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# Nasty, Brutish and Long: America's War on Terrorism

*“A critical question as the United States enters this new ‘cold war’ is whether it has learned the lessons of the last—or whether it is destined to repeat its mistakes.”*

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**T**he post-Cold War era ended abruptly on the morning of September 11, 2001. From the moment terrorists turned jetliners into weapons of mass destruction, the United States was inescapably engaged in a new “war” against global terrorism. The Bush administration now intends to make that war the central organizing principle of America’s foreign and defense policies.

This war is not like the one against Iraq a decade ago, when the United States and its allies had a clear territorial objective that could be swiftly achieved. It is also not like the war over Kosovo in 1999, in which the Serbs relented after 78 days of bombing Yugoslavia and NATO suffered no combat deaths. And while the attacks on New York and Washington immediately brought to mind memories of Pearl Harbor, the United States campaign against terrorism will not be like America’s effort to force Japan’s unconditional surrender.

The campaign against terrorism is instead much more like the cold war of the past century. Like the fight against Soviet communism, today’s campaign against terrorism is likely to be nasty, brutish, and long. Because of the diverse nature of the threat, the United States has no clear vision of when or how the war will end. Complete success in the military operations in Afghanistan will not necessarily mean victory. Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network of terrorists extends well beyond Afghanistan. It could easily reconstitute itself even if the United States captures or kills bin Laden and his lieutenants. Future attacks might even involve the use of sophisticated germ warfare or radiological weapons, if not nuclear weapons.

As at the start of the cold war, the United States response has begun with the arduous task of assembling a global coalition. President Harry Truman’s rousing call in 1947 “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures” set the course of United States history for the next four decades. President Bush’s invitation to every nation to join the United States in “civilization’s fight” was phrased as expansively—and intended to be as enduring. In the new war against terrorism the United States also faces ideologically motivated foes who do not shrink from death. America’s fight will end only when, as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said, Americans can once again get on with their daily lives without fear or thought of a possible terrorist attack. That is a tall order.

A critical question as the United States enters this new “cold war” is whether it has learned the lessons of the last—or whether it is destined to repeat its mistakes. Will Washington again overemphasize military force to achieve its goals and give short shrift to the non-military instruments of statecraft? Will it again focus so narrowly on battle that it forgets other important foreign-policy goals? Will it cut deals today to gain support from other nations that will return to haunt it down the road—in much the same way that supporting the shah led to a deeply hostile Iran and arming Afghan rebels to fight the Soviet Union contributed to the terrorist threat the United States faces today? Will it repudiate its own values at home as it tries to fend off an enemy abroad?

It is crucial that the United States fight its new war against terrorism with the dedication and vigor that President Bush has promised. It is also crucial that it fight that war wisely. Washington must recognize the complexities of its new fight—and the pitfalls that lie before it.

## THE FIRST PHASE

The Bush administration's campaign against terrorism will occur in stages and on multiple fronts. Much of the fight will be conducted through diplomatic pressure; economic, financial, and political sanctions; and intelligence and law enforcement cooperation. But the first phase—capturing or killing bin Laden, destroying his Al Qaeda network in Afghanistan, and deposing the Taliban regime—will be predominantly military.

The administration launched the first phase of its military campaign on October 7, when United States and British forces struck from the air targets in Afghanistan. Administration officials understandably declined to spell out their military strategy in any detail, but early on it appeared to have three components: a Kosovo-style strategic bombing of military targets to weaken the Taliban's hold on power, Somalia-like commando raids to wipe out the terrorists holed up in the unforgiving countryside, and Nicaragua-like support for the Taliban's adversaries (especially the Northern Alliance).

The first weeks of the campaign showed just how difficult things could be. Although United States and British forces quickly destroyed obvious Taliban and Al Qaeda targets, they also hit several civilian sites. These accidents raised tensions within the international coalition the White House had painstakingly assembled in support of the operation, and especially with neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, that fear pro-Taliban sentiments within their own societies. Both bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar escaped capture, perhaps by fleeing to remote caves and valleys. But they may also have taken refuge somewhere in the city of Khandahar, calculating that they would be safe from attack because of the American desire to avoid hitting civilians.

At the same time, United States and British forces initially refrained from attacking front-line Taliban troops around Kabul for fear that doing so would enable Northern Alliance forces to capture Afghanistan's capital before Washington could assemble a new pan-Afghan government. But given the fractious nature of Afghani politics, both within and across ethnic groups, it was far from clear that the political campaign could ever catch up with the military one. When attacks on front-line Taliban forces finally began in the third week of the campaign, they did not produce immediate gains by Northern Alliance forces.

With luck, the military campaign against Afghanistan will end in a matter of weeks or months—with bin Laden and his network inside the country eliminated and the Taliban regime toppled from power. But achieving this set of objectives will require a major and prolonged undertaking with significant costs. And when it succeeds, the campaign against terrorism that Bush promised will only have begun. Just as the Korean War blunted communist expansion but did not end it, the administration will

need to turn to a long, grinding, difficult and expensive campaign to disrupt, deter, and defeat terrorist operations elsewhere in the world. And while military force will continue to play some role in this effort, it will be a distinctly secondary role.

## MAINTAINING THE INTERNATIONAL COALITION

Ultimately, for the Bush administration to succeed in its campaign against terrorism it must push ahead on three other fronts. First, it must maintain the anti-terrorism coalition it has assembled in support of military operations in Afghanistan. The coalition is critical because the United States cannot defeat terrorism on its own: it needs other countries to share information about terrorist activities; impose tighter controls over illicit money, weapons and technology flows; isolate and pressure states that sponsor and support terrorists; and strike militarily if targets for action present themselves.

Unfortunately for the Bush administration, the anti-terrorism coalition is not robust. In the Persian Gulf war, more than two dozen countries, including several Arab nations, contributed troops to the fighting. In contrast, American and British forces carried out the initial military operations in Afghanistan alone. Four other countries—Australia, Canada, France, and Germany—have offered to contribute forces at some future point. But significantly, no troops from the Arab or Islamic world participated in the fighting. Only Oman and Pakistan allowed their territory to be used as staging areas for thrusts into Afghan territory. Saudi Arabia, America's main ally in the gulf and host to a large United States Air Force strike force, refused to allow the United States to use its territory as a base for attack (although the air war is coordinated from the United States air control facility at the Prince Sultan airbase located in the middle of the Arabian desert).

The coalition's lack of robustness reflects concerns among the coalition partners over what the campaign against terrorism means for them. Middle Eastern and Islamic governments are crucial to the coalition's success, if only because so many terror groups originate on their soil. These governments fear, however, that joining with Washington will inflame anti-American sentiment in their own societies. Nor are Islamic countries the only ones unsure of how far to follow Washington. Although NATO invoked the organization's Article V provision on mutual defense for the first time 24 hours after the September 11 attacks—ironically, turning an alliance designed to ensure a United States defense of Europe into one in which Europe would help defend the United States—some European countries worry that the United States will go too far in its fight against terrorism.

The issue most likely to fracture the coalition is Iraq. Before September 11, critics speculated that the Bush administration was spoiling for an opportunity to clear up unfinished business from the elder Bush's presidency and would seek to remove Saddam Hussein from power. In the days immediately following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, key administration officials argued for a broad military re-

sponse that would include Saddam's removal as one of its objectives. President Bush quickly ruled out that option. But in doing so, he embraced an "Afghanistan-first" approach—the "Afghanistan-only" policy that many in Europe and elsewhere support.

Making Iraq the subject of military attack in a second phase of the campaign against terrorism poses problems for the Bush administration. The United States would almost certainly have to carry out the attack on its own and perhaps even without access to bases in the Persian Gulf area, making it far more difficult to win. Middle Eastern countries argue that attacking Iraq will inflame Arab public opinion and make bin Laden's case that the United States is waging war against Islam. Russia, which has provided Washington with considerable intelligence cooperation since the crisis began, has good relations with Baghdad. Most European governments have long opposed Washington's Iraqi policy. To make matters worse for the administration, these same constraints hold with respect to using military force against Iran or Syria, two countries that have actively sponsored and harbored terrorist groups like Lebanon-based Hezbollah.

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Iraq, Iran, and Syria are not the only issues that could fracture the antiterrorism coalition. Should military operations in Afghanistan drag on, or result in large numbers of civilian deaths, the Bush administration could find itself under increasing pressure abroad to end the mission prematurely.

The challenge facing the Bush administration in the near term is to strike the proper balance between its short-term military objectives in Afghanistan and elsewhere and its longer term objective to sustain the international cooperation necessary to conduct a successful fight against global terrorism. In doing so, it will attempt to make the mission define the coalition, rather than letting the coalition define the mission. But it may then find itself confronting what every administration fears: what it wants to do, and perhaps should do, does not mesh with what it can do on its own. There may be times in the campaign against terrorism—as during the cold war itself—when going it alone is both necessary and desirable, but this should be the exception rather than the rule. Ultimately, the fight against global terrorism is one that the United States cannot win on its own.

## Securing the Homeland

The second step Washington must take is to improve homeland security. Much of the focus will understandably be on spending more money on the problem, but the immediate challenge will be to ensure that money is spent wisely. And here the

core challenge is to organize the government so that it is more effective in providing homeland security. As Dwight D. Eisenhower aptly noted, "although organization cannot make a genius out of an incompetent. . .disorganization can scarcely fail to result in inefficiency and can easily lead to disaster."

President Bush moved swiftly to address the organizational issue. In a September 20 address to Congress, he announced that he would appoint Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge head of a new Office of Homeland Security in the White House. The executive order detailing Ridge's duties also created a Homeland Security Council (HSC), modeled after the National Security Council. The HSC's members will consist of the president, vice president, and key cabinet members and agency heads who will advise and assist the president on all aspects of homeland security.

Critics countered that a White House coordinator, even one who was a friend of the president, could not begin to meet the challenge facing the country. They argued that Ridge would have clout only if he were given control of agency budgets or was put in charge of a newly created, cabinet-level department for homeland security that consolidated existing government operations. Proposals along these lines work better in theory than in practice, however. Contrary to the critics, control of budgets or command of an agency is not necessary, or even sufficient, to exercise power in the federal government. National security advisers possess neither, yet no one doubts their authority.

Nor is centralization necessarily the proper prescription. Homeland security to a considerable extent requires decentralization—where the decisions made by people on the "front lines" matter as much if not more than what is decided in Washington. Customs agents need to know what to look for at the border, Coast Guard commanders need to know which ships to interdict, and Immigration and Naturalization Service officers need to know who is to be barred entry. Intelligence officers need to know which pieces of information culled from an overload of data fit together to enable pre-emptive actions. Hospital emergency-room doctors need to know what symptoms indicate possible exposure to a biological attack. Trying to cram these various agencies, and their diverse missions, into a single organization could make the government less effective in battling terrorism, not more.

Another problem with centralization proposals is the sheer number of federal agencies with a stake in counterterrorism—a number that ranges from 46 to 151, depending on who counting. Short of making the entire federal government a counterterrorism agency, that means that any consolidation must be selective. Some agencies and functions critical to the counterterrorism task cannot, by their very nature, be consolidated. The Federal Bureau of Investigation must remain in the Justice Department (where, incidentally, it often resists the attorney general's direction). Further complicating matters is that formal consolidation does not guarantee effective integration. The Department of Energy is the classic cautionary lesson: it was created in 1977 to bring a variety of units under one umbrella, but a quarter of a century later its integration remains far from complete and its effectiveness often questioned. Finally, giving

Ridge command of his own agency would likely destroy his ability to be an “honest broker” who could coordinate conflicting agency demands. Instead, he would, in the eyes of other agencies, simply become another bureaucratic competitor for money and influence.

Thus, the Bush approach of having Ridge coordinate domestic agencies much as the national security adviser coordinates foreign policy agencies makes more sense. His job certainly is more difficult in one key respect: the national security adviser must worry about getting coordinated information to the president in a timely fashion, whereas Ridge must concern himself mainly with how the agencies operate in the field. One factor working in his favor is that September 11 made counterterrorism a priority across all agencies. They not only know that it is a critical mission but also that it is the key to bigger budgets and more authority. The challenge facing Ridge is to forge the channels of formal and informal agency cooperation where they do not exist today—both among domestic agencies and between them and the national security apparatus. Within this coordination framework some agency consolidation may make sense (for example, combining agencies with closely related functions such as the Customs Service, Border Patrol and Coast Guard).

Even if Washington gets organizational matters right, it will not be enough. It must also take major steps to reduce the country’s vulnerability to attack. One obvious need is better control over America’s borders. Several of the September 11 hijackers were in the United States on expired student visas. Others entered even though they were suspected of ties to Al Qaeda. But to speak of better border enforcement is to acknowledge the difficulty of the task. Millions of people enter the United States each year, legally and illegally, and only a few have any interest in committing terrorist attacks. The United States—Canada border is 4,000 miles long and in most places is uncontrolled—the Border Patrol had only one officer for every 12 miles of border before September 11. America’s 2,000-mile-long border with Mexico is also notorious for its porosity.

Another obvious need is to make the country’s transportation networks more secure. Congress and the White House took initial steps in this direction immediately after September 11 by tightening aviation security. Much more remains to be done to make rail and vehicular traffic less vulnerable. Reports that Al Qaeda operatives had obtained licenses to drive trucks carrying hazardous materials points only to the beginning of the havoc that terrorists could wreak using ordinary ground transport. And the United States needs to improve the transportation system’s equivalent in cyberspace. The Bush administration took an initial organizational step in this direction by appointing a special adviser to the president for cybersecurity, but more must be done to persuade private actors to make their computer networks more secure. That raises the difficult question of who should pay for this “security tax” and whether protection will be best generated by government mandates or incentives.

Washington also needs to improve the ability of federal, state, and local governments to respond once a terrorist attack occurs—especially chemical, biological, and radiological attacks. The anthrax incidents that followed the September 11 at-

tacks broke the taboo against using such weapons and possibly foreshadowed much more devastating future attacks. Congress and the Bush administration have already responded to this need to some extent, especially by deciding to stockpile additional vaccines and antibiotics for biological attacks using communicable diseases such as smallpox. But perhaps just as important, the initial anthrax attacks have made clear the importance of creating a more effective organizational structure for responding. The government’s initial response to the release of anthrax in Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle’s office was marked by inconsistent and conflicting statements about the extent of the danger. And federal credibility suffered when two postal workers died of pulmonary anthrax after government officials failed, regrettably though perhaps understandably, to anticipate that Daschle’s anthrax-laden letter might have contaminated mailrooms along the way.

## Addressing Anti-Americanism Abroad

The campaign against terrorism must also address the sources of the intense anti-Americanism that now roils the Arab and Islamic world and forms the backdrop for Al Qaeda attacks. Hatred of the United States is not peculiar to the Middle East, nor does it translate directly into a desire to launch terrorist attacks. The relationship between the two is more complicated and indirect, akin in many ways to that between oxygen and fire. Oxygen does not cause fires—the spark must come from somewhere else—but fire requires oxygen to rage. In the same fashion, terrorists need anti-American sentiment. It provides them with recruits, and more important, it provides them with people willing to give aid and comfort.

But how can the United States cut off oxygen to the fires of anti-Americanism, especially when the justifiable military operation in Afghanistan and the support it has received from ruling elites in the Arab and Islamic world is likely to feed them? One strategy is to redouble United States efforts to limit and resolve conflicts around the world, especially the one between Israel and the Palestinians. Again, these conflicts did not cause the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. They do, however, contribute to the anger that terrorists manipulate to their own, despicable ends.

The payoff from this strategy is questionable; it is easy to call for conflict resolution and hard to deliver it. A Middle East peace deal has been the holy grail of the last six presidential administrations. The escalating violence of the past twelve months has only made it more difficult to persuade Israelis and Palestinians to speak of concession and compromise. The conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir—an issue of great concern to Pakistani militants—has dragged on for more than half a century. New Delhi and Islamabad are not about to toss aside their longstanding differences simply because Washington thinks they should. Nor will being seen as actively pursuing peace necessarily do much to deflect Arab and Islamic anger. Former President Bill Clinton’s feverish and ultimately unsuccessfully effort in 2000 to broker a Middle East peace deal passed largely unnoticed in the Arab and Islamic world. The

frequent complaints about United States policy seldom mention that Washington liberated Kuwait, saved hundreds of thousands of starving Somalis in the early 1990s, fought not one but two wars to protect Muslims in the Balkans, and provided more humanitarian aid than any other country to the people of Afghanistan.

Washington will also need to intensify its support for democracy and economic development—especially in areas like Central Asia and the Arab world, where repression and poverty provide breeding grounds for anti-American sentiments. Prosperous democratic countries are America’s best allies against terrorism. But again, this strategy is easier to urge than to carry out. One problem is that while Washington generally knows how to promote economic development, its success in promoting political development is spotty—witness the record in Vietnam, Somalia, and Haiti. The other problem is whether the United States can gracefully extract itself from its current political commitments in the Arab and Islamic world. Calls are likely to mount in the coming months for the United States to distance itself from Cairo and Riyadh unless they enact democratic reforms. Yet that policy could well endanger other important United States foreign policy objectives—not the least securing Egyptian and Saudi cooperation in the fight against terrorism. And it may produce regime change, though not necessarily one that comports with American values. To judge by the slogans of dissidents in Saudi Arabia, greater mass political participation will not deliver a Westminster-style democracy but rather an Iranian-style theocracy steeped in anti-Americanism.

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The focus on big-picture policies like conflict resolution and political development should not obscure small-picture policies that take aim at anti-Americanism. A key here is a concerted public diplomacy campaign, much like the one the United States waged vigorously in the early years of the cold war. Then United States used the media and exchange programs to refute the lies of communist rulers. Today, as President Bush noted in his October 11 press conference, it needs to make a better case for America and to argue that bin Laden represents a perversion of Islam and threatens the stability of all civilizations.

This public diplomacy should use the public relations tools of the cold war, including radio broadcasts, magazines, and cultural centers. But the strategy should also adapt to the times. Bin Laden shrewdly used the Arab-language satellite television channel Al Jazeera to broadcast his hatred to Arabs around the world. Before September 11, however, American officials seldom sought to appear on Al Jazeera and other media outlets

in the Arab world to present their case. And the United States needs to press its Middle Eastern allies to do their share in discrediting anti-Americanism. In recent years countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia have bought social peace for themselves by ignoring and even encouraging growing hatred toward the United States. Criticizing President Hosni Mubarak on the streets of Cairo will get you arrested; criticizing America will get you applause. Washington must press these governments to confront dangerous distortions of the truth rather than to stoke anti-Americanism.

## Hard Lessons

Because the fight against terrorism is a new cold war, some key lessons of the old one are worth remembering. Although the United States ultimately triumphed in that conflict, it made critical mistakes along the way that it must now seek to avoid.

Americans must begin by recognizing that military force alone is not enough; pretending that it is takes us down a dangerous road. The militarization of containment—which elevated military responses over all other tools of policy and culminated in the disastrous United States engagement in Vietnam—undermined the American public’s trust in its government. It also weakened the very alliances on which the United States depended to win its confrontation with the Soviet Union.

In calling on the nation to conduct a “war” against terrorism, the Bush administration has helped create the impression that America’s victory will be a military one. Again, there is a role for military force in today’s fight—to destroy the terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan, compel an end to continued state-sponsorship of terrorism, and pre-empt any planned terrorist attacks. But the force of arms alone cannot defeat terrorism. The United States also needs better law enforcement, enhanced intelligence, focused diplomacy, and targeted sanctions to succeed.

Second, the United States must avoid creating new threats even as it seeks to defeat the current ones. The most immediate need is to end the cycle of violence in Afghanistan. In the 1980s, the United States armed the mujahideen to help them to defeat the Soviet invaders. When Moscow finally withdrew its troops in 1989, Washington walked away from the scene. We are now living with the consequences.

Washington must not repeat this mistake. The threat of further destabilization in Afghanistan is real. Nearly constant war for more than two decades—first against the Soviet Union and then among Afghans themselves—has created more than 1.5 million refugees and left many hundreds of thousands of others lacking sufficient food or adequate shelter. United States military operations will make matters worse, notwithstanding the efforts to drop relief supplies to those in need. Should Afghanistan’s unrest spread, the consequences for neighboring Pakistan—an internally divided and failing state in possession of nuclear weapons—could be severe. The last thing the United States wants or needs is for Islamic fundamentalist sympathizers of bin Laden to take over Pakistan.

United States military operations need to be followed by a concerted effort to stabilize Afghanistan if the United States hopes to discourage its future use as a terrorist haven. Fortunately, the Bush administration, despite a deep-seated hostility to nation-building, has signaled that it understands it must be engaged in Afghanistan. Even if the White House insists that it is not engaged in “nation building” but rather the “stabilization of a future government,” these efforts are necessary to increase the prospects for regional stability. The Bush administration wants the United Nations to play a major role in reconstructing Afghanistan, thereby spreading responsibility and perhaps making success more likely, but extensive American involvement is inescapable.

But avoiding policies that inadvertently create new threats also means not carelessly sacrificing other important foreign policy interests and values to serve the cause of defeating global terrorism. During the cold war, Washington made battling the spread of communism an all-consuming fight. Other priorities and interests were jettisoned when they conflicted with the objective of holding Soviet expansion at bay. As a result, the United States embraced unsavory characters (from Spain’s Franco to Zaire’s Mobutu and Chile’s Pinochet), engaged in highly questionable conduct (from assassinations to secret coups), wasted billions of dollars on dead-end interventions and superfluous weapon systems, and ignored a long list of other foreign policy challenges (from human rights to weapons proliferation to the environment).

The same risks exist today. To solicit support for its anti-terror coalition, the Bush administration has lifted sanctions imposed on Pakistan for testing nuclear weapons, begun to side rhetorically

with Russia in its brutal fight in Chechnya, and sought assistance from key state sponsors of terrorism such as Iran and Sudan. These and other steps may be needed to address a short-term emergency, but they may come at a hefty price in the long term.

Third, the United States must not needlessly sacrifice its civil liberties as it combats the terrorist threat. The willingness with which Washington and the country as a whole trampled on cherished civil liberties during the McCarthy years of the early cold war is too well known to merit repeating. Perhaps most remarkable about how Americans reacted in the first month after the September 11 attacks was how quickly they acknowledged the importance of not forfeiting America’s basic principles as the country met its new challenge. Politicians, the media, and the public emphasized the importance of tolerance. Civil libertarians challenged the merits of some of the administration’s proposed changes to law enforcement authority. The question that remains is whether this commitment to fundamental principles of liberty will withstand future terrorist attacks.

In the end, America’s campaign to restore the margin of security it enjoyed before September 11 will be neither easy nor quick. The defeat of terrorism will not be achieved or celebrated in one grand moment. There will be no V-E or V-J day, no ticker-tape parade along Fifth Avenue. America’s victory will be piecemeal. Every day the United States goes without a terrorist attack will be a triumph. But even that limited achievement requires waging the fight against terrorism with a clear memory that the last war demanded much more than just battlefield bravery. Otherwise, any victory will be tarnished by the new problems the United States will reap.