President Bush continues to amaze, baffle and infuriate most of the Washington political class. Yesterday, he pronounced that "under my leadership America is more secure and peaceful ... the world is safer for having removed Saddam Hussein," even while the ambulances were still removing the dead and dying from suicide bombsites in Baghdad. The president's claim of more security and peace only makes sense if one understands to what he is comparing the current condition. Presumably, if we hadn't invaded Iraq (and Afghanistan), things would be more peaceful right now. American soldiers wouldn't be dying on foreign soil, and there would be no explosions on the streets of Baghdad. If we had let the U.N. quietly, politely and ineffectively continue to complain to Mr. Hussein and the Taliban for their various misdeeds, the French, Germans and many Muslim governments would not now be saying rude things about America. We might even be admired around the world for our forbearance, restraint and maturity after that tragedy in New York and at the Pentagon.

The president's statement makes sense only if one believes that the terrorist danger will not go away, but rather will grow ever worse until it reaches a genocidal level of applied WMD weaponry against Americans here at home. In that case, every day we delay our effort to suppress and extinguish terrorism at its heart in the Middle East, America and the world grows less secure and less full of peace. It is in that sense that the president was correct yesterday. Having started the process of rolling back terrorism (however falteringly or imperfectly), we are more secure than if we had not yet started. On Sept. 12, and for some months thereafter, most Washington politicians and journalists shared with the president that sense of the danger and urgency. But with the passage of months, and now years, for many the very idea of a war on terrorism has become prosaic. It has become a mere cliche, an abstraction, a political phrase to be tossed off without thinking.

But it is not so for George Bush. For him the terrorism menace is corporeal, ominous and imminent. If he is right -- and almost every technical terrorism expert believes he is -- I believe his obsessive, sustained focus on the danger is a sign of greatness. When Napoleon was asked what distinguished a great leader from a regular politician, he explained that it was not innate intelligence, but rather the mental power "de fixer les objets longtemps sans etre fatigue" (to concentrate on objectives for long periods without tiring). While most other politicians (certainly including most of the Democratic Party presidential aspirants) have long since tired of the mental and emotional strain of staring into the terrorism abyss), the president continues to focus and to act.

And he understands that the early rounds may be the hardest, because the terrorists and others still doubt America's staying power. They remember Vietnam, where we lost the will to fight. They remember Beirut in 1983, where we turned tail and ran after they killed our Marines in their barracks. They remember the first WTC bombing in 1993, when we turned to our lawyers instead of our soldiers. They remember Mogadishu in 1996, where we left our dead and skedaddled out of country. They remember the attack on the USS Cole in 2000, where we ordered our ships to sea rather than our Marines to shore. So now, in 2003, in Iraq and Afghanistan, our soldiers and Marines are paying the price in their blood for the boundless tolerance and rationalized inaction of their superiors when faced with danger and assault over the last 30 years.

There is another term for tolerant inaction in the face of danger: appeasement. Whether they know it or not, the Deans, Clarkes, Kerrys and all the other politicians and pundits who will find any excuse for inaction or retreat, are, functionally, appeasers. That is a rational policy -- if the enemy is appeasable. If Hitler had been content with taking Czechoslovakia, Neville Chamberlain would be seen as a great man by history. And Churchill would have been seen as the mere warmonger he was then called. If, today, the Islamist terrorists are appeasable, then Bush is a fool. If they are not, then we should apply to America, Churchill's warning to England over 70 years ago: "England's hour of weakness is Europe's hour of danger." And we should be heartened by George Bush's confident strides in the inevitably bloody march to peace.