

## A Willful Ignorance

By Paul Krugman

According to The New York Times, President Bush was genuinely surprised to learn from moderate Islamic leaders that they had become deeply distrustful of American intentions. The report on the “perception gap” suggests that the leader of the war on terror has no idea how badly that war—which must, ultimately, be a war for hearts and minds—is going.

Mr. Bush’s ignorance may reflect his lack of curiosity: “The best way to get the news,” he says, “is from objective sources. And the most objective sources I have are people on my staff.” Two words: emperor, clothes.

But there’s something broader going on: a sort of willful ignorance, supposedly driven by moral concerns but actually reflecting domestic politics. Surely it’s important to understand how others see us, but a new, post 9/11 version of political correctness has made it difficult even to discuss their points of view. Any American who tries to go beyond “America good, terrorists evil,” who tries to understand—not condone—the growing world backlash against the United States, faces furious attacks delivered in a tone of high moral indignation. The attackers claim to be standing up for moral clarity, and some of them may even believe it. But they are really being used in a domestic political struggle.

Last week I found myself caught up in that struggle. I wrote about why Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia’s prime minister—a clever if loathsome man who adjusts the volume of his anti-Semitism depending on circumstances—chose to include an anti-Jewish diatribe in his speech to an Islamic conference. Sure enough, I was accused in various places not just of “tolerance for anti-Semitism” (yes, I’m Jewish) but of being in Mr. Mahathir’s pay. Smear tactics aside, the thrust of the attacks was that because anti-Semitism is evil, anyone who tries to understand why politicians foment anti-Semitism—and looks for ways other than military force to combat the disease—is an apologist for anti-Semitism and is complicit in evil.

Yet that moral punctiliousness is curiously selective. Last year the Bush administration, in return for a military base in Uzbekistan, gave \$500 million to a government that, according to the State Department, uses torture “as a routine investigation technique,” and whose president has killed opponents with boiling water. The moral clarity police were notably quiet.

Why is aiding a brutal dictator o.k., while trying to understand why others don’t trust us—and doing something to create that trust—isn’t? Why won’t the administration mollify Muslims by firing Lt. Gen. William Boykin, whose anti-Islamic remarks have created vast ill will, from his counterterrorism position? Why won’t it give moderate Muslims a better argument against the radicals by opposing Ariel Sharon’s settlement policy, when a majority of Israelis think that some settlements should be abandoned, and even Israeli military officers have become bitterly critical of Mr. Sharon?

The answer is that in these cases politics takes priority over the war on terror. Moderate Muslims would have more faith in America’s good intentions if there were at least the appearance of a distinction between the U.S. and the Sharon government—but the administration seeks votes from those who think that supporting Israel means supporting whatever Mr. Sharon does. It’s sheer folly to keep General Boykin in his present position, but as Howard Fineman writes in a Newsweek Web-exclusive column, the administration doesn’t want “to make a martyr of a man who depicts himself as a Christian Soldier, marching off to war.”

Muslims are completely wrong to think that the U.S. is engaged in a war against Islam. But that misperception flourishes in part because the domestic political strategy of

the Bush administration—no longer able to claim the Iraq war was a triumph, and with little but red ink to show for its economic plans—looks more and more like a crusade. “Election Boils Down to a Culture War” was the title of Mr. Fineman’s column. But the analysis was all about abortion and euthanasia, and now we hear that opposition to gay marriage will be a major campaign theme. This isn’t a culture war—it’s a religious war.

Which brings me back to my starting point: we’ll lose the fight against terror if we don’t make an effort to understand how others think. Yet because of a domestic political struggle that seems ever more centered on religion, such attempts at understanding are shouted down.