

# WHAT WAR ON TERROR?

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**F**or all of its rhetoric to the contrary, when it comes to counterterrorism, the administration of President George W. Bush has closely followed in the footsteps of the Clinton and first Bush administrations. As a result, America is no safer today than it was on September 11, 2001—or, indeed, on the day Mr. Bush’s father was inaugurated in 1989.

Why? The answer is because each of the three administrations has chosen to fight Islamist militancy without understanding the enemy. Instead, each has framed the war in its own terms—imagining that the enemy hates us only because of how we live and think—and therefore have fought an adversary that exists only in their minds. The current president’s is the purest version of this doctrine, but it is a refinement of the policy established and pursued by his father and mimicked by President Clinton.

Recognizing this historical continuity is important. When U.S. political leaders finally come to understand the enemy’s motivation—probably after another devastating terrorist attack, perhaps one involving weapons of mass destruction—it will help measure the length of the head start we have given the Islamists, as well as to assess how far behind the curve we actually are in meeting even minimal national security requirements.

## **Suicide by semantic stubbornness**

The U.S. government had no idea of al-Qaeda’s order-of-battle before 9/11,



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and it does not have a plausible idea of the group's military priorities today. This is because it stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that al-Qaeda is an insurgent organization and not a terrorist group.

Such a classification is obviously problematic. All decent and loyal Americans must oppose terrorists, after all, but the word *insurgent* evokes a certain sense of freedom-fighting legitimacy in the minds of many people. During the American Revolution, for example, General Nathaniel Greene led insurgent forces so effectively in the Carolinas and Georgia that—while losing most battles he fought—he wore out British forces, motivated them to move north, and thereby helped provide occasion in Virginia for General Washington to deliver the *coup de grâce*. Insurgents therefore are often good guys battling tyranny, and so urging the destruction of insurgents—say, the al-Qaeda insurgents seeking to destroy the tyrannical Saudi police state—may not produce the domestic political unity guaranteed by a cry to annihilate terrorists.

This is not simply semantic quibbling. Rather, it goes to the heart of the terrorists' tactics and methodology. In the first place, insurgents always count on fighting an enemy vastly more powerful than themselves, and as a result devote much time and resources to preparing for steady losses in their organization's leadership cadre. This is the case with al-Qaeda; to date, the group has never sought to hide the apprehension or death of one of its major leaders. Indeed, each senior loss is generally announced in a few days along with the naming of a successor and some mention of the successor's résumé. Because of this planning, what Washington possesses today is a body count

of the approximate number of al-Qaeda and other Islamist leaders U.S. forces have killed or captured. It does not, however, have a metric for gauging how degraded the organization's command-and-control actually is.

## Why they fight

Compounding the dangers that flow from fighting an enemy we have not accurately named and gauged, the Bush administration—and its two immediate predecessors—has invited defeat by refusing to understand the Islamists' motivation. For this abject failure, one that is shared and amplified by most of America's generals, academics and pundits, there can be no plausible excuse. Not since Ho Chi Minh and General Giap has America faced a foe that has been as precise as Osama bin Laden in publicly describing why he and his followers fight, what they aim to achieve, and the means they are willing to use to do so. This list of motivations has been clear and consistent since bin Laden declared war on the United States more than a decade ago, in September 1996.

- The U.S. military and civilian presence on the Arabian Peninsula
- Unqualified U.S. support for Israel
- The U.S. ability to keep energy prices below market levels
- U.S. support for anti-Muslim powers: Russia, China, India, etc.
- U.S. military presence in Muslim countries
- U.S. support and protection for tyrannies across the Islamic world

No American, of course, must accept these points as legitimate grievances against the United States. Nor should anyone feel obliged to empathize with, or be sympathetic to, those that express them. But only a fool would ignore the importance these grievances hold for those who assert them—and who are eager to lay down their lives to rectify them.

For more than a decade, however, official Washington has chosen to do just that. Faced with an enemy who has helpfully detailed the reasons for which he is fighting, Washington's sages have chosen to fight a war that exists only in their own imagination: a war to save American society and, while they are at it, Western civilization. The Islamists hate us, this nearly twenty-year-old libretto goes, because of our freedoms, liberties, gender equality, elections, democracy, movies, and taste for Budweiser.

Now, some Islamic radicals certainly do hate America for these reasons. When he was alive, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini railed against the degeneracy and debauchery of American society, trying to ignite a holy war against these cultural and political characteristics. Alas for the grouchy old mullah, very few Muslims gravitated to the *jihad* he wanted to lead. Even Hezbollah's spectacular successes in the 1980s against U.S. and French targets in Beirut—while justified and advertised using the Ayatollah's rhetoric—were grounded in a nationalist motivation: getting the foreigners off our turf. The most obvious and important lesson that U.S. policymakers and strategists should have learned from Khomeini's reign was that there was almost no support among Muslims for a *jihad* against the United States based on animosities toward its culture, politics, and social mores.

But U.S. leaders failed to take this lesson to heart, while bin Laden, his lieutenants, and their allies learned it by rote. In the corpus of his writings and speeches, which now span many hundreds of pages, bin Laden tips his turban to Khomeini in *pro forma* condemnations of U.S. society, but keeps a detailed, laser-like focus on the six grievances noted above. Bin Laden and his lieutenants clearly learned from Khomeini's failure, and have focused on issues that the Muslim masses perceive to be proof positive of premeditated and vicious U.S.-led attacks meant to destroy Islam and its followers. And, as always, perception is reality. Bin Laden is a multi-talented political leader and nowhere is his skill more brilliantly on display than in shunning the Ayatollah's failure and building an increasingly successful and widespread "defensive" *jihad* that is grounded in attacking the impact of long-standing U.S. foreign policies in the Muslim world. Genius is often accompanied by great good luck, however, and bin Laden could not have been any luckier than to have walked onto the world scene in 1996 alongside the increasing accessibility of the Internet and twenty-four-hour Arabic satellite television—the very tools necessary to spread his radical message and provide "proof" of his claims of malignant U.S. intent.

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The results have been spectacular. For more than a decade, polling from a variety of Muslim countries

done by reliable Western firms, such as Gallup, Zogby, BBC, and Pew, has invariably shown that bin Laden's focus on U.S. foreign policy is a *jihād* spreader and perhaps a war winner. In Muslim countries, pollsters consistently find majorities, and at times large ones, that admire the striving of Americans for equity for all, as well as the ability of Americans to speak their mind, find work, and care for and educate their children—in other words, there is almost no market for a Khomeini-like, culture-based, anti-U.S. *jihād* in the Muslim world. These same surveys, however, continually find majorities of up to ninety percent believing that the same U.S. foreign policies cited by bin Laden and other Islamists equate to a war on Islam and Muslims. It is perhaps perverse poetic justice that a governing elite so focused on polls may end up losing a war because it discounts a decade or more of pertinent data about overseas opinion.

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### **No diversity recognized here**

Inattention to foreign attitudes is not the U.S. government's only failing, however. The Bush administra-

tion, like the Clinton and George H. W. Bush White Houses before it, has been unmistakable in its "little brown brother" approach to the Muslim masses. Even a cursory review of contemporary Islamic civilization will show that it as diverse and fragmented as any other of the world's great civilizations, perhaps more so. Muslims are divided by millennia-old sectarian schisms, a wide array of different languages, multiple ethnicities, geographical dispersion, and a deeply engrained insularity and localism that the Internet, cell phones, and twenty-four-hour satellite television are only slowly breaking down.

Yet American rhetoric reflects none of these realities. Officials from President Bush on down consistently argue that "bin Laden and al-Qaeda have hijacked the Islamic religion" (a claim that has been taken up and echoed by most European leaders as well). In this simplistic view of things, far more than a billion Muslims are unable to speak for themselves about their faith, and have been transformed into a mass of homogeneous, unthinking automatons. This is, quite simply, false; many Islamist leaders have opposed bin Laden's methods and timing, but very few—even among the crowded stables of clerics owned, operated, and scripted by Mubarak and the al-Sauds—have disagreed with al-Qaeda's portrayal of U.S. foreign policy as a mortal threat to Islam. On the issue of Washington's foreign policy, bin Laden speaks for the Muslim world, and our governing elite's use of the hijacking explanation makes sense only as a political device that allows it to avoid admitting that an overwhelming majority of a very diverse Muslim world is united in hatred for the impact of U.S. foreign policies.

Equally absurd is the idea that a new, monolithic, and militaristic caliphate run by bloodthirsty Islamofascists is just around the corner. Is such a grouping a goal of bin Laden and other Islamist leaders? Of course it is. They talk of it regularly, but only in a lip-service sort of way. The establishment of a worldwide caliphate is the divinely ordained culmination of Islam's historical progress: Islam's end-state on earth, a world entirely Islamic and at peace. As revelation, the creation of a caliphate is the goal of all Muslim believers, just as permanent peace and the brotherhood of men is the Jesus-delineated goal of Christianity. But neither has a chance of being realized in any remotely foreseeable future. Quite simply, the diversity and fragmentation of contemporary Islamic civilization makes the creation of an effective, near-term, all-inclusive, Nazi-like caliphate a patent impossibility; a point hammered home by the sectarian strife between Sunnis and Shi'as now visible in Iraq. But even if it bears no resemblance to reality, the bogeyman of a looming caliphate is useful political kindling—which is why politicians from both political parties are bound to continue using it for political gain.

### **Ripe for catastrophe at home**

Since the fall of the USSR in 1991 and the near-simultaneous rise of anti-U.S. transnational entities—terrorists, narcotics traffickers, WMD proliferators, organized crime, etc.—three great tasks have had to be accomplished by the U.S. federal government:

1. Controlling the northern and southern borders of the United States;

2. Securing the former Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal; and
3. Using the U.S. military in a manner that, by the devastation it delivered, made it credible and feared by both nation-state and transnational foes.

The complete deterrence of most transnational threats is not possible; this is particularly true of the Islamists. But a sense of certainty among America's enemies that Washington will use military force savagely to protect U.S. citizens and interests is a feeling that must be assiduously cultivated in the post-Cold War world. Each of the three most recent administrations has failed in these areas, but the current one has failed most spectacularly.

Border control is a national security issue of the first order, but political leaders in both parties have turned it into a human-rights/humanitarian issue in their cynical and unrelenting pursuit of votes. Moreover, the tens of billions of dollars that the federal government has spent since 9/11 to fill official border-crossing points with cutting-edge electronic detection gear will be effective only if the Islamist fighters are stupid enough to enter the United States via official checkpoints. Unfortunately, al-Qaeda and its allies have shown themselves to be anything but stupid. Carrying on the tradition of his father and Mr. Clinton, President Bush has allowed the borders to remain open, thereby ensuring that (a) all levels of U.S. law enforcement will be overwhelmed by a pool of undocumented aliens that grows every hour, and (b) there is no serious impediment to our Islamist foes' inserting operatives into the United States.

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And when those operatives come across the border, there is every chance they will be carrying a nuclear device from the arsenal of the former Soviet Union. Although it defies common sense, the program introduced and untiringly championed by Senator Richard Lugar to facilitate U.S.-Russian efforts to secure the twenty-two thousand devices in the Soviet nuclear arsenal remains less than half complete in early 2007—sixteen years after the Evil Empire's dissolution. Indeed, the current administration and that of Mr. Clinton cut funding and manpower for the program. Juxtapose this criminal negligence with the fact that Washington has held definitive intelligence since late 1996 that bin Laden, in 1992, ordered his lieutenants to seek both the components for a nuclear bomb and to buy or steal an off-the-shelf nuclear device. As always, al-Qaeda began this two-track acquisition effort with prudence and intelligence, forming a special unit of hard scientists, technicians, smugglers, and engineers to increase the likelihood of success and try to limit the potential for being scammed. In essence, the past three administrations knowingly have presented al-Qaeda with a sixteen-year window for acquiring a nuclear device. Blessed with abundant funding, the essential expertise, negligence in Washington, easily crossed U.S. borders, and a *fatwa* sanctioning the use of nuclear weapons in the

United States, so long as no more than ten million Americans are killed, bin Laden has more than enough motive, means and opportunity to eventually detonate a nuclear device in one or more U.S. cities.

As for the credibility of the U.S. military, President Bush has completed the process of making it a laughingstock that was begun by his father and Mr. Clinton. Clearly, the track toward destroying U.S. military credibility was well-marked in the 1990s. The first Mr. Bush refused to finish off Saddam in the 1991 Gulf War, promised but did not deliver military aid to the post-war Kurd and Shi'a rebellions against Saddam he himself had encouraged, sent U.S. forces to Somalia without tanks, and believed the mighty victory over Panama's Noriega would impress America's foes. Mr. Clinton ran from Somalia, responded to Saddam's attempt to kill the first president Bush through feeble strikes on Iraq's intelligence headquarters, and resolutely refused to follow through on multiple chances to capture or kill Osama bin Laden.

One would think that these negative military achievements are a hard mark to surpass, but the Bush administration has succeeded in doing so. Thanks to a catchy slogan—democracy!—but no achievable war aims, too few troops, and rules of engagement favoring the enemy and making U.S. soldiers and Marines more targets than killers, the Bush team is about to lose wars to Islamist insurgencies in both Afghanistan and Iraq. The credibility of U.S. military power will be extraordinarily diminished by these losses in the minds of both our Islamist enemies and those nation-states that harbor ill-will for America.

More importantly, the Islamists' victory in Iraq and their restoration of Taliban rule in Afghanistan will be

of historic importance, in fact a historical turning point. The contemporary Sunni *jihad* movement was born during the Afghans' decade-long war against the Red Army, and it became a worldwide movement thanks to the inspiration derived from and organizational networks built during that successful war. For the first time in several centuries, poorly-armed Muslims had defeated a modern Western military power in battle, and that victory has become a heroic legend which reverberates across the Islamic world to this day. In the aftermath of Moscow's defeat, Osama bin Laden and other Arab Islamist leaders argued that with one superpower scalp on their belts, the *mujahedin* should plan and prepare to defeat the United States, the second superpower. Whereas the Soviets were tough and ruthless fighters, the Islamists said, the Americans are soft, afraid to apply the full measure of their military power, and lack the will to fight a long, bloody battle against holy warriors. And through its actions, the Bush administration is about to make bin Laden and the Islamists appear to be prophetic visionaries.

When America's coming defeats are complete, the *mujahedin* will not only have vanquished the second superpower, but will have done so not just in Afghanistan—on the periphery of the Arab world—but in Iraq, the very heartland of Arab Islam. The victory in Iraq, moreover, will have been scored by Arabs, thereby validating bin Laden's claim that this generation of Arab *mujahedin* is, through a defensive jihad, capable of ridding the Muslim world of the U.S. presence and then moving on to its main goal of destroying Israel and the multiple U.S.-protected tyrannies in the region under which Muslims live. While the Afghan victory over

the Red Army will always be revered as Islam's first modern military triumph, the Arab success of the *mujahedin* in Iraq—in terms of motivating power and historical salience—will be modern Islam's most important.

### **Worse to come**

At day's end, then, the counterterrorism record of the Bush administration is resoundingly negative: two wars (nearly) lost, thousands of lives sacrificed, immense amounts of money spent, U.S. military credibility at low ebb, domestic political unity shattered, and an Islamist enemy more powerful and motivated today than on the day in 2001 that Mr. Bush swore his first oath of office. But the Bush administration's failings should be understood for what they are—part of a continuum of negative accomplishments stretching back more than a decade.

Unable to adjust to a world of lethal transnational threats and unwilling to square with Americans the reasons behind why Islamists are at war with us, the contemporary bipartisan governing generation has left the United States in a dangerous position. We are a country weary of war and its costs, and unprepared to accept that our war against Islamist militancy has barely commenced. At the same time, al-Qaeda, its allies, and an overwhelming number of the world's Muslims are about to be thrilled and powerfully motivated by the defeat of the second superpower on the Iraqi battlefield. Flush with victory, our enemies will then confront Americans with renewed vigor, fully supported by their only two indispensable allies—the Islamic faith and the U.S. foreign policy status quo.

