

## From the ‘Global War on Terror’ to Containment: An Opinion Brief

*By Robert E. Kelly*

The Global War on Terror (GWOt) is maturing. In the first Bush term, it was characterized by aggressive rhetoric (“regime change,” “bring ’em on”) and soaring declarations of principle (Bush’s second inaugural address about freedom as a divine gift). But the day-to-day grind of Iraq, collapsing approval figures for that war and the president himself, and the stubborn persistence of al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden have shifted Washington’s rhetoric. President Kennedy famously referred to the long, patient effort to contain Soviet expansionism and wait out communism’s internal contradictions as a “twilight struggle.” That Americans are coming to see the GWOt similarly is a healthy shift in its politics. All three Democratic presidential frontrunners refused to commit to withdraw American forces from Iraq in their first term. The US is recognizing, at last, that this is, as Donald Rumsfeld said, “the long war,” or more appropriately, the long slog. This war – a global counterinsurgency actually – requires grim determination, tax hikes, and stolid public support.[1]

To be sure, this shift is depressing and infuriating. American primacy in military might and economic output is unquestioned, but this power profile has proven disappointingly ineffective. It is frustrating for the most powerful state in history to see its will thwarted so clearly in Eurasia by sub-state militias, terrorists, and brigands. Democracies dislike long, ill-defined campaigns – bloody, seemingly intractable guerilla conflicts with no turning points, highlights, or parades. The model for Iraq and the wider GWOt is not WWII or Korea – to which the president makes unhelpful reference – but America’s involvement in Vietnam and the Philippines, or Britain’s “emergency” efforts against the Irish Republican Army or in Malaya in the 1950s. These wars took decades to complete, broached searing moral questions, and rarely show up on the good-versus-evil History Channel or Fox News.

Vietnam and the Philippines are disturbing “models” for America, but there is little alternative in its history. The quagmire in Iraq demonstrates the limited efficacy of American hard power in this conflict. The enemy is not states – like Iraq, Afghanistan or Somalia. These are easily defeated in conventional warfighting, but this does little to soften the harsh edge of the Islamist social movement that generates the terrorists who plotted 9/11. This is a struggle for hearts and minds – a conflict of values between liberal modernity and reactionary religious medievalism. Long patience, frustrating, compromise-ridden diplomacy, asymmetric force (special operations instead of massed infantry or air power), and a constant recitation of Western values in the face of such controversies as the Muhammad cartoons or the threats against Ayaan Hirsi Ali [2] is the path to an awkward “victory.”

### From GWOt to Global Counterinsurgency

Since the start of the GWOt, the United States has implicitly treated its terrorist opponents as if they were states. American posture has long been structured around state opponents to US power. The US military would engage traditional warfighting against a country with a coherent military firmly controlling some space of territory with a “target rich” infrastructure and population. In a Clausewitzian clash of forces, the US superpower would prevail, and the opponent would sue for a structured peace. In short, US planning has assumed and preferred opponents such as the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany. Indeed, the US military’s primary engagement in counter-insurgency – Vietnam - left the Army in particular so scarred and battered, that future planning purposely focused on state opponents. Never again would the US military wade into a long-term guerilla conflict where US military comparative advantage (firepower, logistics, air dominance) would not matter much. For three decades, the US military has been structured around a large, Cold War-style contest, best embodied in the so-called “Powell doctrine” of overwhelming force, a clear political goal, and a clean exit strategy. [3]

Hence when the GWOt began after 9/11, the instinct of the US defense establishment was to “state-ize” the opponent. The US military is good at defeating states but has a mixed record at counter-insurgency and finds it quite distasteful. What might have been a campaign against a few specific terrorists entities – most notably al-Qaeda – became instead a “war” on terror. The “axis of evil” identified rogue states as America’s primary op-

ponents, and the US has fought or threatened with “regime change” states like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran.

Unfortunately this war paradigm mistargets the West’s opponent in this struggle. Defeating failed postcolonial states is easy [4], but will not reduce the actual militant Islamist threat, because the post-9/11 opponent is the slippery, transnational, radicalized edge of a contemporary Islamic revival. Terrorist groups are more like international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) than states; militarily reducing rickety Muslim-majority states only feeds the radicalism. National Intelligence estimates suggest that the Iraq War may be pushing moderate Muslims toward the jihadists. Iraq and Afghanistan are now counter-insurgency efforts – “hearts and minds” struggles in which legitimacy and moral authority trump “shock and awe.” Tanks, artillery and other expensive, hard power assets are in less demand than good intelligence, culturally literate soldiers and black operators, and the restoration of US moral credibility after Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and the “torture debate.”[5]

Unfortunately, Americans are handicapped because in such a campaign, they do not travel or learn foreign languages, and they accept American exceptionalism.[6] There are powerful bureaucratic and political culture imperatives to “state-ize” the enemy, which allows the US to play to its strengths. Hence, America interpreted the Islamic revival as an exaggerated “war” paradigm that wildly over-reads the opponent, but is bureaucratically comfortable (no pressure to stop procuring submarines and aircraft carriers) and political preferable (pleasing nationalist machismo with “mission accomplished” or “bring ‘em on”).[7] By contrast, few have thought what it means to use force against NGOs, and the US has lost some of the moral legitimacy (at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib) necessary to combat the War of Ideas against militant Islamist radicalism.

A post-Bush strategy will more effectively match the shape of the force to the shape of the mission. Al-Qaeda is not the Soviet Union, and few Muslim-majority states are openly balancing US power. Indeed, the GWOt is not really a war at all. It is challenge by a medievalist wing of the current Islamic “great awakening” to liberal modernity. And most Muslims reject this reactionary agenda. Hence the West’s goal is to win this contest of ideas – not crush rickety Muslim-majority rogue states because it fits the bureaucratic predilections of the defense establishment.[8] Force will occasionally be necessary, but in a discrete, focused counterinsurgency. Israel’s struggle against local terrorism and asymmetric conflict, and Britain’s “emergencies” in Ireland and Malaya provide a different frame for combating terror: a patient, fine-grained effort of special operations forces, special investigative and police powers, plus intelligence, with the occasional backing of significant force – all couched a political framework of moral superiority to the guerillas. Long, difficult, requiring stolid determination, filled with awkward moral choices for a liberal democracy, employing special forces and intelligence instead of “shock and awe”, “victory” in such a campaign is a far-off, grim, unhappy whimper which is not easily politicized in the US election cycle or by cable news.[9]

## From GWOt to Containment

In the context of American grand strategy, a return to containment is therefore likely in the next administration; the preemptive warfighting paradigm of the Bush team has eroded in Iraq. Bush-style preemption is forward and aggressive. The heavy footprint of American power around Eurasia alienates traditional allies and partners and buttresses propagandistic Islamist interpretations of the US. Viewing the US as a “hyperpower” or revisionist hegemon run amok, other states are (soft-) balancing and hedging against American power. Preemption damages US legitimacy, and the fall-out from Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib reduce American moral authority. All this raises the likelihood that critical moderate Muslim states like Turkey or Indonesia will defect from the US alliance network. Their resistance increases the Clausewitzian “friction” against American power in the world.[10]

Containment is forward but defensive, engaged but restrained. Restraint reassures the skittish, as do the institutions and alliances containment requires. Containment sees realistic limits to America’s ability to remake other parts of the world. But this is not retreat or isolation. Containment requires a tough ring of bases and allies, particularly Israel and India, around the Middle East to hem in radical Islam. But containment is wary of heavy interventionist strategies like Iraq II or Vietnam.[11]

Victory in the GWOt will come from hanging tough.[12] Twilight struggles require tenacity through long years of uncomfortable counter-insurgency. Nationalist and revolutionary ideologies are common in postcolonial, modernizing areas. If these passions spill across borders, containment can hold the line without the high costs of rollback or preemption. Containment, including US-sponsored counter-insurgencies in the Third World, boxed-in Soviet power until its expansionist ideology and revolutionary fervor burned itself out. Autocracies

and ideologues make poor economic managers. Subject populations weary of rhetoric, mismanagement, and threats of war as they see others moderate, join the global economy, and enrich themselves. The Islamist fashion, too, will fade as clerics and religious authoritarians prove unable to deliver growth and international prestige. The West can contain radical Islam as it contained communism, but it took decades to achieve. The maturation in GWOt rhetoric suggests a willingness to confront this long war as the battle of ideas and counterinsurgency which it has become in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Africa.

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## NOTES:

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