**Fate of innocents is in Bush’s hands**

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Dear President Bush:

Thank you for the remarkable fortitude you have shown in protecting our country as commander in chief.

In the days after Sept. 11, 2001, you ably marshaled the resources of our nation to resist and repel future threats. You focused our resolve to be as smart and effective as we can be in protecting ourselves without succumbing to terror. You exercised moral leadership by challenging us not to target Muslims indiscriminately at home or abroad.

But there is one more thing you can do to secure us against terrorism.

Even as we hasten toward a showdown with Iraq, the opportunity you have is the singular ability, rarely available to a nation-state, to define a new standard of civilization for all subsequent civilizations; specifically a new standard for the world order emerging after the fall of communism in the former Soviet Union. Such a geopolitical consensus was more likely immediately after Sept. 11. But it’s not too late to enlist all nations, and all religions, to join us in establishing a new world standard:

There is no killing of innocents in the name of our nation or in the name of God.

That claim is the single most-contested principle of civilization (and civility) that remains to become normative in human events. To date no nation and no religion (not even Buddhism) has been able to establish that standard in a way that is compelling and binding on all its adherents or leaders. Heretofore, rather, every tradition and every state has retained a belief in "sacred violence": violence as the god of last resort who will save us when all else fails; violence "in the name of God" or in our own name -- the name of the people or the state.

For the first time, after Sept. 11, a superpower was positioned with enough moral authority (and international sympathy for its victims) to call for a new standard in geopolitical relations.

Mr. President, we are still so positioned. It is still in your power to call on all world leaders, governmental bodies and religious councils to join us by ruling publicly and unequivocally against the killing of innocent people (the so-called "collateral damage" of war).

In this way we would "bring to bar" proponents of the major world religions and challenge them to disavow the exploitation and abuse of their traditions by terrorists who are pseudo-Muslim, pseudo-Jewish, pseudo-Christian. In this way we could make anti-terrorism a new standard in both civil and religious law.
Our allies, some of whom are backing away from the United States now, will flock to our side. Our enemies will learn a new meaning of the word superpower -- a state whose highest value is not the acquisition of power but the provision of peace.

Indeed, for many of our Muslim allies we would achieve from outside what they themselves are not able to achieve internally: the long-awaited movement toward an Islam that is politically and ideologically moderate and that can restrain the more extremist, repressive and entrenched voices of Islam.

Such moral and enlightened leadership would empower Muslim moderates in relation to their own political and religious leaders and in relation to their own peoples.

And only such a consensus would render us ultimately secure from terrorism, because only such a consensus can expose, disable and disempower terrorism from within as a distorted form of extremist religion.

Finally, only such a consensus can restore, propagate and augment a standard of civility and humanity among nations that the Sept. 11 attacks attempted to preclude.

You can appreciate that we will have morally forfeited such new order statesmanship by continuing with a military response that incurs the killing of innocents in the name of our national security. Mr. President, any powerful nation can lead the world into war. At this moment, only one powerful nation can lead the world into peace.

Respectfully yours,

Theophus "Thee" Smith,
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Captions: Photo: Theophus "Thee" Smith

Photo: President Bush tells reporters outside the Treasury Department on Feb. 7 that the United Nations Security Council needs to "make up its mind soon" about dealing with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. / DOUG MILLS / The New York Times

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