The Longest (Small) War

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The year 2011 saw the 10th anniversary of the worst terrorist attacks in modern history. Al Qaeda' s religiously-motivated murder of almost 3,000 people on that sunny Tuesday morning in 2001 led directly to military operations in Afghanistan and then Iraq which together mark the longest ever large-scale military engagement by America since 1776. We are still fighting in a war that has already outlasted our combat in Korea, WWII and even Vietnam. Whilst the mastermind behind the September 11th attacks is dead - thanks to the courage and audacity of the US military and intelligence community - the war is not over, the enemy not vanquished.

At the decade-marker for this war, there remain two disturbing truths that the American policy elite has yet to recognize or understand:

- Stunning tactical successes – no matter how numerous - in no way necessarily lead to strategic victory.
- The second related point is that today, a decade after September 11th, America still does not fully understand the nature of the enemy that most threatens its citizens and thus its strategic response is undermined.

Beyond Bin Laden - America and the Strategic Principles of Irregular Warfare

The special forces raid against Osama bin Laden in Abottabad will clearly become the textbook example of how to perfectly execute high-risk military operations in the post-9/11 world. In locating and killing Osama bin Laden on foreign soil America has again demonstrated its peerless capacity at the tactical and operational level. Nevertheless, as the supreme military thinker Sun Tsu taught, "tactics without strategy is simply the noise before defeat," and it is my firm conviction that the last ten years of this conflict have lacked the strategic guidance that a threat of the magnitude of transnational and transcendentally-informed terrorism demands.

This can be illustrated with one simple observation. Since the escalation of the Iraqi insurgency in 2004, the subsequent rewriting and rapid application of the US Army/USMC Field Manual 3-24 on Counterinsurgency, and the release of General Stanley McChrystal's report on operations in Afghanistan, Washington has persisted in calling our approach to the threat in theater a "Counterinsurgency Strategy." (In fact, a basic internet search on the term "Counterinsurgency Strategy" yields over 300,000 results). This is despite the fact that counterinsurgency always has been, and always will be, a doctrinal approach to irregular warfare, never a strategic solution to any kind of threat.

Strategy explains how one matches resources and methods to ultimate objectives. Strategy explains the why of war, never the operational "how to" of war. The fact that even official bodies can repeatedly make this mistake so many years into this fight indicates that we are breaking cardinal rules of how to realize America's national security interests. To compound the confusion we have also ignored the Prussian master, von Clausewitz's warning that the most important responsibility of the commander, or leader, is to first understand the nature of the conflict he is about to embark upon. Likewise, we have institutionally failed to meet our duty to become well-informed on the Threat Doctrine of our enemy. And without a clear understanding of the Enemy Threat Doctrine, victory is likely impossible.

The reasons for our paucity in this area are many. Most of these stem from two serious and interconnected obstacles of strategic magnitude. The first is a misguided belief that the religious character of the enemy's ideology should not be discussed, and that we need not address it, but should instead use the phrase "Violent Extremism" to describe our foe and thus avoid any unnecessary unpleasantness. The second is that even if we could demonstrate clear-headedness on the issue and recognize the religious ideology of al Qaeda and its associate movements for what it is: a form of *hybrid totalitarianism*, we still drastically lack the institutional ability to analyze and comprehend the worldview of the enemy and therefore its strategic mindset and ultimate objectives..

Here it is enlightening to look to the past to understand just how great a challenge is posed by the need for our national security establishment to understand its new enemy. It is now well recognized that it was only in 1946, with the authoring of George Kennan's classified 'Long Telegram' (later republished pseudonymously as *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*) that America began to understand the nature of the Soviet Union, why it acted the way it did, how the Kremlin thought, and why the USSR was an existential threat to America.[1] Consider now the fact that this document was written three decades after the Russian Revolution, and that despite all the scholarship and analysis available in the United States, it took more than a generation to penetrate the mind of the enemy and come to a point where a counter-strategy could be formulated in the shape of Paul Nitze's NSC-68.[2] Now add to this the fact that today our enemy is not a European secular nation-state, as was the USSR, but a non-European, religiously-informed non-state terrorist group, and we see the magnitude of the challenge. Whilst initiatives such as Fort Leavenworth's Human Terrain System (HTS) and the teams they provide to theater commanders are well meant efforts in the right direction of trying to understand the context of the enemy, they still miss the mark on more than one level.

To begin with, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to provide the contextual knowledge we need to understand and defeat our enemy if we rely solely upon anthropologists and social scientists, as the HTS does. Today our multi-disciplinary analysis of the enemy and his doctrine just as much requires – if not more so – the expertise of the regional historian and the theologian, the specialist who knows when and how Sunni Islam split from Shia Islam and what the difference is between the Meccan and Medinan verses of the Khoran. We should ask ourselves honestly, how many national security practitioners know the answers to these questions, or at least have somewhere to turn to within government to provide them such essential expertise.

Secondly, we must, after seven years, take the counsel of the 9/11 congressional commission seriously in recognizing that the threat environment itself has radically changed beyond the capacity of our legacy national security structures to deal with it.

In the case of how two of the 9/11 hijackers (Nawaf al-Hamzi and Khalid al-Midhar) were flagged as threats and then still permitted to enter the United States legally, we see proof of how our national security structures do not live up to the threat our new enemies represent. This problem is not unique to the United States, but a product of what the academic world calls the Westphalian system of nation-states and how

we are structured to protect ourselves.

For the 350 years since the Treaty of Westphalia that ended the religious wars of Europe, Western nations developed and perfected national security architectures that were predicated on an institutional division of labor and discrete categorization of threats. Internally we had to maintain constitutionality and law and order. Externally we had to deal with the threat of aggression by another state. As a result all our countries divided the national security task-set into separate conceptual and functional baskets: internal versus external, military versus non-military. And this system worked very well for three and half centuries during which time states fought other nation-states, the age of so-called 'conventional warfare.' However, as Philip Bobbitt has so masterfully described in his book *The Shield of Achilles*, that age is behind us. Al Qaeda, Al Shabaab, or even the Muslim Brotherhood cannot be forced into analytic boxes which are military or non-military, or into internal or external threat categories.**[3]** We must recognize the hard truth that the threat environment is no longer primarily defined by the state-actor.

Take, for example, the case of the most successful al Qaeda attack on US soil since 9/11, the Fort Hood massacre. A serving Major in the US Army decided that his loyalty lay with his Muslim co-religionists and not his nation, or his branch of service. He was recruited, encouraged and finally blessed in his actions by the late Anwar al-Awlaki, a US citizen who was a Muslim cleric then hiding out in Yemen. When MAJ Hasan was about to be deployed into theater in the service of our country, he instead chose the path of Holy War against the infidel and slew 13 and wounded 31 of his fellow servicemen and their family members and colleagues on the largest US Army base in the United States.

How Westphalian was this deadly attack by al Qaeda? What does it have to do with conventional warfare? Was this threat external or internal in nature? Was it a military attack or a non-military one? As you see, the conceptual frameworks and capabilities that served us so well through the last century fail us today in the 21st. As a result we must develop new methodologies to analyze the threats to our nation and new ways to bridge the conventional gaps between government and agency departments and their respective mindsets, gaps which are so deftly exploited by groups such al Qaeda.**[4]** We must recognize that the master of military strategy, von Clausewitz, wrote his *mesiterwerk* in the context of station state war. His trinity of government, people and military and the related characteristics or reason, passion and skill do not obtain in the realm of irregular warfare as they do in conventional war (see illustration). Today the enemy is more flexible and not driven by rational conceptualizations of *raison d'etat*. One draft redrawing of the Clausewitzian Trinity is as follows: **[5]**
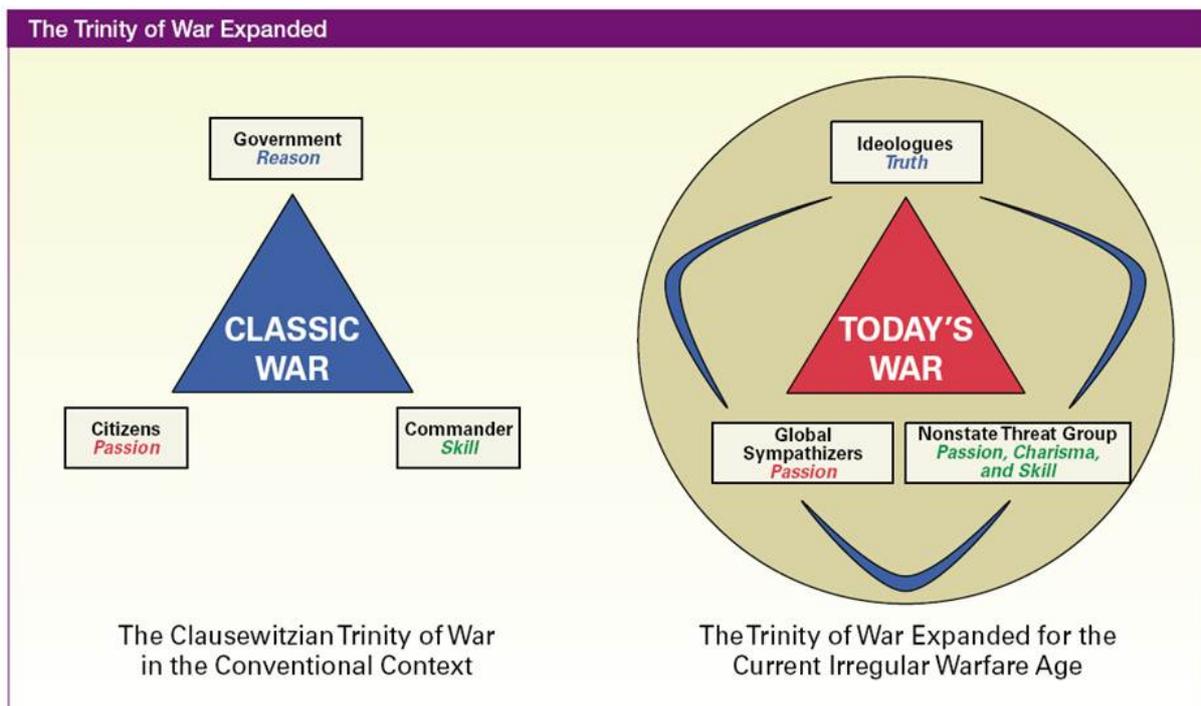
Figure One: Clausewitz versus Irregular Warfare

The paradox of al Qaeda is that whilst we have in the last 10 years been incredibly successful in militarily degrading its operational capacity to directly do us harm, al Qaeda has become even more powerful in the domain of ideological warfare and other indirect forms of attack. Whilst bin Laden may be dead, the narrative of religiously-motivated global revolution that he embodied is very much alive and growing in popularity.[6] Whilst we have crippled al Qaeda's capacity to execute mass casualty attacks with its own assets on the mainland of the United States, we see that its message has and holds traction with individuals prepared to take the fight to us individually, be it Major Hasan, Faisal Shahzad, the Times Square attacker, or Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Christmas-Day bomber.

Counterterrorism: Beyond the Kinetic

Although we have proven our capacity in the last 10 years to kinetically engage our enemy at the operational and tactical level with unsurpassed effectiveness, we have not even begun to take the war to al Qaeda at the strategic-level of counter-ideology. To paraphrase Dr. James Kiras of the Air University, we have denied al Qaeda the capability to conduct complex devastating attacks on the scale of 9/11, but we now need to transition away from concentrating on dismantling and disrupting al Qaeda's network, to undermining its core strategy of ideological attack. We need to employ much more the indirect approach made famous by our community of Special Forces operators of working "by, with and through" local allies and move beyond attacking the enemy directly at the operational and tactical level to attacking it indirectly at the strategic level.

We need to bankrupt transnational Jihadist terrorism at it most powerful point: its narrative of global religious war. For the majority of the last ten years the narrative of the conflict has been controlled by our enemy. Just as in the Cold War, the United States must take active measures to arrive at a position where it shapes the agenda and the story of the conflict, where we force our enemy onto the back foot to such an extent that Jihadism eventually loses all credibility and implodes as an ideology. For this to happen we must re-think from the ground up the way in which strategic communications and information operations

are run across the US government. Additionally, Congress itself will have work to do to remove out-dated limitations on our national ability to fight the war of ideas, such as the Smith-Mundt Act, which were born of a by-gone age before the world of modern communications and especially the internet.

Our ability to fight al Qaeda and similar transnational terrorist actors will depend upon our capacity to communicate to our own citizens and to the world what it is we are fighting for and what it is that the ideology of Jihad threatens in terms of the universal values we hold so dear. To quote Sun Tsu again, in war it is not enough to know the enemy in order to win. One must first know oneself. During the Cold War this happened naturally. Given the nature of the Soviet Union and the nuclear threat it clearly posed to the West, from the first successful Soviet atom-bomb test to the collapse of the USSR in 1991, every day for four decades Americans knew what was at stake and why Communism could not be allowed to spread its totalitarian grip beyond the Iron Curtain.

However, with the end of the Cold War and the decade of peace dividends that was the 1990s, America and the West understandably lost clarity with regard to what it was about its way of life that was precious and worth fighting since the specter of WWIII had been vanquished and the (Cold) war had been won.

The shock of the September 11th attacks did not, however, automatically return us to a point of clarity. The reasons for this flow from several of the observations made above, but also from the fact that now our enemy is a religiously-colored one unlike the secular foe we faced during the Cold War.

Due in part to a misinterpretation of what the Founding Fathers actually meant by "separation of church and state," today we have hobbled our capacity to understand and counter this enemy at the strategic level. Based upon my experience with military operators and also US law enforcement officers fighting terrorism at home, many in senior management positions in government have misconstrued the matter to such an extent that religion has become a taboo issue within national threat analysis. This is despite that fact that all those who have brought death to our shores as al Qaeda operatives have done so not out of purely political conviction but clearly as a result of the fact that they feel transcendentally justified, that they see their violent deeds as sanctioned by God. If we wish to combat the ideology that drives these murderers, we ignore the role of religion at our peril.

The official decision in recent years to use the term "Violent Extremism" to describe the threat is misleading and deleterious to our ability to understand the enemy and defeat it. America is not at war with all forms of violent extremism. The attacks of September 11th were the work not of a group of terrorists motivated by a generic form of extremism. We are not at war with communists, fascists or nationalists but religiously inspired mass-murderers who consistently cite the Khoran to justify their actions. Denying this fact simply out of a misguided sensitivity will delay our ability to understand the nature of this conflict and to delegitimize our foe. By analogy, imagine if in the fight against the Ku Klux Klan federal law enforcement had been forbidden from describing the group they were trying to neutralize as white supremacists or racists, or if during WWII, for political reasons, we forbad our forces from understanding the enemy as a Nazi regime fueled and guided by a fascist ideology of racial hatred, but forced them to call them "violent extremists" instead. We did not do it then and we must not do it now. The safety of America's citizens and our chances of eventual victory depend upon our being able to call the enemy by its proper name: *Global Jihadism*.[7]

To conclude, the last ten years since September 11th 2001 can be summarized as a vast collection of tactical and operational successes but a vacuum in terms of strategic understanding and strategic response. To paraphrase a former US Marine who knows the enemy very well, "we have failed to understand the enemy at any more than an operational level and have instead, by default, addressed the enemy solely on the operational plane of engagement." Operationally we have become most proficient at responding to the

localized threats caused by al Qaeda, but those localized threats are simply tactical manifestations of what is happening at the strategic level and driven by the ideology of Global Jihad. As a result, by not responding to what al Qaeda has become at the strategic level, we continue to attempt to engage it on the wrong battlefield.

The tenth anniversary of the attacks in Washington, in New York and in Pennsylvania, afford those in the US government who have sworn to uphold and defend the national interests of this greatest of nations a clear opportunity to recognize what we have accomplished and what needs to be reassessed. All involved must begin anew to recommit themselves to attacking this deadliest of enemies at the level which is deserves to be – and must be – which is, of course, the strategic.

Osama bin Laden may be dead, but his ideology of global supremacy through religious war is far more vibrant and sympathetic to audiences around the world than it was on the day before the attacks ten years ago. We need to guarantee the conditions by which the executive branch is able finally to produce a comprehensive understanding of the enemy threat doctrine that is Global Jihadism, a document akin to Kennan's foundational analysis that eventually led to the Truman Doctrine and its exquisite operationalization in Paul Nitze's plan for containment, NSC-68.

Ten years into this war, a strategic re-evaluation is justified. Four practical principles should guide such a reevaluation:[8]

I. The United States must suppress the sphere of mobility of al Qaeda and its Associated Movements (AQAM). This war with not end in a neat ceasefire and peace treaty. It must consist of a constant pressure against both the will and the capability of Global Jihadists to do us harm.

I. The American intelligence and national security communities must invest far greater effort into understanding the Historic, Economic, Social and Political factors that AQAM uses to mobilize its followers and operators. This is NOT a cause and effect relationship, but a dynamic whereby elite ideologies exploit objective condition through a subject mobilizing religious ideology.

I. This war is no longer simply about hijacked planes, IEDs or gun-men. Ten years after 9/11 it is perhaps more non-kinetic than it is physical. America must rediscovered and deploy the tools it used so effectively in past ideological wars to build a powerful and globally applicable counter-narrative. This narrative must undermine the legitimacy and attractiveness of the enemy, as well as deter potential allies and recruits. America must drive the global agenda of justice and liberty, as it did during WWII and the Cold War.[9]

I. The American national security establishment must purge itself of well-intentioned but neutering concepts of political correctness and cultural sensitivity concerned who the enemy is and what it intends. AQAM uses religion not only to win adherents but also justify mass-murder. We must tackle this reality head-on. The religious nature of our enemy's ideology cannot obstruct us from defining and realizing our national interests.

Only if we have an overarching strategic response will America be able to defeat al Qaeda and its associates before the next significant anniversary of 9/11.

The views herein expressed do not necessarily represent those of the US Department of Defense or any other government agency.

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[1] The declassified text of Kennan's original cable can be found at **http://www.ntanet.net/KENNAN.html**. The pseudonymous article he later wrote for a broader audience

in *Foreign Affairs* is at **http://www.historyguide.org/europe/kennan.html** .

[2] The declassified NSC-68 which operationalized George Kennan's enemy threat doctrine analysis of the USSR is available at:
http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Documents/2004/December%202004/1204keeperfull.pdf (accessed 15th June 2011).

[3] Philip Bobbitt: *The Shield of Achilles – War, Peace and the Course of History*, (New York, N.Y.: Random House), 2002. In "The Age of Irregular Warfare – So What?," in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 58, 3rd Quarter, 2010, (p 32-38) I take the discussion further and discuss just how different this post-Westphalian threat environment is and how we need to reappraise key Clausewitzian aspects of the analysis of war.

[4] For a discussion of how to institutionally and conceptually bridge these gaps and so be able to defeat the new types of threat we face see the concept "Super-Purple" described in my chapter "International Cooperation as a Tool in Counterterrorism: Super-Purple as a Weapon to Defeat the Nonrational Terrorist," in *Toward a Grand Strategy Against Terrorism*, Christopher C. Harmon, Andrew N. Pratt and Sebastian L. v. Gorka (eds.), (New York, N.Y.: McGraw Hill) 2011, 71-83.

[5] See S. L. v. Gorka "The Age of Irregular Warfare: So What?, op. cit..

[6] For the rise of Jihadi ideology and what should be done in response, see Sebastian L. v. Gorka: "The Surge that Could Defeat Al Qaeda," *ForeignPolicy.Com*, 10 AUG 2009, at
http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/10/the_one_surge_that_could_defeat_al_qaeda
(accessed 15th June 2011).

[7] For the best work on understanding the enemy we now face see Patrick Sookhdeo's *Global Jihad: The Future in the Face of militant Islam*, Isaac Publishing, McLean, VA, 2007, and the analytic work of Stephen Ulph, including: *Towards a Curriculum for Teaching Jihadist Ideology*, The Jamestown Foundation, available at
http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36999. For an overview of the key thinkers and strategists of Global Jihadi ideology see Sebastian L. v. Gorka: *Jihadist ideology: The Core Texts*, lecture to the Westminster institute. Audio and transcript available at
http://www.westminster-institute.org/articles/jihadist-ideology-the-core-texts-3/#more-385 (both accessed 15 June 2011).

[8] For a lengthier discussion of these principles, see the forthcoming monograph by Gorka, Sloan and Ishimoto from the Joint Special Operations University, US Special Operations Command.

[9] For a detailed analyis of al Qaeda's strategoic communications and how we should build a counter see S. Gorka and D. Kilcullen: *Who's Winning the Battle for Narrative?* With in "Influence Warfare," ed. James J. F. Forest, (Praeger Security International, Westport, CT), 2009

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