

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

April 22, 2010

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I am writing in response to your letter of April 9, 2010, in which you expressed your concern about recent reports that this Administration has deleted the phrase "Islamist extremism" from its National Security Strategy (NSS), and replaced it with what you call the "nebulous term" violent extremism.

Though I take issue with the suggestion that the Administration has not considered the terrorism question with rigor and care, I would like to take this opportunity to reassure you that these recent reports are largely inaccurate. Based on our past discussions and your public remarks, I do not believe that my views are fundamentally out of step with your own.

To begin with, I wanted to address the question you raised about whether the Administration acknowledges that we are "at war." The President and his Administration have repeatedly made it clear that we are at war with al Qaeda, a transnational terrorist organization that continues to pose the most direct and significant threat to the United States, primarily from its current base along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, as it continues to demonstrate both the intent and capability to conduct significant terrorist attacks against the homeland and U.S. interests abroad. The President has said so many times in his public remarks, beginning with his Inaugural Address and continuing through all of his major speeches on this subject. Furthermore, beyond our words, the Administration's actions demonstrate our commitment to waging that war, for instance through the increased commitment of resources to Afghanistan and Pakistan, or through our relentless efforts to deny al Qaeda a safe haven.

Contrary to press reports, this Administration has not issued any directive barring the use of specific words or phrases, and has not undertaken any effort to eliminate their use in government documents or public statements by Administration officials. Though we obviously strive to speak with a consistent voice and in a manner that reflects the President's

vision and policies, this Administration has not attempted to censor or control the way government officials at any level talk about any of the threats facing this country

It is of course true that, as an Administration, we have sought to be precise and accurate in our public statements about the threats posed to this country by terrorist organizations across the globe. In fact, it is in the very spirit of your letter that we have sought to do so. In order to devise an effective strategy to disrupt, dismantle and defeat those terrorist organizations that threaten our nation, it is critically important to define accurately and precisely our enemies; assess honestly the nature of the threat they pose; and understand fully their motivations, capabilities, tactics, and goals. In my view, using "Islamic extremist" and other variations of that phrase does not bring us closer to this objective. Rather, the phrase lumps a diverse set of organizations - with different motivations, goals, capabilities, and justifications for their actions - into a single group in a way that may actually be counterproductive, creating confusion among the American public, across the United States Government, and with our allies as to what steps are needed to counter them. In short, I don't think it's possible or even necessary to reduce the terrorism challenge that we face to a single term or phrase, and I don't anticipate that we will seek to do so in our public remarks or our strategy documents.

In fact, when we take care to spell out more specifically our conception of the terrorist threat we face, and when we are more precise in our language, I believe there is broad agreement across the political spectrum about the threats we face and the actions we can and must undertake to combat them. For example, I am certain that we can agree that the threat posed by al-Qa'ida and al-Qa'ida-inspired violence is the preeminent counterterrorism challenge we face, and that eliminating that threat remains our highest national security priority.

The terrorist threat to this country and its people does not, of course, end with the core of al-Qa'ida. In addition to declaring war and plotting attacks against the United States, al-Qa'ida seeks to inspire a broader movement against the United States and many of our allies and partners. It does so by preying upon personal and local grievances and propagating a distorted interpretation of Islam - one that has been vocally

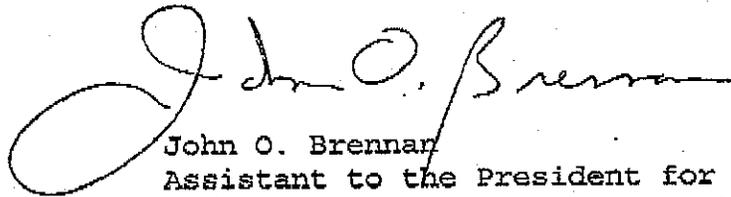
rejected by Muslims around the world - to inspire and justify individuals and groups to follow in their footsteps or join their cause. As a result, I believe we face an evolving, adaptable threat from groups and individuals that have accepted al-Qaida's agenda and its "call to action" through formal alliance, loose affiliation or association, or simple inspiration and seek to conduct acts of terror against the U.S. and our allies and partners. These groups have killed civilians of many different religions, in many different parts of the world.

Of course, we must also recognize that there are several other foreign terrorist organizations that pose a range of threats to U.S. national security, from undermining the security and stability of an allied government to the global trafficking in narcotics. For each of these unique threats, not all of which would fall under the umbrella of "violent Islamic extremists," I believe we must conduct a sober assessment of the threat and then devise a coherent and effective strategy to counter it, using all appropriate tools and capabilities at our disposal.

In addition, I remain concerned that the use of the phrase "violent Islamic extremists" could be counterproductive in another way. As you point out in your letter, the way in which some organizations, including al-Qa'ida, justify their violent agenda distorts the teachings of a great religion, the vast majority of whose followers strongly reject that agenda. Labeling these groups collectively as "Islamic extremists" or "violent Islamic extremists" could, in fact, validate the perception that they are trying to create - that, even though the overwhelming majority of their victims are themselves Muslim, Islam somehow justifies their actions, and that by fighting them the United States is engaged in a war against Islam. Though we both know that is far from the truth, words matter, and it is important that we avoid using language that can be misinterpreted and distorted by those who will no doubt seek to use our words against us. Furthermore, we strongly reject the claim of al Qa'ida's leaders that they are religious figures; their actions run counter to the teaching of all great religions, and we will use all elements of our power to defeat them not because of their religious views, but rather because they are terrorists who threaten the United States, our allies and partners, and the peace and security of the world.

Thank you again for your interest in and dedication to the current national security threats to this country.

Sincerely,



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Assistant to the President for  
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The Honorable Joseph I. Lieberman  
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