

Terrorism Is a Persistent and Evolving Threat to U.S. Security

Michael Chertoff

Michael Chertoff was the secretary of Homeland Security until 2009.

Without doubt the United States is safer than it was at the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks because of the critical steps and actions the U.S. and its overseas friends and allies have taken to enhance security. However, we are not completely safe and the job is not done yet. We cannot afford to be hysterical or complacent. We face a persistent and evolving terrorist threat. That threat is changing, and we must adapt to meet that change. Among other things, that means addressing some legal challenges. We must use every known national security and homeland security tool we can—military, civilian, law enforcement, ideology—to keep the country safe from terrorists. Equally important, we must not only expand the number of tools we use but invent some new ones as well.

I appreciate your all coming here today. It is obviously the eve of a very important date in our history, not only our national history but I suspect the personal history of just about everybody in the room. And, of course, I'm referring to September 11th. . . .

And tomorrow [September 11, 2008] is an opportunity both to reflect on what we've lost in terms of the people that

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were sacrificed and, of course, the huge impact it had on the family members of those who perished, but also to look back with some satisfaction that we've averted a successful attack over the last seven years, and at the same time with a re-dedication of effort to make sure that that record continues into the future so far as it's humanly possible for us to assure that. . . .

I do want to turn to the main topic for today, which is: Are we safer now than we were on September 11th [2001]? And I want to address the question squarely, but then talk about it in terms of its implications for our long-term strategy against terrorism. . . .

I don't think there's any doubt that we are safer today than we were seven years ago.

Now, when confronting the question, are we safer, there are really, in my view, two opposite extremes that we have to avoid: on the one hand, hysteria, hysterical fear; and on the other hand, complacency and almost blithe disregard for what the threat really is.

The Hysteria Argument

So what do I mean by hysteria? Well, what I mean is the kind of rhetoric—I'm slightly exaggerating here, but the kind of rhetoric that sounds like this: Here we are seven years after 9/11. Al-Qaeda still exists. Bin Laden remains at large. Terrorists continue to plot and continue atrocities. Nothing we've been doing has worked. Everything is a failure. We're no safer now than we were then.

Now, in my view, that argument is clearly incorrect. It is a false argument. I don't think there's any doubt that we are safer today than we were seven years ago. I think the proof is, of course, what's happened over the last seven years. And the reason for this, I believe, is obvious. Since 9/11, we and our friends and allies overseas around the globe have taken deci-