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## **Lessons from U.N. Week**

By David Brooks

One of the lessons of this past week is that the international system is broken. The world community might make declarations — on preventing Iranian and North Korean nukes, disarming Hezbollah, or preventing genocide in Darfur — but when it comes to actually uniting to take action, words and resolutions lead nowhere. Thanks to a combination of American errors, European escapism, and Russian and Chinese greed, the worst people in the world now drive events while the best people do nothing.

The second big lesson of the past week is that five years after 9/11 we are farther from reaching a consensus on the nature of the threat than ever before. Instead of clarity, there is a cacophony of theories that attempt to explain the extremists — emphasizing religion or ideology or feelings of historic humiliation or some combination of all three.

The core of the dispute is: Do the extremists play by the normal rules of geostrategy, or are their minds off in some mystical sphere that is utterly alien to our categories?

Do they respond to incentives and follow the dictates of what we call self-interest? Can they be deterred by normal threats to their security? Or, alternatively, are they playing an entirely different game? Are the men who occupy the black hole that is the Iranian power elite engaged in a religious enterprise based on an eschatological time frame and driven by supernatural longings we can't begin to fathom?

The definition of the threat determines the remedies we select to combat it, and yet what we have now is a clash of incongruous definitions and an enemy that is chaos theory in human form — an ever-shifting array of state and nonstate actors who cooperate, coagulate, divide, feud and feed on one another without end.

The third lesson is that a huge gap is emerging between the way ordinary Americans see the Arab world and the way members of the political, media and intellectual elites see it.

Elite debate is restrained by a series of enlightened attitudes that amount to a code of political correctness: be tolerant of cultural differences, seek to understand the responses of people who feel oppressed, don't judge groups, never criticize somebody else's religion.

As anybody who has traveled around the country or listened to talk radio of left, right and center knows, these genteel manners do not inhibit the masses. Millions of Americans think the pope asked exactly the right questions: Does the Muslim God accord with the categories of reason? Are Muslims trying to spread their religion with the sword?

These millions of Americans believe the pope has nothing to apologize for. They regard the vicious overreaction to his speech, like the vicious overreaction to the Danish cartoons, as another sign that some sort of intellectual disease is sweeping through the Arab world.

What these Americans see is fanatical violence, a rampant culture of victimology and grievance, a tendency by many Arabs to blame anyone other than themselves for the problems they create. These Americans don't believe they should lower their standards of tolerable behavior merely for the sake of multicultural politeness, and they are growing ever more disgusted with commentators and leaders who are totally divorced from the reality they see on TV every night.

The fourth lesson is that we are drifting toward a policy that does not match the threat we face. Extremism is not an isolated cult in the Muslim world. It is a diverse and vibrant movement, which inspires the smartest of the young and treats the psychological wounds of those who are trapped between tradition and modernity.

The Muslim millenarians possess a habit of mind that causes them to escalate conflicts. They seem confident they can prevail, owing to their willingness to die for their truth. They don't seem to feel marginalized, but look down on us as weak, and doubt our ability to strike back.

With America exhausted by Iraq, with the threat of Iranian sanctions dissolving before our eyes, Western policy is drifting toward the option that most resembles passivity. That is containment — accepting Iranian nukes and trying to deter their use with our arsenal.

In other words, a policy that was designed to confront a secular, bureaucratic foe — the Soviets — will now be used to confront a surging, jihadist one. The survival of Tel Aviv, and maybe New York and Washington, will depend on the Clausewitzian rationalism of the Iranian mullahs, or the angry younger brothers who will replace them.

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