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TERRORISM

DEFEATING MILITANTS AND WINNING MODERATES

RECONCEPTUALISING THE WAR ON TERROR

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The great failing in the US war effort since September 2001 has been the reluctance to comprehend the enemy that America confronts. As long as the anodyne, euphemistic and inaccurate term ‘the war on terror’ remains the official nomenclature, the struggle will not be won. The genesis of the term war on terror goes back to 11 September 2001 when, twelve hours after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, President George W. Bush addressed the American nation and launched a war against terror. At the time, the use of this term was correct since, in the immediate aftermath of the surprise attacks, there was no confirmation as to the identity of those responsible. Within days, however, it became apparent that the al-Qa’ida movement was responsible for the 11 September attacks. Yet the term war on terror remained in official use. Why? It is because as a term it has no dire implications and does not point to any group within society. As a result, the term is both useful and relatively inoffensive since most of us are against terrorism.

It is far better, however, and certainly more accurate, to describe the kind of war in which the United States has been engaged since 11 September 2001 as a war against Islamist terrorism. Even more precise would be to call the struggle a war on political Islamism. If the Islamist dimension were to be recognised as the central threat, then

it would be possible to examine the totalitarian ideology that drives the instrument of terror. From this perspective, it is encouraging that the *9/11 Commission Report* views the terrorist threat against the United States not in generic terms but as being of a particular type, namely Islamist terrorism. Indeed, the Commission calls Islamist terrorism the ‘catastrophic threat’ that faces the United States in the early 21st century.¹

Why does it matter that the Islamist dimension of contemporary terrorism be specified? It is a simple case of diagnosis. Just as a physician must identify a disease in order to treat it successfully, so too must a strategist identify an enemy in order to secure victory. The point of this article is to emphasise the importance of knowing one’s enemy. For two years during the 1980s, the author taught a course in strategy and policy at the United States Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. The key text of this course was Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War*. Some of the student officers found it mildly odd that a strategy and policy course should take its inspiration from a Prussian soldier who had been dead for a century and a half. Yet Clausewitz’s *On War* contains a timeless message, and it is this: one must define one’s policy before one can decide on an appropriate strategy. At the Naval War College, the author conducted a historical survey of warfare, starting with the ancient Greeks and concluding with the Falkland Islands campaign of 1982. Students examined how various politicians and military leaders from antiquity to modern times had analysed their war aims and how correctly or how mistakenly they had then conducted their strategy.

The author learnt from teaching this course that, not only in military affairs but in life more generally, one must determine one’s aims and goals before one can plan to reach them. In theory such action, of course, sounds obvious. Yet it is seldom obvious in practice. It is, for example, far from obvious in what is called the war on terror, even though the term is unfortunate. The important question to ask in the war on terror is: what is the overall goal of the struggle? Is it the seizure of an enemy’s capital? Is it taking land? Is it influencing public opinion? What have US politicians defined as the purpose of fighting?

In the United States in October 2001, the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, stated that America’s strategic goal was to end terrorism. Yet the threat is not simply one of terrorism, which, after all, is a method. The threat is altogether

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something more profound. For the United States, World War II started with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941. Pearl Harbour was a surprise attack, but the war that followed was not conceptualised as a war on surprise attacks. The surprise attack was a tactic employed by the Japanese. Similarly, in August 1914, World War I started because of an assassination in Sarajevo. Again, the combatants of World War I did not conceptualise the war as being waged against assassinations. In short, the current war on terror cannot be classified as a war against terrorism because terrorism is a tactic.

In classical wars such as World War I, the central issue was which state could deploy the greater industrial resources to produce the maximum number of shells, tanks, rifles, aircraft and ships. Industrial resources of this type are not an obvious issue in this war. Economically and militarily, the war on terror is a case of what is now called asymmetric warfare. The enemy has chosen terrorism because it does not have ships, planes or tanks to deploy against the United States. However, if the enemy did have a conventional capability, or the capacity to develop weapons of mass destruction, the war would no longer be confined to terrorism. The true enemy in the war on terror is the belief system that motivates the use of terrorism—a belief system that is larger than war and that transcends crime. The enemy in the war on terror is an ideology—a radical utopian ideology known variously as Islamism, militant Islam, radical Islam, political Islam and fundamentalist Islam. It is important to note that Islamism is not the same as Islam—the personal faith of over one billion people. Rather, Islamism is a form of religious belief transmuted into a radical utopian ideology. As a result, the best way to understand the Islamist phenomenon is to examine it in the context of other modern and radical utopian ideologies. The two main radical ideologies of the modern era against which our forebears—both American and Australian—fought were the fascists in World War II and the Marxist–Leninists in the Cold War. Islamism represents a third totalitarian ideology. However, it is different in many ways from fascism and communism. First, it is non-Western in character. Second, it has a religious quality that is not found in the secular ideologies

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of the fascists and Marxist–Leninists. Third, Islamism is not the product of a great power such as Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, the Soviet Union or Mao Zedong’s China.

Wars are fought for underlying political beliefs. In World War II, the true goal of the Western allies was the destruction of fascist ideology in those states and its influence as a world force. Indeed, since 1945, fascism—while still present as a body of ideas—is now a minor phenomenon that has never threatened the world as it did in the inter-war years. After 1945, the fascist states such as Germany and Italy were resurrected as liberal Western democracies. Similarly, the struggle against Marxist–Leninism during the Cold War involved a fifty-year ideological struggle that culminated in 1991 with the implosion and end of the Soviet Union. Today, in the early 21st century, Marxism–Leninism is no longer an ideological threat to democracy. Even in China and Vietnam, Marxist–Leninism has been transformed by free-market ideas. Moreover, the international communist movement has largely disappeared as a political force.

The West’s strategy in the war on terror must be to bring about another 1945 and 1991 in order to end the international phenomenon of an Islamist totalitarian ideology. While there are considerable differences between European totalitarianism and radical Islamism there are also similarities present. Like the fascists and the communists, contemporary Islamists are devoted to a body of ideas that are powerful, convincing and inspiring and, for which adherents to the cause are willing, in many cases, to give up their lives. As in communism and fascism there are several distinct currents of Islamism. For example, in Saudi Arabia there is Wahabbism; in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood; and in Iran, the Khomeini ideology that overthrew the Shah in the late 1970s. Employing a communist analogy, these Islamist currents are similar to the Stalinist vision, the Maoist vision and the Ho Chi Minh vision of revolutionary Marxism–Leninism. Each Islamist strand has differing emphases, involves different personalities and contains different temperaments, but like the various communist parties of the 20th century, ultimately they form part of a worldwide Islamist movement.

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The Islamists view themselves as the Elect, the Chosen—a messianic vanguard whose task is to further their peculiar ideology globally. Like the ambitious European totalitarians, the Islamist goal is to expand in order to achieve ideological hegemony. Since there are no serried ranks of Islamist soldiers, the movement undertakes special operations such as the 11 September assault on the United States, the 2002 Bali bombing in Indonesia and the 2004 Madrid train attack. Afghanistan under the Taliban was the purest example of what we can expect from an Islamist state. For five years during the 1990s, the Taliban regime's control of society was comparable to that exercised in Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia in the 1930s.

In the course of expanding its influence, the Islamist movement sees the modern West as its primary obstacle. Like the fascists, as with the communists, the Islamists view the West as an implacable enemy. The West has enormous military and economic power, and possesses an alternative liberal ideology that stands in opposition to illiberal Islamism. The West has the material appeal to lure the young of Islam away from Islamism. As a result, we in the West are the main enemy.

While the terrorism practised by radical Islamism is of a new type and is bound up with criminality, it is a mistake to attempt to treat it as a law enforcement operation. The law enforcement model of counter-terrorism was employed in the 1990s and proved incapable of securing Western societies from attack. Under the law enforcement approach, there was no concerted counterattack on the Islamist international movement, no global effort to restrict their funding and little direct military involvement in disrupting Islamist command-and-control networks. Instead, police and intelligence agencies concentrated on tracking individuals and attempted to capture the most visible foot-soldiers of the movement.

It is imperative that we look beyond law enforcement towards the strategic requirement of countering the concerted political effort that drives Islamism. There are two prongs in the Islamist campaign against the West: a military-criminal prong and a political-ideological prong. The latter dimension is more worrisome than the former. Western nations possess professional militaries, intelligence forces and law enforcement agencies, all of which are capable of dealing with violent threats to liberal societies. However, there is much less experience in understanding the legal, political and cultural efforts to expand Islamism in the form of schools, education and immigration. The ultimate danger to

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the West from Islamism lies in its termite-like infiltration of liberal democratic societies. It would be more logical for an Islamist strategist to say: 'Let's have much less violence. Build radical mosques. It's legal.'

In order to destroy the threat of militant Islam there must be a struggle waged against both the military-criminal and the political-ideological dimensions. The first dimension involves the exertion of physical force and political will to defeat Islamist military-criminal action. However, it is the second—the political-ideological dimension—that is the vital battleground. Politically, we must concentrate on assisting anti-Islamist Muslims, our natural allies in this war, to promote the merits of moderate Islam. In other words, the ultimate strategic goal must be for the West to encourage a Middle East that is tolerant, modern and, above all, anti-Islamist.

While visiting Australia, the author has been asked what should be the role of this country in the war against radical Islamism. First, in part, Australia's effort must be regional in character because the country possesses expertise on conditions in South-East Asia—particularly those in Indonesia and Malaysia—that is far beyond the capacity of most other Western states. Second, Australia has an important role to play in assisting the evolution of an 'anti-Islamist Islam'. Western governments, media, academia and the churches must develop a clear understanding of the character of Islamism, and they must help further the cause of moderate Muslims everywhere. Our strategic enemy, as the final 9/11 Commission report stated, is an ideology, not a religion. Just as we had to understand fascism and communism in order to defeat them, so too will we have to comprehend political Islamism as a global movement.

Before 11 September, we saw terrorism as criminal and fought it mainly with law enforcement means. After that date, we declared war on terror and have adopted a stronger military component. Yet our struggle transcends both law enforcement efforts and military campaigning, both of which are methods. Ultimately, we are engaged in what is a war of ideas. In such a war, the military, intelligence and law enforcement dimensions are secondary to the vital political battle of contending ideas. The key political task is to convince moderate

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Muslims around the globe that the radical utopian path of Islamism is self-defeating. In short, if militant Islam is the problem, then moderate Islam must become the solution.

Will the modern West come to terms with the grave challenge of countering Islamism expeditiously and with a minimum loss of life? Our use of euphemism, our pluralism and our frequent unwillingness to define political challenges realistically often prevent clarity of thought and timely action until catastrophes such as 11 September and Bali occur. We in the West have a tradition of what might be dubbed 'education by murder'. We often only learn the harsh reality of the ways of the world when our people die violently and tragically—as they did in terror attacks in New York, Washington, Bali and Madrid. We need to prepare ourselves with an education that analyses and researches the roots of Islamism as a radical utopian ideology, in much the same way as our forebears learnt to understand the challenge of fascism and communism. Only through such preparation will we learn that our struggle is not against a tactic or a method but against an anti-democratic, illiberal ideological movement. When we have grasped this central truth, we will be in a position to know our enemy, to fight him effectively and, ultimately, to defeat him decisively.

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ENDNOTE

- 1 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, Authorized Edition, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2004.

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