

Commentary

Institute of Diplomacy and Global Affairs

9/11 and the Successful War

By George Friedman

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It has been 10 years since 9/11, and all of us who write about such things for a living are writing about it. That causes me to be wary. I prefer being the lonely voice, but the fact is that 9/11 was a defining moment in American history. On Sept. 12, 2001, few would have anticipated the course the resulting war would take — but then, few knew what to think. The nation was in shock. In retrospect, many speak with great wisdom about what should have been thought about 9/11 at the time and what should have been done in its aftermath. I am always interested in looking at what people actually said and did at the time.

The country was in shock, and shock was a reasonable response. The country was afraid, and fear was a reasonable response. Ten years later, we are all much wiser and sure that our wisdom was there from the beginning. But the truth is that, in retrospect, we know we would have done things superbly had we the authority. Few of us are being honest with ourselves. We were all shocked and frightened. Our wisdom came much later, when it had little impact. Yes, if we knew then what we know now we would have all bought Google stock. But we didn't know things then that we know now, so it is all rather pointless to lecture those who had decisions to make in the midst of chaos.

Some wars are carefully planned, but even those wars rarely take place as expected. Think of the Germans in World War I, having planned the invasion of France for decades and with meticulous care. Nothing went as planned for either side, and the war did not take a course that was anticipated by anyone. Wars occur at unpredictable times, take unpredictable courses and have unexpected consequences. Who expected the American Civil War to take the course it did? We have been second-guessing Lincoln and Davis, Grant and Lee and all the rest for more than a century.

This particular war — the one that began on 9/11 and swept into Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries — is hard to second-guess because there are those who do not think it is a war. Some people, including President George W. Bush, seem to regard it as a criminal conspiracy. When Bush started talking about bringing al Qaeda to justice, he was talking about bringing them before the bar of justice. Imagine trying to arrest British sailors for burning Washington. War is not about bringing people to justice. It is about destroying their ability to wage war. The contemporary confusion between warfare and criminality creates profound confusion about the rules under which you operate. [There are the rules of war as set forth in the Geneva Conventions](#), and there are criminal actions. The former are designed to facilitate the defense of national interests and involve killing people because of the uniform they wear. The latter is about punishing people for prior action. I have never sorted through what it was that the Bush administration thought it was doing.

This entire matter is made more complex by the fact that al Qaeda doesn't wear a uniform. Under the Geneva Conventions, there is no protection for those who do not openly carry weapons or wear uniforms or at least armbands. They are regarded as violating the rules of war. If they are not protected by the rules of war then they must fall under criminal law by default. But criminal law is not really focused on preventing acts so much as it is on punishing them. And as satisfying as it is to capture someone who did something, the real point of the U.S. response to 9/11 was to prevent anyone else from doing something — killing and capturing people who have not done anything yet but who might.

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Coming to Grips

The problem is that international law has simply failed to address the question of how a nation-state deals with forces that wage war through terrorism but are not part of any nation-state. Neither criminal law nor the laws of war apply. One of the real travesties of 9/11 was the manner in which the international legal community — the United Nations and its legal structures, the professors of international law who discuss such matters and the American legal community — could not come to grips with the tensions underlying the resulting war. There was an unpleasant and fairly smug view that the United States had violated both the rules of war and domestic legal processes, but very little attempt was made to craft a rule of warfare designed to cope with a group like al Qaeda — organized, covert, effective — that attacked a nation-state.

As U.S. President Barack Obama has discovered, the failure of the international legal community to rapidly evolve new rules of war placed him at odds with his erstwhile supporters. The ease with which the international legal community found U.S. decision makers' attempts to craft a lawful and effective path “illegal and immoral” (an oft-repeated cliché of critics of post-9/11 policy) created an insoluble dilemma for the United States. The mission of the U.S. government was to prevent further attacks on the homeland. The Geneva Conventions, for the most part, didn't apply. Criminal law is not about prevention. The inability of the law to deal with reality generated an image of American lawlessness.

Of course, one of the most extraordinary facts of the war that began on 9/11 was that [there have been no more successful major attacks on the United States](#). Had I been asked on Sept. 11, 2001, about the likelihood of that (in fact, I was asked), my answer would have been that it was part of a series of attacks, and not just the first. This assumption came from a knowledge of al Qaeda's stated strategic intent, the fact that the 9/11 team had operated with highly effective covert techniques based on technical simplicity and organizational effectiveness, and that its command structure seemed to operate with effective command and control. Put simply, the 9/11 team was good and was prepared to go to its certain death to complete the mission. Anyone not frightened by this was out of touch with reality.

Yet there have been no further attacks. This is not, I think, because they did not intend to carry out such attacks. It is because the United States forced the al Qaeda leadership to flee Afghanistan during the early days of the U.S. war, disrupting command and control. It is also because [U.S. covert operations on a global scale attacked and disrupted al Qaeda's strength on the ground](#) and penetrated its communications. A significant number of attacks on the United States were planned and prosecuted. They were all disrupted before they could be launched, save for the attempted and failed bombing in Times Square, the famed shoe bomber and, my favorite, the [crotch bomber](#). Al Qaeda has not been capable of mounting effective attacks against the United States (though it has conducted successful attacks in Spain and Britain) because the United States surged its substantial covert capabilities against it.

Obviously, as in all wars, what is now called “collateral damage” occurred (in a more civilized time it would have been called “innocent civilians killed, wounded and detained”). How could it have been otherwise? Just as aircraft dropping bombs don't easily discriminate against targets and artillery sometimes kills innocent people, covert operations can harm the unintended. That is the nature and horror of war. The choice for the United States was to accept the danger of another al Qaeda attack — an event that I am certain was intended and would have happened without a forceful U.S. response — or accept innocent casualties elsewhere. The foundation of a polity is that it protects its own at the cost of others. This doctrine might be troubling, but few of us in World War II felt that protecting

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Americans by bombing German and Japanese cities was a bad idea. If this troubles us, the history of warfare should trouble us. And if the history of warfare troubles us, we should bear in mind that we are all its heirs and beneficiaries, particularly in the United States.

The first mission of the war that followed 9/11 was to prevent any further attacks. That mission was accomplished. That is a fact often forgotten.

Of course, there are those who believe that 9/11 was a conspiracy carried out by the CIA in order to justify interference in our liberty. But an organization as capable as they believe the CIA is would not need a justification to abridge liberty. That was a lot of work to justify something, and the truly powerful don't need to justify anything. Nor do they need to leave people who are revealing the truth alive. It is striking that the "doubters" believe 9/11 was created in order to crush American freedoms but that the conspirators are so incompetent they cannot shut down those who have discovered the conspiracy and are telling the world about it. Personally, if I were interested in global domination triggered by a covert act like 9/11, I would silence those revealing my secret. But then I'm not that good at it, and the doubters all have reasons why they are blogging the truth and are not dead or languishing in a concentration camp.

I take this detour for four reasons. First, doubters should not be ignored but answered. Second, unless they are answered, they will be able to say the CIA (or whomever they think did it) needed one attack to achieve its goals. Third, the issue the doubters raise is not the structural integrity of a building but the underlying intent of the CIA in carrying out the attack. The why is everything to them, and it is important to point out that it is their explanation of motive that makes no sense. Finally, I am engaging the doubters here because I enjoy receiving an abundance of emails containing fascinating accusations and the occasional threat.

Considering the Failures

But to return to the main theme, it is important here to consider not only the successes but also the failures of the war, and here Iraq comes to mind. There is a case to be made that the Iraq campaign was not irrational, but even more interesting, I think, is the fact that no war is without its disastrous misjudgments, even successful wars. In my mind, the U.S. invasion of the Philippines in 1944 was a major mistake. It did little to contribute to the fall of Japan, cost far more than the 4,000 American lives lost in Iraq, and it could have actually delayed the end of the war. It was opposed by senior commanders and was essentially something Gen. Douglas MacArthur insisted on for political reasons. The Battle of the Somme in World War I cost 600,000 British and French casualties, with 60,000 in one day. Their total gain during the battle was perhaps six miles. And in the American Civil War, the federal drive into Virginia turned into a disaster.

Every successful war is built around a series of defeats and miscalculations. The perfect war is built around deeply flawed and unnecessary campaigns. My own personal selections are not as important as the principle that all successful wars contain massive mistakes. If we simply write off Iraq as one of these, that in itself does not change the fact that the American homeland was not attacked again. Did Iraq contribute to that? This is a question that warrants a long discussion. But conceding that it had no effect simply makes the post-9/11 war normal and, in that normality, tragic.

What has not been normal has been the length of the war. [Heavy fighting continues in Afghanistan](#), Iraq is not quite done and new theaters for covert operations are constantly opening and closing. It is the first U.S. campaign — Afghanistan — that actually poses the most vexing problem, one that is simple to express: When is the war over? That, of course, depends on the goal. What is the United States trying to achieve there?

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The initial goal of the invasion was to dislodge al Qaeda, overthrow the government that had supported it and defeat the Taliban. The first two goals were accomplished quickly. The third goal has not been accomplished to this day, nor is it likely that the United States will ever accomplish it. Other powers have tried to subdue Afghanistan, but few have succeeded. The Taliban are optimized for the battlefield they fight on, have superior intelligence and have penetrated and are able to subvert government institutions, including the Afghan military. They have the implicit support of elements in a neighboring major nation — Pakistan — that are well beyond American means to intimidate. The United States has no port from which to supply its forces except the one controlled by Pakistan and only complex and difficult supply routes through other countries.

On the other hand, the Taliban cannot defeat the United States, which can stay in Afghanistan indefinitely. But the major U.S. mission in Afghanistan is concluded. Al Qaeda has not used Afghanistan as a primary base since 2002. Al Qaeda in Pakistan, according to the United States, has been crippled. The Taliban, products of Afghanistan for the most part, have no international ambitions. [Al Qaeda has relocated to other countries](#) like Yemen and Somalia.

Given this, continued combat in Afghanistan cannot be linked to al Qaeda. It could be said that the reason to go to war in Afghanistan was to prevent al Qaeda's return. But the fact is that it doesn't need Afghanistan, and if it did return to Afghanistan, it would be no more dangerous to the United States than it currently is with its bases elsewhere.

In wars, and especially in counterinsurgencies, the mission tends to creep upward. In Afghanistan, the goal is now the transformation of Afghan society into one that is democratic, no longer corrupt by American standards and able to defend itself against the Taliban. This goal does not seem attainable given the relative forces and interests in the country.

Therefore, this war will go on until the United States decides to end it or there is a political evolution in Kabul in which the government orders us out. The point is that the goal has become disengaged from the original intent and is unattainable. Unlike other wars, counterinsurgencies rarely end in victory. They usually end when the foreign forces decide to leave.