



## Commentary

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

# When will the terrorists have won?

These are the most unsettled and unsettling times American citizens have lived through since the Vietnam War, when our country was pulled apart by assassinations, civil-rights and anti-war demonstrations, women's rights initiatives, the United Farm Workers movement, race riots, the Watergate tapes and mass murder. The great difference between then and



now is the source of upheaval.

In the '60s and early '70s the agents of turbulence were — with the exception of Palestinian-born Sirhan Sirhan — all true-blue American. American citizens watched the Vietnam War in their living rooms. American citizens wore peace symbols or American flags as they protested for or against the war, or as they patriotically chose to serve in the armed forces or to resist the war as conscientious objectors. One war-resister of Muslim faith was sentenced to five years in prison for his convictions. He is now revered. His name is Muhammad Ali.

In the 1960s, American citizens demonstrated for the rights of other citizens to vote, to receive an equal education, to eat at public lunch counters, to use public bathrooms. Other American citizens resisted, within their hearts or with terrifying violence. Two deranged Americans, Charles Whitman and Charlie Manson, made us fearful at home and out in public.

All this violence and turmoil hit us during the tensions of the Cold War. Families and communities were terrified. In my hometown, doors on houses were locked at night for the first time. Hand-guns were bought as protection against Manson-like cults or the possible spillover of inner-city violence. Manson and his cult followers practiced terrorism, aimed at fomenting a race war by murdering randomly targeted white Americans.

Individuals, families and communities were split apart by the Vietnam War: whether we should fight it and how we could win a war far away, on strategically problematical terrain, within a culture whose history and belief systems we poorly understood. "America: Love It or Leave It." "Give Peace a Chance." "The Silent Majority."

If we could not defeat ourselves a generation ago through our own all-out multifront attack on our way of life, we shall

not be defeated now by outside terrorist forces, so long as we adhere to the principles that guided us as a country during the Cold War. These were enunciated with stern pragmatism, not fairy-tale idealism, in National Security Council Document 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security (April 14, 1950), and they are as good now as they were then. They boil down to respect for the freedom of the individual, tolerance of diversity and recognition of our collective responsibilities to the common good. We avoided extremism in the '60s and early '70s, survived shocks to our national political system, absorbed and accepted radical changes in our ways of living and overcame widespread distrust and fear.

What concerns me right now are pronouncements that we should return to living our lives as we led them before Sept. 11, that "[o]ur biggest problem is fear" (Dan Rather), or that "I'd be cautious if I worked in a high-profile place like the upper tiers of the federal government . . . but when you've got housewives in rural Kentucky telling their kids to be careful with the mail, let's just admit the truth: The terrorists have won" (J. Wesley Boyd).

This is categorical nonsense. Our lives have been fundamentally altered by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. But the terrorists have not won. We do not defeat terrorists by ignoring real and justifiable feelings of fear, by pretending that we should return to the kinds of lives we led before the World Trade Center-Pentagon terrorism or by believing that it is good and healthy to do so. Terrorism everywhere, including the insane terrorism of a Charlie Manson or Ted Kaczynski, targets innocent people. The United and American Airlines planes and the WTC were not full of "employees in the upper tiers of the federal government."

Kentucky housewives should tell their children that the world today is not what it was seven weeks ago. But they and their husbands should also teach them to love and respect other human beings and not to fear diversity of opinion, religious belief or skin color. We should all remain confident that adherence to fundamental American values will bring us through into a new and wiser version of a free society our children and grandchildren can live in proudly and safely.

When will the terrorists have won?  
Never.