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“Offending Islam ”

On the morning of August 10, as news broke that British police were arresting suspects in a plot to bomb flights to the US, I was in a New York airport, stuck in the longest security line I have seen since 9/11, under strict orders to jettison my tooth paste and shaving cream.

At that very moment the President of the United States, too, was unburdening himself. The arrests, President Bush told the press, were a reminder that we are “at war with Islamic fascists who will use any means to destroy those of us who love freedom, to hurt our nation.”

Now, even without quibbling over dictionary definitions of “fascism” or offering history lessons about Mussolini’s Italy, the President’s statement was ill-advised.

Why? Because it offends many Muslims all around the world. It thus contrasts sharply with the President’s original choice of target after 9/11. By then identifying “terrorism” as the enemy, the President wisely focused on the *what* – violence -- and not on the *who* – terrorists motivated by their particular, extreme view of Islam. One could object to the phrase “war on terror” for other reasons, but not because it was calculated to cause gratuitous offense to most members of one of the world’s great religions.

With his new phrase, “Islamic fascists,” the President loses whatever ground he gained by his initial, judicious phrasing. He opens the door not only to offense by Muslims everywhere, but also to accusations by terrorist firebrands that the President identifies Islam as the enemy. This will not help our cause.

Many Americans will protest that the President meant no such thing. Of course he did not. But that misses the point. The issue is not how his words will be understood by most Americans, but how they will be understood – or misunderstood – by most Muslims worldwide. We are in a global struggle against terrorists. We need to make allies, not enemies, of innocent Muslim bystanders.

If that were all – a strategic error in rhetoric, with potentially fatal consequences – it would be bad enough. But the reality may be worse. The President’s words were not only ill-chosen, but also, it seems, politically motivated.

Shortly before the President's remarks, Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, a Republican facing a stiff fight for reelection this November, addressed the National Press Club in Washington. "I would say that we have a messaging problem, and that we in this country for a variety of reasons have chosen not to identify the enemy and to do it with consistency," said Santorum.

"Some say we're fighting a war on terror," he added. "That's like saying World War II was a war on blitzkrieg. In World War II we fought Nazism and Japanese imperialism. Today we are fighting against Islamic fascism."

Now, does anyone believe that in the midst of a hot reelection campaign, Senator Santorum suddenly discovered the need to revise the rhetoric of American security policy? Or that he chose his remarks without regard to what he thought would be their effect on his standing in the polls? Would he have articulated his new twist on terrorism, if Muslims were a significant swing vote in Pennsylvania?

And Santorum is not alone. Right wing talk shows have been preaching so-called "Islamofascism" for some time.

In this context it strains credulity to suggest that President Bush chose to condemn "Islamic fascism" simply because he has now come to believe that this new phrase will somehow serve American strategic interests. More likely he thinks it will help Republican political interests in November. After all, there are not many congressional races where Muslim voters will make the difference, but there are plenty of close races where turning out the Republican right may help the President to keep Congress in his party's hands.

It appears, then, that this new, strategic blunder comes not from our Commander in Chief, but from our Republican in chief. Unfortunately its consequences will last far longer than the November elections.

Doug Cassel's commentaries are broadcast Wednesdays during the noon hour of the Worldview program on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM. Views expressed are personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.