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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

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).

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The War on Terror: Forgotten Lessons from World War II

Stephen Van Evera

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President Bush recently likened the war on terror to the struggles Americans faced in World War II, explaining that our enemies are “successors to Fascists, to Nazis ... and other totalitarians of the 20th century.”¹ The analogy to World War II is useful and illuminating. Important lessons from World War II apply to the war on terror.

Yet the Bush administration has itself left the lessons of World War II largely unheeded. Its conduct of the war on terror departs from the policies that brought the United States victory in World War II and success in the postwar years.² The administration will have more success against our terrorist enemies if it learns and applies the methods that won the Second World War.

Setting Priorities

In World War II, the Roosevelt administration believed that Nazi Germany was its most dangerous opponent. Administration officials reasoned that only Germany could possibly conquer Great Britain, and Britain's demise would open the whole Atlantic region to German dominion and leave the United States dangerously exposed. The administration therefore adopted a “Germany First” strategy, under which it focused its power first against Germany, while only checking Japan in Asia; and concentrated on defeating Japan only after Germany was beaten.³

In contrast, the Bush administration has not put top priority on defeating America's most dangerous current enemy, al-Qaeda. Instead it suffers a strategic attention deficit disorder (SADD), characterized by brief moments of focus on al-Qaeda soon followed by distraction into other adventures. It launched the war on terror in October 2001 by invading Afghanistan and ousting the Taliban regime, which had sheltered al-Qaeda. Good going! Shows focus! But soon it took a strange left turn into Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein, although Saddam was not cooperating with al-Qaeda and was otherwise con-

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tained. It also pursued hostile policies toward Iran and Syria, talking of ousting both regimes, in another left turn away from combating al-Qaeda. Iran and Syria have odious rulers but they are not in league with al-Qaeda. Conflict with all three states—Iraq, Iran and Syria—is a diversion from al-Qaeda, the main threat. One administration official, then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, even argued shortly after 9/11 that the U.S. should attack Iraq while leaving alone Afghanistan, al-Qaeda's haven.⁴ His remarkable argument was rejected, but the administration did transfer resources from Afghanistan to Iraq before it had destroyed the al-Qaeda leadership and consolidated the new government in Afghanistan. This allowed important al-Qaeda elements to escape and fight another day.⁵ It also allowed the Taliban to survive and later recover strength. Today they pose a serious threat to the new Afghan government of Hamid Karzai.⁶

The administration shows no sign of curing its al-Qaeda SADD. Its most recent National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, issued in September 2006, never mentions Osama bin Laden. It frames all terrorist movements as American enemies, including those that have no evident intention of attacking the United States.⁷ States that sponsor terror but do not sponsor terror against the United States and are not in league with al-Qaeda are also defined as American targets. As such, the report is a warrant for a wide American rampage in the Mideast that would not directly address the al-Qaeda threat and would surely benefit al-Qaeda by diverting American focus onto other terror groups.

Mobilizing Resources

President Franklin Roosevelt fully mobilized the American people and the American economy to fight World War II. He asked for and got great sacrifices from the American people. He increased defense spending from 2 percent of national income in 1939 to 54 percent of national income in 1944.⁸ He raised taxes and imposed rationing. He called all able-bodied men to arms.

In contrast, the Bush administration mobilized few resources for the war on al-Qaeda. It has made no call for sacrifice from the American people. Instead, it has focused on cutting taxes for the very wealthy. After 9/11, President Bush urged Americans to support the war effort by going shopping, in order to avert an economic slowdown. The only Americans called on to sacrifice are those in our armed forces, especially in the reserves, who are compelled to pay for the Iraq war with their sweat and blood.

Forging Alliances, Striking Deals

The Roosevelt administration forged a vast alliance to wage World War II. It won the war with only modest U.S. losses because its allies together had such vast resources (by themselves America's allies had more industrial power than the Axis states; combined with the U.S. they had more than three times the industrial power of the Axis)⁹ and because America's allies did most of the hard fighting and took most of the casualties that victory required.

Some of these allies and associates were odious, including the mass-murderous Stalin regime in the Soviet Union, the corrupt and autocratic Chiang Kai-shek in China, the brutal Josip Broz Tito in Yugoslavia and the Vichy government in France. However unsavory, these associates vastly eased the American road to victory against the Axis. Without their help the U.S. would have paid a huge blood price for victory if it won at all. Later, President Truman stabilized the postwar world by forging the broad and powerful NATO alliance, which kept the Soviet Union at bay for four decades and won the Cold War.

In contrast, the Bush administration made little effort to win allied support for its Mideast policies. Regarding Iraq, the administration gained important international backing only from Britain. Once in Iraq, it failed to move quickly to cut a deal with the Iraqi Sunnis. This left the Sunnis assuming they had no place in a U.S.-crafted Iraq, fueling their decision to rebel. And the administration failed to reach understandings with Syria and Iran to gain their cooperation with Iraq's reconstruction. Yet postwar reconstruction usually fails if neighboring states don't want it to succeed.

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Why is the U.S. failing in Iraq? Partly because the Bush team sought no accord with the Sunnis and took a belligerent stance toward Iraq's neighbors instead of seeking an understanding on Iraq with them. It failed to follow FDR in practicing the art of the deal.

The Bush team also failed to practice the art of the deal in the broader war on al-Qaeda. It offered little inducement to Iran or North Korea to end their nuclear programs, recklessly talking about regime change instead, even though Iran clearly signaled its willingness cut a deal on nuclear weapons to the Bush team,¹⁰ and President Clinton was very close to a deal with North Korea when he left office in 2001. Nuclear weapons built as a result could wind up in the hands of terrorists. And the administration pushed its relations with Syria to rupture despite valuable Syrian help against al-Qaeda after 9/11. Syrian intelligence cooperation after 9/11 allowed the U.S. to thwart al-Qaeda attacks on the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain and the U.S. embassy in Ottawa.¹¹ Administration talk of regime change in Syria has ended this useful cooperation.

Waging a War of Ideas

The Roosevelt administration waged an intense war of ideas to bring the world to its side in World War II. Even Hollywood was mobilized, producing Frank Capra's effective seven-part series "Why We Fight" and many other films.¹² The Truman and Eisenhower administration continued this effort into the Cold War, waging a strong war of ideas through the U.S. Information Agency and other activities.¹³

In contrast, the Bush has left the war of ideas unfought. It has left al-Qaeda's propaganda largely unanswered. As a result, that propaganda is widely believed in the Arab and wider Muslim world. For example, large majorities in Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, and Indonesia still do not believe that groups of Arabs carried out the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.¹⁴ U.S. efforts to destroy al-Qaeda cannot succeed while such attitudes endure.

The U.S. is losing the war of ideas partly because U.S. public diplomacy efforts have been poorly funded and poorly led. The State Department Office of Public Diplomacy, which should lead in waging the war of ideas, received only \$1.36 billion in funding for FY 2006.¹⁵ Only a fraction of this funding was devoted on efforts directed at the Muslim world. This effort is far too small relative to the task at hand.

Some might say that waging a war of ideas against monsters like Hitler, Tojo and Mussolini was like shooting fish in a barrel. They were easy to discredit because they were immensely unattractive. But the same is true of bin Laden, al-Zawahiri and Mullah Omar. They preach hate against most of the world, including the vast share of the Muslim world that differs with

their view of Islam. Their violence has killed many Muslims and other innocents. Their Islamist political model has already been tried with disastrous results in Afghanistan, Sudan, and Iran. They are hiding in caves, with no state apparatus to amplify their message. That the United States is losing a public relations contest to such primitive thugs is an appalling failure and a disgrace on those responsible.

A Soft Landing for Defeated Powers

After winning World War II, President Roosevelt and then President Harry Truman invested vast amounts of money and brainpower guiding Germany, Japan, and Italy toward democracy, prosperity, and political moderation. The U.S. occupied Germany for four years and Japan for six years, staffing these occupations with highly competent people.

In contrast, the Bush administration tried to resuscitate Iraq and Afghanistan on the cheap. It sent undersized military forces into Iraq and staffed the occupation with amateurs. It under-resourced the rebuilding of Afghanistan, denying the urgent requests of the new Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, for more security and economic assistance. As a result, both Iraq and Afghanistan now qualify as failed states. Iraq, as we know, is descending into civil war. Afghanistan is

the world's largest opium producer and is again breeding terrorists friendly to al-Qaeda. Large portions of Afghanistan have reverted to the control of the Taliban, who are allied with al-Qaeda.

The Roosevelt administration began planning for the postwar peace as a first order of wartime business, in December 1941. In contrast, the Bush administration made no serious plan for managing the postwar situation in Iraq and made no use of government research that was done toward planning.¹⁶ Vice President Dick Cheney even prevented General Jay Garner, the first head of the American postwar mission in Iraq, from hiring onto his staff a State Department official who had organized research in the State Department to support postwar planning, apparently from fear of tainting U.S. Iraq policy with (horrors) State Department thinking. As a result, the U.S. entered Iraq with no scheme for the postwar.¹⁷

A New Political Order

President Roosevelt recognized that U.S. interests would be injured if a new war followed World War II. Accordingly, he worked to create institutions that would bolster peace. Specifically, he established the United Nations, which he modeled on the 1815 Concert of Europe, an institution created by the European powers to preserve peace after the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.¹⁸ Roosevelt also worked to create institutions that would promote free trade in part because he believed, along with Immanuel Kant and many others, that a liberal trade regime would bolster peace.

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Later U.S. Presidents have also played peacemaker, including Jimmy Carter, who engineered peace between Israel and Egypt, and Bill Clinton, who engineered peace in Bosnia, helped bring peace in Northern Ireland, and tried, although without success, to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In contrast, the Bush administration has declined to play the peacemaker. It walked away from managing the Israel-Palestinian conflict, dropping efforts to bring peace and failing even to work to prevent the conflict from escalating. It has made little effort to dampen other conflicts, including those in Somalia, Kashmir, and Chechnya. And it has proven inept in its efforts to dampen Sunni-Shi'a conflict in Iraq.

Al-Qaeda feeds on war. It exploits all conflicts involving Muslims in its recruiting message, painting the Muslims as victims whether or not they are. This gives the U.S. a large interest in peace. It should work to dampen conflict throughout the region.¹⁹ But the Bush administration declines to play this role.

The Best People for the Job

Roosevelt appointed General George Marshall, an outstanding leader and strategist, as his Army chief of staff.²⁰ Together Roosevelt and Marshall in turn appointed as war commanders the best group of officers ever to lead America's armed forces, including Dwight Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, Matthew Ridgway, George Gavin, George Patton, Joseph Lawton Collins, Pete Quesada, Raymond Spruance, Chester Nimitz, and William (Bull) Halsey.

In contrast, President Bush has appointed mediocre leaders and left them in place despite poor performance. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld committed epic errors in his handling of Iraq but remains in office.²¹ Rumsfeld in turn promoted individuals more known for their obedience than their competence to top policy posts and military commands.²² Ignoring clear evidence that al-Qaeda posed a grave danger, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz belittled the al-Qaeda threat before the 9/11 attack and urged the removal of another official, Ambassador Robert Gelbard, who rightly recognized the danger al-Qaeda posed.²³ Despite Wolfowitz's grave misjudgments President Bush rewarded him with appointment to the presidency of the World Bank. The story was repeated elsewhere. Bush appointed the incompetent Michael Brown to head FEMA and the incompetent L. Paul Bremer to head Iraqi reconstruction.²⁴ A group of inexperienced and unqualified lesser officials, selected for their conservative politics rather than their competence, filled out the Iraq reconstruction team.²⁵ An extreme ideologue, David Wurmser, has played a key role in making Bush administration policy toward the Middle East from his position as chief Middle East advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney.²⁶

Why has Iraq gone so badly? Partly because someone like George Marshall was not in charge. Marshall's exacting standards of com-

petence were not applied when the Bush team selected officials responsible for conducting its policy toward Iraq. Instead, a lesser standard was applied and inferior results were achieved.

Lessons Not Heeded

Under Roosevelt's leadership the U.S. won World War II in three years and nine months. In contrast, President Bush has now been leading us against al-Qaeda for five years with no end in sight.

Al-Qaeda's top leaders, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, remain at large in Pakistan, plotting more mayhem against us. Taliban leader Mullah Omar remains at large. Al-Qaeda lost its secure base in Afghanistan in 2002 but it adapted by morphing into a decentralized organization that remains capable of great destruction. Estimates of the number of al-Qaeda members worldwide have grown from 20,000 to 50,000 during 2001-2006.²⁷ The number of al-Qaeda attacks worldwide has grown from three during the five years before 9/11/01 to thirty in the five years following 9/11/01.²⁸

The conditions for the continued existence of al-Qaeda—failed states, inflammatory civil and international wars, and deep anger at the Bush Administration among Muslim elites and publics—remain in place in the Middle East. Al-Qaeda will not be defeated until these conditions are addressed. The Bush administration has no plan to address them.

Instead, it misdirects its efforts toward the pipedream of ending terror by ousting regimes and spreading democracy in the Middle East.

Why has the administration failed to apply best practices from the past to the current war against al-Qaeda? Why does it not learn from the experience, gained at great cost, of World War II and other wars? Historian Andrew Bacevich notes the "contempt for the accumulated wisdom of the military profession" among Bush administration civilians officials in the Defense Department.²⁹ Commentator Fareed Zakaria has noted the contempt with which the administration has treated foreign leaders and officials.³⁰ A senior U.S. Army general who worked in the Bush administration notes that "the people who worked around the President were ... intellectually arrogant."³¹ Another Army officer has noted the "towering hubris" that mars Secretary Rumsfeld's character and "the grace and humility which he so sorely lacks." The Bush administration's view of past U.S. administrations is likewise tainted with arrogance and disrespect. Bush officials believe most past U.S. national security managers were weak of will and mind. They learn little from the past because they think past American policymakers, like those in FDR's administration, have little to teach them.

The American people have paid a high price in dollars, casualties and security for government leadership infused with such mind-warping hubris. They suffered on 9/11 and have suffered since in Iraq. The price will likely keep rising until new U.S. leadership appears that is more mindful of the lessons of the past.

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article footnotes

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- 2 Valuable introductions to U.S. policy in World War II include Kent Roberts Greenfield, *American Strategy in World War II: A Reconsideration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963); Mark Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Warren F. Kimball, "Franklin Roosevelt: 'Dr. Win-the-War,'" in Joseph G. Dawson, *Commanders in Chief: Presidential Leadership in Modern Wars* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1993): 87-105; and Kent Roberts Greenfield, ed., *Command Decisions: 20 Crucial Command Decisions that Decided the Outcome of World War II* (London: Methuen, 1960).
- 3 Louis Morton, "Germany First: The Basic Concept of Allied Strategy in World War II," in Greenfield, ed., *Command Decisions*: 3-38.
- 4 Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006): 30-31. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld echoed Wolfowitz's Iraq-first idea. Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004): 30-31.
- 5 The Bush administration had an opportunity to capture al-Qaeda leaders during Operation Anaconda in March 2002 but failed partly because it diverted needed U.S. forces to Iraq. Sean Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda* (New York, NY: Berkley Books, 2005): 85-86.
- 6 Administration policy toward Afghanistan during 2001-2003 is outlined in Clarke, *Against All Enemies*: 274-79. A recent look at deterioration in Afghanistan is David Rohde, "Afghan Symbol for Change Becomes a Symbol for Failure," *New York Times*, September 5, 2006: 1.
- 7 *National Strategy for Combatting Terrorism* (The White House: September, 2006), retrieved from www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nsc2006 on 9/6/06): 5, 15.
- 8 Peter Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay? The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996): 33, Table 2-2.
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- 13 Recent works on the efforts to win the war of ideas during the Cold War both in the "free world" and behind the Iron Curtain include: Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War: The American Crusade Against the Soviet Union* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America's Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1956* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006); and Gary D. Rawnsley, ed., *Cold-War Propaganda in the 1950s* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999). Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000 (New York: Random House, 1987): 332.
- 14 "The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other," *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, June 12, 2006, question 38; retrieved from <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=253>. Disbelievers that Arabs performed the 9/11 attack outnumbered believers by 59 to 32 percent in Egypt, 59 to 16 percent in Turkey, 65 to 16 percent in Indonesia, and 41 to 16 percent in Pakistan. Ibid.
- 15 U.S. Congressional Research Service, U.S. Public Diplomacy: *Background and the 9/11 Commission Recommendations (RL32607)*; May 1, 2006), by Susan B. Epstein; 5, estimated from Figure 1. Accessed on 5/30/06 at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/66505.pdf>.
- 16 Ricks, *Fiasco*: 76-81, 101-4.
- 17 Ricks, *Fiasco*: 101-4.
- 18 A summary of FDR's strategy for postwar peace is Gordon A. Craig and Alexander L. George, *Force and Statecraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983): 101-113.
- 19 My argument is from Stephanie Kaplan, who argues in a forthcoming MIT political science Ph.D. dissertation that war is a tonic for terrorist propaganda-making, recruiting, network-building, and training, and thus serves as a general breeding ground for terrorists.
- 20 On Marshall see Mark A. Stoler, *George C. Marshall: Soldier-Statesman of the American Century* (Boston: Twayne, 1989).
- 21 An excellent survey of Bush administration policy in Iraq is Ricks, *Fiasco*.
- 22 Ricks, *Fiasco*: 33, 80-81, 89, 103-6, 127-8.
- 23 Clarke, *Against All Enemies*: 231-33.
- 24 On Bremer's errors see Ricks, *Fiasco*: 158-66.
- 25 Ricks, *Fiasco*: 111, 203, 208-212; Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Ties to GOP Trumped Know-How Among Staff Sent to Rebuild Iraq," *Washington Post*, September 17, 2006; and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* (New York: Knopf, 2006).
- 26 On Wurmser see James Bamford, *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies* (NY: Anchor, 2005): 261-65, 268-69, 281, 287-90, 293, 304, 315. In early 2001, Wurmser published a paper advising that the United States and Israel should together destroy the regimes in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, and the Palestinian authority. Ibid.: 268. In 1996, Wurmser also advised incoming Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that Israel should attack Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Netanyahu wisely declined the advice. Ibid.: 262-3.
- 27 Sharon Burke and Harlan Geer, *The Neo Con: The Bush Defense Record by the Numbers*, Third Way National Security Project, September 2006, retrieved from http://third-way.com/data/product/file/58/The_Neo_Con_9.5.06_final_electronic_version.pdf. on 9/6/06): 9.
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- 30 In 2003 Zakaria wrote: "Having traveled the world and met with senior government officials in dozens of countries over the past year, I can report that with the exception of Britain and Israel, every country the administration has dealt with feels humiliated by it." Fareed Zakaria, "The Arrogant Empire," *Newsweek*, March 24, 2003. Jorge Castañeda, Mexico's reformist foreign minister until January, 2003, said of Latin American officials: "We like and understand America. But we find it extremely irritating to be treated with utter contempt." Ibid. A retired senior Turkish diplomat, Ozdem Sanberk, remarked that U.S. abrasiveness helped prevent Turkish support for the 2003 U.S. attack on Iraq: "The way the U.S. has been conducting the negotiations has been, in general, humiliating." Ibid.
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