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One War, Two Fronts

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A month into the war in Afghanistan, the hand-wringing has already begun over how long this might last. Let's all take a deep breath and repeat after me: Give war a chance. This is Afghanistan we're talking about. Check the map. It's far away.

I have no doubt, for now, that the Bush team has a military strategy for winning a long war. I do worry, though, whether it has a public relations strategy for sustaining a long war. Over time, Arab and Muslim public opinion will matter. The silent majority in Pakistan, which for now is supporting President Pervez Musharraf's new-found alliance with the U.S. — something that is strategically critical for us — will be influenced by the broad trends in Arab-Muslim public opinion. So too will the next generation in the region. It is critical that generation see bin Laden as a rogue, not a role model. So how do we fight this P.R. war?

The most important way we win the public relations war is by first winning the real war — by uprooting the Taliban regime and the bin Laden network, and sending the message that this is the fate of anyone who kills 5,000 innocent Americans. Quite simply, if we win the war and are seen to be winning, we will have friends and allies in the Arab-Muslim world. If we are seen as losing the war or wavering, our allies will disappear in a flash.

Indeed, to read some of the commentaries in the Arab press is to understand that bin Laden and Saddam Hussein still have a great deal of popular support. It is no easy trick to lose a P.R. war to two mass murderers — but we've been doing just that lately. It is not enough for the White House just to label them "evildoers." We have to take the P.R. war right to them, just like the real one.

When the president or his spokesmen are asked about civilian casualties from our bombing in Afghanistan, they should answer: "Yes, for the 30th straight day Osama bin Laden, a mass murderer, has cloaked himself in a human blanket of Afghan civilians. Unfortunately, this has led to some civilian deaths." Or "Yes, for the fourth straight week Osama bin Laden, the man who sends other Muslims to their death but never risks his own life, is now sending Afghans to die for him."

Ditto with Saddam. Whenever U.S. officials speak about Saddam they should always say: "Saddam Hussein, the man who has killed more Muslims in the 20th century than any other human being . . ." (He's killed a million Iranians, Iraqi Kurds and Kuwaitis.) Or they should point out that Saddam and bin Laden are "the world's two biggest hijackers — they have each hijacked a country and are holding its civilians hostage, and we're trying to liberate them."

Besides playing better defense, we also need to play offense. Yes, it's time for the Bush administration to do more to get the poisonous Palestinian-Israeli conflict off TV. It doesn't have to solve it, but it should send a serious, high-level U.S. envoy to work on a real cease-fire or interim deal. Israelis and Palestinians on their own are not going to find a way out of this dead end. Negotiations won't end all the violence, but they might at least create a competing story line and dynamic.

But we can't play offense by ourselves. It is not enough for our allies Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Kuwait to issue one formal statement in support of the U.S. and then duck for cover. Not a single Arab-Muslim leader has yet answered bin Laden's taped message, which was heard all over the world. Our Arab-Muslim allies have to give their people a vision of why they are with us — not just secretly let us use their bases while their newspapers fuel anti-American rage.

Bin Laden told the Arabs that the Arab modernizing strategy had failed and all that was left was Islam — particularly his angry, retrograde version. Egypt, the leading Arab country, needs to take on that bin Laden message and insist that there is an Arab vision that can blend modernism with respect for Arab culture and tradition. And Saudi Arabia, the leading Muslim state, has to take on that bin Laden message and insist that there is a Muslim ideal that can blend faith, tolerance and modernity.

But to sell that vision they first have to have that vision.

Bottom line: We can't win the P.R. war with polite arguments, passive diplomacy or allies that are afraid to claim the future from a man who wants to bury it with the past.