

July 29, 2007

Our War on Terror

By SAMANTHA POWER

The day after the 9/11 attacks, President [George W. Bush](#) declared the strikes by [Al Qaeda](#) “more than acts of terror. They were acts of war.” Bush’s “war on terror” was “not a figure of speech,” he said. Rather, it was a defining framework. The war, Bush announced, would begin with Al Qaeda, but would “not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.” The global war on terror, he said, was the “inescapable calling of our generation.”

The phrase and the agenda that grew out of it caught on, and from 9/11 onward, the administration used its pulpit to propagate several new premises. First, with the threat of Islamic radical terrorism, new rules, new tools and new mind-sets had to be devised to meet the novelty of the menace. As Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) put it, “old doctrines of security do not apply.” The criminal justice approach of trying terrorists would have to be scrapped, supplanted by a military approach. Second, we were told, the states that sponsored terrorism or offered lodging to terrorists had to be treated the same way as those nonstate actors who carried out the threats. Even more dramatically, America’s friends had to prove their loyalty by taking concrete steps in our global war. As Bush put it, the “duties” of peace-loving people “involve more than sympathy or words. No nation can be neutral.” By requiring governments to step up, we would be able to root out the unreliable and distribute sanctions and favors accordingly.

Third, since international treaties and institutions often constrained Washington’s ability to combat terrorism on its own terms, they should be dipped into and exploited selectively. While it was true that other countries valued those laws and institutions, the gravity of the terrorist threat would ultimately unite nations with shared interests. The urgency of the common cause would override choosiness about the means. Our allies would need us more than we would need them, so we could count on them to rally to our side in a crunch.

And fourth, in Bush’s view, wartime demanded a strong commander in chief, and he would be far more effective prosecuting the war if he could free himself of the meddlesome legislative, judicial and even interagency checks fashionable in peacetime. Surely, Bush’s team argued, the extreme continuing threats to our national security warranted a dramatic expansion of presidential power.

Six years later, most Americans still rightly believe that the United States must confront Islamic terrorism — and must be relentless in preventing terrorist networks from getting weapons of mass destruction. But Bush’s premises have proved flawed, and the war-on-terror frame has obscured more than it has clarified.

As with the war on drugs and the war on crime, the invocation of “war” initially seemed metaphorical (we do not send the 82nd Airborne into downtown Detroit to combat street crime). But in the terrorism context, war proved less a rhetorical frame than a strategic assertion that armed conflict (that is, ground and air invasions of other countries) was the main tool the United States should employ to neutralize terrorism. The [United Nations](#)-endorsed war against the [Taliban](#) regime in Afghanistan gave way to a period in which the Bush administration used its post-9/11 political capital to smuggle its pre-existing anti-[Saddam Hussein](#) agenda to the fore — with disastrous results for American forces, for

Iraq and for the wider strategic goal of eliminating Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

Defense Secretary [Donald Rumsfeld](#) offered perhaps the best standard by which to measure the Bush administration's performance: "Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?" Leaked intelligence reports have shown that the answer is negative. The administration's tactical and strategic blunders have crippled American military readiness; exposed vulnerabilities in training, equipment and force structure; and accelerated terrorist recruitment. In short, although the United States has not been directly hit since 9/11, we are less safe as a result of the Bush administration's rhetoric, conduct and strategy.

The war rhetoric has raised expectations that a "complete victory" is not only possible, but in fact necessary (even as Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy preamble reminds us that it will be a "global enterprise of uncertain duration"). That same rhetoric has licensed the executive branch to remove itself from traditional legal frameworks and consolidate power in imperial fashion. And the torture, kidnappings and indefinite detentions carried out at the behest of senior administration officials have blurred the moral distinction between "us" and "them" on which much of Bush's logic rested.

While our allies still share intelligence with us in order to combat domestic terrorism, our disavowal of international law has made it harder for our friends to contribute military and even financial resources to shore up failing states like Afghanistan, which is portrayed by the opposition in countries like Canada and the Netherlands as one of Bush's wars. Many of our friends believe that too close an association with American objectives will make them electorally vulnerable and their cities potential targets.

Moreover, by branding the cause a war and calling the enemy terror, the administration has lumped like with unlike foes and elevated hostile elements from the ranks of the criminal (stigmatized in all societies) to the ranks of soldiers of war (a status that carries connotations of sacrifice and courage). Although anybody taking aim at the American superpower would have seemed an underdog, the White House's approach enhanced the terrorists' cachet, accentuating the image of self-sacrificing Davids taking up slingshots against a rich, flaccid, hypocritical Goliath. In rejecting the war-on-terror frame recently, Hilary Benn, the British secretary of state for international development, argued: "What these groups want is to force their individual and narrow values on others, without dialogue, without debate, through violence. And by letting them feel part of something bigger, we give them strength."

But criticizing the calamities of the last six years of American foreign policy has become all too easy. And it does not itself improve our approach to combating terrorist threats that do in fact loom large — larger, in fact, because of Bush's mistakes. The challenge now is to accept that just because George W. Bush hyped the threat does not mean the threat should be played down. Rather, we must urgently set about reversing the harm done to the nation's standing and security by simultaneously reasserting the moral difference between the United States and Islamic terrorists and by developing a 21st-century toolbox to minimize actual terrorist threats. Several new books take up this challenge, each addressing a different piece of the national security predicament. Together, they allow one to begin to define a new approach to counterterrorism.

If the United States is to reduce the terrorist threat (diminishing both the probability of attack and the likely scale of harm), the next president must do a far better job of improving the security of civilians abroad, discerning and exploiting fissures among our enemies, persuading our allies to share the burdens of tackling terrorism and

strengthening our capacity to withstand attacks at home. None of these steps will be taken in earnest unless we acknowledge the fallacies not simply of Bush's post-9/11 policies but also of his post-9/11 premises. One question in particular hangs over this discussion: Are the American and international publics so disenchanted with Bush's effort to curb terrorism the wrong way that they will deprive his successor of the resources he or she needs to change course?

The book to begin with in looking for a revised 21st-century strategy is, unexpectedly, the landmark U.S. ARMY/MARINE CORPS COUNTERINSURGENCY FIELD MANUAL ([University of Chicago](#), paper, \$15). It was released as a government document in December 2006, but owing to its enormous popularity (1.5 million downloads in the first month alone), it has now been published by a university press, with a provocative, highly readable new foreword and introduction that testify to the manual's "paradigm-shattering" content.

When the terrorists struck on 9/11, the United States military was singularly unprepared to deal with them. One reflection of the Pentagon's mind-set at the time was the fact that the Army counterinsurgency manual had not been updated since 1986 and the Marine Corps guide had not been revised since 1980.

This lack of preparedness showed. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the armed forces did not have the appropriate intelligence, linguistic capabilities, weapons, equipment, force structures, civil affairs know-how or capacity to train security forces in other countries. "It is not unfair to say that in 2003 most Army officers knew more about the U.S. Civil War than they did about counterinsurgency," Lt. Col. John A. Nagl writes in the foreword to the University of Chicago edition. But while the Bush administration dug in, refusing to admit how ill-suited its premises were to the new century, American military officers revised their old doctrines on the fly.

The leading architect of the manual was [David Petraeus](#), then a lieutenant general, who commanded the 101st Airborne Division in the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003 and took responsibility for governing Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, immediately thereafter. He is now the overall American commander in Iraq. Petraeus emphasized economic and political development and is said to have asked his soldiers, "What have you done for the people of Iraq today?" He worked with another military man who also saw that his job would have to be more than strictly military — Lt. Gen. James Mattis, who commanded the First Marine Division during the initial invasion and then in 2004 returned to help stabilize Anbar Province. His division motto was "No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy — First Do No Harm." In February 2006, while the new counterinsurgency doctrine was still being drafted, and while international criticism of American military excesses mounted, Petraeus invited journalists, human rights lawyers, academics and practitioners of counterinsurgency to Fort Leavenworth to vet a draft, initiating what participants characterized as one of the most open and productive exchanges of ideas they had ever witnessed.

The fundamental premise of the manual is that the key to successful counterinsurgency is protecting civilians. The manual notes: "An operation that kills five insurgents is counterproductive if collateral damage leads to the recruitment of 50 more insurgents." It suggests that force size be calculated in relation not to the enemy, but to inhabitants (a minimum of 20 counterinsurgents per 1,000 residents). It emphasizes the necessity of coordination with beefed-up civilian agencies, which are needed to take on reconstruction and development tasks.

The most counterintuitive, as well as the most politically difficult, premise of the manual is that the American military must assume greater risk in order to gather much-needed intelligence and, in the end, achieve greater safety. The emphasis of the 1990s on force protection is overturned by the assertion of several breathtaking paradoxes: "Sometimes, the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be." "Sometimes, the more force is used, the less effective it is."

“Sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction.” Sarah Sewall, a former Pentagon official who teaches at the Kennedy School of Government at [Harvard University](#) (and a close colleague of mine), has contributed an introduction that should be required reading for anybody who wants to understand the huge demands effective counterinsurgency will place on the military and the voting public. “Those who fail to see the manual as radical probably don’t understand it,” she writes, “or at least what it’s up against.”

Sewall can say what the generals who devised the manual cannot. She addresses the concern that the manual is nothing more than a “marketing campaign for an inherently inhumane concept of war,” arguing that if politicians continue to put young American men and women in harm’s way, military leaders have an obligation to enhance effectiveness, which in a globalized era cannot be disentangled from taking better care of civilians. Military actions that cause civilian deaths, she argues, are not simply morally questionable; they are self-defeating.

But Sewall explains that even if the military can overcome the substantial challenges of executing such a counterintuitive doctrine — and here the near-daily reports of large-scale civilian loss of life as a result of United States counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq are a reminder of the yawning gap between theory and practice — it will not succeed if it does not get the civilian leadership and support it needs. The military does not have the expertise to perform the range of economic and political tasks associated with nation-building, but in Iraq and Afghanistan, as civilian reconstruction teams went unstaffed, it was forced to pinch-hit. Sewall rightly calls for the “risks and costs of counterinsurgency” to be spread across the American government, but notes this is not an overnight job. “More people play in Army bands than serve in the U.S. foreign service,” she writes.

The manual shows that the demands of counterinsurgency are greater than those the American public has yet been asked to bear. Sewall is skeptical that the public — now feeling burned by Iraq — will muster the will, even in Afghanistan, to “supply greater concentrations of forces, accept higher casualties, fund serious nation-building and stay many long years to conduct counterinsurgency by the book.”

While the United States military’s new counterinsurgency doctrine is based on achieving legitimacy with the local population, Ian Shapiro, a professor of political science at [Yale](#), believes American foreign policy as a whole must vastly increase its legitimacy if it is to defang terrorists in the long term. For this to happen, he writes in his book *CONTAINMENT: Rebuilding a Strategy Against Global Terror* ([Princeton University](#), \$24.95), the president’s critics in the Democratic Party must stop freezing like “donkeys in the headlights” in the face of Bush’s war on terror and instead put forth an alternative strategy. “You can’t beat something with nothing,” he insists. Shapiro argues for a return to the cold war rubric of “containment” — a halfway house between “appeasement and the chimerical aspiration to achieve U.S. control over the global security environment.”

While Bush’s 2002 National Security Strategy preamble says that in the “new world,” the “only path to peace and security is the path of action,” Shapiro shows how aggressive action has played into the hands of terrorist recruiters. When vital interests are imperiled, war may be necessary, he concedes. But generally the United States will invite fewer threats if, rather than attempting to achieve military hegemony, it employs economic, political and law-enforcement tools. “The idea behind containment,” Shapiro writes, “is to refuse to be bullied, while at the same time declining to become a bully.”

Shapiro is at his most persuasive when he argues against lumping Islamic radical threats together. He points out that at the time of the cold war, George Kennan, the formulator of the containment policy, warned against treating Communism

as a monolith. Policy makers, Kennan said, ought to emphasize the differences among and within Communist groups and “contribute to the widening of these rifts without assuming responsibility.” The Bush administration, by contrast, has grouped together a hugely diverse band of violent actors as terrorists, failing to employ divide-and-conquer tactics.

Although it is tempting to feel overwhelmed by the diversity of the threats aligned against the United States, Shapiro says that very diversity presents us with opportunities, since it “creates tensions among our adversaries’ agendas, as well as openings for competition among them.” To pry apart violent Islamic radicals, the United States has to become knowledgeable about internal cleavages and be patient in exploiting them. Arguably, this is what American forces in Iraq are doing belatedly — and perilously — as they undertake the high-risk approach of turning Sunni ex-Baathists against Qaeda forces.

Shapiro argues, much as the Counterinsurgency Field Manual does, that the United States must learn to get inside the minds of its enemies, to try to see the world as they do. Take Iran, for example. A Bush administration that had stepped into Iran’s shoes might have toned down its inflammatory rhetoric, having seen that the American occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq would be, in Shapiro’s words, “as if the Soviet Union had occupied Canada and Mexico at the height of the cold war, and had its fleet anchored off Cuba.” United States intelligence capacities, he says, must be revamped so that policy makers in Washington can guard against a “propensity to confuse leaders the United States might regard as desirable with leaders who actually enjoy legitimacy on the ground.”

Had President Bush adopted Shapiro’s approach on Sept. 12, 2001, it is quite likely that he would have had more success in marginalizing adversaries. Security Council powerhouses like Russia and China would still have thrown their weight around in ways that the administration would have found problematic, but Washington would have been better able to coerce or persuade the fence sitters. Today, however, containment is more challenging than it was before 9/11, or in the days of the cold war.

In addition, for containment to work, Washington needs to be able to deliver credible threats. The irony of Bush’s flawed approach is that it has exposed the limits of American enforcement tools, stretching military and financial resources beyond recognition. This has a doubly negative effect: it emboldens those who need to be contained, and it deters those we once might have counted on for help in doing the containing.

Shapiro seems consoled by his belief that the threat we now face is not new — that the potential accessibility of weapons of mass destruction has not changed anything fundamental in the global order from the cold war years. Nuclear weapons, he writes, are too hard to assemble, and biological agents too hard to store; chemical weapons, though a genuine danger, are not a new one. “Nothing in the nature of the materials themselves,” he says, “presents a qualitatively new threat.” But here, he seems far too eager to minimize the threat, perhaps fearing that by conceding any aspect of the Bush doctrine, he somehow legitimizes the whole flawed approach. In fact, after six years of dishonesty and alarmism, it seems especially important — if challenging — to retain a capacity for grave, calibrated concern about the proliferation of nuclear aspirant states and their proud ties to terrorist networks.

How real is the difference between our foes and us? One of the most incisive challenges to current debates comes from Talal Asad, whose *ON SUICIDE BOMBING* ([Columbia University](#), \$19.95) argues that the distinction between what Bush calls “us” and “them” exists in the heads of Western leaders, publics and intellectuals, but not in reality. Asad, a professor of anthropology at the Graduate Center of the [City University of New York](#), takes aim less at the Bush administration than at the rest of us, and at what he sees as our unspoken complicity in “some kinds of cruelty as

opposed to others.” He hopes, he writes, to “disturb the reader sufficiently” by showing the hypocrisy of rules that permit murderous conduct by states but deny it to nonstate actors. And he is angered by scholars, theorists and journalists who don’t speak Arabic and have never set foot in the Middle East, yet sound off about why suicide bombers do what they do. He is understandably aghast that the American public has expressed so little shock over the bloodshed inflicted in its name. And by the end of the book, his rage has overtaken him. The Bush administration’s actions in the Middle East have left him so disgusted that he declares simply, “It seems to me that there is no moral difference between the horror inflicted by state armies (especially if those armies belong to powerful states that are unaccountable to international law) and the horror inflicted by insurgents.”

It is hard to answer Asad’s argument without drifting into the distinctions he attempts to demolish. For instance, he cites the political philosopher Michael Walzer’s definition of the “peculiar evil of terrorism,” which, according to Walzer, is “not only the killing of innocent people but also the intrusion of fear into everyday life, the violation of private purposes, the insecurity of public spaces, the endless coerciveness of precaution.” Asad then asks why the United States’ war in Iraq and the Israeli cluster bombs in Lebanon do not earn the same condemnation as bombs wielded by terrorists. But if you continue to believe (as I do) that there is a moral difference between setting out to destroy as many civilians as possible and killing civilians unintentionally and reluctantly in pursuit of a military objective, you will indeed find “On Suicide Bombing” disturbing, if not always in the way he intends.

Nonetheless, Asad’s book is valuable because the legal distinctions he is challenging are especially vulnerable now. They are vulnerable sociologically, in that millions — if not billions — of people around the world do not see the difference between a suicide bomber’s attack on a pizzeria and an American attack on what turns out to be a wedding party. Asad’s challenge is one politicians must answer if they stand any chance of recapturing hearts and minds. At the same time, when a war is fought on false grounds, like that in Iraq, the notion of “collateral damage” breaks down, since one must ask what civilian harm could possibly be justified in a war that was itself unnecessary.

Revamping our approach to terrorism requires changes that extend far beyond the battlefields of Iraq all the way back to the American homefront. Remarkably, despite six years of warnings about “imminent threats” and inevitable mushroom clouds, the Bush administration has not led the country into taking precautions that would reduce mass casualties in the event of a major terrorist strike. The White House’s emphasis on war has come at the expense of homefront preparedness. For Stephen Flynn, a senior fellow at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), we are a surprisingly “brittle nation.”

By defining American security objectives in military terms, the Bush administration has failed to set achievable goals that could vastly decrease the human and financial damage from a large-scale attack at home. While the United States military has done its best to adjust to the inadequacies recent conflicts have exposed, almost no meaningful midcourse corrections have been made on the homefront, Flynn argues in *THE EDGE OF DISASTER: Rebuilding a Resilient Nation* (Random House, \$25.95) — not in educating the public, training emergency responders, fortifying “soft targets,” securing hazardous materials or strengthening critical infrastructure.

Regardless of how catastrophic or imminent one believes the threats are, and regardless of whether American legitimacy can be retrieved abroad, the government has an obligation to protect its citizens and its infrastructure from future attack. Flynn reminds us of the importance of “resiliency” — the ability to recover from a disaster. “A society that can match its strength to deliver a punch with the means to take one,” he writes, “makes an unattractive target.”

Flynn observes that the twin catastrophes of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina testify to major gaps in our preparedness and competence. He calls for open debates about our vulnerabilities. Exposing our weaknesses will not empower our foes, he insists, but will help build broad support at home for a reallocation of resources. “What makes a disaster a true catastrophe,” Flynn says, “has more to do with our own acts of omission or commission than with the forces that lie beyond our control.” Publicity and free discussion are necessary to produce political action.

None of the recommendations outlined in any of these books would be easy to achieve under the best of circumstances. But what is striking is how few have even been pursued. The Bush administration’s unwillingness to admit failure causes it to cling to a flawed approach rather than revisit its premises, adopt a new strategy or experiment with new tactics.

The president, apparently, remains determined to treat the American people as if they have no role to play in what will, in fact, be a “global struggle of uncertain duration.” In a January interview with Jim Lehrer, Bush was asked why he hadn’t called for more Americans to “sacrifice something.” He said: “Well, you know, I think a lot of people are in this fight. I mean, they sacrifice peace of mind when they see the terrible images of violence on TV every night.”

The effect of such an attitude is not simply that the American military will continue to bear the lion’s share of the national security burden — a burden, the Counterinsurgency Field Manual practically screams out, the military cannot meet alone. It is that the American public, with little faith in the credibility of the government’s claims, may deny even cleareyed leaders the resources they need to meet the complex demands of neutralizing modern threats.h

Will the United States military have to assume greater risks to achieve greater safety in the end?

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The War on Terror (or War on Terrorism) is a campaign that was launched by the United States of America with support from NATO and other allies with the stated goal of ending international terrorism, which is typically understood to refer particularly to radical Islamist terrorism. The campaign was launched after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, for which Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility. The "War on Terror" has taken many forms, such as diplomacy, going after