



healing words

BY MARK W. McCLURE, MD, MEDICAL EDITOR

common ground revisited

Six years ago I wrote an editorial about the September 11th terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. At that time, the precise details surrounding that tragic event were unclear and President Bush and our congressional leaders were still debating how to respond. I was inspired by an editorial about the terrorist attack that was entitled “Shared Values.”

Written by the editor-in-chief of *Hope Magazine*, Jon Wilson, his editorial made a persuasive argument for an enlightened approach to the problem of terrorism. He lobbied against a short sighted eye-for-an-eye retaliation. As we all know, President Bush had another agenda in mind. Shortly thereafter, he embroiled our nation in an Iraqi war, a quagmire that continues to cost our country dearly—28,000 American casualties thus far, military expenses that exceed 200 million dollars a day, and a loss of esteem and legitimacy among the worldwide community. Mr. Bush is now rattling his saber against Iran. Lest history repeat itself, let me recap what Mr. Wilson had to say about the war on terrorism.


One of the byproducts of the terrorist attack has been a resurgence of patriotism. Jon Wilson commented: “I thought it [patriotism] meant a pride in our values and ideals, but I’ve begun to fear it really means a pride in our ability to avenge our losses, to strike back with overwhelming, if sometimes imprecise force.” Widespread destruction of Iraqi cities and soaring civilian casualties, eighty thousand to date, bear witness to the truth of his statement.

He opined that the promise of retaliation was not the answer. If it were, he pointed out, Northern Ireland and the Middle East would be the safest places on earth. I’ll address his statement about Northern Ireland later, but first I want to revisit what he had to say about another strategy for the war on terrorism.

“During the darkest days of World War II, with the fate of the free world hanging in the balance,

President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill faced a similar challenge. Our enemies were attacking us on all fronts. Victory was far from certain. Yet these visionary leaders met on a battleship in the midst of the turmoil and conceived the Atlantic Charter—a manifesto based on forgiveness and rehabilitation instead of retribution and revenge. The legacy of this document was a safer world. Notice I didn’t say a ‘safe’ world—human nature being what it is—but the provisions of the Atlantic Charter spawned a safer world where former enemies have become our friends and allies.”

Six years ago, President Bush and our congressional leaders forfeited a golden opportunity to reshape the war on terrorism. This fall, the American people will have an opportunity to send a message to our leaders. What legacy do we want to leave to our children? I share Jon Wilson’s vision: “The answer, it seems, is to invent a whole new kind of ‘strategy,’ one that aims to integrate shared values among differing peoples, one that re-ignites our zeal for listening, learning, and devoting ourselves to finding the common bonds of our humanity—no matter what it might mean for our old way of life. We can find common ground with those who have grown up under different belief systems and even those who mean us harm. It has happened before in the world. What we need now is to inspire the political and social will to embody our highest values: understanding, acceptance, tolerance, and cooperation. These are the values we all aspire to; they are also the values the world demands from us.”

The 1998 peace accord between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland illustrates that a new strategy can surmount generations of terrorism. Ten years after its inception, the Irish people and leaders on both sides continue to work together to find common ground. So can we. 

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