



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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Ten Reasons to Ignore bin Laden: Restoring the Balance¹

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For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here.

--Thomas Carlyle

If it be a fact that the great man may modify his nation in its structure and actions.... Before he can re-make his society, his society must make him.

--Herbert Spencer²

What to do about bin Ladin? Ever since 9/11 that has been the central question in US policy to combat international terrorism. The events of 9/11 defined a presidency, became the motivation for the policies and actions of a superpower, and have remained a key component in an internal American debate over the best policies and strategies for understanding and responding to the world and US responsibilities in it. Exactly what is best to do and why? The major contention in what follows is offered more as a proposition than as a conclusion. It is a thought piece not a policy statement, in part because we have not thought enough about what we are doing, why or whether we should be doing it, and have rushed forward with policies and actions.

¹ The following views are wholly those of the author and do not reflect the views of NDU, the Department of Defense, or any USG agency.

² A subtext of what follows concerns the role of great men. Do great men make history or are they made by it? Is history the sum total of their thoughts and deeds; or are their ideas and actions the product of powerful social, economic, historical, and political forces, seen and unseen, that shape the circumstances and minds of great men who embody more than they mold the fortunes of their age? Or is there some halfway house, as suggested by Max Weber's concept of 'charisma', of 'a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities...' recognized and honored but not possessed by ordinary men?² Questions answered more by fashion than by fact, perhaps. How does one prove, or even substantially demonstrate, the efficacy of either contention noted above? Or quantify, or even qualify the role of charisma? Yet, one cannot deny that some individuals possess qualities and embody characteristics that can win followers and devotees; that merit accolades and acolytes. Men can inspire nations or lynch mobs. Found movements of great moment, or criminal conspiracies of vast dimensions. Where does bin Ladin fall in this mix? Great man or social avatar? Apart from a mere academic discussion, does it really matter how one answers the questions posed? While the following discussion will not take sides on this point, at least directly, from a policy perspective, the essay to follow will argue that the focus on bin Ladin and his movement that currently dominates US thinking is misplaced because it is imbalanced, off the mark because it misses the point. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, two volumes, Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978, volume 1, p241.

The main point is to argue that the focus on bin Ladin, on his organization, and on the role of Islam in their actions misses the point of the exercise as they misinterpret the world we now commonly inhabit. The proper focus is not what to do about bin Ladin but what American purpose is in a world where people like bin Ladin are possible. Viewed solely from the perspective of a bin Ladin, or any aspirants to his mantle, he is the most spectacularly successful terrorist in history. Not because of any individual acts, which have been heinous, but in their ability to mesmerize the world and to become the centerpiece of the purposes, policies, and actions of a superpower. The argument here is that this is not what the situation merits and is not what we should be about. It is not an argument for doing nothing but for reassessing the reasons for what we are doing or need to be doing. As a proposition, it does not offer final answers but a point of view. The United States has lost the art of strategic thinking and is locked in cycles of operational and tactical responses dressed up as strategy. The real struggle is about ideas not techniques. A change is needed.

One of the main elements in current US thinking on how to deal with the threat from bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida is the need to respond to the ideological support to terrorism derived from their efforts to coax the Islamic world into action. The idea behind combating the ideological support to terrorism is that bin Ladin & Associates are propagating an ideology, based on Islam, that is the source of their ability to recruit fighters among the world's Muslims and that this effort must and can be countered in a fashion parallel to how the United States countered Marxism, an ideology, and defeated the Soviet Union. It is, after all, a war of ideas and so we must engage on this battlefield as well.³ But, which war of ideas? What ideas are waging war and what ideas need to be countered? Supported? With what means?

While a truism, almost a banality, that men act on the basis of the ideas that they hold and believe in, whether consciously or not, it is nevertheless too often the case, especially in circumstances when it is felt necessary to counter ideas that motivate others, that the nature of those ideas receive little beyond a cursory review to justify and enable counter measures. This 'review' all too often fails to examine the nature, context, and content of the ideas that call for a response, failing, for example, to determine whether there is any difference between ideas that motivate actions and ideology. Are the terms synonymous? If so, then all actions based on ideas, ideas themselves, are ideological in character and everyone is, therefore, an ideologue, which means, in this case, that religion and faith are, likewise, merely a special category of ideology. Therefore, a species of special pleading. Claims for democracy not excepted. If this is the case, then US claims to promote democracy and to sustain it are merely another chapter in the case book of ideologies, backed up with a superpower's armamentarium.⁴

³ Various sources make this argument, such as the late Michael Radu from the Foreign Policy Research Institute, or less polemically, Bernard Lewis. Counter arguments are made by others, such as John Esposito. Arguing from more or less the same set of basic facts, they reach different conclusions. Some of the confusion seems to come into play in how one responds to the notion of 'fundamentalism' or religious revivalism. If one changes the wave band slightly, one encounters arguments about Christian fundamentalism and revivalism that sees in those movements great evil that must be countered. Voices such as Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins, authors who see no good coming from faith.

⁴ To a significant degree, the claim of an ideology is to describe, account for certain facts about life, not only what is but what ought to be. It is a claim beyond self-interest. The problem for the United States in seeking to combat ideology, without fully understanding its appeal and to whom it appeals and why, is that it pits the self-interest of the United States against a universal, apparently disinterested claim. Thus, in many minds what the United States is

As such, responding to bin Ladin and associated movements is a clash of ideologies, being based on ideas, which are therefore merely ideological constructs of another sort. In which case, to the degree that Islam is an ideology, which ipso facto it is based on this way of thinking, and bin Ladin speaks for Islam, or at least one view of it, then the war on bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida is, despite repeated policy statements to the contrary, a war on Islam and a war of civilizations. The implications of such a position are profound.⁵

If this 'war' is not the case, or not to be the case, then some further work is necessary to discern what issues, in addition to any ideologically inspired ones, are engaged and what policies and actions are necessary and suited to the circumstances. Not how to deal with bin Ladin, for the United States, but what ideas and ideals we are about trying to realize. If there are differences and distinctions, then it is important to understand what those are and how one is to accommodate policy and action to a reality that is more subtle than our categories of analysis. If religion and faith are not ideologies, granting that some believers are not immune to efforts to 'ideologize' faith for political ends, then there is no easy comparison between communism and fascism, which are clearly ideological, and Islam, Christianity, or Judaism.⁶

With some two billion Christians, over one billion Muslims, and perhaps another billion and half Hindus and Buddhists worldwide, more than two thirds of the world's population are believers. If, as John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge argue in *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World*, religion is not a vanishing phenomenon as secularist analysis long held, then whether it is resurgent Islam or Christianity any simple and simplistic policy approaches that reduce faith to an ideology to be countered is staking out a huge project that puts

doing is simply asserting its own selfish claims against selfless ones. It starts on the wrong foot and limps accordingly.

⁵ This is an issue playing out, for example, in the politics of Europe where the presence of a significant Islamic minority population is becoming a source of growing dissension and social unrest, in part linked to questions of global terrorism and whether Islam and Muslims are a threat to the values of liberal, European society. London is 'Londonistan' not only because of a significant Muslim presence but because the government seems uncertain how to accommodate that presence within the rule of law. France is similarly convulsed by how to respond to a large Muslim, largely North African, ethnic minority that refuses to assimilate—or is not permitted to do so, depending on one's point of view. The Netherlands is divided in trying to deal with its own Muslim population, an issue whose political dimensions find current expression in the trial of Geert Wilders and his film, *Fitna*, that highlights the militant aspects of the Koran and radical Islamists. Insurgents in Chechnya are Islamic militant terrorists or ethnic freedom fighters. Thus, the issues are not remote and esoteric but immediate with domestic political ramifications.

⁶ In modern, secular analysis, the only discernible difference is that beliefs like communism and fascism have substituted history or race for God, and are therefore rational; while the religious believe in God, which is a false consciousness to disguise actual motives, and are therefore irrational. In a world dominated by secularized forms of analysis, however, in which faith and religion have no meaning apart from analytical categories, there is no way to accommodate belief except as a form of ideology. In that same world, where religion and religious expression are reasserting themselves, the potential for fateful confrontation has become significantly greater, again, with profound implications. The whole question of what an idea is, however, is a philosophically vexed one and has been since whoever it was had the first idea. Stripped of all the glosses and varnishes, an idea is a belief in what the facts mean, or rather the metaphysical notion that facts have meaning, that this can be discerned, proved, and then acted upon. Although the notion, an idea, that there is such a thing as objectivity—facts quo facts outside individual interpretation—is often invoked in favor of an interpretation, in the end facts don't stay put, they drift and in doing so render time-bound interpretations isolated. Nowhere is this clearer than in science, that supposedly ultimate bastion of knowing about the facts and nothing but the facts.

policy and the governments that sustain them on a collision course with most of the world's population.⁷

Further, if US ideas of democracy, as a principle if not always a practice, is to have any sway, it must be based on more than a bullying moralizing backed up with military force. It cannot be based on responding to terrorists or terrorism. It needs to resonate. In many minds around the world, however, we have linked our efforts to a militarized approach and a style of tactical and operational responses that speaks for us regardless of what we might say or mean. People look to what we do as much as to what we say, and if there is a gap, actions speak louder than words. We have turned the situation into a struggle of techniques and not ideas. What is in conflict is not just individuals but ideas, concepts, principles. "Speaking only a little fancifully, what comes into conflict is the moral or political theories and systems held by individuals and groups."⁸

Ten Reasons to Ignore bin Ladin

The first reason to ignore bin Ladin is not an argument that there is nothing of importance going on. It is a matter of perspective. Or of proportion. While acknowledging that individuals can make a difference, ideas and their social context, the determinants of how those ideas are received and acted upon and by and for whom are at least as fundamental; and, if the ideas have resonance, they are more enduring than single individuals no matter how charismatic. Bin Ladin and his movement made a dramatic appearance on the world stage, most notably with the attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001. Awareness of his activities, of course, preceded that event.⁹ Exactly how much of a threat before 9/11 was debatable, as was what represented that threat's true nature—a clash of civilizations or an isolated terrorist group with

⁷ Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *God Is Back*, NY: Penguin Press, 2009. As the authors note, both Christianity and Islam have major movements within them determined to proselytize, to seek new converts and expand the realm of the faithful. These efforts are particularly active in the Third World and are generally the result of local efforts. See pp. 297ff. For a more detailed, scholarly study of this phenomenon in the context of 'fundamentalism' see the five volumes of the The Fundamentalist Project, edited by Martin Marty and R. Scoot Appleby, Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993. The problem of faith vs. ideology is not just a problem for secular authorities. It presents a challenge to the religious as well. Both Christians and Muslims face issues of how to deal with groups within the respective religions that favor agendas contrary to mainstream doctrine, practice, and interpretation. Sometimes called 'heresy', this is not a recent phenomenon for faith and the faithful. In recent years, various popes have faced the problem of 'liberation theology'; and there is a vigorous debate ongoing in the Islamic world between mainstream clerics and would-be interpreters of faith, such as bin Ladin and associates over the meaning and interpretation of the Koran and hadith.

⁸ John Dunn, *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays, 1981-1989*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990, p.51. The common Washington terminology for how to address this is 'strategic communications', the idea being to come up with the right mix of sound bites to get America's message out. A nation of consumers encouraged to buy through sophisticated advertising campaigns finds this approach accessible and meaningful. But just what is that message? And who is to deliver it? Who speaks for America? America broadcasts on some many frequencies with so many conflicting messages with the government's views only one voice, and one that is heavily discounted at home, that it is virtually impossible for anyone to know what the message is or ought to be. And all too frequently actions undo pronouncements even if the ad campaign is well constructed and delivered.

⁹ Works by Michael Scheuer, *Imperial Hubris*, and *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*; and Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies*, and, of course, the *9/11 Commission Report* all point up that bin Ladin & Co. were serious threats to be taken seriously well before 9/11, arguing that no one paid proper attention or not enough attention to the threat.

global ambitions—and, therefore, exactly what to do about it—drop bombs on caves in Afghanistan or invasion and regime change. The nature of those attacks, linked as they were to bin Ladin and his charismatic presence, have made personification easy. But easy is not necessarily right and focusing on bin Ladin or al-Qa'ida tends to obscure deeper realities and thus makes responses superficial.

1. Disproportionate Responses. It is sometimes hard to realize the uniqueness of the current US effort in developing responses. The Bush Administration, responding to the shock of 9/11, declared war on terrorism, in effect, declaring war on bin Ladin, his movement, and anyone who aided or abetted that movement. The full weight of the US policy and defense establishment—an establishment designed to fight and win the Cold War against the existential threat of the Soviet Union—mobilized to respond to a threat from a non-state actor with all the power and capability hitherto seen only in state-on-state warfare. Although this mobilization eventually resulted in the invasion of a quasi-state, Afghanistan, and of an existing state, Iraq, the motivation was to strike root and branch at bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida. The decision to take such a dramatic step, declaring war on a movement—some would say on a tactic—and not a state, has generated its share of ambiguities.

As a result, the United States now finds itself deeply engaged in dealing with the unintended consequences of that focus on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the political and social realities of foreign occupation have fundamentally altered the original circumstances. Meanwhile, bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida have moved on and become, if less centralized, more diverse and no less a potential threat in search of other insecure or unstable environments from which to conduct operations—Yemen, Somalia, and wherever next.

Further, there is an intense domestic debate on how to sustain such an effort, its proper focus, and future direction. Moreover, it has also occasioned major controversy over how to treat the individuals in US custody as a result of actions to wage a war. If it is a war, it is one of a very different kind, again, against a non-state actor and movement, albeit one with international reach. These very facts now rack the US political environment over how to respond. Are the enemy combatants or criminals? Should they be treated as prisoners of war—international law is not much help here since the rules of war apply to state actors—or as criminal defendants with all the Constitutional protections thereof? Meanwhile, the Obama Administration, while walking back from war-on-terrorism rhetoric, continues to deploy the full weight of the US defense establishment in waging a war on bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida, searching for the right mix of military, nation building, and strategic communications responses to deal with possible terrorist acts—now made warlike—and the struggle for hearts and minds of the international community.

The question is, is this approach proportionate to the nature of the problem and are the instruments deployed appropriate to the circumstance. For the reasons to be discussed below, the answer is 'no'.

2. Making the US bin Ladin's principal ally. Thus the second reason to ignore bin Ladin: by our disproportionate focus on him and al-Qa'ida, we have added enormously to his prestige and appeal. We have become his best ally. The issue is not whether he and his movement can stage dramatic attacks on the United States or others, but of a response to those actions that treats him

and them as if they were an existential threat on par with interstate war, requiring the fully panoply of American power to respond. The essence of success for a terrorist is to advertise success. Having the United States focus itself on responding to the actions of a non-state actor as if he or his movement was a major state able to mount an existential threat puts more power into his hands than he had any right to expect. Without the resources of a state, by simply being there, he has seized the initiative and made US policy reactive.

The US response also focuses on his use of an Islamic idiom to make his case. In doing so, the tendency has been to hector Muslims and Islamic countries to be more pro-active in responding to Islamic terrorists. As if, somehow, there was something distinctive in Islam that promotes terrorism, as opposed to other motivations. This approach tends to treat Islam as an ideology not a faith and tends to conflate genuine Islamic sentiments—which is a proselytizing faith—and its use by ideologists. The irony is, that on purely Islamic grounds, bin Ladin has little resonance in the Islamic community.¹⁰ Thus, there are sound reasons to ignore bin Ladin, or to put him in perspective, and to moderate approaches that alienate the very audience that we are trying to win to our side. The Islamic community, by in large, rejects most of his claims based on Islam—more on that later—and has tried to make us understand how much harder many of our responses make the effort to discredit bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida.¹¹

3. Becoming the Problem. The third reason to ignore bin Ladin rests is the context in which he and we operate. It is a context that he takes advantage of but did not create. Conversely, it is a context that we have partly made and are partly responsible for maintaining. An impression more than a reality. Discussed in more detail below, the main problem that confronts the US today is the degree to which it substitutes in many minds for the heritage of exploitation and humiliation that European imperialism generated in many parts of the so-called Third World and in ideologically inspired movements in the developed world, particularly Marxism and its various offshoots. By focusing on bin Ladin or associated movements we tend to misdirect out attention from this larger reality. This is not some concern for a standard list of 'root causes', which are generally also a canard, but with where the United States stands or is perceived to stand on the deep issues of social development, political equity, and justice. Hearts and minds.

¹⁰ With over 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide, al-Qa'ida and affiliates can muster only a tiny fraction of supporters. Even sympathy for its wider goals is thin, especially in areas that have experienced the opportunity of living in the type of state that bin Ladin's sketchy ideas would create. For a recent study of public support for radical groups see Pew Research Center: Global Attitudes Project, 'Mixed Views of Hamas and Hizbullah in Mostly Muslim Nations: Little Enthusiasm for Muslim Leaders', <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=268>, 4 February 2010, which also discusses support for al-Qaida and bin Ladin. A similar opinion poll by ABC/Pew shows a similar trend in Afghanistan. <http://abcnews.go.com/PollingUnit/afghanistan-abc-news-national-survey-poll-show-support/story?id=9511961>. For a recent survey of al-Qa'ida and affiliates see John Rollins, 'Al-Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy', Congressional Research Service R41070, 5 February 2010. Also see Fared Zakaria, 'How Bin Laden Lost the Clash of Civilizations', *Newsweek*, 22 February 2010. In many areas of Islamic activity, much of it has more links to Wahhabism emanating from once mainly Saudi-supported madrassas, than to bin Ladin. This strict interpretation of Islam based on the teachings of the 18th century Islamic reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhabi, based on the legal formulations of one of the four great Muslim founding jurists, Ahmad Hanbal, is the dominate version of Saudi Arabia's Sunni beliefs. It is a very active proselytizing religion, backed with Saudi oil money.

¹¹ For a take on this see Fared Zakaria, "How Bin Laden Lost the Clash of Civilizations", *Newsweek*, 22 February 2010. For a deeper analysis see Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004; or his *Failure of Political Islam*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004.

To many in Washington, this is a matter of strategic communications or nation building. It isn't, or at least not as commonly understood.

4. Not the Only Kid on the Block. The fourth reason to ignore bin Ladin lies in the reality that the focus on him and his arguments tends to obscure the range of other threats that exist independent of him and his movement. This is not a recent phenomenon. The US focus on the Soviet Union, understandable in its context, tended to obscure many of these same developments, leaving the United States unprepared to respond to the international environment as it had evolved beneath Cold War rivalry and the threats that created an elaborate political/military establishment designed for one type of situation wholly unsuited for the new circumstances that followed the end of that rivalry. By trying to make bin Ladin and his arguments a substitute for the existential threat once posed by the Soviet Union, the US, while finding a justification for maintaining an elaborate political/military establishment, has gone forward with a set of programs and policies that fail to grasp the nature of the problem and that generates responses that make many of those problems worse. A focus, frankly, that threatens to bankrupt the country or seriously damage its economic well being.

5. Dead on Arrival. The fifth reason to ignore bin Ladin is that he will die. His death will not end his appeal but his living or dying is not the true nature of the issues engaged. Bin Ladin represents a certain type of response to the realities of modernization and the alienation that it generates, not the least of which is a groping sense of a loss of value and virtue, the search for a meaningfulness that transcend material interests, which, ironically, the United States has come to represent.

6. Undone by Success. The main irony is that the United States has already won the war of ideas. Thus, the sixth reason to ignore bin Ladin lies in the nature of that victory and the need not to snatch failure for the jaws of success. It was the main argument of George Kennan in his famous 'Mr. X' article that, in fact, the Soviet Union was based on a set of false premises that in time would fail of their own accord. What the United States needed to do was to adhere to its basic principles, containing the Soviet threat, avoiding World War III, until those internal dynamics pulled the whole Potemkin architecture down.¹² That is not unlike the present circumstance. Bin Ladin's appeal is based on longings unconnected to his arguments. His arguments and the few practical efforts to base a system of governance upon them—most notably in Afghanistan—have been rude failures. The alienation that he preaches and hopes to rally support against cannot be addressed by anything in his agenda, such as it is. The principal desire is for a system of governance authentic of local circumstances that gives people a say in their own government, and holds that government to account. In short, democracy. Yet, he fulminates against it and offers a putative Islamic solution. He has already lost that argument and can offer no convincing substitute save brute force and intimidation. The best argument we

¹² Per Kennan: 'The issue of Soviet-American relations is in essence a test of the over-all worth of the United States as a nation among nations.... To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.' Quoted in John Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War*, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992, p.48. While this understanding informed the development of the subsequent policy of containment, the way the Truman, Eisenhower and following administrations set about to implement the policy, represented initially in NSC 68, departed radically from Kennan's initial ideas, a divergence that Kennan came to denounce, feeling that the progressive militarization of the approach—creating a large, standing army—went against the very traditions he thought needed preservation.

have is his efforts to accomplish his goals. The trick is to allow him to fail while limiting his ability to kill and maim.¹³

7. A Box of Pandoras. The seventh reason to ignore bin Ladin is that responses to him do nothing to address the reasons why figures like him, and he is only the most visible and charismatic manifestation of a deeper longing, have an appeal in the modern imagination. As one political wag noted, our problem is not Pandora's box, but a box of Pandoras. Why, for example, do some young Americans forsake hearth and home for the wilds of wherever al-Qa'ida calls home today to kill other Americans in the belief that they contribute to the greater good? Why Nigerians? Yemenis? Europeans? The facile answer is that it is Islam or something in Islam that explains. But, there are a host of similarly dissonant movements across the landscape that seek to alter fundamentally the world as now received. They appeal to Christianity, or Buddhism, or warmed over Marxism, or some sort of vague environmentalism—Gaia or greenism—to justify any and every sort of violence to change the world as it is to make men and society perfect. This is an environment of dissonance that exists independently of bin Ladin or any related movement.¹⁴ Focusing on bin Ladin only obscures the need for deeper understanding and broader responses.

The final reasons to ignore bin Ladin, which require a more detailed discussion, involve examining the reasons to take him seriously.

Three Reasons to Take bin Ladin Seriously

Ironically, the reasons to take bin Ladin seriously do not concern him directly but go to deeper structural and systemic realities of the current international, globalized environment, some related to the United States and its role in that environment and to the challenge that bin Ladin and others raise to that environment as a legitimate expression of the aspirations of people worldwide. Certainly, bin Ladin, himself, claims that it is that role that lies behind and underpins much of the rationale for his actions and his claims to legitimacy in the Islamic world.¹⁵ In the

¹³ The irony is further compounded by the one success of using Islam as the claim for creating a government, that is, Khumayni's Islamic Republic. There is more of Montesquieu than Muhammad in Khumayni's design, which bears no resemblance to any Islamic system of rule, Shia or Sunni, past or present, and is premised on trying to effect a local variant of democracy, the main rhetorical flourishes aimed at creating the impression that it is homegrown and owes nothing to non-Islamic or non-Iranian sources of inspiration.

¹⁴ A theme I address in more detail in a forthcoming piece in *Terrorism: An International Electronic Journal*, "Terrorism in the Mind of the Age: Revolt against the Modern".

¹⁵ See *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, Bruce Lawrence, editor, NY: Verso Press, 2005; or *Anti-American Terrorism and the Middle East: A Documentary Reader*, edited by Barry and Judith Rubin, London: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002, especially bin-Ladin's declaration of jihad. Also, regional concerns, especially over the American agenda for democracy, is not some frivolous opposition or mindless authoritarianism, although there is some of that. There is a deeper issue. It is a dispute over *telos*, over the goals or ends for which political society exists. Largely lost in the West is the sense that politics ought to have an end, prescribed, in mind other than the choices made by voters and their elected representatives. This is not exactly true for Western politics either, which is why there can be some much controversy—over healthcare, for example—but it has lost the one determining feature of *telos* still important for many, that is an end prescribed not by human wants and desires expressed through electoral muscle but by God's will expressed in his messages. 'These days, we don't think of politics as such as having some particular substantive end, but as being open to the various ends that citizens may espouse... We view politics as a procedure that enables persons to choose their ends for themselves.' See Michael Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009, p.192ff for an accessible

end, the reasons for taking bin Ladin seriously go to moral issues not questions of interests or of actions based on them; or at least to an understanding that moral questions of the issues involved must figure first in thinking about interests and actions. Answers lie not in what to do about bin Ladin but about what America should and needs to be doing, about America's position and role in the world, the rationale and moral basis for that presence and those actions.

Whether one regards the United States as the only remaining superpower, or hyperpower, or whatever, it is fairly clear that the United States occupies a unique position in the current international system by virtue of the role it developed in the Cold War vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and the capabilities and commitments consequent upon that confrontation. As the newest *Quadrennial Defense Review* argues, 'America's interests are inextricably linked to the integrity and resilience of the international system. Chief among these interests are security, prosperity, broad respect for universal values, and an international order that promotes cooperative action.' Because the 'United States remains the only nation able to project and sustain large-scale operations over extended distances.... This unique position generates an obligation to be responsible stewards of the power and influence that history, determination, and circumstance have provided.' This rather broad mandate of responsibilities born of capabilities also includes a mission in outer space, cyberspace, and inner space—what to do about global climate change as a security issue.

While it is debatable whether an 'ought' can be derived from an 'is'—whether the US capability to project power requires it to project power—the United States is in a unique position to exercise its powers. The question is whether current circumstances require such a commitment and whether the nation is prepared to sustain it for the long term implicit in the argument to respond to the challenges real and perceived. And if it is the case and we must act, upon what principles should we act and judge and be judged by. It is the essence of bin Ladin's challenge to question that very commitment and willingness, to challenge the current architecture of international relations, the international system itself as it is, and America's role as part of it.

Interestingly, although the United States, as the QDR would have it, is integral to helping maintain the integrity of the international system, in important ways it stands outside that system and is a challenge to it, as it has been since the founding of the republic. If the way forward is about ideas and not actions, then we need some understanding of our present situation, how we got here, and why. To understand this requires an act of memory.

The Past as Prologue

The essence of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence was based on two major political arguments and a third argument derived from an abstract principle upon which all else rested. A moral principle. The abstract principle was this: that all men are created equal and

discussion of the issue of telos as a political reality. For most Muslims, and many other religious, the end of society and politics is bound up with the fulfillment of God's purpose not human wants and desires per se. Ends are not subject to votes. The question is how to make democracy work in that context and whether it is, indeed, possible at all to do so. The bind for teleology, in this case that of Muslims, is that while agreeing that there is an end it is still only too possible to disagree over means or over the interpretation of ends, as bin Ladin only too forcefully demonstrates.

endowed by their Creator with certain ‘unalienable’ rights. From this Americans derived the idea that when those God-chartered rights were violated people had a right to revolution; and second, following from this, a right then to establish a form of government based on those rights acceptable to the people and righteous in the sight of God. There was, in effect, a law above law, a source of law independent of any manmade arrangements against which the validity of those arrangements were to be measured and judged.

The character of these arguments went beyond the dispute between the American colonies and Great Britain. It challenged the nature of the international system as then conceived or as it existed. Remembering that the putative origin of that system lay in the Peace of Westphalia and the founding documents of Western thought on just war, that system, if it can be called such, was barely over 100 years old when Americans made their claim. The Declaration of Independence and eventually the Constitution of the United States, challenged the essential rationale of that system, based as it then was largely on the emerging nations of Europe and their corresponding empires, whose systems of government were largely monarchical.¹⁶ Even when the French Revolution seemed to import the essence of the American argument, it did so in a very different spirit. First it increased, over time, the power of centralizing governments beyond anything Old Regime monarchies could contemplate. Second, it based its arguments on eliminating religion or faith as a component underpinning fundamental rights. Third, in solidifying state power, it accelerated European imperialism as one of the essential components of the international system, which was evolving from the nature of the relationships of the states of Europe and their interaction with the wider world. All elements that the US system, as then conceived and practiced, opposed.

The essence of the American system opposed the concentration of power in government as ultimately subversive of the sovereignty of the people from whom all genuine power derived. Those powers, also derived from God, therefore were not secular in nature. And, while American continental expansion had its imperial features, the American system was inherently anti-imperialist and incapable of empire by its nature. Even the concept of ‘nationalism’ differed. Whereas in Europe and eventually elsewhere, the idea of nationalism derives its rationale from a ‘nation’, that is a coherent not to say tribal sense of common ethnic identity, in the United States, such a nation does not and cannot exist because it is based on a set of shared ideas independent of confessional identity.¹⁷

¹⁶ This is not to assert that ideas of American democracy, representative government, and nationalism based on shared principles were at this stage a settled matter. If they had been, the various and evolving individual state constitutions would not have been necessary nor, as for a national government, would the Constitutional Convention of 1787 to revise the Articles of Confederation been necessary. While Americans, as colonial dependencies, had almost 160 years of running local government before the revolution in which to learn the skills required for national self-governance, ideas of democracy and representation went through a series of experiments and revisions that have not ceased to this day. But whatever the varying interpretations and iterations, the common impulse was for a form of national government at odds with then common practice, and by extension, opposed to an involving international system based on non-representative forms of government in the first instance and on practices based on imperial power rivalries in the second. In particular see Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969; and Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005.

¹⁷ The United States has not lacked nativist impulses, whether in the so-called ‘Know Nothing Party’ of the mid-1800s or the various militias of today. While these movements have enjoyed some influence, this has generally been limited and of short duration.

For much of its history and for the evolution of the international system, the United States lay outside or on the margins of the processes—largely based on the practices of European states, their wars, and imperial acquisitions—that gradually defined the moral and legal components of the international system, content to develop its internal dynamics behind the barriers of two oceans and a foreign policy based largely on avoiding foreign entanglements beyond a belief in free trade, open oceans, and the Monroe Doctrine.¹⁸ While the US Civil War forced a more vigorous international engagement, both North and South, it was not until WWI that the US found itself engaging in a major way in a foreign war.¹⁹ While the US sent troops to join the Allies against the Germans, the nature of that intervention, or, rather, the purpose President Woodrow Wilson stated for how the war should end, reflected a very American point of view that stood outside the mainstream of international practice. Wilson’s 14 Points were idealistic, anti-imperialist in sentiment, stressed the right of self-determination, and sought a revision of the international system that would end war:

It will be our wish and purpose that the processes of peace, when they are begun, shall be absolutely open and that they shall involve and permit henceforth no secret understandings of any kind. The day of conquest and aggrandizement is gone by; so is also the day of secret covenants entered into in the interest of particular governments and likely at some unlooked-for moment to upset the peace of the world. It is this happy fact, now clear to the view of every public man whose thoughts do not still linger in an age that is dead and gone, which makes it possible for every nation whose purposes are consistent with justice and the peace of the world to avow now or at any other time the objects it has in view.... All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us.²⁰

Wilson’s attendance at the peace talks in Paris to end the war brought these concerns into deliberations, and the presence of The Inquiry, perhaps America’s first ‘think tank’, a board of experts, was uniquely American in its structure and intent to find a way to resolve a host of geographical, political obstacles to a lasting peace. Obstacles believed to arise from the nature of the international system as then conceived and practiced.²¹ Modern judgment tends to view Wilson’s views and American ideas as naively idealistic, and Wilson failed in most of his direct efforts; but the 14 Points inspired a host of expectations among then colonial people whose long-term consequence was the end of empire; forced a change in international practice—from the

¹⁸ As and aside, to underscore the point, America did not sign a foreign military alliance after the revolutionary one with France in 1778 until the NATO alliance document in 1949. See Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: A History*, NY: Modern Library, 2002, p.82.

¹⁹ The Spanish American War was a special case, in part aimed at the one residual European holding in the New World. The anomaly was the acquisition of the Philippines, which provided no end of a headache for US policy.

²⁰ Text can be found at the website for the Woodrow Wilson Library, http://www.woodrowwilson.org/learn_sub/learn_sub_show.htm?doc_id=377217

²¹ See Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*, NY: Random House, 2002; David Andelman, *A Shattered Peace: Versailles 1919 and the Price We Pay Today*, N.J.: J Wiley, 2008; and Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt’s Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization*, Berkeley, CA: Univ of California Press, 2008, which provides a look inside the Inquiry and its role in helping to draft the 14 Points, its contribution to the Paris Peace Conference, and the development of the League of Nations.

idea of formal acquisition of conquered territories to the idea of temporary mandates—and saw the creation of the League of Nations, whose charter was to provide a mechanism for the peaceful resolution of international disputes and an end to the power politics that had heretofore governed relations among peoples and states.

Wilson's and American naïveté failed to end war or the ideological outbursts that so disfigured international politics in the years to follow. Wilson could not even convince his own countrymen to bring the United States formally into the League of Nations, a rejection based on very American reasons and political realities—no small part of which was the judgment that American idealism would not, in fact, change the nature of international politics and that it was better for the United States to remain aloof rather than become part of the problem.²² Yet, that failure, which helped to create the environment for WWII and the Cold War to follow, brought the United States, eventually, into center stage, and in the words of the QDR into a place where 'America's interests are inextricably linked to the integrity and resilience of the international system.' But, is this, in fact, the case? Are American interests inextricably linked in the fashion suggested by the QDR? And does that linkage require the types of capabilities and responsibilities it then details? Answers for later.²³ Suffice it to say at this point that American engagement with the international system did not begin with a resounding endorsement of it. Latterly, the answers have been assumed and not examined as a brief for policy decisions. But if the above argument carries weight, the United States has been largely successful in its efforts, intended or consequentially, to redraft the terms of reference for the international system.

8. Unless Justice Be Done

Thus, the first reason to take bin Ladin seriously, and the eight reason to ignore him, is the point on which his underlying arguments coincide with those of the United States in its purpose for engaging the international system, which at the beginning was not to accept or ensure its integrity as American found it but to change it radically based on a sense of reciprocal justice. Stripped of its peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, bin Ladin's argument rejects the current international system and seeks to realign it based on principles of justice that take the aspirations of those the system disenfranchises into consideration. This deserves to be taken seriously as a critique, in part because of the enormity of the proposal and in part because he then proceeds to hold the United States particularly to blame for those injustices that can only be rectified by the reconstitution he urges. They must be taken seriously not in order to protect the integrity of the international system, which may result, but to address the moral nature of the argument advanced

²² There was considerable critique of Wilson's argument but the most forceful and consistent were the arguments delivered by Henry Cabot Lodge, who spoke for many: 'National I must remain, and in that way I like all other Americans can render the amplest service to the world. The United States is the world's best hope, but if you fetter her in the interests and quarrels of other nations, if you tangle her in the intrigues of Europe, you will destroy her power for good and endanger her very existence. Leave her to march freely through the centuries to come as in the years that have gone.... Strong, generous, and confident, she has nobly served mankind. Beware how you trifle with your marvellous inheritance, this great land of ordered liberty, for if we stumble and fall freedom and civilization everywhere will go down in ruin.'

²³ Why should we even care what the QDR says? The short answer is because it, and DoD, have come to speak for American strategic thought, militarizing it. We have come to put our mouth where our money is. Although the Obama Administration, by congressional mandate, will eventually issue its National Strategy, it will follow the QDR and its statements of priority and focus. Thus, our statement of our military policy and strategy precedes our national strategy, the money to support the former assuming that the latter will comply.

and its appeal in a watching world. To date, we have not made a counter argument. We have one and it is high time to respond and reclaim the moral high ground that is at issue.

While Wilson's 14 Points were designed in part to persuade Germany to enter peace negotiations, it was also a damning critique of the international system as it existed and which Wilson, and most Americans, believed was the source of war and injustice that needed to be fundamentally changed so that WWI would be the war to end all wars. That effort failed, the seal of that failure being the horrors of WWII.

Based on a sense of aloofness from the affairs of Europe, where once again it seemed its leaders were bent on putting civilization as a whole at risk to settle European disputes, the United States did not become a combatant in WWII until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler's declaration of war brought a forceful end to American isolationism. Even so, with that attack fresh in American minds, President Roosevelt, very much still in the vein of Wilson, described US war aims in January, 1942, as a determination not only not to accept the international system as it existed but also to respond to the challenge of those states that sought to change that system in ways hostile to American notions of justice. He sought to oppose the latter effort and to reconstruct the whole based on enduring, underlying moral claims:

In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms...freedom of speech and expression...freedom of every person to worship God in his own way...freedom from want...freedom from fear.... That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation.... To that new order we oppose the greater conception -- the moral order.... Since the beginning of our American history, we have been engaged in change -- in a perpetual peaceful revolution...without the concentration camp or the quick-lime in the ditch. The world order which we seek is the cooperation of free countries, working together in a friendly, civilized society.

This nation has placed its destiny in the hands and heads and hearts of its millions of free men and women; and its faith in freedom under the guidance of God. Freedom means the supremacy of human rights everywhere. Our support goes to those who struggle to gain those rights or keep them. Our strength is our unity of purpose.

To that high concept there can be no end save victory.

Because of arguments like this, and the US effort to make the United Nations work in a way it failed to do with the League of Nations, the war, America's involvement in it, was not in the pattern of 18th or 19th century conflicts designed to realign European borders or imperial possessions but to reconstruct the international order based on a set of moral principles not directly linked to power politics, part of the quiet revolution that Roosevelt spoke of. The Cold War, Vietnam, and a cycle of internal differences that have embittered domestic politics with spillover into US thinking about and actions in the world have tended to obscure the basic element in American purpose, and have undermined that unity of purpose that Roosevelt believed was our strength. Still, we are about justice—internationally and in local self-

government—and finding a way, practically, to make it work. We were there long before bin Ladin, and our argument, unlike his, is based on universal principles of a shared humanity derived from God. Bin Ladin’s claim is for Muslims, and not just for all Muslims, but only for those who accept his interpretation and his methods. Unless and until everyone agrees with that claim, he and his followers are committed to every atrocity imaginable, which if followed to its logical conclusion requires the death or forced conversion of everyone alive. We need to take his argument seriously to remind ourselves that we have a better one, one not based on the integrity of the international system but on the ideas and ideals that must sustain it and American purpose in engaging it.²⁴

9. No End Save Victory

The second reason to take bin Ladin seriously is the extent to which his argument and the efforts to realize them have resonance. And the extent to which our responses lend support to his efforts in the minds of those we both seek to influence. Bin Ladin has history on his side. Not history in the sense of time to succeed but in the sense of a past that he seeks to exploit. To the degree that he can make himself and his arguments side with a history of past humiliation he puts himself in the right in popular imagination.

The history that bin Ladin seeks to exploit is the legacy of European imperialism, and by extension capitalism, that subordinated much of the Islamic world, and much besides, to European power politics, in the process creating an international system born of the interaction of European powers regardless of other people’s concerns.²⁵ The sense of humiliation as a result runs deep and has a resonance in local minds that we ignore at our peril. To the extent that the US replaces in popular imagination a remembered past of humiliation at the hands of imperial powers with its own actions, it renders those actions suspect and plays bin Ladin’s game.

He, for example, conjures up the idea of the Crusades, an event over 900 years ago, as if it were a reality today and is part and parcel of a long-term effort to destroy Islam, humble Muslims, and subordinate them to external power, now represented by the United States and its fellow travelers. He uses an Islamic idiom to make his case because it has local resonance as well as the history that he is trying to invent in order to win support. It is not working, but US actions that treat him and his ideas as if they are right contribute to his success. He relies on a siege

²⁴ An idea captured by Arthur Schlesinger Jr.: ‘Morality[in foreign policy]is basically a matter of keeping faith with a nation’s own best ideals.... A democracy is in bad shape when it keeps two sets of books—when it uses one scale of values for its internal policy and uses another in foreign affairs.’ Quoted in John L. Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War*, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992, p.47. An age of nuclear weapons and their proliferation adds a new urgency to a project that makes morality and continuing to resist patterns of international rivalry that make their use possible, essential features of US international participation. On this point, see Walter Russell Mead, *Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America’s Grand Strategy in a World at Risk*, NY: Knopf, 2004: ‘...the project of world order-building is increasingly seen as a matter of life and death for the whole human race. Those who hold this view believe we cannot allow the world to simply go on as it did in the past, with nations and civilizations dueling for supremacy heedless of the cost in human suffering.’ P.18.

²⁵ The curiosity is that Europe acquired empires before it acquired capitalism, which does not need imperial possessions to work. The confluence or coincidence of the two, however, convinced many of some sort of inextricable link, the basis for much subsequent communist, socialist, and anarchist analysis. That it was wrong did not keep this form of analysis and the links it thought it saw from becoming a dominate methodology of interpretation in many circles, active still in some quarters.

mentality, a certain ahistorical perspective that does not distinguish rigorously between past and present, and US actions that are offensive to local sentiments and realities to make his case.

But if, as noted above, the US has already won the war of ideas and a bin-Ladin-driven policy threatens to undermine that success, then something different is called for. For if what must be responded to is a mindset and not an organization, if this is a movement and not an individual, how will approaches that focus on organizations and individuals help? More on that later. Clearly, however, there is no end save victory and that victory must be based on ideas that capture the imagination and produce results that people can and will accept as their own. The question is what is the best means to secure success. For reasons linked to the Cold War and the intricate, unique bureaucratic architecture developed for that struggle, the United States has largely militarized its efforts and has focused on more operational and tactical responses, lacking the non-military means to exercise its influence. It has been the essence of the American ideal, one in which the nation once invested, to capture the imagination and secure the means to realize it. We have been living off that investment, using up the principal, wearing thin the principle. It's time to consider a reinvestment.

10. Franchise Chaos

The final reason to take bin Ladin seriously and the tenth reason to ignore him, lies in the nature of the modern political, social, and economic environment based on long-term trends. The essence of that environment revolves first around the issue of governability, of the ability or its lack of governments, however conceived, to govern, if not perfectly at least adequately; and secondly around changes in the international system that empowers a variety of non-state actors, a parallel international system. Commonly noticed as the problem of weak, failing, or failed states, the real problem is one of failed empires and the extended consequences of their creation and ultimate collapse. America played a key role in that collapse and is now trying to find means to deal with those extended consequences, deferred because of the Cold War.

The process of imperial disintegration began with WWI and the peace that followed.²⁶ Although not obvious at the time, America's role in seeking to rewrite the terms upon which international relations rested sowed the seeds of imperial collapse. World War II, which was the second European attempt at cultural suicide, confirmed the trend, exhausting European resources and resolve at the same time it empowered and emboldened local movements for self-determination and the ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union to take center stage.

The various European imperial powers, principally France and Great Britain, began what at first was a measured recession that eventually turned into a rout. In the process, large parts of the Third World suddenly achieved independence without any experience of self-government often left to the tender mercies of emerging elites who saw government not as a responsibility for public good but as a resource for personal gain. The imperial recession provided few answers to suddenly independent former colonies on whom should govern and on what principles. Thus, vast areas little capable of governing found themselves thrown on their own resources with a

²⁶ The Japanese victory over Russia in 1905, in which the US played a key role as mediator, pierced the aura of European invincibility that was part of the illusion of imperial power that made a psychological contribution to ultimate collapse.

host of unresolved local social, economic, and political issues for which there was no basis or experience of compromise.

The result was a series of internal wars seeking to reach a solution by force. The emergence of US-Soviet rivalry as the premier international political reality, with all its conflicting appeals for hearts and minds, obscured or subordinated this host of local struggles to a reality once again not of local design and largely indifferent to local realities and needs. The Cold War not only masked, for the United States, the underlying pathologies, but tended to color them in terms of US-Soviet rivalry, everything being seen as somehow subsumed. As a result, that struggle also profoundly affected how the US thought about and engaged the world.

While it recognized throughout that it was engaged in a conflict of ideas, how the United States found it necessary to create the means to promote, protect, and defend those ideas forced it into a set of actions and relationships not always consonant with those ideas, creating in the process enduring institutional realities at home at odds with many of those ideas, particularly a large, standing military and a defense-oriented bureaucracy, and a set of international commitments and entanglements with little sympathy for those ideas, becoming, in the words of the QDR inextricably linked with certain arrangements and realities it felt and feels compelled to sustain. The collapse of the Soviet Union removed much of the rationale for such an engagement, but it left behind that host of ambiguous situations created by weak, failing, or failed states long ignored or subordinated to other needs along with a US domestic political environment that the long struggle with the Soviet Union had embittered. In addition, it left the United States with a host of legacy institutions and practices designed to deal with the existential threat posed by another superpower and its ideological constructs. That architecture was not designed for a post-Cold War world.

The world that the United States encountered after the Cold War was a much changed environment, and not simply because the other superpower had disappeared. If the recognizable trend of the previous three centuries, in broad terms, was the gradual consolidation of people—at first mostly Europeans—into nation-states as the principal organizing feature for political society along with the corresponding evolution of the interaction of those states into some sort of recognizable pattern of international relations, the circumstance in the post-Cold War environment was far less clear.

This circumstance was not the result either of the Cold War or its end but of long-term processes, obscured by US-Soviet rivalry and preoccupation with each other, that were creating a very different international environment, one indicated by one of two trends. Either the earlier trend of the gradual consolidation of diverse people and interests into more or less coherent nation-states is, as with empire, starting a process of reversal and therefore characterized by the slow disintegration of states; or, conversely, a trend is emerging more similar to the situation at the beginning of nation-state formation in 16th and 17th century Europe, in which order is gradually emerging from chaos and confusion, accompanied with wars, revolutions, and horrific violence that was essential to that earlier evolution.²⁷ There are reasons to believe in either trend or in

²⁷ As a thought experiment, transpose yourself for a moment to the Europe of 1650, two years after the Thirty Years War, and imagine that you are ignorant of the future, viewing the then Europe from a position comparable to the situation then of the US now, faced with trying to deal in a world of quasi-states, conflicting identities, competing

some combination of the two. Whichever is the case, there is considerable accompanying social and political chaos, with profound implications for the international system, in an environment characterized by a further, overlaying trend: globalization.

While globalization is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that has been evolving for much of the past two hundred years, its main modern features are a high and increasing degree of international economic interdependence; rapidly expanding forms of electronic connectivity—closely tied as well to economic development; complex forms of transportation to facilitate the movement of vast quantities of goods and large numbers of people over vast distances irrespective of national borders; and a dizzying pace of technological innovation. Further, this increasing international interconnectivity and interdependence have both a legal environment and a large and growing non-government, informal, and criminal environment, in effect, a parallel international system for which there is no adequate theory or practice as of yet to comprehend it, explain it, or for how to operate in it. The main point of interest here, however, is not in the prevalence and importance of globalization, per se, but its fragility, or perhaps better, its vulnerability, on the one hand; and the triumph of largely American ideas of economic activity, a version of free trade capitalism as the dominate element in global interdependence, on the other.²⁸

For all the benefits that flow from globalization, it also exacts a heavy toll in local circumstances, where most people live and earn a living, subjecting local environments to seemingly irrational market forces. Part of that toll is to remove control, or any sense of control, over the forces that determine one's life and livelihood, substituting mysterious forces—generally explained by conspiracy theories as part of a vast cabal of evil politicians and businessmen living in alien capitols—that create fluctuations that destroy jobs and lives for amusement and profit.

But more to the point, the economic interdependence occasioned by globalization means that international economic activity is more vulnerable not just to the normal fluctuations of markets but to efforts to disrupt that activity, which the processes of improving electronic connectivity and technological innovation make more possible while also making the ability to disrupt available to smaller and smaller groups. Hence, al-Qa'ida's 9/11 attacks had consequences far

political loyalties, and an environment characterized by chaos. Is the world evolving towards some sort of coherent, recognizable order, or is it a mere collection of disparate circumstances without coherence or any hope of it? What to do and how to do it? In a domestic environment in which there is no consensus on what to do or how to do it. We know the answer now, but before the events? Could anyone have predicted the outcome then? Could any single state shoulder the burden of making it happen as it did, investing to bring some order out of the chaos based on its own blood and treasure? The theme of the demise of the nation state system is not new. See, for example, Jean-Marie Guehenno, *The End of the Nation-State*, translated by Victoria Elliott, Minneapolis, Univ. of Michigan Press, 2000. On the theme of a return to a pre-state environment of chaos, see Phil Williams, *From the New Middle Ages to a New Dark Age: The Decline of the State and U.S. Strategy*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2008.²⁸ To a considerable degree, much of the US-Soviet rivalry derived from significantly different concepts of economic organization, simplistically put, between planned and free market economies. Overlaying these interpretations was a largely Marxist analysis that viewed free market economies, AKA capitalism, as an exploitative device, closely linked to imperialism, for social control doomed to disappear—which, given the evolution of European empires and capitalism provided a coincidence that looked like cause and effect. While the Soviet Union may have been doomed by its internal contradictions, this form of analysis and the understanding of economic realities that it encourages was and remains a powerful conceptual framework in many quarters sustaining a deep and abiding hostility to market-based ideas and practices.

beyond any mere physical damage to property or its human toll in lives, or of the numbers of enemy combatants engaged. Other groups, individuals, and states, are increasingly prepared to exploit the vulnerabilities of globalization. Attacks on economic infrastructure, whether by physical means or electronically, are growing; while the costs from disruption, in money, lost labor, and social upheaval, are expanding. Further, there are growing populations of disaffected individuals, not to mention international criminal cartels, who now have no fixed loyalties except perhaps to vague conspiracy-driven oppositionism—ala affinity groups such as the various loosely associated groups that oppose the World Trade Organization—or a desire for illegal enterprise linked by and organized through modern forms of communication.

Winning the Cold War meant the triumph of American ideas of an international environment, increasingly globalized, based on free markets. Thus, winning has inextricably linked American credibility and success to the success or failure of globalization and free markets, and not necessarily to the other major American ideal of representative government, despite the talk of democracy promotion. At the same time, because of the inherent realities of and problems with globalization there is a sense in many quarters around the globe, in developed and developing societies, of a loss of control, disenfranchisement, feelings of alienation, and generalized hostility to the status quo, increasingly focused on the United States, its ideas, its presence, much of this associated with lingering hostility to ideas of imperialism, linked in many minds to capitalism. Improvements in forms of communication along with technologies for violence and disruption now mean that even small groups can have disproportionate influence, capitalizing on dissatisfaction for recruitment and a chaotic environment in which to hide and from which to strike. But bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida are symptoms of a deeper problem and not their cause, which is why a concentration on them misleads. Chaos is now a franchise operation.

The question is, what now needs to be done to respond to this environment. Central to the answer presented below is the need not only to consider appropriate policies and strategies but to re-examine the essentials of the US posture in response. For if the contention noted earlier that the US is no longer capable of strategic responses because of a Cold War architecture inadequate to the task at hand, then a reassessment is needed and is long overdue.

What's To Be Done: A Revisionist Reinterpretation of a Long War

The United States won the Cold War. If one takes its start date as roughly 1947, the year in which the United States reorganized its national security architecture, and its end with the fall of the Soviet Union in roughly 1991, it was a 45-year engagement.²⁹ It was unique not just for its duration or its successful conclusion based on a strategic concept of containment, but for its logic-defying execution.

In the first instance, the implementation of US policy ran counter to the dominate form of analysis of international relations theory as it emerged after WWII. It was not, as that theory held, an updated version of balance of power rivalry, with the US goal seeking to balance the

²⁹ George Kennan's long telegram and Mr. X article laid the intellectual groundwork for the containment strategy in 1946, but the ideas there were not captured in a policy document until NSC-68 in 1950, following a number of international provocations by the Soviets in Eastern Europe and Greece, the 'loss' of China to the Communists, and the pace of Soviet nuclear technology development.

Soviet Union. It was a strategy designed to defeat not balance an adversary based on the strengths of the US and its ideas, their appeal, and on US economic and technological prowess. Secondly, largely because of nuclear weapons, it recognized that the logic of war and balance of power notions—which in repeated US statements was seen as one of the principal causes of war that needed to be changed—that had governed international relations had themselves to be contained.³⁰

Nuclear weapons made WWII, the natural corollary of a rivalry as intense as that between the United States and the Soviet Union, unthinkable. In essence, US policy substituted longevity of confrontation, informed by a belief that the contradictions in the Soviet system would spell its ultimate collapse, as the means to avoid the logic of direct conflict, which, taking human history and World Wars I and II as primers, generally ended in hot wars. The essence of the policy the United States ultimately developed was a non-war-fighting strategy to win a war.

Fortunately for everyone concerned, the Soviets also understood the need to avoid a resort to arms, at least directly, that might lead to Armageddon. Thus, the US and the Soviet Union evolved a form of adversarial cooperation to avoid direct conflict, substituting the struggle of ideas, methodologies, and the occasional proxy war to see them through to victory, both sides believing in the inevitability of their success. America prevailed but in doing so has left itself poorly positioned to execute a post-Cold War policy and strategy. In the words of Dryden, ‘E’en victors are by victories undone.’

Legacy of Success

The United States, in its history, does not have a long experience of Grand Strategy, per se. It has had its share of grand statements of intent—the Declaration of Independence, the Monroe Doctrine, the Emancipation Proclamation, Wilson’s 14 Points, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms—but, being for much of its history inward focused, it did not have the need for precise statements of strategy and strategic goals for engaging the world.³¹ The prospect of a long and difficult struggle with the Soviet Union, involving as it did a host of potential ambiguities and troubling

³⁰ The main document setting out US containment strategy, NSC-68, makes this position abundantly clear in its preamble. ‘In a shrinking world, which now faces the threat of atomic warfare, it is not an adequate objective merely to seek to check the Kremlin design, for the absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable. This fact imposes on us, in our own interests, the responsibility of world leadership. It demands that we make the attempt, and accept the risks inherent in it, to bring about order and justice by means consistent with the principles of freedom and democracy.’ After analyzing the previous course of balance of power and conflict, it called for a commitment to engage in a struggle of ideas to defeat not balance the Soviet Union. It was Ronald Reagan’s contention that, in fact, because of the longevity of the conflict that somewhere along the way US policy forgot that it was about defeating the Soviets not balancing their influence. He reoriented US policy to bring it back to its original intent, in part lost in the ‘realist’ policies of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger.

³¹ The ‘Anaconda Plan’ developed by Winfield Scott that guided the thinking about how to defeat the Confederacy during the Civil War might be regarded as an exception, but it did not contain the most important element of a Grand Strategy. It focused on the military effort not on the political purposes and necessities in which a military strategy had to function. The US strategy in WWII of concentrating on defeating Germany first along with Roosevelt’s rhetorical flourishes on great principles is closer, but these were more along the lines of shared understanding underpinning efforts than a formal statement of design. NSC-68 is the first real attempt at a Grand Strategy that seeks to combine political and military concepts into a coherent whole in a specific document. Its statements guided policy for most of the Cold War, a remarkable run.

commitments, convinced the Truman, and later the Eisenhower, Administration of the need for a comprehensive strategic framework to guide US policy.³² The result was NSC-68, America's first true national strategy, and, unfortunately, its last.

Although a relative short document, it encapsulated not only an analysis of the situation but proceeded to combine a tolerably precise delineation of the main principles and efforts needed to inform and implement the type of sustained efforts inherent in the concept of a long struggle of containment. It also included a couple of unique circumstances, as it has transpired, and an internal controversy between its main architects—George Kennan and Paul Nitze—over implementation that reflected larger conflicts as the theory of containment, as first envisioned by Kennan, encountered the give-and-take of the realities of US-Soviet rivalry, actions and counter-actions. A situation fraught with fateful consequences.

One of the things that made the development of containment strategy unique was that it was almost solely the product of the State Department and key figures within it. Even NSC-68 was largely a State Department project through the Policy Planning staff, with Nitze in charge and Kennan acting as a sometimes advisor. The second unique aspect of its development, compared to the situation today, is the small number of people engaged in devising the strategy.

The foreign policy making establishment of the late 1940s and early 1950s, even given the scale of WWII and the Korean War, was vanishingly small compared to the rococo free-for-all environment that now pervades the policy process, with 'whole of government' approaches, congressional staffs, think tanks, lobbying groups, pundits, news organizations, and the hair of the dog feeling compelled to advise, criticize, and otherwise engage.

The ins and outs of the Kennan-Nitze disagreement, and ultimately the larger policy debate that it presaged, is not the main focus here, but for its principal element and how that played out in practice.³³ The essential point of controversy involved how to incorporate a military element into the overall containment architecture, the scope and size of such a commitment. Kennan's original concept was based on the US ability, through diplomacy and economic clout, to out compete the Soviets, with only a marginal military investment to engage in asymmetrical conflict.

Nitze, and ultimately NSC-68, while determined to avoid direct military confrontation potentially leading to nuclear war and not envisioning a military mobilization comparable to WWII that would jeopardized civilian economic well being, saw the need for a larger military establishment to counter Soviet military threats, made more menacing by Korea and subsequent Chinese intervention there. This view prevailed, and embarked the United States not only on an international policy at odds with most of its history, but, for the first time, involved it in creating a large, standing military in peacetime, something unprecedented in US history.

³² There is a lengthy literature on containment, including the revisionist interpretations of William Appleman Williams and Noam Chomsky, both of dubious virtue. But I have relied mainly on the books and ideas of John Lewis Gaddis, the dean of containment historiography. See, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, NY: Oxford U. Press, 1982; *The United States and the End of the Cold War*, noted above; and *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, NY: Oxford U. Press, 1997.

³³ For a detailed discussion see Gaddis, *Strategies*, pp. 54-126.

The concern that this military expansion not undermine the civilian economy produced another side effect. It led to efforts not only to ensure the vitality of the overall economy it also led to efforts to make the military contribute to that economy, thus, gradually, creating the so-called military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower was among the first to caution against. The long duration of the confrontation with the Soviet Union left the United States the winner but it left it with several unintended consequences, legacies of success.

The first, noted earlier, was a failure to adequately understand an international dynamic of imperial recession and movements around the world for self-determination with only tangential connections to US-Soviet rivalry. Situations that complicated that rivalry as both of the superpowers interpreted them in the context of their mutual competition. The collapse of the Soviet Union has brought that reality more into focus.

The second consequence, however, has left the US ill-prepared to respond. In winning the Cold War, the US created a large, complex military and intelligence architecture and bureaucracy threaded throughout the policy making structure of the government and deeply embedded in the economy. The legacy institutions of the Cold War are now trying to respond to situations, trying to preserve their own status and role, that are no longer amenable to such a structure in an environment in which policy consensus, once sustaining the containment doctrine, no longer exists. And it is questionable, given the elaborate foreign policy making environment that evolved along with containment, that such a consensus is now possible.

In addition, the success of the containment Grand Strategy and the duration of the Cold War, which has produced an ever-larger military establishment while encouraging an under investment in the array of non-military capabilities, meant that over time strategic thinking went on autopilot. Where it has remained. Since containment was the settled concept, all subsequent thinking was on how best to implement that concept operationally and tactically. Successive administrations accepted the concept and marched forward. Similarly, the bureaucracy took its direction from this environment.

Over time, with the expansion of the military, development and implementation of the concept fell increasingly under the Department of Defense and its myriad planning capabilities, which generate countless documents on strategy that are not anything of the kind. Thus, we have gradually militarized our foreign policy and focused it on implementation. This worked for and was a logical outgrowth of the containment strategy, although with severe strains by the end. The question now is whether this architecture and a passé strategy are what are needed, having lost sight of the fact that we no longer have a strategy for the world as we now find it and may have lost our way back to knowing how to develop one.

Even more ironic is the fact that, although the containment strategy envisioned a strong US military component as essential, the United States won the Cold War not based on its military might but on its ability to bury the Soviets economically and with a set of ideas that it developed at its founding, ideas that captured the imagination and won the day. With the end of Cold War, however, there was no major reassessment of grand strategy and no sustained scaling back of the military establishment as in previous victories. It was business as usual. The result is that the

United States lacks a strategy for what it is about, for how it must go about achieving its goals. We cannot explain to ourselves or to a watching world what we mean and intend. Even the American people are puzzled.

Unintended Consequences

This is a fairly large contention, not subject to evidence, apart from intuition, to establish beyond a reasonable doubt. But here is a thought experiment. Who is responsible for articulating a national strategy for the United States? The President? Congress? Both? Congress suggested its own conclusion in 1988 by requiring the president to articulate a National Strategy, mandating it in law. The fact that Congress felt the need reflected its sense of the absence of just such an overarching concept despite a warehouse full of strategic documents.

But for the sake of argument let's say that the president in consultation with congressional leaders consulting the public mood is the proper starting point for the development of a grand strategic architecture. Is this the case? What actually happens is that an incoming president inherits a complex bureaucratic system designed to generate 'strategies'. It is, therefore, the bureaucracy, now the 'whole of government', and largely a military one, that develops strategy and presents it for review and approval to the resident administration and the Congress, with a gaggle of think tank and beltway consultancies cheering from the sidelines—if only. Incoming administrations turn to the bureaucracy and task them with developing a strategy or strategies.

These are largely resource-based presentations, with a thin overlay of threat assessments and large ideas designed to sell a resource-based presentation. Strategy chases implementation. And money. Increasingly it is the bureaucracy that develops 'strategy' for the administration and Congress. This is a complete reversal of what is called for. Thus, we have the Quadrennial Defense Review and the baroque set of strategy documents in the works before the Obama Administration has articulated its national strategy, which, when it appears will also have been developed by the whole of government. Nor is there any joy in reaching back before this administration on the assumption that it is continuing a national strategy that coherently responds to the post-Cold War world. There isn't one. The last grand strategy was NSC-68 and its legacy.

In addition, since most of this work is now in the hands of the Department of Defense—with its \$700bn budget clout—current strategy development is dominated by military concepts and lacks the essential component of any strategy, the political dimension. While defense officials and the military talk about employing all the means of national power, emphasizing that the military is only one component and in many situations not the most important component, what actually results is the subordination of political considerations to military ones. It should come as no surprise, then, that the United States finds itself on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, ostensibly to fight international terrorists, trying to engage in national building with only military capabilities at its disposal.

There is now an attempt, a day late and dollars short, to bolster all those non-military elements of national strategy long starved of funding and priority in order to meet the belatedly recognized need. Even if presidents recognized the need for employing all the instruments of national

power, what they find, reaching into the policy kit bag, is rhetoric sufficing on the one side and well-funded military means on the other. This is policy by inertia not intent. And it focuses on techniques and capabilities, which we are good at but which are self-defeating in the context, and not the ideas that will produce victory for ourselves and others. Thus the spectacle of a superpower focusing its energies on a madman and his henchmen, threatening in the process to undermine the effort to manage a fragile international economy and neglecting the ideas that have won the day. Discrediting the country and the ideas it champions in the process.

A National Strategy

As noted at the beginning, this piece does not offer answers but a point of view. But if the United States is to have a national strategy, one that proposes to deal with the world now as opposed to then, a few things are necessary. Clearly, based on the above, there is a need to rethink the current emphasis on bin Ladin and by extension terrorists in general. Again, not that they are not a threat or a concern, but out of a sense of proportion. They are not existential threats unless we bankrupt our economy and our credibility in focusing on them. There is also a need to re-examine how we invest in the national security architecture with a view of redeploying the military. It is perhaps past the time when we can return to not having a large, standing military, but reconsideration is overdue.

Next we need a serious look at the justifications—the ideas—that must sustain our policies, justifications supported by efforts that capitalize on our strengths and not strengthen our weaknesses. If we are and are to remain a leader in dealing with the international environment as it now exists, then techniques are not enough. It is not meant that our ideas should support what we do but that what we do supports our ideas. The United States did not reach its present position based on force but on the force of its ideas. The real question is how to go about reconsideration in the complicated national security environment, public and private, that now exists and clamors for attention. It is just as impossible to return to a world of fewer voices, but something is called for.³⁴

The operating assumption in some quarters, part of a general recognition that there are problems with the formation and implementation of national security, is that what is needed is yet another reform of the architecture along the lines of the Goldwater-Nichols defense reorganization act or the National Security Act of 1947. While the urge to do something is indicative of a problem, the question is whether a set of reforms focusing on the ‘whole of government’ in order to make the current national security bureaucracy work better represents a real fix. Does the problem lie in making interagency coordination better?

In the view here, that is looking through the wrong end of the telescope, and, to mix metaphors, does little more than rearrange the deck chairs. If, as argued here, it is the architecture itself that is part of the problem, made worse by a systemic inability to conceptualize, define, sell, and implement a grand strategy, then trying to make the parts work better without an understanding of the whole only makes the problem worse while it convinces people that they can have their cake and eat it too. We have a system in which the national security bureaucracy, dominated by

³⁴ And, no, this is not an argument that we have too much democracy or that the unwashed public doesn't know its own best interests. This is not about debate, per se, but about the level of noise that crowds out the debate.

the Department of Defense, is making what it thinks is strategy but which in reality is serial operational and tactical planning. The cart is before the horse. Change needs to start here before there is talk of reform. We need to switch off the autopilot. Here is a modest proposal.

What is needed is a commission of presidents. Not another presidential blue ribbon commission or a private initiative lobbying for the changes it favors but a commission headed and presided over by the sitting president and all former presidents to review the present and chart a way forward. This commission should then have further working groups composed of the serving Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Secretary of DHS, the head of the intelligence community, and as many former such officials as are available along with key congressional leaders, present and past. There should be a further working group of key governors, present and past. The goal is two fold: to develop the key elements of what the United States faces and must do to respond; and to build the consensus across the political spectrum necessary to sustain any policy that results. Having reached a consensus, then, and only then, should this be turned over the 'whole of government' to figure out how to implement the grand strategy, reversing the current situation in which presidents and Congress receive the strategy.

This best chance for such a commission is during the transition between administrations when the president-elect has the time, before he is captured by the workload that overwhelms and distracts. If so, it's already too late for this administration. Nor is it an idea likely to win favor in the current environment. But without something like it, we are in a state of drift. Present ideas of reform ignore the iceberg.

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