How the terrorists use hate to try to divide us

This is a satisfying and time-honored way of making peace. Mr. Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” had the same idea of how to bring peace to the Belgian Congo in the 1890’s: “Exterminate the Brutes.” And Col. Kurtz in Francis Ford Coppola’s “Apocalypse Now” scrawled “Drop the Bomb. Exterminate Them All” as his final solution for saving Vietnam from the communists. We went well along toward doing that through conventional bombing in Vietnam. But what clear targets are there for our superior firepower in the counterterrorism war we are waging in Iraq?

The same day as the London bombings, people opposed to White House policies called me up cursing the terrorists in London for “playing into Bush’s hands,” strengthening support for military action. There was no period of decent grief for the innocent dead. A conservative list serve I am on sent out a “patriotic” Marine’s ironic apology for American actions abroad. The apology is presented as coming from Lt. Gen. Chuck Pittman. He blames “our own left wing, our media, and our own brainwashed masses,” along with “radical professors, CNN, the New York Times and the United Nations” for presenting a distorted view of our history of altruistic military interventions. He declares that the true enemies are Islamic Arabs — notice he does not say Iraqis, nor does he say a terrorist sect of Islamic Arabs — and stop terrorism. But they gave no advice on how to do this. Fomenting hatred against all practitioners of Islam was their contribution to saving our world.

Receiving this message of hatred — for that is what it is — made me realize how close the terrorists are to winning. They use fear to polarize us. They reduce the world’s many beautiful, but confusing colors to simple black and white. They use dogmatic certainty to cut off communication.

These tactics have been known ever since Thucydides wrote about factional terrorism during the civil war in Corcyra in 427 B.C.E. These tactics are still with us because they work — if we let them work.

We are polarized about the war in Iraq. Most opinion pieces reinforce fixed positions about its connection to our declared war on terrorism and how and how long it should be fought. There is not much we can do. But we can decide personally not to close our minds.

The same day as the London bombings, I rode the back of an SUV on Koenig Lane. Alongside a bumper sticker that said “Luvya Dubya” was a peace symbol transformed into a missile inside a circle. Its slogan was “Peace through Superior Fire Power.”