

Rethinking Victory in the “War on Terror”

Interview with Philip H. Gordon

GJIA: You say in your new book, *Winning the Right War: The Path to Security for America and the World*, that we've been fighting the wrong war, the war on terror, for the past six years. Why is the war on terror the "wrong" war? What would be the "right" war? What do you mean by the title?

GORDON: Let me start with the notion of war. A lot of people have criticized the terminology of calling it a war. I think that's fair. There are real problems with thinking about it as a war. I have decided not to fight that rhetorical battle because I think that's what we call it, for better or for worse, that's how it got named. Both the supporters and the critics of the war on terror utilize the term—it's a shorthand. Is it problematic? A little bit. But then, we also have the war on poverty, the war on drugs, and the war on crime. And nobody thinks that we should use the military to solve poverty. I would rather focus my attention on what we are doing than what we call it. And that's why I use the word "war" in the title and, at least, that has the merit of galvanizing people to know that there's something really serious that we have to do together.

But it is the "wrong" war because we have thought about it and fought it too much like a traditional conflict that you can win by deploying your military power against "the enemy," as

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if there were some single enemy out there. If there is an analogy at all that is appropriate for this, it is not World War II—it is the Cold War. And that's because I think this is ultimately a question of ideas, an ideological issue that will end only when the adversaries give up their romantic and revolutionary ideology rather than when we somehow defeat them on the battlefield.

So again, a classic war you win on the battlefield. You have political differences, it's decided on the battlefield, and then you impose political conditions on the enemy. That is very much the wrong way to think about what's going on here. So that's the core argument.

GJIA: You argue that the Cold War "provides the most instructive metaphor for

Moscow and trying to defeat the Soviets—and just doing nothing and letting them defeat us. That's what we did. We contained it and we ultimately won in that way. The Cold War is a useful analogy now because we have to do the same thing. It would be nice to think that we could win the war on terror by sending military troops to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Iran, and Pakistan, but the reality is quite different. Merely discussing the war on terror in these terms shows that this strategy is an absurd, ineffective measure. Instead, we should contain the threat, defend ourselves, and promote changes in other ways.

GJIA: Given that President Bush recently suggested the Iranian nuclear threat might possibly unleash World War III,

The Americans are no longer ready to follow an argument that says, "Let's go use our power to spread democracy and freedom."

the struggle against Islamic terrorism." Could you elaborate why?

GORDON: Yes, the Cold War was called the "Cold War" precisely because it wasn't a traditional war. Our leaders in the mid to late 1940s realized that they could win the struggle against the Soviet Union and communism as if it was a traditional war. This is why it ended up being a Cold War where we contained it and waited until the ideology in the system crumbled from beneath it. Kennan talked about how the Soviet Union would mellow over time. He did not know it would take that long. But his most important insight was to realize that we needed an alternative between World War III—invading

how real do you think is the threat of another world war? Which war would it be, given that there is some dispute over whether we are currently in World War III? Would this be World War IV?

GORDON: I think that World War III is a terrible concept and it's linked to what I mean about the "right" war and the "wrong" war. It is a dangerous concept because it does exactly the opposite of what we want to do. It implies that there is one big enemy out there and, if necessary, we need to do something similar to what we did in World War II. In that war, we operated a draft; we had 16 million soldiers; we spent 40 percent of our GDP on defense; we invaded major

countries in Europe and Asia; we occupied them for a large number of years.

Now if you think that is what we need to do with this threat, then by all means, make the case. Some are making it. Norman Podhoretz's new book is called *World War IV* because he considers the Cold War to be World War III. But that misunderstands the nature and scale of the threat. In World War II, Nazi Germany was in the process of conquering all of Europe, while Japan was dominating Asia. This was a massive and major threat to our interests, and ultimately to our own country. The terrorism threat is very real and very serious, but it is not existential in the same sort of way.

There are indeed people who believe that the threat of another massive terrorist attack in the United States legitimizes emergency military measures and casualties running in the thousands or tens of thousands of lives. In my view, we could send those military forces to Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and Egypt, but we will only exacerbate the problem. So I think "World War III" is a terrible concept, and a dangerous one.

GJIA: The Cold War came to an end when the people realized that the system was no longer reliable. The United States helped by offering an alternative model for society, and by encouraging change from outside. How could the United States instigate a change from the outside in today's world?

GORDON: That's a really good question, a hard one. Ultimately, I don't think the United States can itself bring about that change. It has to come from within, just as it did in the Soviet world or in the communist world. We had our role. We defended ourselves; we tried to uphold

our own system as a model to show that freedom, capitalism, and democracy were attractive; and we did our best to assist those fighting for these same principles within the communist world. We couldn't do it for them, but we were confident that in the end they would see the light and do it themselves; and I think that is much more effective and much more lasting, and the same needs to happen now. It would be nice if we were powerful enough to reach in into the Islamic world and show people that they need to change. But ultimately, it has to come from within, and so we have to do something similar to what we did then: uphold our own principles and values and show that in the end our system is worth emulating, and that there are better ways for them to change their own futures than through violence and terrorism.

GJIA: This March will mark five years since the U.S. invasion in Iraq. Many people in this country and in Europe believe that this war was a failure, and that neo-conservative theorists who affected that policy have been effectively discredited. But now it seems that maybe they are not a thing of the past, as neo-conservative thinkers are serving as foreign policy advisers to some of the presidential candidates. Do you think that neo-conservative thought still plays a large role in this administration, and might potentially in the next administration as well?

GORDON: Neo-conservative ideas will always be around in the United States because there will always be people who think that we *can* and therefore *should* use our power to do good in the world. But these ideas are currently on the decline. They seem to always come in waves, and

the more powerful the United States is feeling, the more optimistic some people are that we can actually use our power to spread our values. And we did feel this way in the early 2000s when, after the 1990s, we had achieved impressive economic growth, military strength, and political legitimacy and popularity around the world. After 9/11, it was also really tempting to believe that we *had* to do it. So you had a moment that fueled the rise of neo-conservatism.

But now after these past few years of getting bogged down in Iraq, and seeing how hard it is to spread democracy, those ideas are on the wane and building up budget deficits and overstressing the military. The mood has changed. Americans are no longer ready and comfortable with the idea of using their power to spread democracy and freedom. These ideas are largely on a decline and they will dominate the next administration, and I think even the Bush administration has largely abandoned it. I wrote a piece in *Foreign Affairs* in 2006 called "The End of the Bush Revolution" in which I tried to show that the Bush administration was already moving away from this policy. Indeed, certain candidates, including Giuliani, have surrounded themselves with neoconservative advisers, but I do not think that the structure is there anymore to support that sort of foreign policy.

GJIA: Are the sanctions that were recently imposed on Iran at all related to the neoconservative movement, or is that just a separate idea? Do you think these sanctions are an effective strategy?

GORDON: There is a spectrum here—it's not one or the other. You don't have to be a neoconservative to think that the

United States should promote democracy and that there are times when it needs to use force and sometimes sanctions against a regime such as Iran. I would not use the sanctions case as proof that neo-conservatism is back. There is a spectrum, and I think that we've moved along it, away from neo-conservatism.

There is a possibility of a comeback, and Iran is an issue that could push the country back in that direction. Those ideas could and would come to the fore again if Iran developed a nuclear weapon, or provoked another conflict in the Middle East via Hezbollah. There would be more support in the United States for dealing with it in ways that neo-conservatives would be sympathetic with. Those ideas could also come back if there was another major terrorist strike on the United States. It's been six years, so people are thinking, "Alright, that was terrible, but maybe we overstated the threat," and if there was another 9/11, people might say, "Bush was right, we have to do what we have to do no matter what it costs and democratize the Middle East." Therefore it could come back, but I wouldn't necessarily see something like sanctions on Iran as proof that these ideas are still strong.

GJIA: Comparing and contrasting the events in Iraq in 2002 and 2003 and in Iran today, do you see similarities between the two situations, with accusations of weapons of mass destruction and a drumbeat for sanctions—UN sanctions—or this time, unilateral sanctions?

GORDON: There are both major similarities and major differences. It is similar in the sense that you have the United States accusing a hostile regime in the Middle East of developing weapons of mass

destruction. Ironically in this case, those accusations are almost certainly true. It was thought they were true about Iraq the last time, but one of the consequences of being wrong about it is that people do not believe the U.S. government now when it makes allegations.

Frankly, they are right; I think Iran is moving in the direction of nuclear weapons capability. That's similar. The use of UN Security Council resolutions to justify potential action is also similar. Last time it didn't come out of the blue. The Bush administration and others said, "Look, we have seventeen UN Security Council resolutions stating that Saddam Hussein must accept inspectors." A similar situation is happening with Iran now. There is a Security Council resolution saying that they're not allowed to enrich uranium, but they are enriching uranium, and therefore action is justified. In short, there are some similarities, but there are also major differences. It's important to remember that no one is really talking about an invasion of Iran and occupation and regime change in the way we were about Iraq. That's partly because Iraq has proven so difficult, but

GJIA: How do you envision the role of the Europe in the diplomatic effort to deal with the Iranian nuclear problem?

GORDON: Americans realize that they can't do everything alone anymore. The attitude in 2001 and 2002 was that it would be nice to have European support, but we don't need it. People thought, "We're really powerful, they're wrong, they'll come around anyway, and so let's just do what we have to do." Now there is a new mood and new needs to find friends and allies around the world. On Iran, especially, there is a great desire to have European support for sanctions as an alternative to war. The administration has changed its tone on the issue and is now trying to win back European support.

GJIA: EU Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana has been leading the effort on nuclear diplomacy with Iran. However, those efforts were recently bypassed by the latest sanctions by the United States. What has been the reaction in Brussels to the latest sanctions? Is there the feeling that the United States is again acting uni-

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it's also because Iran is a much bigger country, and to the extent that people are talking about military force, they're talking about air strikes on nuclear facilities rather than invasion, occupation, and regime change. That's a major difference.

laterally and sidestepping Europe?

GORDON: One could argue that the sanctions, rather than undercutting Solana, actually bolster him. They allow him to say to Iran, "Look, the Americans want to

do a lot more: they want to increase pressure; some of them want to use force; so let's talk about a deal. Here's a package of

tries, and they would be unified in their criticism. They would also criticize Iran for not accepting their compromise, but

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carrots and sticks, and if we don't strike a deal, then there's a risk that the United States is going to do something unpleasant." Most Europeans didn't support this latest round of sanctions, but at the same time, that threat is useful to them in their diplomacy.

GJIA: When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, it divided NATO allies and EU member states, and was the most significant transatlantic political split in decades. What is the current consequence of this rhetoric—for the potential bombing of Iran—on European unity and NATO unity? Do you think that today the EU is a more politically unified and cohesive unit that would work together to balance the United States?

GORDON: Ironically, our actions split Europe over the war in Iraq and our actions in Iran could bring them together to oppose the United States. The truth is, in Iraq, most European governments did support the war. Except France, Germany, Belgium, and Luxemburg, the governments supported it. The European people, however, did not. So we split the governments over Iraq, and I think in this case, barring other circumstances, U.S. air strikes in Iran would be opposed by all of the European coun-

they would not support U.S. military force. It's often overlooked how relatively united the Europeans are. They seem so horribly split on Iraq, but Iraq was more the exception. On most issues—the Arab-Israel conflict, Iran, Afghanistan—they have pretty much a similar position. I would also add on Iraq, that it came out as a European split over Iraq, but it really was a European split over the United States. The European countries that supported the Iraq war did it not because they thought it was a good idea, but because they wanted to stay close to the United States. So the real thing that divides them is how much they want to go out of their way to be close partners to the United States.

GJIA: Do you believe that Iran is the greatest issue right now for U.S. national security? What about Pakistan, North Korea, and other countries? Does it even make sense to talk about countries as threats in the age of terrorism?

GORDON: I find it hard and not terribly useful to rank threats. What does it mean to say that North Korea is more dangerous than Iran? When you're making foreign policy, you obviously need to decide what the priority issues are, but it's impossible to say which is a greater threat.

There are some threats that are more likely but less grave, and there are others that are very serious but less likely. A North Korean ballistic missile with a nuclear weapon landing in an American city is clearly a greater threat in terms of seriousness than an act of terrorism, but it's much less likely. How do you balance seriousness and likelihood as you take this all into account? Is Iran the greatest threat to the United States? Again, Iran getting a nuclear weapon would be a very bad thing and would likely lead to further proliferation in the region. I do think that they could be deterred and contained, but, of course, I can't know for sure. But how do you compare that type of threat with the risk of al-Qaeda operating out of the Pakistan/Afghan border and undertaking terrorist attacks in the United States? The latter is a more likely action, but threats like North Korea and Iran could prove to be more consequential.

GJIA: Going back to the Cold War, you said that we should not try to intervene but instead we should be a model of change and democracy. How do you think the United States should promote its own values in the face of a wide variety of terrorist groups who represent the antithesis of what the United States stands for?

GORDON: You are right that there are a variety of terrorist groups out there and some of them are lost causes, in the sense that core members of heavily implicated terrorist groups are unlikely to change their view of the United States. To elaborate, were the United States to implement the Geneva Conventions tomorrow, leaders of al-Qaeda would certainly not lay down their arms and call a truce. That's a naïve understanding of the issue.

But I do think that there are an awful lot of people out there who are on the fence, who are deciding what they think of the United States and what they think of terrorism and how justified it is. And those people are judging us and our values and our standards, and the more we do to raise questions about whether we really are a decent, caring, and just country and people, the more we do to push them onto the wrong side of that issue, either to support terrorism or at least be indifferent to it. So that's why I think that these things do matter in the end, and ultimately just as we did with communism, we need to prove their ideology wrong. They're out there preaching that the path to happiness and success is through Islamism, fundamentalism, and terrorism, and we should be able to prove that wrong. We should be confident that we can win this battle of ideas.

GJIA: A final question. The last chapter in your book is called "What Victory Will Look Like." Could you elaborate on how you envision the future, and how we'll know when we've achieved "victory"?

GORDON: The end of the Cold War offers an idea of what victory would be like. It is when the adversary realizes that what it thinks it is fighting for is not worth fighting for and looks for a different path. How will we know we're there? We will know the "War on Terror" is over—it could take tens of years or a couple of generations—but we'll know it is over. It will be a world in which fear of terrorism is no longer the dominant political or foreign policy issue of the day. The threat of Islamist terrorism is always going to be a possibility. Eventually, the ideology will be discredited, and the number of its supporters will decrease dramatically,

reducing the terrorist rhetoric to a residual concern rather than a dominant paradigm that shapes the national and international political scene. This scenario is very much similar to the Cold War. For a time, the Cold War was the top priority. Of course there were other issues—environment, immigration, poverty—but the Cold War drove and shaped our defense

budget, until eventually it no longer did. That's when the "War on Terror" will be over: when the risk of terrorism is small enough that it doesn't drive and shape our policy and society, but is another concern among many others.

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