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Ways to take back control

By Tom Allen

What can I do to help?" That was the question a woman asked me at a recent discussion in South Portland.

Since the attacks of Sept. 11, Americans have sought ways to help our nation recover and move forward. We expect our government to implement powerful diplomatic and military responses and to improve domestic security. But as individuals and communities, we want to do our part, too.

As the infernos smoldered in lower Manhattan and the Pentagon, Americans rushed to aid victims and their families, by donating millions of dollars, giving blood and volunteering their services. Maine people have done more than their share to help. The compassion, generosity and unity of our people have never been more evident.

My answer to the question of what else we can do is neither all-encompassing nor right for everyone. Each of us can think of other ideas.

Believe in America.

Symbols are important. Showing the American flag everywhere — on cars, doors, mailboxes and storefronts — is a visible sign of our unity. Flying the flag of the military service of a family member is another powerful display of faith in our nation.

But we must move beyond the symbolic. Our economy, already sluggish before the attacks, is reeling from the impact of the events of Sept. 11. While the physical toll from the destruction is massive, fear of future attacks and eroding consumer confidence are more far-reaching. Travel plans have been canceled or delayed, purchases and investments have been postponed or rejected.

America remains the wealthiest, most energetic nation in the world. Confidence is already returning, but individual consumer actions will speed our economic and psychological recovery.



OP ART BY WILLIAM BROWN

ery. Get on that airplane. Visit New York City. Buy stock in a company you believe in. When deciding which charities to support, don't forget the essential programs unrelated to this tragedy.

Americans have coped with massive threats before — from war, disease and privation. When I was growing up, we practiced ducking under our school desks to find shelter from The Bomb. Even then, we knew it was a useless exercise. But we did not let the very real possibility of instant mass destruction cast a shadow over our daily activities.

Reach out to the Muslim community.

In my Portland office, we put up a poster that reads "Stand Together Against Hate." It shows an American flag next to one representing the Muslim faith, to "honor the victims and their families, and to let those of the Muslim faith know they need not fear guilt by association in your home or workplace."

Greet all people of Arabic descent warmly. Learn about Islam from credible sources. I have placed

information and links on my Web site (www.tomallen.house.gov) that are a good starting point.

A backlash against Muslims here and abroad is not only morally reprehensible, it would undermine the very qualities — diversity and tolerance — that are our strength. It would also play into the hands of our enemies. I believe that Osama bin Laden hopes that attacks on Muslims in the United States will incite hostility in the Islamic world. But I am convinced the terrorists underestimated us.

Conserve energy.

Reduce our dependence on imported oil by lowering your own energy use. While oil isn't the only reason the United States has played a major role in the Mideast, it is a significant factor.

Reducing our oil dependence would enhance our ability to base policy decisions on other factors. It also is the right and responsible thing to do for our environment.

There are hundreds of ways to accomplish this. For most of us, home heating and vehicles consume the largest amount of energy. Walk, bike or use public transportation when possible.

Avoid purchasing gas guzzlers. If you haven't already done an energy audit on your home, do it now, and invest some money into winterizing. Some excellent suggestions can be found at links I have put on my Web site.

These are small steps, but when many people take them, they can be powerful. In a matter of weeks, car washes, bake sales and other charity drives raised \$600 million for the families most directly affected by the attacks. As individuals, if we think globally and act locally, we can meet the challenges that lie ahead.

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