

The Wars of 911

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For much of the twentieth century, Americans who waged Europe's wars were asked to understand the history of the people they were defeating no less than that of the people they were saving. Now, entering the twenty-first century, as Europeans help respond to a war launched against America, it is just as important for them to understand American history. For it is only in the context of this history that people abroad can fully grasp the depth of emotions caused by the attacks of September 2001. These events will dominate the nation's collective memory for generations to come – and they will condition US policies for several more years. Allies and friends may be dismissive of such a reaction to the horrors of this violence in America. These are the ways of history. That may well be true. But this is not the American way – distant from war and invulnerable to attack.

This, however, is not about America alone: it is about history reasserting itself over an experience that was designed to end the evils of history not only for America, but also for like-minded countries in Europe and elsewhere. Losing the battle against terror would be to accept a new global anarchy that would leave most countries at the mercy of such evil, lest they surrender their sovereign will to the nihilistic will of the most extremist organizations at home and abroad. Absent the will to use force to fight and eradicate these organizations, governments will turn against their own citizens with the kind of judicial reforms that will deny the democratic ways to do justice. These may be the primitive preferences of groups and countries that wage battle in the name of the practices that prevailed at the close of the first millennium, around the year 911. But with the second millennium barely behind us, they are not the ways that democratic countries earned in their streets, as well as on the battlefields, against the forces of tyranny.

As these new wars are waged – the wars of 911 – they may prove to be a catalyst for reinforced ties between the United States and the states of Europe.

A new anarchy?

The enormity of the risk was understood in America, where President George W. Bush immediately identified this act of terror as an act of war. Negotiations were never an option: over what and with whom? The magnitude of the killing – in excess of the official totals of both the Revolutionary War and Pearl Harbor combined – made it impossible to settle this war in a court of law. If the use of US military force could not be condoned in such an obvious case, when would it be used and for what reasons? In any case, the perpetrators of the killing were not interested in any plausible goal that might conceivably serve as a focus for negotiations. For too long, their steadfast commitment to terror was met with a persistent belief in appeasement, not with standing the many words and the few cruise missiles that followed earlier attacks against barracks in Beirut, Marines in Mogadishu, the US embassy in Nairobi, or a US ship off the shores of Yemen.

More than a terrorist act, this pointed to an entirely different kind of war. Wars are expected to originate in organized entities whose assets (territorial and otherwise) offer a basis for effective deterrence, pre-emptive attacks or even destructive retaliation. But these are wars launched by the have-nothings of the slums against the have-it-alls of Western democracies – conflicts “between the world where the state exists and the world where it does not”.¹ That does not shape up like an easy battle. Hobbes’ First Man, condemned to a life that is “poor, nasty, brutish, and short” may yet be the future’s winner, as he faces a pampered Last Man who has grown more complacent and too permissive. No wonder if the resulting war finds its middle man in Russia, a country well informed about matters of both war and terror, and where Vladimir Putin can now dismiss a “modern civilization [that] had grown fat, slow and lost the capacity for resistance”. Where Bush weeps an America that “lost a piece of [its] soul” on September 11, his new “friend” Putin rejoices over the fact that on that day “man kind has matured”.²

Our first conclusion is, therefore, that the year 2001 may stand in History as another revolutionary transformation of warfare. This transformation has been slow and tragic, beginning after the Crusades and early in the sixteenth century, when the widening use of gun powder ended the “game quality” of war – an allegedly noble art worthy only of Christian kings and knights, while the great majority of the people remained powerless, ignorant and mostly in different to conflicts that did not truly affect or even touch them. With the combatants able to kill each other from a distance, war became progressively “the continuation of politics by other means”, an action designed to protect and enhance the *raison d’etat* that defined

1 R. D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War* (New York: Random House, 2000); E. Hobsbawm, *On the Edge of The New Century*, in conversation with Antonio Polito (New York, NY: The New Press, 2000) p. 37.

2 See the full text of President Bush’s news conference of October 11 2001, *The Washington Post*, October 12 2001, pp. A20-21. Putin is quoted in *The Washington Post*, October 9 2001, p. A16.

the Westphalian state system.³

That was not all, however. For war to gain the total quality it has enjoyed during our lifetime, it needed more protagonists and better weapons. Thus, in the nineteenth century, public masses were brought into each conflict – conscripts in wars they endorsed with an enthusiasm that peaked in August 1914. With more combatants rendered available for an ever larger number of nation-states, but also within an increasingly global security environment that outgrew the geographic limitations in Europe, technological advances gave war the tools needed to fight more efficiently and over longer distances. Even now, historians are in awe of the dehumanising killing, from the Somme to Hiroshima, incurred for reasons that few remembered as they were ordered to their death or cremated in their sleep. The events of September 11 were, to repeat, different: an unprecedented mixture of both war and terror, designed to kill without any limits and even without weapons and for no identifiable goal. The goal is not merely to defeat the kind of enemy that could dare launch such a war, but to defeat this kind of war altogether.

The new normalcy

“His story,” wrote Zbigniew Brzezinski, “teaches that a super power can not long remain dominant unless it projects ... a message of worldwide relevance” – relevance not only to the bourgeoisie (namely, the democratic allies) but also the people (namely, the others).⁴ Or, as John Hillen once put, “Great powers don’t do win downs.” This is not about power, but the will to use it and, literally, give war a chance. Nor is this about terror, but the unwillingness to endure it. But this is also not only about confrontation but also about reconciliation. Or, as stated by Britain’s Minister for Europe Peter Hain, on October 31 2001, “winning the peace is part of winning the war”.

Lest the seeds of terror be allowed to bloom indefinitely in the future, the war can not, therefore, be limited to its military dimensions even while it is being waged militarily. In other words, however necessary and even imperative the use of military force is, it cannot be sufficient because on its own it will not be effective. To “restore peace and stability”, as pledged by the NATO Article 5, will demand a multidimensional strategy, a mixture of the Manhattan Project and the Marshall Plan, not because either serves as a model for the future but because contemporary variations of both will be indispensable parts of the future. During World War II, the Manhattan Project had to do with the development and application of overwhelming force to defeat the enemy and lead the alliance to victory in the war. After the enemy had been defeated, the Marshall Plan (and its counterpart for Japan) had to do with the generosity and compassion needed to win the peace. Both together

3 See J. U. Nef, *War and Human Progress; an Essay on the Rise of Industrial Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950) pp. 24 ff.

4 Z. Brzezinski, *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993) p. 89.

shaped the credibility of US war time power and post war leadership.

In short, there can and will be no reconciliation without reconstruction of the failed states that are the main battleground of the new normalcy. That is the lesson that was learned after World War II. Grossly ignored by the United States and its allies during the past decade, this lesson will hopefully not be neglected during the coming months, when a renewed commitment on the part of the victorious or dominant countries will have to be made tangible and convincing. "Terrorism," wrote Chalmers Johnson in a recent book, "strikes at the innocent in order to draw attention to the sins of the invulnerable."⁵ If neglect is a sin, then the neglect of those parts of the world where the Cold War was waged and won was indeed sinful – whether the areas of neglect were territorial divisions, social degradation, economic collapse, religious humiliation or a combination of all. Past the war, and beyond Afghanistan and even Al Qaeda, the goal of the grand coalitions of 911 is to address the unfinished business of the Cold War. Some of that business is territorial, some is political, some is economic, some is societal, and some is simply beyond words and hence, beyond definition. But none can be ignored if the unconditional defeat of the enemy does not carry with it the true absolution of the prevailing powers. This is not just a matter of elementary justice: it is also a question of fundamental self-interest.

A coalition of coalitions

The threat of a new normalcy that would be inaugurated by the attacks of September 11 was well understood in Europe. As French President Jacques Chirac put it, "This time, it was New York; next time, it could be Paris, Berlin or London." In each European country, there are many targets. The expression of a nation's identity, these are not only easy to hit (often with structures vulnerable to individual acts of terror requiring limited sophistication), they are also easy to enter (not only as public monuments, but also because of their frequent proximity to a symbol of the American presence in the designated country). In other words, Europe's solidarity with an act of war against the United States was also extended as a matter of self-interest no less than on America's behalf.

America's surprise is itself surprising. If no support from the allies in Europe, where from? Would it be that Americans have learned so little during the past 50 years that they still view Europe in adversarial terms, and thus misunderstand, and even ignore, what Europe is and, above all, feels, relative to America? Or, to make matters worse, have Americans grown too comfortable with the anti-Americanism that is said to prevail abroad, perhaps as the extension of the democratic tolerance expected from a benign hegemony à l'américaine.

The lesson, here, should have been learned a long time ago – that America

5 C. Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Henry Hold, 2000) p. 33.

can not isolate itself from the world, either because of its policies or because of an alleged isolationist vocation. For one, US interests are too widely spread to permit any meaningful disengagement and too important to be left to the good will or capabilities (or lack thereof) of others. In addition, the spontaneous display of solidarity that grew out of America's plight also serves as a reminder that even a power without peers, like America, cannot be without allies, especially among like-minded countries that share values and interests.

"The mission," pointedly noted Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, "determines the coalition." But conversely, will the coalition determine the mission, and if not, who will? For Rumsfeld, but also for most Americans, the answer is clear. This is not Kosovo, or even the Gulf war, when the use of US power was argued primarily in terms of the allies' needs – thereby providing some justification for the multilateral framework within which the war developed. This is a war that other countries are joining, or will join, with America as the assertively explicit coalition leader, as a matter of might (its dominant power) but also as a matter of right (as the primary victim of the initial attack). "The greatest danger to the war on terrorism," concluded a recent editorial of *The Washington Post*, "is not that the Bush administration will resort to unilateralism. It is that the United States will fail to act aggressively and creatively enough, over time, to break the current coalition apart."⁶

Admittedly, the leadership assumed by the Bush administration during the formative phase of coalition-building was laudably flexible, and showed an effective respect for the limits of each ally's contributions. The very idea of a "coalition of coalitions" – first used by Secretary Rumsfeld at the early stage of war planning – reflected a US commitment to a comprehensive strategy that would be, as the French would put it, *tous azimuts* (multi-dimensional) and *à la carte*. Within such a setting, America has not expected 100-percent follower-ship from all its allies in all instances. Each subset of the grand coalition was to include countries that were not only willing but also capable, and not only countries that were both willing and capable but also necessary. In Afghanistan, for example, Britain was willing and capable, but France, Germany and Italy were seemingly not deemed necessary – irrespective of willingness and capabilities – for the opening phase of the military campaign in Afghanistan. As the campaign unfolded, the perspective changed, and offers to contribute were accepted.

Yet, notwithstanding the emphasis placed on coalition-building and consultation, a strategy of selective multilateralism hardly hides the pronounced unilateralist drift that remains in the US approach to the new normalcy. That drift is most apparent with President Bush. Events are not an obstacle to leadership, as Prime Minister Harold MacMillan once observed. Events are the stuff of leadership. For some, leadership is about mimicking historic leaders who faced and overcame comparable events. In October 2001, some already described Tony Blair's tones

⁶ "The Coalition and the Mission", *The Washington Post*, October 21 2001, p. B6.

as “Churchillian”, even though Winston Churchill can hardly be remembered as Roosevelt’s ambassador-at-large around the world. For others, leadership is about exploiting opportunities. Russian President Vladimir Putin has used terror to define a community of interests with the United States and other Western states that had not been seen since 1945. For yet others, these opportunities are more politically trivial, for example, to gain an advantage on an opposition overwhelmed by the public support usually extended to the majority in war time.

As President Bush seized the moment to redefine himself, with remarkable ease and even excellence, as a wartime leader, his rhetoric escalates into the realm of the desirable but beyond the scope of the doable. Now, the war is “a fight to save the civilized world and values common to the West, to Asia, to Islam”. It is indeed, a “crusade” although one that would remain multi-denominational and compassionate. “No government,” Bush told his Chinese hosts in October, “should use our war against terrorism as an excuse to prosecute minorities within their borders.” Ours, he had passionately pleaded a few days earlier, is “a great nation ... a freedom-loving nation. A compassionate nation, a nation that understands the values of life.” This is indeed a doctrine, one that offers evangelic tones as it offers redemption with a “second chance” for those who repent. But most ominously, it is also a doctrine that promises punishment for the sinners and evil-doers.⁷

“We’re watching ... very carefully,” warned Bush on October 11, in direct reference to Saddam Hussein but also any other regime that “will have to pay a price” if they “harbor a terrorist”. There should be no mistake: the language is justified. Because the arithmetic of risk-taking have changed since September 11, so must change, too, the willingness to take chances on what hostile groups, regimes or states might not only be able, but also be willing to do. Where there are the capabilities to do evil, it must now be assumed that there may be a will, and where there is a will there is a risk that is no longer acceptable and must be, therefore, preempted. Reports of a split within the Bush administration, between the administration and Congress, or within America itself are exaggerated. Differences are not over whether Iraq is a central part of the new war, but when and how it should be addressed.

For coalition members, however, the answer may not be as clear. Consultation does not presuppose a consensus, but is designed to permit and mold it. Consultation over Iraq and other suspects will take place, as it should; but so will action, as it must, even in the absence of a consensus. For, in the end, this war will not be won so long as America and its allies do not end the risks of terror that would come out of a regime that has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to terror.

The Wars of 911 will be a decisive test of America’s credibility as a durable

⁷ See President Bush’s news conference of October 11 2001, and media reports of his meeting with President Jiang Zemin on October 19: *The Washington Post*, October 12 2001, pp. A20-21, and October 21 2001, p. A25, respectively.

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power. That test extends beyond its ability to win the war, which is something America rarely fails to do. It has to do with America's ability to improve its relations with other parts of the world where its message has been irrelevant or even destructive. As the battle against a new anarchy is waged, and as the search for a new global order is launched, the transatlantic community of values built during the Cold War will endure and even be completed if it is sustained by a community of action defined by a shared interest in the unconditional defeat of terror and its sponsors. That will require bold and visionary leadership on both sides of the Atlantic. Failure is not an option.