some of which may prove intractable, from ethnic and religious violence on the outer islands to the worst corruption between Lagos and Tijuana (corruption, not fundamentalism, is the country’s primary obstacle to progress, and corruption may prove the unwitting ally of fundamentalism in Indonesia, as it has been elsewhere). Yet the manner in which the United States has alternately scolded and ignored this huge, strategically positioned country, without making any serious efforts to peer behind the occasional nasty headline, is simply remarkable. For all its many problems, this is a country where Islam has spited the fundamentalists thus far, where the overwhelming majority of Muslims want no part of violent extremism, and where Islam is still an evolving religion that may adapt to the demands of a new century better than it will anywhere else in Asia—despite Malaysia’s economic headstart. Throw in its proximity to vital sea lanes, and our blithe dismissal of Indonesia’s importance begins to anger anyone who thinks seriously about America’s future interests.

Indonesians must solve their own problems, of course. They must determine the content and contours of their own faith. But we can help through patient, informed engagement. Our enemies, acknowledged or not, are present and active, fighting to drag Indonesian Islam down to a Middle Eastern oppressiveness. They have spent a great deal of money to persuade Indonesians that intolerance is a virtue, that Christians and Jews are devils, and that God is a stern disciplinarian who expects men to imitate him. Thus far, they have failed. But in these tumultuous times, as Indonesia struggles with democracy, economic depression, and the unprecedented pace of global change, the future remains uncertain.

We Americans have not even been in the game, when we should be engaging Indonesians—despite their excesses in East Timor during their nervous transition to democracy—to impress them with the benefits of the rule of law applied fairly to all citizens, electoral openness, and business done honestly in the global marketplace and at home. We should not go as pontificating crusaders, but as thoughtful, open-eyed counterparts. To use a preferred image, Indonesia does not need and will not tolerate the heroic surgery characteristic of American for-

eign policy, but demands a long treatment with strategic acupuncture. We should engage Indonesia with our goals set half a century out. It may be un-American to think in such long time spans, but we are already more than a quarter century into the active struggle for Islam's future. And no single country is more important to that future than Indonesia.

Islam—the newest, yet the most anxiously traditional, of the world's major religions—is under phenomenal stress, especially in those states and regions where its practices are the most conservative. Any culture which oppresses its women and excludes them from education and the workplace cannot possibly compete with the West and its intensifying human efficiency. The matter of women's freedom is the defining issue of our age. The most profound and fateful divide between human cultures today places the failures decisively on the side that would continue to deny women their basic human rights and equitable opportunities, with the successes on the side that realizes, at last, that women are better suited to be men's partners than their property.

Social and economic freedom for women constitutes the most sweeping revolution in human history, yet this enabling revolution has, thus far, passed by the core Muslim states of the Middle East. My own fondest hope, as the United States intervened in Afghanistan, was that a bomb dropped by a Navy fighter flown by a female pilot would kill Osama bin Laden. It would have been the perfect image of both the West's triumph and a crucial factor in that triumph. But whether Mr. bin Laden is alive or dead at this hour, we should not mistake his war for other than what it is—a war not merely against the West, but against half of mankind, against all women. The West's liberation of women (which has been, to a great degree, their self-liberation in the face of stubborn resistance) is the essential element that renders so many Muslims irreconcilable to us. This particular set of freedoms threatens not only the Muslim male's religious prejudices, but his central identity. Until it successfully addresses the issue of women's rights—full rights—Islam will not compete successfully, in any area, with the West. In that regard, too, Indonesia offers a hopeful example among foreign states.

Numerous other cultural factors, veiled with religious justifications, haunt the old Muslim heartlands. The situation is, indeed, so dire that one sometimes wonders if there is any hope at all. Yes, there is hope, but change must—and will—come first on Islam's frontiers.

Last, we come to a brief mention of what may prove the most vital frontier: North America. September 11th created a wide variety of stresses upon and distress for America's Muslim citizens and residents. This newest body of immigrants, some of whom still have not fitted themselves fully to a profoundly different society from that of their countries of origin, reacted with complex and varied emotions: horror; anger at the damage done to their adopted country as well as to their faith; alarm that their faith might be misunderstood by their fellow Americans; worries about blind retribution directed against them; anxiety to show that

they, too, are good Americans; and, sometimes, defensiveness about the often-disastrous societies they had left behind, incendiary excuses for the inexcusable, and, among the most disappointed and disaffected, muted pleasure that the proud had been given a public blow by the weak. Every single emotion—these and more—felt by our fellow Americans who believe that “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Prophet,” is understandable when we set aside our own emotions. American Muslims are in perhaps the most difficult situation of any immigrant group since the Irish fled the Great Famine. And yet there is cause to be more hopeful for them than for Muslims anywhere else in the world.

As so many religious or ethnic groups have done before them, America’s Muslim immigrants will need to jettison some of the behaviors brought along in their baggage, especially as regards the regulation of women. Many of our Muslim citizens have long-since integrated into American society—some have been fully Americanized for generations—while some new arrivals are still in the process of adapting. All of this is the normal stuff of the immigrant’s experience, with its shocks, discords, and ultimate success. What matters not only to us but to the world is that the long-overdue, liberal reformation of Islam is likeliest to happen here, in the United States.

Just as every other major religion has adapted to the unique challenges and opportunities of American life, Islam will do so as well. To retain the devotion of the young, generation after generation, as the possibilities (and the temptations) of America wean them from old behaviors and antique prejudices, Islam will have to travel the humane route pioneered by American Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. There will be great complaints and concerns—as each of these other religions continues to endure. But the ultimate effect of American life is to humanize the practice of faith. The great debate in the Islamic world as the decades advance may well be between progressive American Islam and more conservative forms lingering abroad.

In the dark days of the Cold War, when the world made grisly sense, American strategists touted the notion of “rolling back” communism. In fact, we never rolled back much—at least until 1989—but did our best to hold the line. But roll-back may have been a strategy far ahead of its time, a concept waiting for more propitious circumstances. It appears to be eminently suited as an approach for dealing with violent Islamic extremism.

We did not imagine we could defeat Soviet communism starting in Moscow; likewise, Islamic extremism cannot be engaged most effectively where it was born and bred. We must work our way in from the hopeful, unsettled frontiers, from Africa through Asia, in the Balkans, and in North America. The complex, exasperating, and frequently inspiring world of Islam faces a historically unique challenge. An entire religious civilization, of remarkable variety, must change if it is to survive economically and culturally. We are foolish if we do not do what lies within our power to enable that change to occur. □