## The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

*In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).*

# The War on Terror and the Cold War: They're Not the Same

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Since the autumn of 2001, following the shocking attacks of September 11th, President Bush and his advisers have repeatedly likened the war against terrorism to the confrontation with Nazi Germany in the Second World War and the long struggle with Soviet communism in the Cold War. But the current anti-terrorist campaign and the related war in Iraq are significantly different from those earlier contests. Where resemblances occur, they are not comforting to our political values. And the comparative lessons that the U.S. Government is proffering are not the ones that are relevant to dealing with terrorism.

Mr. Bush signaled these comparisons in his speech before Congress nine days after the attacks, when he said the terrorists "follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way, to where it ends:  in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies."  The analogy, particularly to the Cold War, has been repeated many times since by the president, the vice president, and their lieutenants. After the London bombing in the summer of 2005, two top aides wrote, "At its root, the struggle is an ideological contest, a war of ideas that engages all of us, public servant and private citizen, regardless of nationality.  We have waged such wars before, and we know how to win them."[1]

The "war of ideas" theme remains prominent, as is the division of the world into those who are "with us or with the terrorists," as the president put it. The threat from al Qaeda and other jihadists, and the American response, are understood primarily in military terms. As the 2006 National Security Strategy states, "We will disrupt and destroy terrorist organizations by: direct and continuous action using all the elements of national and international power. . . ; defending the United States, the American

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people, and our interests at home and abroad by identifying and destroying the threat before it reaches our borders. . . ; denying further sponsorship, support, and sanctuary to terrorists by convincing or compelling states," etc.[2] These frames—freedom v. oppression, the world divided, the necessity of readiness to use overwhelming military force—are directly borrowed from Cold War thinking.

But are the perception of the threat and the construction of the response appropriate?

### Lessons of the Cold War
The Cold War was a great power contest that had many dimensions. There was a "war of ideas," and there were military confrontations. But there were also proxy wars, vast alliances, and institutions for managing the conflict—indeed, it was a highly formalized affair, with mechanisms, treaties, ambassadors, and so on specifically dedicated to defusing potential conflict. It was, most important, an inter-state competition. The states could and did speak with each other, negotiate with each other, trade with each other, sustain cultural and educational exchanges, and the like, for decades.

While the causes of the end of the Cold War remain a contentious topic, there is much to suggest that these dense networks, institutions, global norms, rational discourse, and civil society advocacy had enormously powerful effects in lowering tensions and opening opportunities to conclude the rivalry.[3] The military competition was essentially a stalemate. Up to the end, American hardliners warned of Soviet nuclear superiority, for example, or their numerical advantages in the European theater. And the major proxy war—Vietnam—was a colossal failure for the United States.

The Cold War was ended by engagement, rather than "destroying the threat," and that is a powerful lesson. But because of the highly formal and state-centric nature of the confrontation, one has to ask if there is any relevance to the "twilight struggle" with Soviet communism.

One could say, parenthetically, that the Second World War was also fundamentally different from the current antiterrorism campaign. Like the Cold War, it was state-centric, and militarily colossal in scale. It required massive mobilization and shared sacrifice. With the end of the conflict, there was dedication to rebuilding the vanquished countries and empowering multilateral institutions. The contrast with today could not be sharper.

At home, the Cold War also reverberated through governance, politics, and society. The creation of a new national security state in the late 1940s was fraught with symbolism as well as concrete changes in politics. A new "red scare," internal surveillance, and other anti-communist tropes filled America for many years. Democratic socialism was tarnished as a political alternative. Groups opposing the nuclear arms race or military interventions were targeted and scorned. Government secrecy grew; science and other such endeavors were affected. Internal conspiracies of any significance were never, or rarely, discovered, yet the impact of fear—or the political utilization of fear—had immense and deleterious consequences for democratic values in the United States and in many countries allied with the West.[4]

### A Different War
The threat from al Qaeda and similar groups is wholly different from the menace of the Soviet Union. The latter, despite chronic weaknesses, had thousands of nuclear weapons, enormous conventional forces, and many allies. Al Qaeda is nothing like a state. Its ideology is largely a cry against alleged Western mistreatment, rather than a successor system rooted in European philosophy (as was communism and fascism). Since the spectacular attacks of 9/11, al Qaeda has provoked little actual violence in the West. The London and Madrid bombings, small in scale, were the work of local, self-styled malcontents.

Law enforcement and intelligence operations by the United States and many other countries have likely had some useful effect in diminishing the number of potential or actual al Qaeda members and operations, although a very small number of plots have come to light, and none in the United States. The war in Afghanistan, while notably unsuccessful in arrest-

ing Osama bin Laden, has surely disrupted his operations and deprived him of a friendly central government. These kinds of counter-terrorism activities have been successful, perhaps, but they bear little resemblance to strategies of the Cold War.

What does bear a striking resemblance is the war in Iraq. Like Vietnam, it has been pursued to teach lessons and demonstrate resolve. Like Vietnam, it began with popular support that suddenly eroded as rationales built on false premises dissolved. Like Vietnam, the high toll in casualties and insecurity threatens the entire region's future, even as the intervention was promoted in terms of protecting or promoting stability and democracy. Like Vietnam, the war in Iraq is increasingly a distraction from other security priorities and opportunities, is corrosive of alliances, and is economically costly. And, like Vietnam, it is creating new enemies.

Another regrettable similarity with the Cold War is the effect on American politics and democratic values. The creation of a new security state apparatus mirrors the initiatives begun in the late 1940s. Not only has military spending reached heights never seen during the Cold War,[5] but now the government has newly expanded powers of surveillance, secret courts, targeted communities, and, most prominently, a new federal bureaucracy that institutionalizes the anti-terrorism campaign. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and special offices in the Justice Department, FBI, and elsewhere, buttressed by the USA Patriot Act and its successor, are now embedded in the political life of the state and society. As they have been in previous red scares, immigrants are subjected to particularly onerous attention.[6]

The federal government's broad encroachment on civil liberties and its political use of fear are not rooted in a demonstrable domestic threat. Virtually none of the 300-plus indictments on "terrorism related" activities since 9/11 have involved anything remotely resembling a domestically based plot against America, and the 9/11 Commission found no such thing, either. Despite this, according to some analyses, fear of terrorism determined the outcome of the 2004 presidential election.[7] The cultivation of fear by federal authorities also built initial support for the war in Iraq—"we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud," was one official's memorable stratagem.

While some of the most alarmist rhetoric and policy assertions have been diminished by the embarrassments of the Iraq war and the suddenly lower threat assessments since the 2004 election, much of the domestic security apparatus has been deeply institutionalized. DHS is a $30 billion-plus agency. The USA Patriot Act was renewed by Congress in 2006 despite a concerted effort by civil libertarians to block it. The debate on immigration pivots partly on the unsubstantiated threat of terrorists entering from Mexico. The administration has stoutly defended its domestic surveillance, retentions of suspected terrorists, and other extraordinary measures. Every sign points to a permanent antiterrorism campaign within the United States that will consistently cause friction with civil liberties and democratic process.

This impact of the war on terror within the United States is perhaps the strongest parallel to the Cold War, and equally unnecessary and futile.

## Rethinking Terrorism

Al Qaeda is neither Nazi Germany nor Soviet Russia. It is a tiny revanchist network that is dangerous in limited ways. This is not to say it cannot wreak havoc; if, in an unlikely case, it acquired nuclear or biological weapons, it could obviously be very destructive. Also, its non-statehood protects it from the deterrence value of the U.S. nuclear arsenal—another important, if chilling, difference from the U.S.-USSR standoff, and one that should earn more attention in resources and focus from the White House. Yet to raise the jihadists to the status of a global "totalitarian" threat is foolish and counterproductive. And, as we have already seen, it has fearfully led the American people to support an extremely costly invasion of Iraq and a stronger state at home that is undermining democratic values.

Perhaps most destructively, the war on terrorism worsens some of the factors that contribute to Muslim wariness of the West. Israeli hardliners were extolled as a model for dealing with terrorism, and the American refusal to recognize Hamas's electoral victory in Palestine belies Washington's talk about democratization. The anti-terrorist targeting of many Muslim organizations in the United States appears discriminatory. The war in Iraq has been carried out callously with regard to human security. The confrontation with Iran appears to be a case of nuclear "orientalism." Continued U.S. backing for repressive Arab regimes remains a sore point with Arab democrats, and repressive regimes are being bolstered in Central and South Asia.

The nation needs to take stock of what has worked and not worked in the anti-terrorism initiatives of the last five years, separating out (if possible) the fractious topic of Iraq and wanton claims of success on other fronts. A body of empirical literature on other struggles against politically violent groups is growing, and is informative. We can learn from such analysis, and guide our national and international efforts accordingly.

But most of all, we should stop referring to the anti-terror effort as another epic episode of America's triumphal battle against totalitarianism. The analogy is weak, and it is leading the country to support poor—even catastrophic—policies in the anti-terror effort.

**article footnotes**

**1** Stephen J. Hadley and Frances Fragos Townsend, "What We Saw in London," *New York Times*, July 23, 2005. Hadley is national security adviser and Townsend is homeland security adviser.

**2** http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss3.html.

**3** The weight of scholarship, in fact, suggests that these "soft power" factors were more significant than military confrontation. See, for example, Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 1999); Leon Sigal, *Hang Separately: Cooperative Security Between the United States and Russia, 1985-1994* (Century Foundation Press, 2000); Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton University Press, 2001); and Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transformation: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Brookings Institution, 1994).

**4** See, for example, Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Robert J. Harris, "The Impact of the Cold War on Civil Liberties," *Journal of Politics* (1956): 3-16; R. Griffith and A. Theoharis, eds., *The Specter: Original Essays on the Cold War and the Origins of McCarthyism* (New Viewpoints, 1974).

**5** Cindy Williams, "Weighing the Costs of Today's Defense Strategy," *Boston Globe* (March 21, 2006).

**6** See David Cole, *Enemy Aliens: Double Standards and Constitutional Freedoms in the War on Terrorism* (The New Press, 2003), and John Tirman, ed., *The Maze of Fear: Security & Migration After 9/11* (The New Press, 2004).

**7** See the UPI report: Al Swanson, "Analysis: 'Security' Moms Decided Election," *Washington Times* Web site, Nov. 15, 2004, based on analysis by the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

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