

(This op-ed by Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Secretary of Defense, appeared August 1 in the Financial Times and is in the public domain. There are no republication restrictions.)

There Can Be No Moderate Solutions To Extremism

By Donald Rumsfeld

Last month Britain was twice attacked by an enemy that takes advantage of the openness of free societies to kill and terrorise from within. Shortly after the July 7 massacre, one American, summarising the sentiments of his countrymen, wrote to the British embassy in Washington: "Anyone who would attack London must not know history. The people who did this will find that while you can never have a better friend than the British, you can also never have a more fearsome enemy."

In the wake of such an atrocity it is essential that we take care in understanding what motivates -- and does not motivate -- extremists to commit mass murder. As they have in previous attacks, the extremists and their sympathisers will offer the usual empty justifications. In the past, these have included a range of real and imagined affronts going back centuries, including, but not limited to: US troops stationed in Saudi Arabia after 1991 to deter an attack by Saddam Hussein; the founding of Israel in 1948; the break-up of the Ottoman Empire some 80 years ago; the reconquest of Spain from the Moors in 1492; and the Crusades, the first of which was in 1095.

Chief among these today is the coalition's campaign against extremists worldwide and the so-called "occupation" of Muslim countries by the west. In fact, coalition forces operate in Afghanistan and Iraq at the request of democratically elected governments. It is the extremists, not the coalition, who are intentionally targeting and killing countless Muslim civilians in a series of barbaric attacks in recent months.

Some seem to believe that accommodating extremists' demands -- including retreating from Afghanistan and Iraq -- might put an end to their grievances, and, with them, future attacks. But consider that when terrorists struck America on September 11, 2001, a radical Islamist government ruled Afghanistan and harboured al-Qaeda leaders, virtually undisturbed by the international community. And Saddam Hussein tightly clung to power in Iraq, and appeared to be winning support for his efforts to end United Nations sanctions.

In reality, Islamic extremists have long demonstrated an interest in attacking Britain. In January 2003, British police thwarted a likely planned attack using ricin -- a poisonous agent -- two months before Operation Iraqi Freedom began.

And in the two decades before September 11, long before coalition involvement in Afghanistan or Iraq, extremists killed or kidnapped hundreds of innocent civilians in places such as Tehran, Beirut, Saudi Arabia, Berlin, New York, on ships in the Mediterranean and a jet over Scotland.

The extremists do not seek a negotiated settlement with the west. They want America and Britain and other coalition allies to surrender our principles and commitment to Muslim friends around the world. In 2002, Osama bin Laden advocated the overthrow of moderate Muslim governments. And the fantasies of al-Qaeda and its ilk to impose intolerance and indoctrination extend far beyond the Middle East. In particular, the extremists are enraged by equality for women and the freedom of expression that are the hallmarks of free societies.

Just a few days after the first London attack, an extremist accused of murdering a Dutch filmmaker over a film deemed offensive to Islam stated openly that he would kill again if given the chance. There is no "separate peace" to be had with such an enemy.

The attacks of September 11 roused a nation and a civilisation to anger and action. Since then, the extremists have lost sanctuaries and popular support in Afghanistan and Iraq, and are being hunted down on every continent by an unprecedented global coalition.

They have struck back using everything from knapsacks to cars to kill hundreds of innocent people in places such as Spain, Turkey, Kenya, Indonesia, Russia and, now, London. They seek to destroy things they could never build in 1,000 years and kill people they could never persuade.

They failed on September 11. They are failing in Iraq and Afghanistan. And, knowing what we know about the British people, in attacking London the extremists have no doubt failed again.

[The writer is U.S. defense secretary.]