Responding to Evil: September 11, 2001 Attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon

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Let's call it what it is…Evil. Whatever the motive, past grievances or present perception of the decadence of Western culture, their response was evil. By definition, evil is the denigration or destruction of life. It can be as small as a personal or racist insult, or grow to crashing a plane purposely into the World Trade Center. Make no mistake these were no martyrs. Martyrs from an Islamic, Jewish, or Christian perspective voluntarily forfeit their life for a moral cause that leads to a greater social good. Neither occurred by these actions. These actions were not martyrdom, not revenge, not collateral damage – but evil.

How then do we as individuals and as a nation respond to this evil?

Don't blame the many for a few. We will be tempted to "broad brush" all Muslims and mid-Easterners for the actions of a few. We must resist this with all the moral fiber of our individual and national character. If we fail to separate the few from the many, we too will fall into the same morass of evil that we now condemn. Frankly, millions of Muslims weep with us and, along with us, condemn the actions of the few.

One of America's great strengths is our ability to, somehow, live in a culture of passionate beliefs and unbelief. And, on most days we get along well. Certainly, from this mosaic of belief and unbelief comes the imperative to renew bonds of love, affection and tolerance.

Respond to evil in a measured, focused and moral manner. American leaders must respond to this evil in diplomatic and military ways. But how should we as a nation respond?

There is relevant wisdom at this time from the sources of our Judeo-Christian tradition. The Torah calls for *"an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"*. This popular text affirms that a just response is one that does not exceed the provocation or crime. As we see pictures of a collapsed World Trade Center and Pentagon we will be tempted to urge massive retaliation to "kill them all." If we succumb to that temptation we will violate this wisdom from the ages, lose the moral high ground, contradict American legal tradition, and will invite ever increasing rounds of violent responses in the future. Whatever our response, let it be focused, measured, and above all, moral.

Don't let fear paralyze our country. Evil triumphs, and these evildoers win when we as individuals and as a country fear, cower, or become distracted by amusements. Evil succeeds to the extent that we alter our life. Yes! Be aware of your environment. Yes! Take precaution when necessary. But as we mourn the dead and wounded, and support their families and friends, raise your fist in defiance with me and live your life with passion, grace, and conviction. Resume your life and let us together restore the best of America as a challenge to those who do evil. And, by so doing, we say to the dead and mourning, your death and pain was not futile because evil *will not* have the last word.