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The War of Ideas, Revisited

by Gabriel C. Lajeunesse

Three years ago, in this forum, I argued for an increasingly robust U.S. effort in what had been described by many as the “War of Ideas”—the battle for hearts and minds among Muslim populations. This struggle is between the worldview of radical Islamic extremists on one hand and the liberal values of liberty, human rights and freedom of conscience on the other. This is the foundational struggle in the global war on terrorism. I argued for a renewed effort, akin to that undertaken during the Cold War, to support reformers and moderate voices within their societies. Further, I described the woeful gap in U.S. strategic communications efforts as compared to the nimble use of new media by violent extremists and called for redoubling of U.S. efforts, both by the government and by key influencers in civil society. While the Bush administration’s Middle East Partnership Initiative made some attempts in that direction, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hurricane Katrina and economic troubles pushed these aspirational goals to the back-burner. President Obama seemed to take up the banner of the War of Ideas in his inaugural address:

We will not apologize for our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense. And for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken -- you cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you. ..To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.

Yet despite these words and this vision, the administration has more often adopted a policy of realism and engagement that may be described as a pragmatic approach to Foreign Policy. This type of worldview has often resurfaced in U.S. policy circles—particularly in times of transition such as after World War I or at the end of the Cold War. Policy of this sort is designed to strike a balance between U.S. ideals and U.S. interests—and result in choices that seem quite reasonable considering the circumstances, regardless of their palatability—with reasoning along the lines of “He may be an S.O.B., but he's our S.O.B.”

However, as Condoleezza Rice argued in her 2008 *Foreign Affairs* article, the spread of liberty is paramount to U.S. national security interests. Support of repressive regimes may buy short term stability, but in the long term may yield disastrous results (i.e. Iran).

As we’ve watched events unfold in Tunisia and Egypt and looked on as demonstrators take to the streets in Yemen and Jordan, it is appropriate that we reevaluate our efforts to support those who seek liberty. It has been woefully insufficient. It will be difficult to change this overnight. Decades of a stability seeking U.S. policy in the region impact our credibility, and while many are pushing for the President to speak out and not repeat the missteps of President Carter in his support to the Shah in the months leading up to the Iranian revolution, U.S. efforts cannot be but a single moment. A mere sound bite from an Oval Office speech will not suffice.

We need to reintroduce the War of Ideas into our policy lexicon and recognize that our national security interests are best served by the spread of liberty and free markets.

This is a generational struggle that must continue until real freedoms are available to all. To be effective, psychological operations, information operations and policy must be carefully aligned. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has critiqued: “To put it simply, we need to worry a lot less about how to communicate our actions and much more about what our actions communicate...Each time we fail to live up to our values or don’t follow up on a promise, we look more and more like the arrogant Americans the enemy claims we are.”

This is not a war that will be won by force of arms, but by choices of peoples who rise up to claim their freedoms. While we may, of pragmatic necessity, have ties to many less than savory regimes, we also must simultaneously support reformers from within. Additionally, since the State Department absorbed the mission of the U.S. Information Agency, far too little has been done to effectively communicate U.S. values—especially with the advent of new media. In addition to bolstering information operations capabilities of the U.S. military, civilian capacity in this area must also be strengthened. This may require removal of the function from within the Department of State. We will also need those of our foreign service to be in closer contact with reformers abroad than ever before. Without a more watchful eye, we are apt to wake up one day to find the elites that were telling us the tales we wanted to hear at U.S. hosted cocktail parties last night, seeking for the next plane out of Cairo in the morning.

As we move forward in the coming days and watch the events of the Middle East unfold, we should renew our commitment to being on “the right side of history,” or as John Quincy Adams reminds us,

Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will recommend the general cause, by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example.

Lt Col Gabriel C. Lajeunesse writes and researches on topics related to international criminal law, the Middle East and national security policy. He has been a visiting fellow at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service, where he taught a course on radical Islam, and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Lt Col Lajeunesse is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, and has been awarded a Masters degree in Middle Eastern Studies from the Naval Postgraduate School and a Juris Doctor degree from Georgetown University Law Center. He is a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

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