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THE WAR ON TERROR

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POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Though the name "War on Terror" was invented by the administration of U.S. president George W. Bush (2001-2009), the conflict between the Western powers (and their allies) and the usually less organized and therefore more difficult-to-track terrorist groups long predates the 2000's. The constant conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors, not to mention its Palestinian residents, made terrorism a concern of the United States, as Israel's staunchest ally. During the late 1970's, the birth of the Islamic revolutionary movement in Iran provided the United States with its longest involvement with Arab groups bent on America's destruction, when fifty-three hostages were held in the U.S. embassy in Iran for 444 days. Further attacks, such as the 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps encampment in Beirut, Lebanon, and the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, continually kept terrorism near the top of the evening newscasts.

The 1990's witnessed a rise in the frequency and lethality of international terrorism, principally from the Middle East, perpetrated by Islamic religious fanatics and culminating in the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001. This tragic, three-pronged attack—in which hijacked airlines were deliberately crashed into the World Trade Center towers, the Pentagon, and (after heroic action on the part of passengers) a field in Pennsylvania—was followed by bombings in Bali, Indonesia, in 2002; Madrid, Spain, in 2004; London, England, in 2005; and Mumbai, India, in 2008.

After the 9/11 attacks, the United States' efforts under President Bush to combat international terrorism—particularly from al-Qaeda and its associates and affiliates—was called the War (or Global War) on Terror. Taking office in 2009, President Barack Obama dropped this controversial phrase in favor of

"Overseas Contingency Operation." Nevertheless, the United States and Europe, as President Obama announced during his April, 2009, trip to the Continent, continued to face the very real threat of international terrorism.

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon—the 1960's and 1970's witnessed terrorism—nor has it been limited to foreign perpetrators. However, the decline and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and its radicalization of the Middle East and Arab politics, the status of the United States as the sole remaining world superpower (along with the envy and hatred this created), the development of a truly global economy, and a growing interdependence among states in terms of communications, trade, and travel have all contributed to make terrorism more far-reaching and lethal to nation-states. The threat of nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War years (1945-1991) was replaced by international terrorism, and while that threat was disrupted and even weakened by the actions taken by the United States and its allies, it has yet to be eliminated, as demonstrated by the November, 2008, attacks on a hotel in Mumbai, India, which killed more than 170 people and injured some 300.

Initially, the world, including the United States, was slow in realizing—much less confronting—the growing danger posed by Islamic terrorism. Indeed, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (the so-called 9/11 Commission), which investigated the events leading up to and during the September 11 attacks, cited a "failure of imagination" on the part of U.S. intelligence services, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as Congress for insufficient oversight of these and other agencies. Instead of recognizing the grave threat posed by al-Qaeda and like-minded groups, through-

out the 1990's the American intelligence services were operating from a Cold War mind-set. In addition, American law prohibited the sharing of intelligence between the CIA and the FBI, and outdated laws crippled efforts to track suspected terrorists in the United States.

Historically, the United States has suffered few terrorist incidents and thus on September 11, 2001, had little experience dealing with terrorism, such that the federal government was slow and unprepared to confront this growing threat. Even Western Europe, which had suffered acts of terrorism over the preceding few decades, seemed to have failed to appreciate the growing threat posed by Islamic terrorism. For example, as a brutal civil war raged in the former French colony of Algeria throughout the 1990's, pitting the army-run government against the terrorist organization known as the Islamic Armed Group (or GIA, Groupe Islamique Armée, for the French name of the group), the GIA launched terrorist attacks in France in retaliation against France's alleged sympathy (if not also covert support) for the army-backed Algerian government. GIA attacks in France included the 1994 hijacking of an Air France flight from Algiers to Paris with the aim of flying the plane

into the Eiffel Tower or blowing up the plane over Paris to inflict mass casualties; the plane was recaptured by French commandos in Marseille, France, while being refueled. The GIA also launched a series of bombings in the Paris metro in 1995 that killed eight people and injured more than one hundred. These attacks by the GIA—particularly the attempt to use a commercial aircraft as a bomb, as would be done on 9/11—seem neither to have alerted European nations that Islamic terrorists were starting to direct their attacks toward Europe nor to have signaled the increasing reach and operational capability of these groups. Even the February 26, 1993, World Trade Center and April 19, 1995, Oklahoma City bombings in the United States seemed to have been treated by the U.S. government as almost aberrant acts—perhaps because of the successful arrest and prosecution of those responsible for both attacks: Ramzi Yousef (a member of al-Qaeda) in the case of the 1993 World Trade Center attacks and Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols (anarchist opponents of the federal government) in the Oklahoma case.

Preoccupied with events in Europe as the Cold War came to an end, the breakup of Yugoslavia and the ensuing civil wars in Bosnia and Croatia, the building of a "new world order," the push to expand the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into Eastern Europe, and the outbreak of the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War (which precipitated the decades-long confrontation with Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein), the world failed to appreciate not only that terrorism was growing but also, more ominously and for the first time, that terrorist groups, particularly Arab Islamic groups, had begun to develop an international character in terms of presence and reach, finance and support. Disparate Islamic Sunni groups that had fought together against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan (1980-1988) developed a sense of identity that transcended nationality and were organized between the late

TURNING POINTS

1988   After Pan American Flight 103 explodes over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing hundreds, state terrorism mounted by Libya is suspected as cause.

1993   A bomb attack on New York's World Trade Center kills 6 people and injures more than 1,000.

1995   The April bombing of a federal office building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, by one or more individuals allegedly affiliated with militia groups kills 168. Within the same week, a Japanese religious cult mounts a gas attack in a Tokyo subway, hospitalizing 400.

1996   Millionaire Islamic extremist Osama Bin Laden issues a declaration of war against United States.

1998   The simultaneous bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August kill 224, and Bin Laden group supporters are suspected. United States conducts counterattack shortly thereafter against Bin Laden training base in Afghanistan.

2000   The October 12 suicide bombing of the USS *Cole* in the Persian Gulf kills 17 sailors.

1980's and early 1990's by the exiled Saudi Arabian Osama Bin Laden into al-Qaeda (Arabic for "the base").

Bin Laden, like countless other Muslims, had gone to Afghanistan to wage jihad (holy war) against the Soviet Union and used his inherited family fortune and organizational skills to recruit, arm, train, and organize the mujahideen (Arabic for "holy warriors of jihad"), thereby developing a favorable reputation among the mujahideen community. Shortly after forming al-Qaeda, Bin Laden met fellow mujahideen Ayman al-Zawahiri in Afghanistan, merging al-Qaeda with al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihadist followers in the early 1990's. Announcing that America had declared war on God and Islam, in February, 1998, Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri arranged for an Arabic newspaper in London, England, to publish a fatwa (or religious edict) calling it the duty of every Muslim to kill Americans. In a May, 1998, interview with ABC News reporter John Miller, Bin Laden said the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and its subsequent collapse convinced him that "we shall—with the grace of Allah—prevail over the Americans and the Jews." In the same interview, he also warned that unless the U.S. government stopped catering to "the interests of Jews," al-Qaeda would "inevitably move the battle to American soil, just as Ramzi Yousef and others have done"—a direct threat to commit terrorist attacks in America. By 1992, al-Qaeda had begun launching terrorist attacks, first in the Middle East and then, as the organization and its members' competence expanded, in other parts of the world, including Africa, the United States, and Europe.

MILITARY ACHIEVEMENT

Before the mass casualties inflicted by the attacks of 9/11, the United States and the rest of the world regarded terrorism as a problem for law enforcement rather than the military, emphasizing the arrest and prosecution of terrorists, such that where military force was used, it was limited to missile or air strikes designed to punish rather than destroy the terrorists and their safe havens. Until 9/11, despite several attacks overseas, the United States did not view terrorism as an act of war, and consequently airport security was lax and ineffective. Not until after 9/11 did President Bush declare a War on Terror, announcing to the world on November 6, 2001, that "you are either with us [the United States] or against us" in the global war on terrorism. Until 9/11, neither President Bill Clinton nor President Bush regarded terrorism as much of a threat to the United States. For that matter, the world was as surprised and horrified as Americans were at the ability of al-Qaeda to inflict such death and destruction (more than twenty-seven hundred people died in New York alone) on 9/11.

Despite the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, which had killed six people and injured more than one thousand, and the 1996 bombing of the U.S. Air Force's Khobar Towers barracks in Saudi Arabia, which killed nineteen airmen, not until August 7, 1998, and the American embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, which killed twelve Americans and more than two hundred Africans, did President Clinton launch cruise missile strikes (on August 20) against al-Qaeda targets in Sudan and Afghanistan. These strikes, however, failed to kill al-Qaeda's leadership, including Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, and, although destroying some al-Qaeda training camps (abandoned in anticipation of an American attack), had no effect on the organization; indeed, Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri promised more attacks against the United States. Although it is likely that any American response would have provoked additional al-Qaeda attacks, because America's response was ineffective and the use of missiles was interpreted by al-Qaeda as a sign of weakness (that the U.S. was unwilling to commit significant military forces and risk suffering casualties by committing ground troops to Afghanistan), Clinton's missile strikes probably only emboldened al-Qaeda.

It is worth remarking, however, that no political support existed among either Democrats or Republicans—or among the American people—for launching an invasion or even a limited ground campaign in Afghanistan, where the Taliban government had granted al-Qaeda sanctuary in 1996. In 1998, America still suffered from a false sense of invulnerability against terrorism, and therefore neither the will nor

The USS Cole, *after a terrorist attack in Yemeni waterways in October, 2000, possibly by the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army.*

the support existed for overthrowing the Taliban regime and depriving al-Qaeda of its sanctuary and bases in Afghanistan. In 2000, al-Qaeda terrorists attacked the U.S. Navy ship USS *Cole* in Yemen, killing seventeen sailors and severely damaging the ship, but failed in an attempt to bomb Los Angeles International Airport after the bomber—who apparently was under surveillance by Canadian intelligence—was arrested at the U.S.-Canadian border with explosives in his vehicle.

The attacks of 9/11, however, shattered America's sense of invulnerability and, tragically, literally brought home the threat posed by al-Qaeda. Like his

predecessor, it was not until faced with a crisis—this time, the 9/11 attacks—that President Bush took decisive action against al-Qaeda and international terrorism, launching the War on Terror with the stated aim of destroying al-Qaeda and states sponsoring or supporting terrorism. There was a strong outpouring of sympathy and support for the United States from most of the world as the 9/11 attacks united much of the world in solidarity with the Americans against al-Qaeda and terrorism. One month after 9/11, the United States, along with Britain, invaded Afghanistan, and two months later they overthrew the Taliban regime, inflicting heavy casualties on both Tali-

ban and al-Qaeda forces as U.S. and British troops and their Afghan allies in the Northern Alliance pursued fleeing militants. However, despite the swift collapse and defeat of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri eluded capture or death, presumably fleeing during the December, 2001, Battle of Tora Bora into the lawless tribal areas of northwestern Pakistan.

On March 20, 2003, the United States and Britain invaded Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein for his continued refusal to comply with sixteen U.N. resolutions stipulating that he account for and give up all of his weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)—namely, biological and chemical weapons—and thus prove that he no longer possessed them. President Bush alleged that Hussein's defiance of the United Nations, his continued efforts to develop WMDs (in defiance of the United Nations), his past use of WMDs, the brutality of his regime, and his links to terrorism (including, allegedly, to al-Qaeda) constituted a threat to the United States and the world. Bush believed that with Hussein redeveloping his WMDs and ties to terrorism, he might once again wage war against his neighbors (as he had done by invading Kuwait in 1990), form alliances with terrorist groups (including al-Qaeda), and even supply terrorists with WMDs. In the wake of 9/11, Bush argued that the specter of Hussein repossessing WMDs was intolerable. The March, 2003, invasion of Iraq, followed by the overthrow of Hussein's government one month later, killed about 150 American soldiers in two months of fighting. The post-invasion occupation of Iraq, however, proved to be an enormous challenge and a problem for the United States in terms of mounting casualties (4,277 as of April 19, 2009, according to the U.S. Pentagon), sustained and soaring costs (estimated at around $860 billion as of 2009), and loss of significant world support. The Iraq War not only preoccupied the Bush administration for the next six years but also proved to be the main factor in the six-year decline of Bush's approval ratings (to approximately 34 percent, according to Gallup) by the time he left office on January 20, 2009. By 2007, however, after a much-needed shift in U.S. strategy and tactics, the situation in Iraq had finally started to improve, and by 2008 violence in Iraq, including American casualties, had declined significantly and the country and its nascent democratic government had become much more stable.

Although the situation in Iraq improved, conditions in Afghanistan worsened as al-Qaeda terrorists fled from Iraq to Afghanistan, political instability consumed Pakistan and sapped its willingness to confront Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorists hiding in Pakistan, and the Taliban and al-Qaeda regrouped and launched an insurgency against U.S. forces and the democratic Afghan government of Hamid Karzai. As American military deaths in Afghanistan rose by 35 percent in 2008 (and to 113 soldiers killed in February, 2009), President Obama pledged to "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban" and dispatched to Afghanistan an additional 17,000 combat troops and 4,000 military trainers from the Eighty-second Airborne Division to train that country's army, bringing the total number of U.S. troops to about 27,000.

WEAPONS, UNIFORMS, AND ARMOR

Al-Qaeda and its affiliates and associates have resorted to largely unconventional weapons to wage terrorism, using vehicles, boats (as in the case of the USS *Cole* attack), and airplanes (as on 9/11) to inflict mass casualties. In Afghanistan and Iraq, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), to say nothing of deadly ambush attacks, have killed hundreds of American and Allied, including NATO, troops. Al-Qaeda has also been known to rely on suicide bombings, as on 9/11 and in the Bali, Madrid, and London bombings.

Al-Qaeda and the Taliban lack firepower and technology, particularly the artillery, air power, and night-vision equipment used by U.S. forces. Therefore, they generally avoid open, prolonged engagements and favor ambushes and hit-and-run tactics. These serve to frustrate and demoralize their adversary, denying the enemy a decisive victory and thus prolonging the conflict. In so doing, the Taliban and al-Qaeda hope to win the psychological battle of wearing down the enemy by making the war seem endless and thus unwinnable.

MILITARY ORGANIZATION

The organization of forces in the war against terrorism is as nebulous and varied as it is vast. On the U.S. and Allied side, military organization comprises military and civilian departments within the U.S. government and the military forces and government offices of other Allied nations. Although the military structure and interrelationships of the myriad terrorist and extremist groups worldwide would take more than one volume to cover in detail, some rundown of the main players in the War on Terror is helpful.

Each terrorist group has a different structure, and often those structures change as soon as Western intelligence can classify them. Although al-Qaeda and the Taliban dominate the headlines, groups classified as current threats are not limited by geography. Other groups involved in the War on Terror include Colombia's National Liberation Army and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (both of whose members have carried out kidnappings of American citizens), Al-Jihad (whose members assassinated Egyptian president Anwar el-Sadat), al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt, the National Liberation Army of Iran in Iraq, Aum Shinrikyo (Supreme Truth) sect in Japan (which carried out the 1995 Tokyo subway attack using sarin nerve gas), Hezbollah in Israel and Lebanon (which carried out the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks), Hamas in Israel, Harakat ul-Ansar and Harakat ul-Mujahidin in Pakistan, the New People's Army in the Philippines, the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party in Turkey, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Of course, the very nature of these transitory groups means that they are constantly and currently metamorphosing, as new groups are founded out of the remnants of old ones.

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, President Bush created the Department of Homeland Security, under whose auspices many previously independent federal bureaus and offices were consolidated, including the National Guard, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Citizenship and Immigration Services, the Secret Service, the Transportation Security Administration, and the Civil Air Patrol. In addition, although the U.S. government has long called operations to quell terrorism and secure the country a "war," the varied and often unstructured nature of terrorist organizations has raised questions as to the status of their "soldiers." For its purposes, the United States has called them "unlawful combatants," which allows the United States to escape the provisions of the Geneva Conventions. However, such a characterization has not gone without criticism by the American public, as has been demonstrated by the backlash against the use of torture and the indefinite confinement, without being charged, of Iraqis and other nationals deemed to have been involved in international terrorism at the Joint Task Force's detention camps at Guantánamo Bay (Gitmo).

DOCTRINE, STRATEGY, AND TACTICS

Al-Qaeda and the mujahideen community in general developed significant combat experience fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, and those experiences served as the basis for their insurgency campaign against U.S. and Allied forces, including NATO forces, in Afghanistan and Iraq. In Iraq, the United States was able, under the leadership of U.S. Army general David Petraeus, then commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, to reverse most of the violence and terrorism plaguing Iraq. His strategy, known as the surge, changed the way the United States and its allies were battling al-Qaeda and other insurgents and terrorist groups in Iraq by denying them the ability to control territory, terrorize, and enjoy sanctuary among the local population. Under General Petraeus, the strategy of the United States was to clear and hold territory; instead of remaining ensconced in well-defended bases distant from violence, the U.S. military, along with Iraqi forces, took up residence inside the most violent areas of Iraq not only to eliminate insurgent activity but, just as important, to hold the territory, thereby denying the insurgents and terrorists sanctuary and support. As security improved (along with the competence of Iraqi

forces), so did civil services, and the insurgents and terrorists lost much of their support and, at least temporarily, were rendered largely ineffective. In 2009, al-Qaeda no longer even mentioned Iraq in its propaganda broadcasts—a tacit admission it had failed to turn Iraq into a terrorist state.

In addition to the surge, al-Qaeda's killing of Muslim insurgents contributed to the improvement in Iraq's security, encouraging many Iraqis to turn against al-Qaeda through so-called awakening councils and enabling the United States to recruit former insurgents and terrorists to fight al-Qaeda.

Whether such a surge can succeed in Afghanistan is a different matter, since conditions in that country are very different from those in Iraq. Unlike Iraq, terrain in Afghanistan is dotted with high mountains and deep valleys and caves, along with treacherous weather, especially in the winter. There is little sense of a national identity or unity among the people of Afghanistan, and politics are based instead on ethnic (tribal, clan, and linguistic) identities. The country lacks a history of a centralized government and, in addition to its rough terrain, its lack of a national system of roads makes travel difficult. Furthermore, the presence of a porous mountainous border with Pakistan to the east—and vast, essentially anarchic border regions (the North-West Frontier Province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas), autonomous from Pakistani government control—gives al-Qaeda and the Taliban sanctuary.

In his first year in office, President Obama continued the Bush administration's policy of unmanned Predator drone strikes along the Afghan-Pakistani border and also inside both the North-West Frontier Province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas, much to the anger of local residents, who not only sympathized with al-Qaeda and the Taliban but also claimed that these strikes have killed innocent civilians. The Pakistani government also objected to these strikes as a violation of its sovereignty, because of the civilians killed as well as the effect that attacks had of fanning anti-American sentiment. Exacerbating these problems was

a weak and unstable Pakistani government, paralyzed from both a series of political disputes and a surge of terrorist acts fomented by al-Qaeda and its affiliates and associates. The tension and hostility between the United States and its NATO allies regarding Afghanistan was another factor contributing to the problems: The United States resented having to shoulder most of the military burden in Afghanistan and viewed Europe as not doing enough to help in the the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban; in addition, most European countries did not permit their forces in Afghanistan to engage in combat (or limited such engagements to responses to being attacked).

On the other side, the Iraq War strained U.S.-

A small portion of the destruction of the World Trade Center towers in Manhattan, a few days after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

European relations, and most European governments, regarding the war in Afghanistan as unwinnable, objected to the military focus of the American war effort, arguing that the best way to blunt the appeal and strength of al-Qaeda and the Taliban was to rebuild the country's economy and infrastructure. Despite President Obama's immense popularity in Europe, his April, 2009, European trip was notable for its lack of success in gaining pledges of additional support for the war in Afghanistan.

In any case, withdrawing or abandoning Afghanistan would not make the United States safe from al-Qaeda and future terrorism; such a course of action would only embolden al-Qaeda and Afghanistan would once again become the terrorist safe haven it was during the 1990's. It seems likely that the War on Terror will continue for a very long time, and the best-case scenario is that the United States will stop and maybe even reverse much of the surge in al-Qaeda and Taliban attacks.

CONTEMPORARY SOURCES

Despite President Obama's change in nomenclature, the War on Terror is an ongoing conflict, with new primary sources being generated almost daily. There are a few indispensable pieces, without which the War on Terror cannot be fully understood. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), is a sort of manual for the War on Terror, outlining the context of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and the U.S. government's response to the attacks. Most of the book-length primary sources take the form of memoirs that are just beginning to appear. *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) is a memoir by former director of the Central Intelligence Agency George Tenet, in which he discusses all aspects of the U.S. response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the War on Terror, the Afghanistan War, and the Iraq War. Douglas Feith, former undersecretary of defense for policy, wrote *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper, 2008), in which he gives an insider's view of the history of the early years of the War on Terror, including the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. The book also includes facsimiles of U.S. government memoranda and other documents from the period.

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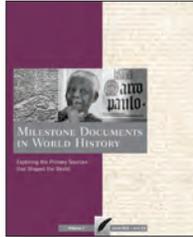
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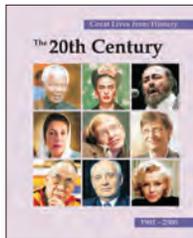
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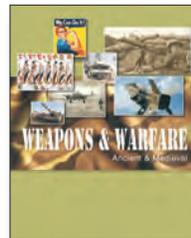
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