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Keeping terrorism away

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The president's partial declassification of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), has provided an extraordinary glimpse of the hurdles the American people face in our battle with Islamist extremists.

The president's decision to declassify portions of the document was unusual. But remarkable times require uncommon solutions -- particularly when confronted with distortions from Democrats and their Moveon supporters. Democrats and the New York Times have once again done a disservice to our folks in uniform and our intelligence community.

Despite the best efforts of the Democratic spin machine, the simple truth is the NIE concludes U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts have not only severely damaged al Qaeda and disrupted its terrorist operations but that U.S. success in Iraq is key to ensuring that this terrorist threat does not grow. The confusion promulgated by Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California puts into sharp relief the inability of Democratic leadership to formulate any rational, national security plan to confront the insidious threat of terrorism and in turn keep America and the American people safe.

According to House Minority Leader Mrs. Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, of Nevada, the war on terror has hurt only the United States and the West while aiding al Qaeda. Assuming Osama bin Laden is alive in a rathole somewhere near the Pakistan-Afghan border, would he agree with the cut-and-run left? Five years on from the September 11, 2001, attacks, the Wahhabist terror organization has failed to win the hearts and minds of the world's Muslims. Al Qaeda's remaining leaders hide in remote caves. No one is sure if bin Laden is dead or alive, sick or healthy, in Pakistan or in Afghanistan. He is less and less relevant.

The organization's state-of-the-art terrorist training infrastructure in Afghanistan has been dismantled. Its estimated 4,000-strong membership has been decimated, at least 3,000 al Qaeda cadres -- including September 11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed have been killed or captured in more than 100 countries.

The Bush administration's rigorous security strategy to protect Americans at home has prevented a fresh attack on the continental United States. And according to some experts, the remaining leadership of al Qaeda is wracked with division over whether bin Laden

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overplayed his hand in murdering nearly 3,000 civilians. What bin Laden and his cadres initially saw as a triumph against the West was condemned almost universally as an unprecedented act of barbarism. Instead of producing a groundswell of support from within the Islamic world, continuing wanton violence orchestrated by al Qaeda has resulted in the opposite: growing discomfort about the association between Islam and violence and an increasing split between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites -- and not just in Iraq.

Though weakened, al Qaeda is still resilient and has adopted new targets, technologies and tactics, some of which have backfired. Rather than winning recruits, al Qaeda faces a very serious challenge to its legitimacy from Muslims sickened by its multiple atrocities. These attacks lose popular support and only brace thoughtful Muslim's leadership across the world against terrorist forces.

The militant critics who sneer at Mr. Bush over the war on terror are those cheering the rising death toll in Iraq, hoping for a civil war to justify their critique. It is important to recognize that the conflict within Iraq has concentrated al Qaeda's efforts within its borders, allowing its operations elsewhere to be disabled.

In Indonesia, for example, the counterterrorism crackdown by the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono government has broken up Jemaah Islamiah (JI), the terror group behind the Bali bombings and the attack on the Australian Embassy in Jakarta. Many of those responsible are behind bars awaiting firing squads. JI bomb-maker Azahari Husin was killed in a raid last year. Hambali, the mastermind behind the Bali bombings, is incarcerated at Guantanamo Bay after the CIA captured him in Thailand in 2003. In putting Hambali out of action, the CIA cut the link between JI and al Qaeda. There have been similar crackdowns in Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Terrorism as we know it today began not with the September 11 attacks and the White House response, but with the 1979 coup against Iran's shah. This crisis launched radical Islam's rise in the region and underpinned more than a generation of Middle East instability. The first World Trade Center attack in 1993, the bombing of the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1998, and the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000 all preceded the war on terror.

Five years after September 11, 2001, the view from the cave of an aging and possibly dying bin Laden is not one of victory, but of disintegrating plans for a caliphate stretching across the Islamic world.

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