

Restoration, Education, and Coordination: Three Principles to Guide U.S. Counterterrorism Efforts Over the Next Five Years

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I. INTRODUCTION

As we approach the seventh anniversary of the attacks of 9/11, the evidence of the failure of United States counterterrorism policy accumulates daily. True, we have not been attacked at home since then, though whether this is due to actions our government has taken or because our adversaries have lacked the capacity to attack us, we simply do not know. We do not, in fact, know whether the estimated \$58 billion a year the United States (“U.S.”) is spending on Homeland Security is making our homeland more secure. We do know, or rather, there is compelling evidence that the foreign policy our government has followed in the name of counterterrorism has served to swell the ranks of our adversaries and thereby undermine our nation’s security.

In considering the counterterrorism experience of other democracies, one general observation stands out: governments improve the efficacy of their policies over time. The British, Indian, Italian and Peruvian governments, for example, each learned from the early mistakes they made against the Irish Republican Army (“IRA”), Sikh terrorists, the Red Brigades and the Shining Path respectively, and each significantly improved the effectiveness of its counterterrorism policies. The very mixed record of U.S. early counterterrorism policies suggests that there might be an openness to new approaches here too. The record is mixed because, like other democratic governments before us, we have been unable to translate military strength into victory against terrorism. We have waged two wars at a cost of over four thousand American lives, and tens of thousands of non-American lives, yet we have not captured the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack. We have damaged our reputation and undermined our influence overseas while winning recruits for our adversaries. Public confidence in the ability of our government to improve its practices, however, was severely shaken by the thoroughly mishandled response to hurricane Katrina, which occurred only a few years after the U.S. invested billions in homeland security measures and disaster response preparedness. That natural disaster exposed rampant incompetence, confusion, lack of coordination, planning and follow-through, raising serious questions about our ability to handle the repercussions of another terrorist attack.

For the purposes of this paper, I was asked to identify three challenges to counterterrorism over the next five years and to suggest ways that they might be addressed.

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This is a tall order—not to identify the challenges, but to confine the list to three. The three broad challenges I choose to focus on are restoration, education and coordination:

1. to restore American prestige in the world;
2. to educate ourselves both on the nature and the extent of the risk we face and on the impact of our policies on the ground overseas; and to educate the rest of the world on the nature of American society and values; and
3. to coordinate the actions of the various arms of our government so that they are enhancing rather than undermining one another, and, in so doing, exploit our strengths, including our technological superiority, our wealth, and our individual freedoms.

II. THE CHALLENGE OF RESTORATION

President Bush has been quite right in asserting the inextricable link between our foreign and domestic policies when it comes to countering terrorism. He was quite wrong, however, to assert that Iraq was the central front in the war on terror. Unfortunately, by claiming that it was, he made it so.

The U.S. reaction—I would go so far as to call it an overreaction—to the attacks of 9/11 and our response, in particular our war in Iraq, have undermined the prestige of the United States and our legitimacy as a principled power in the world. Our claims to fight for freedom ring hollow in the face of Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and documented U.S. atrocities in Iraq. Our inability to achieve our declared objectives in Iraq, because we arrogantly assumed that our strength and the purity of our motives were adequate and self-evident, has made us appear weak abroad. Our allies have been appalled by American hubris, excesses, and incompetence; our rivals have delighted in our well-publicized difficulties, while our adversaries have seen their suspicions of our malevolence confirmed. This portends a larger security concern: given the transnational nature of the adversaries we face, we are dependent on the cooperation of other countries to share intelligence, to disrupt the movements of terrorists and their financing, and to help us track down those conspiring against us. The United States will not be able to secure the cooperation we require unless we can restore our reputation abroad.

Reputations are easier to damage than to repair. In order to repair ours, we will need first to convince the rest of the world that the U.S. has learned from the past seven years and is about to embark on a different direction. Practically speaking, this will require a change of administration in Washington. But it will also require more than that. It will require a real and public change in direction and a highly articulated rationale for that change in order to persuade the rest of the world that there is a different United States than the one that has shown its face to the world in the past seven years. It will require re-framing the conflict. We should abandon the language of a “War on Terror,” which is a war we cannot hope to win, and reframe the conflict as a focused and limited campaign against individuals and organizations who are willing to use terrorist methods against us. This is a campaign in which we can prevail.

The second and more difficult task required in order to restore American prestige will be to manage our exit from Iraq in such a way as to minimize the damage to our interests. Our exit from Iraq is inevitable; the only questions that remain concern the timing and the circumstances under which we will leave. There can be little doubt that

when we do leave, our adversaries will claim to have defeated us and driven us out. There can also be no doubt that our war in Iraq has produced a new generation of fighters anxious to use terrorist methods against us and trained to do so. Their success against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan inspired Bin Laden and his followers to believe that they could then take on the United States. Veterans of the Soviet-Afghanistan conflict swelled the ranks and radicalized the memberships of terrorist groups throughout the Middle East. It will be difficult to prevent similar developments in the wake of our withdrawal from Iraq. Our reputation will also be tied to the conditions that prevail in Iraq when we leave. Rather than wishfully thinking that peace or democracy, not to mention “victory,” are around the corner, we need pragmatically to accept that our involvement in Iraq was a mistake and we must engage in a concerted effort at extrication and damage limitation. As long as our troops are on the ground in Iraq, we will not be able to persuade moderate Muslims, a group crucial to the success of our counterterrorist policies in the region and around the world, that we believe in the principles we espouse.

III. THE CHALLENGE OF EDUCATION

A resilient public is a key weapon in the counter-terrorism arsenal, but we have made no effort over the past six years to develop one. On the contrary, public fears have been fanned by partisan politicians and revenue-driven media. There is no doubt that the mass murder of almost three thousand people on U.S. soil was a deeply shocking event but I, for one, very much doubt that the scale of the atrocity warranted our response.

Americans were more fearful after 9/11 than they were when tens of thousands of Soviet nuclear weapons were trained on our cities during the Cold War. Six times as many people are killed by drunk drivers every year than were killed on 9/11 and yet we do not live in fear of drunk drivers. Terrorism is a weapon of the weak—the whole point is that the psychological impact is greater than the actual physical act. The public needs to understand this. Rather than encouraging fear for political or financial advantage, our leaders should endeavor to educate the public to the psychological nature of terrorism and the actual risk to individuals. In addition to losing our sense of security on 9/11, we also lost our sense of perspective as evidenced, for example, in the completely unwarranted conclusion that it had become unsafe to fly. Indeed, among the uncounted casualties of 9/11 are the extra 1,200 fatalities on the road occasioned by the diversion from air to road transport after 9/11. Perhaps fearful themselves, or concerned at being proven wrong by another attack, our leaders made no effort to help the American public put the attacks of 9/11 in perspective, thereby enhancing the impact of the attack.

Many Americans responded to the attacks by asking: Why? Why us? Why do they hate us? This is a very important question, but rather than engage in a reasoned analysis, our leaders responded in effect: because we are good and they are bad. If we want to have an effective counterterrorism policy over the next five years, we must engage seriously with this question. The United States needs to understand what it means to be the most powerful country in the history of the planet and how that affects perceptions around the world. We must not only educate our children in the languages and cultures of other societies, but also educate our citizens as to what it means to be on the receiving end of U.S. policies in countries where our good intentions are not self-evident.

We also need to educate our policy makers about the nature of our adversaries. We cannot hope to develop an effective counterterrorism policy unless we understand the nature of our adversary. Why do they wish to attack us? What drives them? What do they hope to achieve? Who are they? How do they manage to recruit followers? What capacity do they have to harm us? Seven years after the attacks, there is remarkably little information and even less consensus on these points. Rather, whether out of fear, conviction, or a desire to justify political and military action, we have defined our enemy as a nebulous, but all-powerful menace such as Islamo-fascism. We have played directly into the hands of our adversaries by declaring war on them and, in so doing, elevating their stature to a height of which they could only have dreamt.

Once we have a clearer understanding of their objectives, then we can fashion policies to deny them. If, indeed, they are driven by a desire to exact vengeance against us, to attain glory for themselves and to provoke us into over-reacting to them, then the policies we have followed for the past seven years are precisely the wrong ones.

For our policies to be effective, we must also educate the rest of the world so that they have a better understanding of the United States. Our wealth, military strength and the pervasiveness of our culture are enough to ensure widespread resentment against us. They are not enough to ensure widespread support for the murder of our civilians. Moreover, our wealth, strength, and culture could—and should—be turned into assets to make our case overseas and to undermine support for our adversaries. The United States has an enormously attractive and successful ideology to spread, but we should be altogether more self-conscious about how we spread it. The rationale that the U.S. public believes for U.S. government actions should be made publicly known in the countries we seek to influence. Most Americans believed, for example, that our sanctions against Iraq were evidence of our humanitarian restraint, designed to prevent the suffering of the Iraqi public while pressuring the Iraqi dictator. Many people in the region believed it was a callous attempt to starve Iraqis. Americans believed we invaded Iraq to defend ourselves against attack, bring down a brutal dictator, and bring democracy to a long-suffering people. Most people in the region believe we invaded Iraq to secure its oil supplies and establish a military base in the region.

We should be aware of these conflicting interpretations of our policies and engage in debate on them. A concerted effort at public diplomacy will not be successful as long as there are hugely unpopular U.S. policies in evidence and as long as we have little or no understanding of the cultures we are trying to influence. Over the next five years, we should make a sophisticated and well-financed effort to use our wealth and our media skills to make our case where it needs to be made—to the moderates in the Middle East. We cannot hope to change the minds of those who are prepared to use violence against us, but the focus of our policies should be the communities in which they operate, from which they draw their recruits and amongst whom they hide.

IV. THE CHALLENGE OF COORDINATION

Specific institutional arrangements are less important than having clearly articulated goals and shared principles to guide action. No amount of organizational restructuring, however sensibly designed or intelligently implemented, will actually be able to counter terrorism effectively or provide security for our homeland unless it is accompanied by a change in our foreign policy, which is daily generating more recruits for the groups who would like to attack us. That said, a large number of bureaucratic initiatives have been undertaken in the past five years. The most dramatic of these

have been the creation of the mammoth Department of Homeland Security and the Transportation Security Administration.

While there is consensus on the centrality of good intelligence to effective counterterrorism, there is little consensus on the effectiveness of these initiatives. Judge Richard Posner, for example, blames the 9/11 Commission Report and what he terms the hasty legislative reorganization to which it led for throwing off course efforts to repair the weaknesses in intelligence that were exposed by 9/11.¹ He suggests that the Intelligence Reform Act and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security may have actually retarded rather than advanced the reform of intelligence. Others, like Michael O'Hanlon and Jeremy Shapiro at Brookings, argue on the contrary that intelligence sharing has improved through increased integration of databases and greater collaboration between the FBI and the intelligence community, improvements that were enhanced by the 2004 act.² All argue the benefits of creating an American domestic intelligence agency along the lines of the British Security service, MI5, and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. Of course, those who argue for the creation of an American MI5 as an antidote to bureaucratic rivalries must never have examined the history of relations between MI5 and MI6 or the bureaucratic rivalries between the various British security agencies engaged in the fight against the IRA in Northern Ireland.

A consideration of the counterterrorism experience of other democracies quickly reveals both the central importance and considerable difficulty of coordinating the actions of various security forces. This was true of countries such as Japan, Italy, France and Spain in which the military were not involved in counterterrorism, as well as countries such as India, Peru, Turkey and Britain, in which both the military and the police were involved. A serious effort to coordinate the various security and law-enforcement organizations involved in counterterrorism was a precursor to every successful counterterrorist campaign. Israel, the country with the most experience in confronting a serious terrorist threat, has developed a special coordinating apparatus, the Counterterrorism Coordination Office within the National Security Council. One of the hallmarks of failed counterterrorism policies has been the failure to coordinate security forces. In Chechnya, for example, federal and regional security units and the army have appeared to be operating on their own which has contributed to the terrible losses in the province. In Columbia too, a weak state was unable to coordinate its forces with the result that freewheeling paramilitary groups, often with tenuous relations to the government, waged their own brutal counterterrorism campaigns. In light of the lessons derived from the experiences of other countries, the position of Director of National Intelligence appears to have been poorly conceived: the crucial role of coordinating the intelligence agencies is diluted when one is simultaneously expected to manage intelligence missions and undermined by the lack of budgetary authority.

An effective counterterrorist policy requires a strong intelligence capability and coordinated security forces. There are real differences in Washington on precisely how this capability is to be developed and how these forces should be coordinated. It may not much matter though: the experience of other governments suggests that there is no one right way to organize one's government for counterterrorism. Different governments have organized themselves differently and successfully, although in every

¹ RICHARD A. POSNER, *COUNTERING TERRORISM: BLURRED FOCUS, HALTING STEPS* (Rowman & Littlefield 2007).

² MICHAEL D'ARCY, MICHAEL O'HANLON, PETER ORSZAG, JEREMY SHAPIRO & JAMES STEINBERG, *PROTECTING THE HOMELAND 2006/2007* (Brookings Institution Press 2006).

instance it has taken them time to do so. What matters domestically is that the priorities are clearly understood, by both policy makers and the public; that responsibilities are clearly assigned and understood; and that effective co-ordination and oversight mechanisms are put in place. What matters with respect to foreign policy is that these government organizations are not undermined by the irresponsible conduct of foreign policy, making their goals impossible to realize. The effective coordination of counterterrorism policy both within and between government bureaucracies was a prelude to every successful counterterrorism campaign carried out by a democratic government.

There are two other lessons that can be derived most broadly from the experiences of other governments. First, that there is no silver bullet in the fight against terrorism, no quick fix; the best counterterrorism policies are likely to be those designed to counter the particular terrorist group one faces. Second, the governments that were most successful in combating terrorism often (not always) turned out to be those that adopted a well-integrated mix of both coercive and conciliatory measures. By coercive measures, I am referring to reliance on the intelligence and security forces. By conciliatory measures I am referring to social reform, political engagement with grievances, and mobilization of moderates.

As well as learning from the experience of other governments, we could learn from our adversaries. They have proven quite adept at using key attributes of our society against us. Given the stark asymmetry of power between us they have, in Ju Jitsu fashion, used our strengths—a free press, competitive media and complex economy—against us. We need to understand them at least as well as they understand us. The source of our adversaries' strength appears to be two fold: they have an ideology that many people find attractive and they have extraordinary organizational flexibility. They have managed to survive a massive military assault, the destruction of their central command and control structure and the death or capture of many of their leaders. They have transformed themselves into a loose, but deadly network of individuals and groups who share a common inspiration. We too have an attractive ideology—and one likely to have far broader appeal—but we cannot match them in organizational flexibility. One of the great frustrations of the past seven years (a frustration shared by most other governments that have relied on military force to defeat terrorism) was our inability to translate our strength into victory.

The transformation of Al Qaeda, however, has only been possible because of their increasingly sophisticated exploitation of the very attributes of the globalization they are so quick to criticize. The transformation of Al Qaeda from hierarchical organization to decentralized network is only made possible by the existence of the Internet. Al Qaeda and their supporters rely on the Internet to communicate with one another across borders, to plan attacks, to raise funds, to make propaganda, to recruit, educate and train their followers. They could not manage without it. With our technological skill, we should be able to devise means to undermine their trust in the security of the Internet. Any effort to do so will raise significant civil liberty concerns, but this is an area in which we should be working assiduously and launching a public debate about the appropriate balance between privacy and security. There are a number of principles that could guide our action in this area, among them: effectiveness must be demonstrated before new procedures are adopted; privacy and other concerns should be incorporated at every stage of the development of the policy; and oversight mechanisms must be put in place to evaluate effectiveness and compliance with stated

principles. Despite the difficulties in finding an appropriate balance, this is an area in which we should be able to use our strengths to our advantage.

A related issue is the monitoring of computers. Our efforts to capture terrorists have led us to launch missiles from predator drones against innocent villagers, have led us into the unworthy world of renditions, secret prisons and abuse of prisoners that has done so much to undermine our moral authority in the world. When we have captured computers, however, we have gained extraordinarily detailed intelligence; the information is far more reliable than that extracted from a prisoner under duress, and we have not had to mistreat anyone to attain the information. Again, there are real areas of concern here, but these are areas on which we need to focus in the next five years.

We have, over the past seven years, spent staggering sums of money in an effort to improve our security. We have no idea how successful we have been. Nor do we know how effective the expenditure of similar or smaller sums on very different policies might have been; policies designed, for example, to prevent radicalization of prison populations, reduce gang violence, and integrate immigrants. These types of longer term policies tend not to be considered. Instead there is widespread consensus that much remains to be done: border and port security is inadequate; state and local governments have not been well integrated into federal efforts at attack prevention or consequence management; there are exposed chemical plants; vulnerable transport systems and ill-secured radiological materials, and much more. The simple truth is that we can never make our society invulnerable to another terrorist attack. We should instead focus our attention on the less likely, but far more damaging possibility of a catastrophic attack by terrorists—an attack using weapons of mass destruction. Our best hope in preventing such a catastrophic attack is good intelligence and the best source of that intelligence is likely to be sympathizers overseas and the loyal Muslim population of this country.

V. CONCLUSION

Over the next five years we should acknowledge the failures of the past seven years. We should publicly repudiate the departures from American principles evident in our counterterrorism policy. We should abandon the language of the “war on terror.” Instead, we should make a concerted effort to restore our prestige in the world, demonstrate our commitment to multilateralism, and reframe the war against terrorism as a transnational campaign against isolated extremists. We should try to persuade the American people that we can be most effective against terrorism when we abide by our principles, keep the threat in perspective, and play to our strengths. We should educate our children in the languages and cultures of others. We should educate our public about how to evaluate risk and how terrorists try to manipulate us. We should educate ourselves about the nature of our adversary and we should educate the rest of the world about America’s virtues. Finally, we should coordinate the actions of our intelligence and security forces, ensuring that their short-term successes are advancing our long-term goals. This means that we should exploit our technological strength to reduce our adversaries’ reliance on new technologies. We should also articulate a set of goals for our policies, principles to guide us in pursuing them, and means to evaluate the success of our actions in achieving them. I have no great confidence that we will do this, but if we did, in five years, we would find ourselves enjoying both more liberty and more security than we do today.