

Getting to the Root of Terror

We must create an agenda that makes us safe and secures democracy



By The Right Honourable Kim Campbell
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The world urgently needs a practical and principled response to terror that draws on the support of citizens everywhere.

On the 12-month anniversary of the Atocha train bombings in Madrid, an unprecedented group of politicians, former heads of state and government, scholars and experts of various kinds will gather there for the first International Summit on Democracy, Terrorism and Security. Our goal at the four-day meeting that starts tomorrow, is to create an agenda for making a safer world while securing democracy.

Obviously, the issue of terrorism is fraught with many political implications and divisions. It touches on ideological divisions and the different visions of the United States and Europe and its other allies. It touches on the difficult question of religious fundamentalism and many issues that are dear to peoples' sense of identity and that can make them feel defensive.

But we must remember that what makes democracies great is not that everyone thinks alike but that people agree to solve their differences through peaceful means, through political processes. So our goal here is not to articulate something everyone will necessarily agree with, but to identify areas of consensus and find a path forward for the protection of democracy, one that is realistic and achievable.

One of the areas we will examine closely are the roots of terrorism and the factors that contribute to its emergence. Conventional wisdom tells us poverty causes terrorism. Yet many terrorists are not at all poor and often are not disadvantaged. We need to study the roots of terrorism and locate the factors over which we might have some control.

What, for example, might reinforce a sense of alienation, or someone's susceptibility to a belief system that justifies something that seems so horrible, such as the targeting of civilians and innocents to make a political point?

We also have to look at public policy and the decisions we make, which may seem sensible at the time but in the long term increase our vulnerability by alienating people in our own societies and increasing the likelihood of violence.

The most important lesson we can learn from examining terrorism around the world is not to simplify this complex phenomenon but to understand that there are many aspects to it and, perhaps, many "terrorisms."

Certainly, those who believe they have a monopoly on the truth can often find justification for any type of violence, whether it is those in the U.S. or Canada who think it is legitimate to kill

abortion doctors, or those in other countries, who think the same for people who do not share their religious values.

It is not simply a question of where terrorisms come from. We must engage with each type of this phenomenon and try to understand what steps might be taken to forestall it or how we might develop the capacity for early detection of the dynamics that could lead to the growth of terrorism.

For me, terrorists are people who have rejected democratic means of solving their problems. That may be because in some cases they don't have democratic means to solve their problems.

Our purpose at this conference is to bring together the community of democracies and to argue that whatever differences they might have, they must co-operate and collaborate if they are to protect democracy.

One of the things we have to think about is the relationship between democracy and terrorism.

It is clearly not the case that you never have terrorism in democracies, nor is it necessarily the case that democracy is the best way to fight terrorism — that is a proposition that needs to be demonstrated (it is one that our experts are talking about).

I would argue that democracy is the best context for human development, for the capacity to live freely and explore one's human potential. My fundamental premise is that democracy has a value in and of itself, and our goal is to find ways to secure ourselves without throwing out that very value.

This is a question that concerns us all. Which is why, with our partners open Democracy.net, we are opening this debate to the world.

This Friday, we are encouraging citizens everywhere, especially those who are coping every day with the insecurity of terror, to reflect on what must be done and add their recommendations to our own.

We need to hear their voices, since it is only by working together that we can create a safer world.

The Right Honourable Kim Campbell was Canada's 19th Prime Minister. She is currently secretary-general of Club de Madrid which is dedicated to strengthening global democracy by drawing on the experience of its members, former heads of state and government.