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**A GLOBAL RESPONSE TO TERRORISM**

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The reflections offered below concern the geo-strategic context within which the U.S. should think about national security in the coming decades. My central contention is that, in order to be effective, U.S. policy must be part of a global response to terrorism. This will involve building and sustaining international institutions and regional alliances. These are essential for practical reasons, and for reclaiming America's legitimacy on the world stage.

A huge problem confronting the U.S. in Iraq is the self-fulfilling perception that we lack the will to stay the course. If enough people believe that it's only a matter of time before we will pack up and leave, this has a knock-on effect in the present. Insurgents have every incentive to wait us out, and, at home, the addition of scores of new American fatalities each month seems all the more tragically pointless.

Some argue that if we the U.S. can stabilize the situation it will then become possible to leave. They point to "the surge" in this regard. The decline in fatalities since late 2007 might partly be due to the surge, but, to the extent that it is, this increases Iraqi reliance on U.S. forces. This difficulty was most starkly apparent in early April of 2008, when over a thousand Iraqi forces refused to fight or abandoned their posts in an assault on Shiite militias in Basra, forcing the British and Americans to take up the slack.<sup>2</sup> The Bush Administration's policy that "as the Iraqis stand up we will stand down"<sup>3</sup> exhibits the logic of a parent telling a teenager that he will stop getting an allowance once he starts earning an income. It is a recipe for fostering dependence rather than weaning.

This difficulty is compounded by the U.S. need to depend on allies whose own politics might make them just as fickle. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown is widely known to be cooler than was Tony Blair about his country's involvement in Iraq. Even as Downing Street was denying that Brown's July 2007 visit to Camp David involved unveiling plans for a British withdrawal, *The Times* of London reported that one of his aides was sounding Washington out "on the possibility of an early British military withdrawal"<sup>4</sup> and the drawdown of British troops in Basra that has since taken place. If the other side believes you are going to fold, why won't they up the ante?

A possible response to this is to scotch the perception of inevitable defeat. No doubt this is what prompted Undersecretary of Defense Eric Edelman's criticism of Senator Clinton earlier last summer. Responding to her request for a Pentagon plan for US departure, Edelman wrote that "premature and public discussion of the withdrawal of

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<sup>1</sup> These comments build on my book *Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy against Global Terror* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Farrell and James Glanz, "More More Than 1,000 in Iraq's Forces Quit Basra Fight," *New York Times*, April 4, 2008.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/04/world/middleeast/04iraq.html?\\_r=1&ref=world&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/04/world/middleeast/04iraq.html?_r=1&ref=world&oref=slogin) (04-26-08).

<sup>3</sup> George W. Bush, "Our strategy can be summed up this way: As the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down." American Armed Forces Press Service, June 28, 2005. [http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=16277\\_\(04-26-08\)](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=16277_(04-26-08)).

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Baxter and David Cracknell, "U.S. Fears that Brown Wants Iraq Pullout," *The Sunday Times*, July 29, 2007. [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article2159281.ece\\_\(04-26-08\)](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article2159281.ece_(04-26-08)).

U.S. forces from Iraq reinforces enemy propaganda that the United States will abandon its allies in Iraq, much as we are perceived to have done in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia.”<sup>5</sup>

This was a gift to Senator Clinton. Suggesting that a Senator who raises questions about the administration’s Iraq policy is somehow unpatriotic or giving aid and comfort to the enemy smacks of McCarthyism. Hillary could therefore both take the moral high ground and further distance herself from her earlier support for the war.<sup>6</sup> Edelman’s response also reflects his slim grasp of the problem’s roots. The reason our leaders’ commitments to Iraq will flag is that the public does not believe that we went to war in Iraq to protect a vital American interest.

Six decades ago George Kennan, Director of Policy Planning in the Truman Administration, pointed out that going to war when a vital American interest is not threatened is problematic just because our adversaries will have vital interests at stake. Opponents will therefore have every incentive to wait us out, confident that the dynamic Edelman would like to head off will eventually kick in. This is why Kennan opposed America’s involvement in Vietnam, which unfolded as he predicted, and why, in 2002 at the age of 98, he also spoke out against the planned Iraq invasion.

President Bush’s recent attempts to deploy the Vietnam analogy have, predictably, backfired.<sup>7</sup> The revisionist historians to whom the President appealed claim—as General Westmoreland and others did at the time—that the war was winnable and greater suffering would have been averted had we stayed. These claims are controversial and have been widely challenged, but the more salient point to note here is that they could be granted without laying a glove on Kennan’s point. It depends not on claims about whether the U.S. might in principle be able to prevail at some point in a given conflict. Rather, it depends on the claim that the window of opportunity, which depends critically on public support, is likely to close before we prevail—if the U.S. goes to war when and American vital interest is not at stake.

Kennan was the architect of the doctrine of containment, developed at the start of the Cold War in response to the Soviet threat. He believed the Soviet system was not viable in the long run and that its international over-extension would lead it eventually to implode. So long as the USSR did not attack us we should rely on economic sticks and carrots, competition within the world communist movement, intelligence and diplomacy, and promoting the health and vitality of the capitalist democracies to hem in the threat. History proved Kennan right.

Containment continues to make sense as a basis for US national security policy in the post-Cold War era. Islamic fundamentalism presents no more of a competitive threat to democratic capitalism than communism did. The costs of “regime change” across the Middle East today are no more sustainable than the “rollback” that Kennan opposed in Eastern Europe in the 1950s. Kennan continues to be plausible that, rather than lump our adversaries together and give them common cause, we should take advantage of their differences. This is the opposite of the Administration’s “Axis of Evil.”

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<sup>5</sup> Russell Berman, “Clinton Aids ‘Enemy Propaganda’ With Talk of Pullout, Official Says,” *The New York Sun* July 20, 2007. <http://www2.nysun.com/article/58851> (04-26-08).

<sup>6</sup> Kate Phillips, “Clinton Criticizes Defense Dept. for Reply to Her Iraq Request”, *New York Times*, July 21, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Massimo Calabresi, “Bush’s Risky Vietnam Gambit,” *Time* August 23, 2007 <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1655516,00.html> (04-26-08).

However, containment faces new challenges in the post-Cold War world. Terrorist groups move around. They often operate out of rogue nations and failed states.

Global terrorism must, indeed, be confronted on a global basis. This might even involve the need for military action, as was required to expel Iraq from Kuwait in 1991.

But the first President Bush understood something that is lost on his son: that sustainable military action against post-Cold War threats requires more than unilateral action buttressed by opportunistic “coalitions of the willing.” Rather, it must be authorized by international institutions and supported by large coalitions in which there is strong representation from countries in the local region.

In the post-Cold War world, facing down the expansion of tyranny might require a military response to belligerence, even when this does not involve strict self-defense. The U.S. should be willing to support international containment for this purpose. Saddam Hussein’s 1991 invasion of Kuwait is a case in point. It was unprovoked aggression that clearly called for a response by democracies committed to resisting the spread of domination in the world. But just because it was not a matter of self-defense for the U.S. and its allies the question inevitably arose: by what authority could they act?

International action with strong regional participation is needed partly for pragmatic reasons. Countries in the region are likely to have vital interests at stake, to be potential spoilers, and their participation will help scotch the perception that the far-off power is acting from imperial motives. Participation from Arab countries in the region in the U.S. effort to oust Iraq from Kuwait was important for all of these reasons. The lack of comparable cooperation with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 has compounded our difficulties there significantly.

It will typically be true that pursuing containment on a global basis will require cooperation from others. It is sometimes said that the containment regime against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was failing by 2002—as indicated by the fact that he agreed to the return of UN weapons inspectors only once American troops were massing on his border. If we grant that argument, it also reveals the limits of unilateral action. As a containment regime, the U.S. action it was unsustainable. Everyone knew that we could not keep the troops there at battle-readiness throughout the summer of 2003, presenting the Bush administration with the conundrum that either they invade or withdraw—in which case Saddam could have expelled the weapons inspectors again.

If, instead, President Bush had put together the kind of coalition his father had assembled in 1991, then troops from different nations could have been rotated in and out, keeping up the pressure. To this it might be objected that too few powers would have agreed to participate to make this viable. Perhaps so, but that suggests, in turn, that the Americans were exaggerating the threat. If other major powers would not participate and Iraq’s neighbors did not feel sufficiently threatened to get involved either, that should have been a warning that the WMD threat in Iraq might indeed be a paper tiger.

Regional participation is needed to make containment sustainable. If we go it alone all over the globe, our bluff will be called time and again for the reason Kennan gave: Americans will not support it down the stretch. The Iraq Study Group understood this when it insisted that we begin working with Syria and Iran to contain the terrorist threats that are going to emanate from Iraq for a long time to come. More generally, as Colonel Joseph Núñez has argued, we need NATO-like organizations on every continent to contain terrorist groups and sectarian conflicts in failed states.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 8 Joseph Núñez, “One Nato is not enough,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2007, p. A17.

This is not to say we should trust the Syrians or be sanguine about Iran's nuclear ambitions. But just as a strategic opening to China was helpful in containing the USSR, so a strategic opening to Iran will be helpful in containing the terrorism that will otherwise emanate from Iraq. Iran would face major problems with its own Kurdish populations if Iraq broke up, not to mention a major refugee crisis. Iran also shares an interest with the U.S. in not seeing the Taliban return to power in Afghanistan. These are among the reasons that the Mullahs have been signaling a desire to work with Washington. This is not to deny that Iran will also need to be contained, just as China had to be contained during the Cold War even after Nixon went to Beijing. It is to say that we often share some common interests with our adversaries, making it feasible and sometimes necessary to work with them.

Regional participation is important also for normative reasons. Nations bordering on an expansionist power will have major, possibly vital, interests at stake. This gives them a strong claim to a say and to a role in the defensive response. To this it might be objected that, if they are not themselves democracies, why should democrats respect the appeal of the governments of regional powers to the principle of affected interest? Why should we care about Kuwait's interests, let alone those of Syria or Iran?

But the failure of others to respect the principle of affected interest is not a good reason for democrats to flout it. Moreover, the leaders of democracies have an interest in encouraging non-democracies to adopt democratic norms and to play by democratic rules when they operate internationally—whether in institutions like the UN or in informal consultations and coalitions. The more governments accept the norm's legitimacy in one context the more they legitimate it, willy nilly, in others—making it harder to resist domestic demands for democratic reform.

Authorization through international institutions also matters for reasons both practical and normative. On the practical front, it will often be the UN officials from development and other agencies on the ground who have access to pertinent information. This is especially likely to be true as far as weak and failed states are concerned, where it will often be these people who will know the details of different war lords' capacities and agendas, where the weak points in borders are, and other relevant street-level information. Moreover, international authorization of containment coalitions enhances their stability. It is harder for a country to withdraw from participation when it has become committed through an international legal process than when it is merely a coalition "of the willing"—of which a different administration might take a different view. Gordon Brown's replacement of Tony Blair is a case in point.

But the most important reasons for international authorization are normative. If major powers act either unilaterally or via coalitions of the willing when they are not themselves under threat of imminent attack, they lack principled authority for their actions. As a result, they are likely to be seen as imperialistic, opportunistic, or both. The 1991 Gulf War and the 2001 action against Afghanistan garnered worldwide support partly because they were authorized by the UN Security Council. This stands in stark contrast the 2003 Iraq war, which continues widely to be seen as a rogue American action against a country the posed no regional or global threat. Rather than undermine the UN at every turn, as the Bush Administration has done, the major democratic powers should be working to strengthen the UN, and then work through it to face domination down. There is no alternative if we are to have an effective *global* strategy against international terror.