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Tunnel at the End of the Light: A Critique of US Counter-terrorist Grand Strategy

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For many Americans, the columns of smoke and dust that rose to obscure the New York skyline on September 11th 2001 recalled the oily black smoke leaking from America's broken battleships on 7 December 1941, when the Imperial Japanese Navy launched a surprise attack on US naval forces at Pearl Harbor. But the parallels between the events are more apparent than real. Although both attacks were surprises and both resulted in a declaration of war by the United States on its attackers, an appreciation of why the two events are different in kind and in scale provides important insights into why the current US reaction to terrorism—its counter-terrorist grand strategy—will fail.

This essay introduces a theoretically grounded critique of US counter-terrorist grand strategy in reaction to the destruction of the World Trade Center's twin towers in New York and a portion of the Pentagon in Washington, DC, on September 11th 2001. This critique has two parts. First, I explain why the United States has responded as it has and why its current response will fail. Second, I explain what is needed—in terms of military and political strategy—to defeat terrorists who continue to seek to harm the people and interests of the United States and its allies in Europe and abroad.

Righteous Reaction to Injury: To War or Not to War?

As fires still smouldered in Hawaii on 8 December 1941, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Congress for a declaration of war on the Empire of Japan. The United States had been attacked, and Roosevelt declared that the memory of that unprovoked attack would 'live in infamy'. In his speech to the nation following the September 11th attacks, US President George W. Bush declared war on global terrorism and promised to punish those who had planned the attacks as well as any states that supported the planners.¹ Yet the attack on US forces at Pearl Harbor was undertaken by the armed forces of another state, and directed against the armed forces of the United States. A declaration of war was appropriate then. As far as we know the September 11th attacks were led by a group of radical Islamists called al-Qaeda. The attacks were directed primarily against unarmed civilians (although the Pentagon was also attacked). Al-Qaeda,

¹ See 'President Bush's Address on Terrorism before a Joint Meeting of Congress', *The New York Times*, 21 September 2001. Although the president's declaration was not formal, it cannot be discounted as mere rhetoric for that reason. The United States also did not formally declare war against either North Korea in 1950 or North Vietnam in 1965.

whatever its claims and pretensions, will never amount to a threat against the territorial integrity or survival of the United States. The US president's impassioned and informal declaration of war was therefore not warranted. It also gave the terrorists the status of combatants, instead of mere criminals. Given its expansive scope—not simply al-Qaeda but states supporting 'global terrorism'—it amounts to a declaration of war against any group whose dislike of the United States is intense enough to warrant the consideration of violence against the United States or its interests. In other words, it amounts to another world war.

A 'War' on Terror

Americans are generally fond of wars because they have almost always won them, and because they believe that the United States only enters into a war when it is absolutely necessary or just. Since World War II alone, the United States has fought a Cold War (including the not-so-cold Korean and Vietnam wars), a war on poverty, a war on drugs, and a war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq (leading a coalition of like-minded states). Now the US president has declared war on terrorism. His declaration of a 'crusade' against global terrorism was impolitic, but in the context of an American conception of just war the president was right on the mark.

Yet the 20th-century wars the United States won all share one key element: they were wars against states and the armed forces that represented them. In Vietnam the United States faced both the North Vietnamese Army—a conventional army it soundly defeated—and the Viet Cong—a guerrilla army against which its record proved mixed at best. The United States has abandoned its war on poverty and has lost its war on drugs. There is therefore little reason to believe that with its current strategy and forces it can win a war against global terrorism. There are three reasons why this is so.

The first and main reason is that terrorism of the kind targeted by US policy makers is primarily a political, not a military problem.² The most successful terrorists are successful because they have social support. Social support in turn depends on the fact that at least some of a terrorist group's grievances are legitimate. Unless these are addressed by appropriate and meaningful political reforms,³ it will prove impossible to separate the terrorists—both those who kill

² For the best discussion of the ideal relative weight of political and military resources in counter-insurgency, see Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1966; and Geoffrey D. T. Shaw, 'Policemen versus Soldiers, the Debate Leading to MAAG Objections and Washington's Rejection of the Core of the British Counter-insurgency Advice', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 12, no. 2, Summer 2001, pp. 51–58.

³ There is a moral hazard problem associated with initiating reforms once an insurgency is in progress. Incumbent governments often argue that even if the terrorists have a legitimate grievance, addressing that grievance after an attack will set the precedent that illicit violence can coerce the government into changing its policies or laws. The problem with this argument is that it fails to take into account the psychology of insurgency. Only a minority of insurgents enjoys violence for violence's sake. Most of the remainder—and thus the insurgency as a whole—will be demobilised by policy changes that address legitimate grievances. The Hukbalahap in the Philippines in 1952 are the classic case in point. Other groups may then feel they should try violence to advance their aims, but unless these aims are widely perceived to be legitimate the insurgency is doomed.

only in order to further what they perceive to be legitimate political aims and the tiny allied minority who kill because they enjoy killing—from the social support that hides and supplies them. This does not mean that a military capability is not a vital component of any counter-terrorist grand strategy, but if it is made the centrepiece of such a strategy it will prove counterproductive.⁴ In other words, a ‘war’ on terrorism is a bad idea from the start.

A second reason, ironically, has to do with the long history of US success in war. The United States has excelled at bringing its industrial productivity and technological genius to bear on conflicts between states and their regular armed forces. Since the end of the Cold War, this capacity to win conventional wars has far outstripped that of any other state in the international system. But success in deterring and defeating conventional adversaries came at a cost. The United States specialised its intelligence gathering capabilities and armed forces—doctrine, equipment and training—to fight and win wars that directly threatened US national security or survival. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union that meant the threat of coercion or conquest from another state or coalition of states. The problem is that in the process of making itself invulnerable to conquest by other states, the United States made itself *increasingly* vulnerable to a form of indirect strategy perfected in the last century by Mao Tse-tung in China.⁵ Training, doctrine and equipment of US armed forces emphasised the ability to employ highly mobile mechanised units to concentrate massive firepower against similarly armed and trained adversaries, such as the Soviet Union. These armies required unprecedented logistical support, and worked best on fairly open terrain. They were emphatically *not* suited to combat operations in mountains, swamps, or jungles. Intelligence capabilities, likewise, tended to emphasise technical over human resources: electromagnetic spectrum intercept, high-altitude airborne reconnaissance and, later, satellite intelligence. These work best against adversaries whose militaries are mechanised and operate across open ground for long distances: Iraq in 1990 providing an ideal case. They are not as effective against adversaries with no vehicles and no radios, and who operate under thick jungle canopies or at night; concentrating briefly to attack and then dispersing instantly afterwards. In essence, as a consequence of their experiences in World War II, the industrialised states of Europe built militaries designed to prosecute direct strategies—strategies that disabled an adversary by the economical destruction of that adversary’s armed forces on open terrain or ocean and in European climates.

Mao realised that the combination of conventional specialisation (both armed forces and intelligence capabilities) and liberal democratic values (a free press and a prohibition against barbarism) made states like the United States and its European allies vulnerable to indirect strategies such as nationalist guerrilla warfare⁶ or terrorism. Post-World War II clashes of state-specialised armed

⁴ See Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, p. 167.

⁵ On direct and indirect strategies in general, see André Corvisier and John Childs, ‘Indirect Warfare’, in Corvisier and Childs, *A Dictionary of Military History and the Art of War*, Cambridge, MA, Blackwell, 1994, p. 378.

⁶ Mao would have called it revolutionary guerrilla warfare, but this would only be propaganda. The key to Mao’s success was Chinese nationalism and the fact that the Communist Party succeeded in representing Chinese nationalism better than the Kuomintang. The same proved true in South Vietnam: after the United States supported the

forces with Mao-inspired indirect defence strategies resulted in costly defeats for the United States in Vietnam and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.⁷ The British were more successful in this period because they had an army whose structure, doctrine, training and institutional expertise made it ideal at supporting colonial administrations: it was less effective at slugging it out in a conventional heavy-mechanised fight than its continental European neighbours, but much more effective at the sort of discriminate violence necessary to combat terrorists and other insurgents in tough terrain and extreme climates. The United States currently maintains a military still heavily weighted toward state-to-state, high-tech mechanised combat. As of 10 September, US special operations forces—the armed forces best trained and equipped to defeat an insurgency—represented from 2% to 3% of US armed forces. After September 11th there is little to suggest that this ratio will increase significantly, even though terrorists prefer to hide in weak states with terrain—including heavily populated cities—that neutralises many of the advantages of a mechanised military supported by technical intelligence resources. Instead, the emphasis on transformation has increasingly focused on strategic mobility: designing equipment sets to be more easily loaded onto air transport for rapid deployment to trouble spots.⁸ The forces will get lighter, but the approach will remain conventional: get the adversary's soldiers and get them by concentrating massive firepower. Special operations forces work not only with lighter equipment, but also with an entirely different mindset.⁹

A third reason is that the United States has refused to learn from either its own mistakes or those of its allies. In 1954, France warned the United States that in the event the communist North refused to abide by its treaty obligations, defending the government of South Vietnam would be difficult and costly at best. French advice was ignored because most of the US military elite—veterans of World War II and the Korean conflict—believed that the French were

(Footnote continued)

assassination of Diem, it lost the last truly credible non-communist claimant to Vietnamese nationalism. Nationalism and not communist ideology is what made guerrilla warfare such a potent force in the 20th century.

⁷ For a discussion on the consequences of systematic interaction of direct and indirect strategies, see Ivan Arreguín-Toft, 'How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict', *International Security*, vol. 26, no. 1, Summer, 2001, pp. 93–128.

⁸ The US defence spending budget will increase an estimated \$48 billion dollars to \$379 billion in 2003. Yet although the war on terrorism has been used to justify the biggest spending increase on defence in 20 years, estimates are that as little as 10% of this money will actually go to fight terrorism (not counting a \$10 billion contingency fund to fight 'wars'). Some costly systems that will receive funding but prove all but useless in a war against terror include the F-22 fighter, more B-2 stealth bombers and possibly a new mobile artillery system called the Crusader. See James Dao, 'Warm Reaction to Bigger Pentagon Budget', *The New York Times*, 13 February 2002; and Editorial, 'A Rising Tide of Defense Dollar', *The New York Times*, 5 May 2002.

⁹ The best recent exposition of this difference in mindset may be found in Mark Bowden's *Blackhawk Down*. Bowden highlights an ancient debate about the role of uniformity, hierarchy of command and 'discipline' in his account of Captain Steele's dismay over the alleged lack of these characteristics in US Delta Force operators in Mogadishu. See Mark Bowden, *Blackhawk Down*, New York, Penguin Books, 1999, pp. 172–74. On the broader topic of why conventional US military elites generally despise special operations forces, see Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding US Special Operations Forces*, Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 1997, pp. 33–43.

militarily incompetent. Similarly, the British, after a number of bitter defeats, including the loss of India to Gandhi's indirect strategy of non-violent resistance, had pioneered a way to defeat indirect strategies without recourse to barbarism. Under the guidance of Sir Robert Thompson, the British successfully employed this system in the Malayan Emergency of 1948.¹⁰ True, the British had a much simpler problem in Malaya than that faced by the United States in South Vietnam: the geography of Malaya made it simpler to isolate the insurgents from support and sanctuary, and the British were able to engage the insurgents at a much earlier stage in their resistance. But when Thompson offered British counter-insurgency advice and experience to the United States in Vietnam it was ultimately rejected. This time it was less because US generals did not respect the British military (although there was some of that), but more a question of counter-insurgency philosophy: the British system emphasised police work and patience, and the US approach emphasised killing 'terrorists' and would not wait.¹¹ US strategists tended to view political initiatives as defensive, and military initiatives as offensive. Why wait years for strategic hamlets to have an impact when the United States had the forces and technology to simply go out into the jungle and kill the terrorists?¹²

The US institutional response to its defeat in Vietnam was not to restructure in order to better fight small wars. On the contrary, the US response is best summarised by what has come to be known as the Powell Doctrine.¹³ Essentially, General Powell argued that the United States could best avoid future 'Vietnams' by refusing to commit US forces in unconventional wars. By avoiding humanitarian, peacekeeping, drug interdiction and counter-terrorism missions, the US military could continue modernising its conventional armed forces without fear of future quagmires. Published in the rosy afterglow of US-led success against Saddam Hussein's Soviet trained and equipped Iraq, the Doctrine suffered from two problems.

The first and most obvious was that left unchecked, significant threats to US vital interests could emerge in the developing world; and in precisely those areas and contexts proscribed by the Doctrine. These threats surround the problem of failed states, and include harbouring organised crime, mass refugee flows, terrorism (including WMD [weapons of mass destruction] terrorism) and even plagues. This may be why General Powell himself supported the disastrous US military mission to Somalia. That mission appeared to be one amenable to the Doctrine, which specified concrete military and political objectives and a clear set of exit criteria. But in reality the crisis of Somalia was like a Chinese

¹⁰ In Malaya the British faced a Mao-type communist insurgency and defeated it by means of the patient application of a well-designed strategy using primarily police forces. See Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, and Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency 1948–1960*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989.

¹¹ See Shaw, 'Policemen versus Soldiers'.

¹² Besides US exceptionalism, a second obstacle to US learning is its faith in technological solutions to social problems, including war. Faith in technology often encourages US military elites to believe that the lessons of past conflicts will be rendered irrelevant by new systems. So far, however, no combination of technology has made armed insurgency or terrorism impossible.

¹³ See Colin L. Powell, 'US Forces: Challenges Ahead', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 71, no. 5, Winter 1992, pp. 32–51.

box:¹⁴ as soon as one 'concrete objective' was approached it became obvious it could not be achieved until some additional goal was met. Each subsequent objective seemed concrete and easily achievable with only a slight escalation in force or resources.¹⁵ In the event the costs of the attempt to capture Aided exceeded US political will to stabilise Somalia and the mission was scrubbed—a failure.

Rhetorically, the current war on terrorism appears to repudiate the Doctrine because the US president has declared war against a vague enemy, for an unspecified time, and with an unclear strategy: 'the course of this conflict is not known'.¹⁶ But in terms of execution a US-led war on terrorism is likely to suffer from the same Chinese box problem as the Somalia mission. To 'get' Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, for example, the United States had to 'get the Taliban'. But the Taliban were the *de facto* rulers of a sovereign state; a state, moreover, surrounded by six other states, none of whom would make very savoury allies. True to form, the United States accused the Taliban of being a totalitarian regime while ignoring the fact that its new ally, Pakistan, was a military dictatorship. The United States also directly aided the Northern Alliance, a loose affiliation of barbarians who had, by their excessively venal and brutal behaviour after the fall of the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul, laid the foundation for the accession to power of the Taliban in the first place. But the conquest of Afghanistan resulted in a dispersal of US adversaries, not their destruction or capture. Now, besides the still-ongoing search for enemies in Afghanistan, the United States and its allies face the prospects of hunting terrorists in other sovereign states.¹⁷

The second problem with the Powell Doctrine is its political naiveté. Omnipotence, so the theologians tell us, can only be justified by omnibenevolence and omniscience. After the collapse of the Soviet Union therefore, US foreign policy has been judged not only in terms of its positive military deployments, but its negative ones: the unwillingness of the United States to commit its armed forces to halt heinous abuses in places such as Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992, and in Rwanda in 1993.¹⁸ The United States must lead, Powell and others have argued, because it is good and it is powerful; and power implies responsibility. Yet the Doctrine simultaneously makes the case that the US political authority should not commit the military to unconventional missions. If followed, the Powell Doctrine would force the United States and its

¹⁴ A Chinese box is a novelty item in which a series of boxes are cleverly nested one within another. As soon as one box is opened, one discovers another, slightly smaller box, nesting inside, and so on down to a very tiny box.

¹⁵ The original mission, Operation Restore Hope, was begun in December of 1992 with the goal of simply feeding starving Somalis. It soon developed that to do so meant it would be necessary to protect the food convoys and distribution centres. This meant going after the warlords who were responsible for looting the convoys and ambushing UNITAF forces. The capture of Somalia's most formidable warlord, Mohammad Farah Aided was, finally, expected to result in mission closure.

¹⁶ See 'President Bush's Address on Terrorism'.

¹⁷ The alternative being to coerce other states into capturing members of what the United States considers to be 'terrorist organisations', but which in all but a few cases will not be considered such on their home soil.

¹⁸ See Timothy Garton Ash, 'The Perils of Too Much Power', *The New York Times*, 9 April 2002.

allies to stand idly by while innocent women are brutally and systematically raped in the Balkans, and children and their mothers are literally hacked to pieces in Rwanda.

The Powell Doctrine's ultimate utility lay in its mapping a clear path out of the existential dilemma faced by the US military after the Gulf War.¹⁹ The US military could be gored by the horn of irrelevance in a world where no 'peer' threats capable of justifying continued and expensive modernisation existed, or by the horn of being forced to accept a host of institutionally distasteful missions, such as peacekeeping or drug interdiction. Keeping council with the Doctrine meant continuing to prepare for a future world war against a fearsome and technologically advanced adversary. It meant continuing to modernise already unmatched US weapons platforms and capabilities. It meant no more quagmires and no more Vietnams. The key to making it work was to locate a threat that could justify modernisation of the US armed forces in preparation for that day—certain to come—when a new state or coalition of states would again credibly threaten US survival. Prior to September 11th the leading contenders were the People's Republic of China and WMD terrorism. These were followed distantly by rogue states: Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

States and Terrorists

The reason why WMD terrorism proved to be so valuable as a post-Cold War bogeyman was that the idealised WMD terrorist both maintained a state-like capacity to harm²⁰ and the possibility of invoking a principle of responsibility called strict liability. Strict liability is typically associated with navies, and holds that the captain of a ship at sea is strictly liable for the actions and conduct of even the lowliest crew member. Since in most cases it was believed that WMD terrorists would need a state's help to acquire a chemical, radiological or biological weapon, one way to deter a potential WMD terrorist would be to make it clear that any state found complicit in a WMD attack against the United States or its allies would be subject to extreme sanction, possibly including retaliation in kind.

This is one reason why the United States has emphasised the liability of states that support terrorism. The Bush administration hopes to deter future attacks—either WMD or of a quality similar to those of September 11th—by threatening complicit states with swift and overwhelming military retaliation. Afghanistan was to be the first test case, as President Bush made clear in his 20 September 2001 address to Congress:

The [Taliban] is not only repressing its own people; it is threatening people everywhere by sponsoring and sheltering and supplying terrorists. By aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder.²¹

The Taliban were in this sense liable for the attacks of September 11th; and the

¹⁹ It was also extremely useful at emphasising the point that many of the crises for which the political authority would wish to use military force were not in fact problems that could be resolved by force or force alone.

²⁰ The detonation of even a small radiological, chemical or biological weapon in the right place at the right time could result in catastrophic loss of life.

²¹ 'President Bush's Address on Terrorism'.

military assault on the Taliban, Operation Enduring Freedom, followed on 7 October. Operation Enduring Freedom was intended to serve as a demonstration to other states—Iraq in particular—whose interests may have included supporting terrorists planning future attacks on the United States or its allies. Another advantage of this policy is that it does not require the United States to adopt new strategies or build counter-insurgency forces. It can stop terrorism using the counter-state forces and doctrines it already has—e.g. nuclear weapons, stealth aircraft and aircraft carriers.

One problem with the strict liability strategy is the growing number of states in the world in which the government—such as it is—is by no means in control of its territory or population. These ships of state are not only leaky, but there is no clear or consistent connection between the bridge and the ship's crew and passengers. There is also a poor understanding of what or who is on board. In the unhappy event that the United States or an ally is again subject to a shocking terrorist attack, what will be the response if the perpetrators were born in Saudi Arabia and trained in Pakistan? Can either of those states be held responsible in the strict liability sense? Even the United States, an advanced industrial state with a sophisticated military and intelligence capability, proved to be an unwitting host to the perpetrators of the September 11th attacks. These men trained at least part of the time in the United States, where they acquired the ability to pilot a large commercial aircraft with sufficient skill to hit two narrow buildings in a crowded New York skyline. Another problem with the strict liability strategy is that it reduces the US military's incentive to restructure to more effectively counter non-state threats: if *states* are liable, then US forces will end up engaging the regular armed forces of other states, rather than shadowy adversaries in impossible terrain. In sum, the United States has declared its intention to hold *other ships'* captains strictly liable for the actions of their crew and passengers, but has planned little in the way of reforming its own military or resolving the deeper structural problem of failed states.

International Law and the Problem of Failed States and Terrorists

In order to survive, insurgencies—be these guerrillas or terrorists—require two things at a minimum. First, political or physical sanctuary; and second, social support. If a state cannot provide for its citizens the minimal service of physical security from non-government-sanctioned organised violence it may be considered a failed state. It is within the geographic confines of such states that terrorism and organised crime—including illicit trade in women and girls, drugs and arms—find their sanctuaries.²²

But ironically, two features of post-World War II international law complicate resolving the problem of failed states. First, the UN Charter prohibits interstate war except in self-defence, where self-defence is defined around the now somewhat dated concept of defence against attack by the regular armed forces of another state. Second, the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conven-

²² Robert Rotberg considers only seven states to be failed states: Afghanistan, Angola, Sudan, Burundi, Congo, Sierra Leone and Liberia. See Robert I. Rotberg, 'Failed States and State Building in a World of Terror', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 81, no. 4, July–August 2002, pp. 127–140.

tions (1977) prohibit states from using armed force to put down 'national liberation movements'.²³

The problem with the interstate war prohibition is that it makes actual or would-be tyrants safe from all but domestic adversaries. So if it is true, as Charles Tilly famously suggests, that 'war made the state and the state made war', then the UN Charter's prohibition on interstate war may have acted as a kind of interstate rent control, diminishing each government's incentive to reform or modernise once the Cold War ended. With a reduced risk of being conquered or of having domestic adversaries armed by the superpowers, governments in much of the developing world were increasingly free to tyrannise their populations and overexploit their natural resources.²⁴ The problem with the national liberation movement prohibition is that while some national liberation movements are represented by terrorists, not all terrorists represent national liberation movements.

The Bush administration has dealt with both complications by a process of selective redefinition. It has redefined self-defence to include attacks such as the September 11th attacks within the category of threats to a state's survival, which would activate a US right to self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter.²⁵ And the United States has followed the practice of most other states by simply redefining inconvenient national liberation movements as 'terrorists'.²⁶ The United States has therefore led the way towards establishing a new and dangerous precedent, in which a military attack against another sovereign state can be justified by a link between that state and a prior, non-WMD terror attack. This is how the United States was able to justify leading a coalition of armed forces against Afghanistan in October of 2001.

Besides undermining the UN Charter's prohibition on interstate war, one problem with this precedent is that by establishing that state *militaries* should resolve the problem of terrorism, attacks such as those on Afghanistan will ultimately prove counterproductive. This is because resolving the problem of failed states demands economic recovery support *and* a post-conflict political

²³ See G. I. A. D. Draper, 'Wars of National Liberation and War Criminality', in Michael Howard, ed., *Restraints on War: Studies in the Limitation of Armed Conflict*, London: Oxford University Press, 1979.

²⁴ This is the flipside of Stanislas Andreski's theory about why interstate war is so rare in Latin America. Andreski argues that states in Latin America have specialised their armed forces to internal control, and are thus proportionately less capable of successfully mounting external adventures. See Stanislas Andreski, *Military Organization and Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968.

²⁵ Israel in its recent campaigns in the West Bank has followed suit: by this logic suicide bombers are a threat to Israel's survival on a par with the wars of 1948 and 1967. This is useful because it gives Israel some public relations leeway in the brutality of its response. As observed years ago by Andrew J. R. Mack, actors fighting for their survival are given a great deal of licence concerning the laws of war. See Andrew J. R. Mack, 'Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict', *World Politics*, vol. 27, no. 2, January 1975, p. 186.

²⁶ The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia sought to define the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as a terrorist organisation, which from its point of view is exactly what the KLA was. But the United States and its allies established—for very good reasons—that the KLA was in fact a national liberation movement.

administration in addition to discriminate military action.²⁷ Robert Thompson puts this best:

It is essential, too, that there should be a proper balance between the military and the civil effort, with complete coordination in all fields. Otherwise a situation will arise in which military operations produce no lasting results because they are unsupported by civil follow-up action.²⁸

In the 19th century, not only the conquest of 'backward' nations, but also colonialism, was acceptable. Military victory, as noted by prominent revolutionaries and soldiers across history, is always a simple matter compared with governing. This is why the more successful empires such as France and especially Britain created and then maintained a wealth of institutional expertise regarding the administration of conquered peoples. But after World War II, colonial possessions became both militarily untenable and politically unpalatable. Colonial offices were closed and over time institutional expertise in what is now called 'nation building' disappeared. The UN Charter's mainly Western authors assumed that the institution of the state was natural, inevitable and desirable. But the state is only a natural institutional development in some parts of the world—e.g. Europe—and not in others—e.g. Africa. A state system was transplanted in sub-Saharan Africa by force, but in most places it survived only with constant tending. Once the gardeners left, the states they had planted began to wither; especially after the end of the Cold War.

Another problem is the precedent's unintended side-effects. The rapid success of US-supported forces against the Taliban in Afghanistan highlights the risks of tyrannising one's population when conquest from another state *is* a strong possibility. The lack of broad social support made guerrilla warfare—the preferred defence against a well-supported conventional army—impossible for the Taliban. The example of the ouster of the Taliban therefore highlights an intriguing possibility: the Bush administration's invocation of strict liability and flouting of the UN Charter's prohibition against interstate war may give other failed states a real incentive to reform. The problem is that any failed states that reform and stabilise as a result of this new incentive will likely be opposed to US interests; possibly expanding the number of states in the current 'rogue state' or 'axis-of-evil' group. Moreover, the reforms these states choose should make them less likely to count as liberal democracies, because if the alternative is destruction in retaliation for a terrorist attack launched from one's territory, the pressure to account for each citizen's activities and whereabouts creates an irresistible incentive towards totalitarianism. Ironically, then, the United States would be attempting to fight terrorism by giving weak states new incentives to abandon liberal democratic institutions in favour of authoritarian ones.

And the United States has not decisively defeated the Taliban, much less

²⁷ The US House of Representatives recently approved economic and military aid to Afghanistan totalling \$1.3 billion. That is a substantial sum, and if properly administered would go a long way towards establishing Afghanistan as a stable state. However, the obstacles to effective distribution of these funds remain quite high. Afghanistan is still highly factionalised, and claimants to the funds remain heavily armed both with weapons and a strong sense of entitlement. See Robert Pear, 'House Votes \$1.3 Billion in Aid for Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 22 May 2002.

²⁸ Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, p. 55.

al-Qaeda. Afghanistan is bordered by six states, not all of which could be described as strong and few of which are likely to be consistent supporters of US policy. Afghanistan's border with Pakistan, in particular, is extremely open. As a result, a number of very smart people with money, an implacable hatred of the United States and its allies, and significant social support in Pakistan, got away and are now hiding in Pakistan and elsewhere. This means the ultimate lesson of Afghanistan must wait on the outcome of the doubtful process of rebuilding a strong and functional Afghan state. Success will require sustained political will and considerable economic support by the United States and its allies.

How to Lose a War against Terrorism

The current war against global terrorism will be fought on three fronts: domestic, military and political. The United States is fortunate in that its own experience with counter-insurgency and that of its allies, such as Britain and Israel, provide strong examples of how the counter-terrorist strategies of even smart, experienced and resourceful states can go wrong.

On the domestic front the clear tendency in a crisis is to restrict the civil liberties of citizens. The United States has already partially succumbed to this temptation,²⁹ but the experience of Britain in Northern Ireland should make it clear that no amount of restriction of civil liberties can by itself defeat terrorism. In its long struggle to overcome Irish Republican Army (IRA) terrorism in Northern Ireland, for example, Britain enacted a number of 'temporary' or 'emergency' measures restricting or suspending civil liberties, all of which remain in force today.³⁰ Yet the IRA and its associated splinter groups remained capable of launching attacks not only in Northern Ireland, but also in Britain proper. There is no question that tough laws and organisational streamlining can affect terrorists, their funding, and their degrees of operational freedom. But there is also no question that over time terrorists can innovate around even the harshest restrictions. The lesson of Britain's experience in Northern Ireland is that only by discriminate political reform can terrorists be demobilised.³¹

On the military front a state attacked by terrorists will be sorely tempted to respond with overwhelming military force, either in retribution or as a demonstration in hopes of deterring future attacks. The United States has so far been uncharacteristically circumspect in this regard. Its campaign in Afghanistan demonstrated both the importance of the discriminate application of force and its ultimate futility in countering terrorism by itself. Its own experience in Vietnam and the examples of Israel in Lebanon and the West Bank should serve as a warning. In Vietnam, the United States placed faith in the notion that if its

²⁹ In particular the United States has arrested at least 1,200 people, most of Middle Eastern origin, and held them without trial. See 'United States of America', *Amnesty International Report 2002* (AI index: POL 10/001/2002).

³⁰ See Laura Donohue, *Counter-terrorist Law and Emergency Powers in the United Kingdom, 1922–2000*, Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2001.

³¹ Not all terrorists can be demobilised by addressing legitimate grievances. As observed above, a residual of individuals who enjoy violence or who are filled with ineradicable hatred may continue acts of violence even after grievances have been addressed. In such cases, however, the violence is more obviously criminal and the lack of broad social support makes catching or killing such individuals much simpler.

military could kill enough of the terrorists in South Vietnam, it could force North Vietnam to settle for a divided Vietnam. The United States then sent an army trained and equipped to fight conventional adversaries to South Vietnam, where the real problem was terrorism. US generals then attempted to use this force to concentrate massive firepower against the enemy. But because the 'enemy' was hidden among the civilian population, this necessarily tended to kill and injure non-combatants. The result was that most US and South Vietnamese counter-insurgency operations failed, and in the process created more terrorists than they killed or captured. The key lesson for the current US-led war on terrorism is that it takes specialised forces—in terms of training, equipment, organisation and mindset—to successfully engage insurgents.³²

Israel provides a slightly different lesson on how not to win a war against terrorism. Israel has one of the finest militaries ever to take the field, and its intelligence support is unrivalled in its geopolitical context. Yet Israel has struggled since its inception to make its *own* successful use of terrorism to acquire a state an exception and not the rule. But Israel's counter-insurgency strategy suffers from two key shortcomings. First, Israel has consistently underestimated the price the Palestinians are willing to pay to achieve a viable state. Israeli policy in the last 50 years has caused most Palestinians to feel they have nothing to lose. This makes them difficult to coerce, and makes any solution by force with a chance of success tantamount to genocide. Second, Israel has tended to respond to terrorist attacks with a policy of escalating reprisal: one Israeli is killed, so two 'terrorists' must die in response. More troubling still, a conviction has grown within significant segments of Israeli society and the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) that the failure of Israel's counter-terrorist strategy is due not to the injustice of its policies in the Occupied Territories but rather to Israel's excessive restraint in response to barbarous attacks. But again, torture, extrajudicial executions, deportation and collective punishment cannot eliminate terrorism unless carried to a degree unacceptable to a liberal democratic state.³³ The Israeli lesson for US counter-terrorist grand strategy is that terrorism cannot be defeated by force alone, no matter how skilful and how well aimed. Killing terrorists and charismatic resistance leaders is not enough. As on the domestic front, highly discriminate and proportionate military action must be supple-

³² In fact many within the US military and political authority did know this, but for bureaucratic and organisational reasons refused to build and deploy that capability. See, for example, Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr, *The Army and Vietnam*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986; and Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*.

³³ Pursued to a lesser degree, as in Israel to date, these policies tend to both justify and increase violent resistance; thus increasing the likelihood and destructiveness of future terrorist attacks. Israel's ideal counter-terrorist strategy is therefore not military but political: give the Palestinians something to lose. Give them a viable state. True, the Palestinian Authority may be corrupt and incompetent. True, the Palestinians of the new state may not love Israelis as a result of statehood; and true, some degree of terror will continue in Israel. But the terrorism of a post-Palestinian-state context will be terrorism that can be effectively managed, countered and ultimately defeated. This is mainly because a large measure of the justness of the Palestinian cause disappears after statehood, and also because being a terrorist or guerrilla fighter is hard, brutal and uncomfortable work. As a result most yearn for uniforms and rank and status. On this point see Peter Paret and John Shy, *Guerrillas in the 1960s*, 2nd edn, New York, Praeger, 1962, p. 35. Once conventionalised, the military of a future Palestinian state would prove no more a threat to Israel than the conventional militaries of Syria and Jordan.

mented by meaningful political reforms or it only perpetuates a resistance and gives it new incentives to innovate ever more devastating attack strategies.

On the political or foreign policy front the United States has been guilty of double standards. During the Cold War, the United States justified many of its commitments to foreign tyrants on grounds of survival: in the existential struggle against a global communist menace, otherwise distasteful bedfellows must be entertained. But the Cold War is over. Unless the United States brings its military, diplomatic and economic support into line with its own liberal values, survivors of torture and abuse in these countries will have a right to claim that US support of an oppressive regime is tantamount to US support of that regime's torture and murder. They will then have a cause capable of mobilising support for violent resistance to US policy both in their own countries and in the United States. In the case of Israel, in particular, US policy has been plagued by double standards. The United States has, for example, supported the Israeli view that violence must stop before peace can be negotiated, without considering that, first, this is tantamount to claiming peace as a precondition to peace; and, second, that what counts as 'violence' depends on the victim. The Palestinians consider Israeli settlements acts of violence, and continue to respond to Israel's refusal to halt them with sniper and suicide bombing attacks.³⁴ Yet the United States has only recognised the Palestinian *response* as violent, not Israeli settlements. If terrorism is to be halted in Israel, the United States must make three things clear to both sides. First, it absolutely stands for the survival and prosperity of a sovereign Israeli state. Second, it absolutely rejects Israel's claim that illegal and often draconian Israeli policies—including the illegal occupation of another people's land—are the only means by which that survival and prosperity can be obtained. Third, the United States stands firmly behind the creation of a viable Palestinian state.³⁵

Conclusions

US and allied mistakes on the domestic, military and foreign policy fronts in past efforts to overcome insurgencies provide important clues about the key elements of an ideal counter-terrorism grand strategy.

On the domestic front, the lesson of Britain in Northern Ireland suggests that resolving the problem of terrorism cannot be accomplished by restricting civil liberties. It must be resolved by addressing legitimate political grievances, even under duress and at the risk of setting a precedent for further acts of terrorism. On the military front, the lessons of Vietnam and Palestine suggest that fighting insurgents requires specially trained, equipped and led soldiers; and it requires patience. Fighting terrorists will demand primarily *police* forces, supported only where absolutely necessary by specially trained soldiers. On the political front, the lessons of the post-Cold War and Israel in Palestine suggest that the United States should avoid supporting states with repressive political regimes.

³⁴ On this point see Monica Duffy Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2003.

³⁵ Satisfying all three policy points requires that the Palestinians abandon their insistence on a right of return for refugees of the war of 1948. Accepting this right would mean the end of Israel as a state.

Taken together, these three sets of lessons suggest two institutional responses. First, the United States and its allies must build forces capable of extended operations in unconventional conflicts. This is not the same thing as arguing the United States must give up its well-established expertise in conventional war, nor that its current force modernisation is necessarily wooden-headed. Because the threat of large-scale conventional war remains—though at a diminished level—it would be folly to demobilise and convert a conventional military to a primarily counter-insurgency mission. But it would be equally wrong to insist that current force modernisation and reorganisation—such as the current Interim Brigade Combat Team concept—will result in a military equally capable of effectively engaging in both conventional and unconventional missions; and unconventional missions are the threat we face *now*.

Second, the United States and its allies should consider the formation of an Office of State Transition (OST). Essentially, this office would command the resources and attract and maintain the administrative expertise necessary to manage the reconstruction of states following the cessation of a civil war or other conflict. Ideally, an OST would be headquartered at the UN, and directed by a council composed of representatives from the United States, Russia, China, India, the European Union, Japan, and a single representative from the five Nordic countries. It would have the same functions as a 19th-century colonial office, with the important difference that the mandate of the OST would be to return the administration of a disrupted state to viability *and then leave*. An OST would have its own specially trained police forces,³⁶ and would be the primary tool in eliminating the habitat in which terrorists and organised criminals flourish.³⁷ This is what makes an OST a collective good and what gives participating states an interest in risking the lives and resources necessary to make it work. Terrorism and organised crime are potential strategic weapons, yes, but as strategic weapons they tend to be *indiscriminate* in their effects.³⁸ Terrorism is bound to get nastier, and in the process of figuring out who was responsible for any given attack, mistakes will be made. If reactions to WMD terror attacks take the form of reprisal in kind, then again all states have a strong incentive to contribute to an organisation with the potential to restrict or eliminate terrorist habitat. Recall that the UN Charter and its Security Council were established in the aftermath of a world war among states that had laid waste much of Europe, China, Japan, and the then Soviet Union. Today we face a different challenge that will demand a different but analogous institutional response. The threats of organised crime, mass refugee flows, plague and terror—even WMD terror—cannot kill a state as quickly as losing a

³⁶ Supplemented by a military rapid deployment force where necessary.

³⁷ In wildlife sciences it is well recognised that most populations will survive even dramatic destruction and rebound, provided their habitats remain stable. Destroying habitat, by contrast, almost always leads to a population's extinction.

³⁸ The 'collective good' logic is analogous to arguments against the use of assassination by states as a strategic weapon. The idea is to reinforce institutions that make states rational, because rational states can be bargained with and deterred. Anything that disrupts a state's thinking and calculating organs therefore makes irrational action more likely and, by extension, makes unnecessary wars or reprisals more likely. On the history and problems surrounding assassination as a strategic weapon, see Ward Thomas, 'Norms and Security: The Case of International Assassination', *International Security*, vol. 25, no. 1, Summer 2000, pp. 105–33.

major conventional war, but they *can* kill states and kill with the same lethal force.

Unfortunately, an ideal counter-terrorism grand strategy may be beyond the reach of the United States and its allies for political reasons.³⁹ It has often been observed that strategies must satisfy a number of utilities, not just the narrow utility of effectiveness against their intended targets. In the political context of the United States after September 11th 2001, for example, the Bush Administration's declaration of war dramatically increased its popularity and gained it considerable leverage with the US Congress across the entire legislative spectrum. Most Americans were perfectly comfortable with the president's declaration of war, and it is difficult to imagine any US president giving a different response. But having declared war and having declared victory against the Taliban in Afghanistan, now is the time to seriously re-assess allied counter-terrorist grand strategy in light of the collective lessons of past wars and past campaigns against terror. With the right tools and the right strategy, even a difficult counter-insurgency war can be won, and won in a way consistent with the liberal values so dearly held and defended by the United States and its allies.

³⁹ Organisational and bureaucratic constraints also apply. As observed here and by other commentators, the US military is generally loathe to seriously restructure itself in order to fight unconventional or small wars. On this point see Eliot A. Cohen, 'Constraints on America's Conduct of Small Wars', *International Security*, vol. 9, no. 2, Fall 1984, pp. 151–81; and Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*.