

# The 'War on Terror' Has Been Lost

After 14 years, trillions of dollars spent and hundreds of thousands of people dead with violence expanding, not abating perhaps it's finally time to admit that the Bush-Obama "War on Terror" has been lost and that a new strategy addressing root causes is required, as Nat Parry describes.

By Nat Parry

Last week's attacks in Paris offered a painful and tragic reminder that despite the unprecedented counterterrorism measures implemented since the attacks on New York and Washington 14 years ago, citizens in the West remain as vulnerable as ever to the threat of extremist violence. This may come as a bit of a shock to those who may have expected that the massive investment in fighting terrorism would have resulted in more safety and security by now.

With trillions of dollars spent on overseas military adventures, unprecedented "homeland security" and mass surveillance, and countless lives lost in U.S. wars, it's not unreasonable to have thought that perhaps more measurable progress would have been made in countering the terrorist threat against the United States.

But with transportation agencies, football stadiums and tourist destinations across the U.S. now bolstering security following the attacks in Paris and with the Islamic State, or ISIS, promising more attacks to come in New York and Washington it is clear how vulnerable Americans remain to the threat of jihadist terrorism, despite all these sacrifices over the past decade and a half.

Efforts to contain terrorism certainly had precedents before President George W. Bush declared a wide-ranging and open-ended "War on Terror" in an address to Congress on Sept. 20, 2001, but the groundwork that was set in the weeks and months after 9/11 has come to define the overall approach to this Twenty-first Century challenge an approach that can now clearly be called an abject failure.

Despite some tactical differences between the Bush and Obama administrations in the way the war has been waged with a preference now on drone assassinations, for example, rather than full-scale invasions the "War on Terror" has essentially followed the same logic of pursuing something like total victory by eliminating every terrorist no matter where they are, with an unfortunately high tolerance for killing large numbers of innocent bystanders in the process.

Any honest appraisal of this effort would now conclude that the overall approach has borne out just as badly as the most pessimistic critics asserted back in 2001 and 2002, when the foundation was being laid for what Secretary of Defense

Donald Rumsfeld later dubbed the “Long War.”

## Early Critics

With new organizations forming in the days after 9/11 with slogans such as “war is not the answer,” voices were being raised to assert that defeating terrorism required first of all that the United States stop engaging in it, based on the Hippocratic principle of “First do no harm.” The U.S. was also urged to devote at least as much attention to addressing the root causes of violent extremism as it was to addressing the military aspect of defeating jihadists on the battlefield. Among the principal causes identified included fighting global poverty and promoting human rights.

While the Bush administration announced in March 2002 that weapons and U.S. military advisers were being sent to countries such as Indonesia, Nepal, Jordan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to mount proxy fights against terrorists, development advocates complained that no comparable effort was being made to alleviate the harsh economic conditions that provide the conditions in which extremism flourishes. Human rights organizations also warned that political repression carried out by some U.S. allies was doing more to fuel terrorism than to contain it.

In an open letter to Bush published on March 7, 2002, Human Rights Watch singled out Uzbekistan in particular as being an undeserving ally, urging the U.S. to reconsider its diplomatic and military support for the Central Asian dictatorship. The rights group warned, “In terms of human rights, Uzbekistan is barely distinguishable from its Soviet past, and [Uzbek] President [Islam] Karimov has shown himself to be an unreconstructed Soviet leader. You have to wonder whether this kind of record makes for a trusted ally or a foreign policy burden.”

Human Rights Watch also criticized expanding aid to Indonesia, where extra-judicial executions, torture and arbitrary detention were commonplace. It argued that increasing aid to Indonesia would “effectively reward the security forces for bad behavior.”

Yet, the Bush administration showed little interest in the correlation between human rights, political repression and militant extremism, a trend that has largely continued through today. In a visit to Central Asia earlier this month, for example, Secretary of State John Kerry met with autocratic rulers and officials from several countries considered some of the world’s worst rights offenders.

Although he had been urged by the human rights community to press the leaders on

their records, Kerry largely downplayed human rights as he sought deeper U.S. ties with the region. As Reuters reported, “he took pains to avoid direct public criticism as he pursued security and economic concerns at the top of his agenda.”

## **Development Agenda**

Back in 2002, when the “War on Terror” was being rolled out, calls for more engagement on development aid grew louder, with some of the strongest pleas coming directly from World Bank President James Wolfensohn.

In a speech at the Woodrow Wilson International Center, Wolfensohn argued that to combat terrorism, global poverty and other international problems must be addressed. “We will not create a safer world with bombs or brigades alone,” he said. Poverty “can provide a breeding ground for the ideas and actions of those who promote conflict and terror.”

Yet, when it comes to fighting global poverty, the U.S. has continued to display a seeming indifference to making this a priority, whether as part of a larger campaign against violent extremism or simply on humanitarian grounds.

Despite pressure placed on the U.S. following 9/11 to make development aid a central plank in the broader campaign against terrorism, the Bush administration resisted calls to increase funding for aid to the world’s poorest nations. Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill insisted that foreign aid wasn’t proven to be effective, and so the U.S. blocked efforts by Great Britain and other countries to raise the level of aid going from international development organizations to poor nations.

After sustained criticism, the Bush administration reluctantly announced an increase in aid by \$5 billion spread over several years. This would represent only a modest rise, however, in the U.S. contribution as measured by its percentage of GDP, which at that time was only 0.1 percent far short of the 0.7 percent that the United Nations had set for the minimal target of industrialized countries.

The UN has explained its 0.7 target as the minimum necessary towards promoting international security and stability, and has urged that meeting this target be considered a requisite for membership on the UN Security Council. For what it’s worth, however, current development aid by the United States stands at just 0.19 percent of its GDP, far behind the global leaders of Norway and Sweden, which donate 1.07 percent and 1.03 percent of their GDPs, respectively.

## **Climate Change Connection**

Besides poverty and human rights, tackling climate change also emerged as an issue related closely to countering the long-term terrorist threat, but for years this connection was essentially ignored by high-level policymakers. While President Obama has just recently prioritized climate change, the Council on Foreign Relations for one was warning as far back as 2007 that climate change was contributing significantly to the terrorist threat.

The report noted for example that “declining food production, extreme weather events, and drought from climate change could further inflame tensions in Africa, weaken governance and economic growth, and contribute to massive migration and possibly state failure, leaving ‘ungoverned spaces’ where terrorists can organize.”

These concerns have since been reiterated by everyone from the Pentagon, which calls climate change a “threat multiplier” because it “has the potential to exacerbate many of the challenges we are dealing with today from infectious disease to terrorism,” to Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, who recently stated that “climate change is directly related to the growth of terrorism.”

Although Sanders was attacked for allegedly overstating a “direct” relationship between global warming and terrorism, there is indeed a mountain of evidence to support the assertion that there is at least a very strong correlation between these two trends.

In fact, it is well-documented that the current conflict in Syria, which has facilitated the rise of ISIS, was triggered by a series of socio-economic, political and environmental factors, including climate change. According to a recent report called “A New Climate for Peace,” an independent study commissioned by the foreign ministers of the G7 nations, a severe drought that hit Syria in 2006 was exacerbated by resource mismanagement and the impact of climate change on water and crop production.

“Herders in the northeast lost nearly 85 percent of their livestock, affecting 1.3 million people,” the report explained. “Nearly 75 percent of families that depend on agriculture suffered total crop failure.”

The widespread loss of livelihoods and food sources compelled farmers and rural families to migrate to overcrowded cities, stressing urban infrastructure and basic services, and increasing urban poverty. “More than 1 million people were food insecure, adding substantial pressure to pre-existing stressors, such as grievances and government mismanagement,” the G7 report pointed out. “This food insecurity was one of the factors that pushed the country over the threshold into violent conflict.”

## U.S. Interventions

This violent conflict in turn was aggravated by previous and ongoing American meddling in the region. As the U.S. intelligence community had warned in 2006, a whole new generation of Islamic radicalism was spawned by the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. The consensus view of 16 U.S. spy services was that “the Iraq war has made the overall terrorism problem worse.” Part of this problem becoming worse was the rise of ISIS, which emerged in Iraq as a direct result of the U.S. occupation.

The *Washington Post* reported in April 2015 that the core of ISIS is primarily made up of ex-Baathist military officials who were summarily disbanded from the Iraqi Army following the U.S. invasion. The organization grew largely thanks to the sectarian policies of U.S.-backed Prime Minister Nouri Maliki in stripping power from the Sunnis in favor of Shiite militias. The early growth of ISIS was further facilitated by the mass detentions of Iraqis in prisons such as Camp Bucca, which provided a fertile networking and recruiting opportunity.

As journalist Glenn Greenwald explained the process on Thursday’s episode of Democracy Now, “the reason there is such a thing as ISIS is because the U.S. invaded Iraq and caused massive instability, destroyed the entire society, destroyed all of the infrastructure, destroyed all order, and it was in that chaos that ISIS was able to emerge.”

After finally withdrawing from a devastated and traumatized Iraq in 2010, the U.S. then turned its attention to Libya, and decided to overthrow the government of Muammar Gaddafi through a massive bombing campaign. Following Gaddafi’s ouster, his caches of weapons ended up being shuttled to rebels in Syria, fueling the civil war there. The U.S. also began directly arming groups attempting to overthrow Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, with these weapons often ending up in the hands of jihadists such as the al-Nusra Front and ISIS.

Some of this was done in the full expectation that the policies would result in emboldening the extremists of groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda. According to a classified 2012 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency memorandum, extremists were the driving forces in the Syrian civil war. As the memo stated, “the Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood and [al-Qaeda in Iraq] are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria.”

And yet, the U.S. was helping coordinate arms transfers to these same groups, leading directly to the rise of Islamic extremism there. These policies later morphed into efforts to promote “moderate rebels,” with no more success.

A \$500 million Pentagon program meant to train and support moderate fighters was

abandoned earlier this year after news emerged that the first group of U.S.-trained Syrian fighters was handily defeated by al-Nusra in late July. The Islamists apparently attacked the group and took an unspecified number hostage, with the remaining fighters fleeing and still unaccounted for.

Congressional hawks like Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, withdrew their support for the program just a year after Congress authorized it. "It's a bad, bad sick joke," said McCain of the program, while Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Connecticut, called it "a bigger disaster than I could have ever imagined."

### **'Do You Realize What You've Done?'**

These counter-productive strategies have not gone unnoticed by some world leaders, most of whom however are too polite to bring up the failures in public settings. One who does not play along by these unspoken diplomatic rules though is Russian President Vladimir Putin. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September, he directly challenged the architects of these policies, in what was surely seen in Washington as a major breach of etiquette.

"It would suffice to look at the situation in the Middle East and North Africa," Putin said before the world. "Certainly political and social problems in this region have been piling up for a long time, and people there wish for changes naturally."

He continued: "But how did it actually turn out? Rather than bringing about reforms, an aggressive foreign interference has resulted in a brazen destruction of national institutions and the lifestyle itself. Instead of the triumph of democracy and progress, we got violence, poverty and social disaster. Nobody cares a bit about human rights, including the right to life."

He then issued a direct appeal to U.S. policymakers: "I cannot help asking those who have caused the situation, do you realize now what you've done? But I am afraid no one is going to answer that. Indeed, policies based on self-conceit and belief in one's exceptionality and impunity have never been abandoned."

As Putin suggested, there is little indication that much will change considering the recent past, with the central logic of the "War on Terror" having endured for 14 years now with no signs of it being revised in any substantial way.

In his address to Congress on Sept. 20, 2001, Bush declared that "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated" a general policy that seems to remain in place today.

What we have seen transpire since Bush laid out his plan is precisely what many

warned would happen: as one terrorist group is “defeated,” another one pops up to fill the void, a cycle that could conceivably go on forever, and by definition would doom the United States to a state of war and retribution for eternity. And although Obama has at times attempted to reassure Americans that the war was drawing to an end, his assurances often did more to confuse than to clarify.

### **Curious Memorial Day ‘Victory’ Speech**

Last May, for example, Obama marked Memorial Day by noting that it was the first one since 9/11 that America was celebrating without being involved in a “major ground war.”

“For many of us, this Memorial Day is especially meaningful,” Obama said at Arlington National Cemetery on May 25. “It is the first since our war in Afghanistan came to an end. Today is the first Memorial Day in 14 years that the United States is not engaged in a major ground war.”

The statement made headlines as a milestone in the U.S.’s post-9/11 war footing a de facto declaration by the U.S. president that, perhaps, the war is over. But, as some media outlets pointed out, there was an element of disingenuousness to the announcement.

“American troops remain mired and at risk in [Iraq and Afghanistan], training and advising Iraqi forces against the Islamic State and Afghan forces fighting the Taliban,” noted the *Washington Post*.

Reuters pointed out that “U.S. forces are now involved in air campaigns against Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria as well as training missions in Iraq and Afghanistan,” noting however that Obama has been “reluctant to relaunch ground operations in Iraq.”

Nevertheless, at the time Obama announced this milestone in winding down the “War on Terror,” 3,000 American military personnel were in Iraq working with the Iraqi army and U.S. airstrikes continued to pound ISIS targets. About 14,000 bombs had been dropped on Iraq and Syria since Sept. 2014, killing an estimated 12,500 fighters, according to Pentagon sources and hundreds of civilians, according to independent monitors.

In Afghanistan, although the end of combat operations was formally announced last December, American forces “are playing a direct combat role” in secretive raids against al-Qaeda targets, *The New York Times* reported in February 2015.

In March 2015, it was announced that the United States will maintain nearly 10,000 service members in Afghanistan at least until 2016. This of course was

revised again just last month, when Obama seemingly abandoned his longstanding goal of ending the war in Afghanistan, saying that he would leave 5,500 U.S. forces in the country beyond his departure from office in January 2017.

With all this in mind, Obama's statement on Memorial Day earlier this year may have raised more questions than it answered. For one thing, what does "major" mean? Is saying that we are not in a "major ground war" an acknowledgement that the U.S. is no longer at war, or is it a tacit confirmation that we are in a minor ground war? If we are not at war, does that mean we are in a state of peace? If so, can pre-9/11 civil liberties, constitutional principles and privacy rights be restored, or are those gone for good?

Of course, all of these questions assume that terms like "war and peace" still have some commonly understood meanings, which is a dubious assumption 14 years into this ill-defined war. While some of us may retain memories of periods of relative peace, these are not memories that can be expected of all Americans.

Indeed, an entire generation of young people has now come of age in the era of the "War on Terror." To put this into perspective: the 18-year-olds currently enlisting in the United States Armed Forces and being deployed to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban or being sent to Guantanamo to guard the prisoners who continue to languish there were just preschoolers when the Twin Towers came crashing down, and can scarcely remember a time at which their country was not "at war."

While many Americans might still consider the not-so-new normal of war, militaristic displays at sporting events, routine scapegoating of Muslims, and the relinquishing of individual privacy and civil liberties to be somehow "weird," to millions of young people, there is nothing weird about it.

While some of us may expect or quietly hope for a return to a time of peace, a time when we can expect both personal safety and individual liberty, it is sobering to realize that this expectation cannot possibly exist for those born and bred in this environment. After all, how can people expect to return to a normalcy that they have never known?

The sad fact is, normalcy to many Americans now means precisely this atmosphere of permanent war, militarism and hyper-security. But perhaps even sadder is that the tradeoff that we have been expected to make in terms of sacrificing blood and treasure in exchange for security and peace of mind now increasingly appears to be a false promise, a mirage on the horizon that always seems to disappear the further we travel across the desert of the "War on Terror."

**Nat Parry is the co-author of [Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W.](#)**

**Bush.** [This story originally appeared at Essential Opinion,  
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