FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

> What's In A Name?: How to Fight Terrorism

Tuesday, January 1, 2002 - 12:00am
What's In A Name?: How to Fight Terrorism
Michael Howard

Michael Howard has been Professor of the History of War at Oxford and Robert A. Lovett Professor of Military and Naval History at Yale. This article is based on a lecture he gave in London on October 30, 2001.

When, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared that the United States was "at war" with terrorism, he made a very natural but terrible and irrevocable error. Administration leaders have been trying to put it right ever since.

What Powell said made sense if one uses the term "war against terrorism" in the sense of a war against crime or against drug trafficking: that is, the mobilization of all available resources against a dangerous, antisocial activity, one that can never be entirely eliminated but can be reduced to, and kept at, a level that does not threaten social stability.

The British in their time have fought many such "wars" -- in Palestine, in Ireland, in Cyprus, and in Malaya (modern-day Malaysia), to mention only a few. But they never called them wars; they called them "emergencies." This terminology meant that the police and intelligence services were provided with exceptional powers and were reinforced where necessary by the armed forces, but they continued to operate within a peacetime framework of civilian authority. If force had to be used, it was at a minimal level and so far as possible did not interrupt the normal tenor of civil life. The objectives were to isolate the terrorists from the rest of the community and to cut them off from external sources of supply. The terrorists were not dignified with the status of belligerents: they were criminals, to be regarded as such by the general public and treated as such by the authorities.

To declare war on terrorists or, even more illiterately, on terrorism is at once to accord terrorists a status and dignity that they seek and that they do not deserve. It confers on them a kind of legitimacy. Do they qualify as belligerents? If so, should they not receive the protection of the laws of war? This protection was something that Irish terrorists always demanded, and it was quite properly refused. But their demands helped to muddy the waters and were given wide credence among their supporters in the United States.

But to use, or rather to misuse, the term "war" is not simply a matter of legality or pedantic semantics. It has deeper and more dangerous consequences. To declare that one is at war is immediately to create a war psychosis that may be totally counterproductive for the objective being sought. It arouses an immediate expectation, and demand, for spectacular military action against some easily identifiable adversary, preferably a hostile state -- action leading to decisive results.

The use of force is seen no longer as a last resort, to be avoided if humanly possible, but as the first, and the sooner it is used the better. The news media demand immediate stories of derring-do, filling their pages with pictures of weapons, ingenious graphics, and contributions from service officers long, and probably deservedly, retired. Any suggestion that the best strategy is not to use military force at all but to employ subtler if less heroic means of destroying the adversary is dismissed as "appeasement" by politicians whose knowledge of history is about on a par with their skill at political management.

Right-wing leaders, seeing themselves cheated of what the Germans used to call a frischer, fršhlicher Krieg (a short, jolly war) in Afghanistan, demand one against a more accessible adversary, Iraq. This is rather like the drunk who lost his watch in a dark alley but looked for it under a lamppost because there was more light there. As for their counterparts on the left, the very word "war" brings them out on the streets to protest as a matter of principle. The qualities needed in a serious campaign against terrorists -- secrecy, intelligence, political

sagacity, quiet ruthlessness, covert actions that remain covert, above all infinite patience -- all these are forgotten or overridden in a media-stoked frenzy for immediate results, and nagging complaints if they do not get them.

CALL TO ARMS

Could it have been avoided? Certainly, rather than what President George W. Bush so unfortunately termed "a crusade against evil" -- that is, a military campaign conducted by an alliance dominated by the United States -- many people would have preferred a police operation conducted under the auspices of the United Nations on behalf of the international community as a whole, against a criminal conspiracy whose members should be hunted down and brought before an international court, where they would receive a fair trial and, if found guilty, be awarded an appropriate sentence.

In an ideal world that is no doubt what would have happened. But we do not live in an ideal world. The suicide plane attacks that killed several thousand innocent office-workers in New York, nearly two hundred military personnel in Washington, D.C., and several hundred passengers on the four hijacked flights were not seen in the United States as crimes against "the international community" to be appropriately dealt with by the United Nations, a body for which Americans have little respect. For them the attacks were outrages against the people of America, far surpassing in infamy even the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Such an insult to American honor was not to be dealt with by a long and meticulous police investigation conducted by international authorities, culminating in an even longer court case in some foreign capital, with sentences that would then no doubt be suspended to allow for further appeals. It cried for immediate and spectacular vengeance to be inflicted by America's own armed forces.

And who can blame Americans? In their position the British would have felt exactly the same way. The courage and wisdom of Bush in resisting the call for a strategy of vendetta has been admirable, but the pressure is still there, both within and beyond the administration. It is a demand that can be satisfied only by military action -- if possible, rapid and decisive military action. There must be catharsis: the blood of five thousand innocent civilians demands it.

Again, Bush deserves enormous credit for his attempt to implement the alternative paradigm. He has abjured unilateral action. He has sought, and received, a United Nations mandate. He has built up an amazingly wide-ranging coalition that truly does embody "the international community" so far as such an entity exists. Within a matter of days, the United States turned its back on the unilateralism and isolationism toward which it seemed to have been steering, and it resumed its former position as leader of a world community far more extensive than the so-called free world of the Cold War.

Almost equally important, the president and his colleagues have done their best to explain to the American people that this will be a war unlike any other, and that they must adjust their expectations accordingly. But it is still a war. The "w" word has been used and now cannot be withdrawn, and its use has brought inevitable and irresistible pressure to use military force as soon, and as decisively, as possible.

BATTLE OF WITS

A struggle against terrorism, as the British have discovered over the past century and particularly in Northern Ireland, is unlike a war against drugs or a war against crime in one vital respect. It is fundamentally a "battle for hearts and minds"; it is worth remembering that that phrase was first coined in the context of the most successful campaign of this kind that the British armed forces have ever fought -- the Malayan emergency in the 1950s (a campaign that, incidentally, took some 15 years to bring to an end). Without hearts and minds one cannot obtain intelligence, and without intelligence terrorists can never be defeated. There is not much of a constituency for criminals or drug traffickers, and in a campaign against them the government can be reasonably certain that the mass of the public will be on its side. But it is well known that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. Terrorists can be successfully destroyed only if public opinion, both at home and abroad, supports the authorities in regarding them as criminals rather than heroes.

In the intricate game of skill played between terrorists and the authorities, as the British discovered in both Palestine and Ireland, the terrorists have already won an important battle if they can provoke the authorities into using overt armed force against them. They will then be in a win-win situation: either they will escape to fight another day, or they will be defeated and celebrated as martyrs.

In the process of fighting them a lot of innocent civilians will certainly be hurt, further eroding the moral authority of the government. Who in the United Kingdom will ever forget Bloody Sunday in Northern Ireland, when in 1972 a few salvos of small-arms fire by the British army gave the Irish Republican Army a propaganda victory from which the British government would never recover? And if so much harm can be done by rifle fire, what is one to say about bombing? It is like trying to eradicate cancer cells with a bloWTOrch. Whatever its military justification, the bombing of Afghanistan, with the inevitable collateral damage, has whittled away the immense moral ascendancy gained as a result of the terrorist attacks in America.

Soon for much of the world that atrocity will be, if not forgotten, then remembered only as history; meanwhile, every fresh picture on television of a hospital hit, or children crippled by land mines, or refugees driven from their homes by Western military action will strengthen the hatred and recruit for the ranks of the terrorists, as well as sow fresh doubts in the minds of America's supporters.

There is no reason to doubt that the campaign in Afghanistan was undertaken only on the best available political and military advice, in full realization of the military difficulties and political dangers and in the sincere belief that there was no alternative. It was, as the Americans so nicely put it, an "AOS" situation: "all options stink." But in compelling the allies to undertake it at all, the terrorists took the first and all-important trick.

The understandable military reasoning that drove the campaign was based on the political assumption that the terrorist network had to be destroyed as quickly as possible before it could do more damage. It further assumed that the network was masterminded by a single evil genius, Osama bin Laden, whose elimination would demoralize if not destroy his organization. Bin Laden operated out of a country the rulers of which refused to yield him up to the forces of international justice. Those rulers had to be compelled to change their minds. The quickest way to break their will was by aerial bombardment, especially since a physical invasion of their territory presented such huge if not insoluble logistical problems. Given these assumptions, what alternative was there?

WEAK FOUNDATIONS

But the best reasoning, and the most flawless logic, is of little value if it starts from false assumptions. I have no doubt that voices were raised both in Washington and in Whitehall questioning the need and pointing out the dangers of immediate military action, but if they were, they were at once drowned out by the thunderous political imperative: "Something must be done." The same voices no doubt also questioned the wisdom, if not the accuracy, of identifying bin Laden as the central and indispensable figure in the terrorist network -- demonizing him for some people, but for others giving him the heroic status enjoyed by "freedom fighters" throughout the ages.

The allies are now in a horrible dilemma. If they "bring him to justice" and put him on trial they will provide bin Laden with a platform for global propaganda. If, instead, he is assassinated -- perhaps "shot while trying to escape" -- he will become a martyr. If he escapes he will become a Robin Hood. Bin Laden cannot lose. And even if he is eliminated, it is hard to believe that his global network, apparently consisting of people as intelligent and well educated as they are dedicated

and ruthless, will not continue to function effectively until they are traced and dug out by patient and long-term operations of police and intelligence forces, whose activities will not, and certainly should not, make headlines. Such a process, as the British defense chief Admiral Sir Michael Boyce has rightly pointed out, may well take decades, perhaps as long as the Cold War.

Now that the operation has begun it must be pressed to a successful conclusion -- successful enough for the allies to be able to disengage with honor and for the tabloid headlines to claim victory (though the very demand for victory and the sub-Churchillian rhetoric that accompanies this battle cry show how profoundly press and politicians still misunderstand the nature of the terrorist problem). Only after achieving an honorable disengagement will it be possible to continue with the real struggle described above, one in which there will be no spectacular battles and no clear victory.

Boyce's analogy with the Cold War is valuable in another respect. Not only did it go on for a very long time, but it had to be kept cold. There was a constant danger that it would be inadvertently toppled into a "hot" nuclear war, which everyone would catastrophically lose. The danger of nuclear war, at least on a global scale, has now ebbed, if only for the moment, but it has been replaced by another threat, and one no less alarming: the likelihood of an ongoing and continuous confrontation of cultures that will not only divide the world but shatter the internal cohesion of our increasingly multicultural societies. And the longer the overt war continues against terrorism, in Afghanistan or anywhere else, the greater is the danger of that confrontation happening.

There is no reason to suppose that Osama bin Laden enjoys any more sympathy in the Islamic world than, say, Northern Ireland's Ian Paisley does in Christendom. The type is a phenomenon that has cropped up several times in British history: a charismatic religious leader fanatically hostile to the West leading a cult that has sometimes gripped an entire nation. There was the Mahdi in the Sudan in the late nineteenth century, and the so-called Mad Mullah in Somaliland in the early twentieth. Admittedly they presented purely local problems, although a substantial proportion of the British army had to be mobilized to deal with the Mahdi and his followers.

CULTURAL UNDERPINNINGS

The difference today is that such leaders can recruit followers from all over the world and can strike back anywhere on the globe. They are neither representative of Islam nor approved by Islam, but the roots of their appeal lie in a peculiarly Islamic predicament that only intensified over the last half of the twentieth century: the challenge to Islamic culture and values posed by the secular and materialistic culture of the West, and the inability to come to terms with it.

This is a vast subject that must be understood if there is to be any hope, not so much of winning the new cold war as of preventing it from becoming hot. In retrospect, it is quite astonishing how little the West has understood, or empathized with, the huge crisis that has faced that vast and populous section of the world stretching from the Maghreb through the Middle East and Central Asia into South and Southeast Asia and beyond to the Philippines: overpopulated, underdeveloped, being dragged headlong by the West into the postmodern age before their populations have come to terms with modernity.

This is not a problem of poverty as against wealth, and it is symptomatic of Western materialism to suppose that it is. It is the far more profound and intractable confrontation between a theistic, land-based, and traditional culture, in places little different from the Europe of the Middle Ages, and the secular material values of the Enlightenment. The British and the French, given their imperial experiences, ought to understand these problems. But for most Americans it must be said that Islam remains one vast terra incognita -- and one, like those blank areas on medieval maps, inhabited very largely by dragons.

This is the region where the struggle for hearts and minds must be waged and won if the struggle against terrorism is to succeed. The front line in the struggle is not in Afghanistan. It is in the Islamic states where modernizing governments are threatened by a traditionalist backlash: Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan, to name only the most obvious. The front line also runs through the streets of the multicultural cities in the West. For Muslims in Ankara or Cairo, Paris or Berlin, the events of September 11 were terrible, but they happened a long way away and in another world. By contrast, those whose sufferings as a result of Western air raids or of Israeli incursions are nightly depicted on television are people, however geographically distant, with whom Muslims around the world can easily identify.

That is why prolonging the war is likely to be so disastrous. Even more disastrous would be its extension, as U.S. opinion seems increasingly to demand, in a long march through other "rogue states" beginning with Iraq, in order to eradicate terrorism for good so that the world can live at peace. No policy is more likely not just to indefinitely prolong the war but to ensure that it can never be won.

The British prime minister and the American president have been exhorting their citizens to keep their nerve. It is no less important that we should keep our heads.

Source URL: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2002-01-01/whats-name-how-fight-terrorism