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Perspectives

The New War



Wars are more complicated than first expected and the War On Terrorism is only in its infant stages. But the world's attention span has become so short and its appetite for instant gratification so large that anything that cannot deliver immediate results is suspect.

Is the US campaign against Al Qaida in trouble? If we listen to US and British leaders, it isn't; they still talk tough, as if they were firmly in command of the situation. "They have only one hope," Tony Blair said a few days ago about the terrorists, "...that we might begin, but won't finish; that we will start then falter; that when the first setbacks occur, we will lose our nerve. And they are wrong."

But if we ignore the rhetoric and watch the coalition's body language we notice a difference. Watch the ministers and generals who have to answer some of the tougher questions and you'll notice that they appear tired, frustrated and no longer as sure of themselves.

US approach flawed

Of course, such were the risks with the US approach. Two major errors occurred long before the first warplane invaded Afghani airspace. The first: America's decision to declare war on terrorists and their supporters everywhere was badly flawed. Strategists from Sun Tzu to Von Clausewitz have taught that smart leaders don't make threats they can't keep. The commitment to eradicate all terrorism, repeated by President Bush almost daily, is utterly unrealizable and will eventually harm the United States' reputation and credibility.

It's only a few weeks since September 11, yet the uneven application of America's resolve is already very apparent. Syria's considerable involvement with terrorism is conveniently overlooked, while the Palestinian Authority gets away with allowing extremist groups like Hamas or Hezbollah to use its territory as a staging post against Israel. To interfere with either would upset US Mid East policy, which is a tangle of contradictions all by itself.

Saudi Arabia is another source of embarrassment. The kingdom's lack of cooperation and the absence of a strong response make the US look blatantly hypocritical. So far, terrorism suspects have been arrested in over 40 countries, but no arrests have been made in Saudi Arabia, the home of at least half of the suicide hijackers and countless suspects. No assets have been frozen in the kingdom either, even though US and European intelligence services have identified several Saudi citizens as demonstrably connected to terrorist operations. Publicly, American officials have been saying that the Saudis are helping where they can; privately, they're fuming.

Policy inconsistencies are always offensive, but it normally takes a trained eye to see them. This time it's different. The contradictions in the US position are so apparent that it's hard to accept that President Bush and his entourage believe what they say.

US should have done it alone

The second major error America has committed is to build as large a coalition as possible. I wish the September 11 tragedy had simply been labeled an attack on America and the US had gone to war by itself. It certainly had the military capability and the moral justification to do so. It's not even the military strike force (which remains under US command and so far only involves Britain, Canada and Australia) that worries me. It's the broadly defined coalition against terrorism assembled along the principle of what is now called the Bush Doctrine ("if you're not with us, you're against us") that's the problem. Some of the members of this coalition have so far urged the US to use restraint, not to bomb during Ramadan, or even to stop the Afghanistan campaign altogether--all before the first terrorist has been brought to justice. The question arises how the Bush doctrine will be applied to coalition members who contribute nothing and criticize coalition policy—are they for the US or against it?

How the world's leading power could tie itself to such a weak premise in what might be a very defining war is extraordinary. The official line has been that this is because the war on terrorism can, by definition, only succeed if most of the countries in terrorism's cradle are part of the effort. Fair enough. My suspicion is that there is a second reason: the creation of a broad coalition is a flexible enough concept to allow Washington to make harsh demands from one coalition partner and to go soft on another, each time depending on what America's economic interests demand.

Elastic policy

Elastic as this aspect of US policy may be, flexible foundations don't make for solid buildings. The US, thanks to its military supremacy, is very strong in terms of tactics, but it doesn't have a strategy. At the beginning of the Gulf War, the elder George Bush correctly enunciated that every campaign had to have a very clear and attainable objective. The objective set for the Gulf War was, of course, the wrong one (the removal of Saddam would have been a more worthwhile cause than the mere ejection of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and the reinstatement there of an utterly corrupt ruling class), but the US was disciplined enough to stick to its goal and quit when it was attained.

The current approach couldn't be more different. When asked what the end-goal for the War on Terrorism was, the President, the Secretary of State and the Defense Minister have all given strikingly different answers. Colin Powell recently said that Americans might never even notice when the war was over: its end would come when the government had done its job and terrorism was no longer a threat. Such talk is frightening. If we take Powell at his word, we should expect to be at war forever, because terrorism will always be a fact of life. In reality, I believe, Powell's evasive words are designed to keep the agenda as general as possible, so that all options remain open. That may be politically shrewd, but it's further evidence that a specific strategy is lacking.

Despite this, I don't feel we know enough to predict another Vietnam-like defeat, as some suggest. Wars have a habit of boosting the fortune of one side or another at a moment's notice. Generals are in need of lucky breaks as much as world-class boxers, famous lawyers or legendary money managers are. And, given its vast technological superiority, the next big break may indeed favor America.

On the other hand, America's fortunes had better improve soon. What started only a few weeks ago with the widely held notion that the Taliban would quickly be eradicated, and Osama Bin Laden thus isolated, already looks like an exhausting and demoralizing haul. That's why I get worried when I listen to Tony Blair say that the West will bring Al-Qaida's leaders to justice and the war to a successful end. Like everyone, I hope the Prime Minister will be right, but I fear the chances that we will lose our nerve and not finish are at least equal. Such an outcome would be a tragedy; first, because the terrorists would win and hold us hostage forever, and second, because America's loss of credibility and prestige would be immense. And without the US, who would lead the West?

The end of one history and the beginning of another

When Communism collapsed, the historian and writer Francis Fukuyama made the now famous comment that history was dead. What he meant is that two great problems that had been discussed through the ages were now resolved. One was philosophical in nature: what is the best political system? The other its logical counterpart: what economic system works best? Fukuyama argued that both had been solved, once and for all, and that history had thus reached an end.

What's intriguing about Fukuyama's theory and the way it was embraced by much of academia is that it reflected a uniquely narrow, purely Judeo-Christian, viewpoint. Out there, all along, were the disenfranchisement and anger of the Muslim world. An anger driven by, if we listen to Bin Laden, the injustice of the Crusades, the expulsion of the Moors from Spain and the annexation by the colonialists of former Ottoman possessions. Europe has always understood Islam's hostility, mainly because it's always been at Europe's doorstep. For many Americans, the intensity of extremist Muslim sentiment came as a surprise; the unprecedented attack on US society and elimination of the most potent symbols of US financial and military might deeply wounded the nation's psyche. Several friends living in the United States have told me they feel we ought to understand Bin Laden's message.

Should we consider the thoughts of someone who ruthlessly slaughters thousands of civilians at their place of work? I don't think so. On the other hand, I wonder about our ability to ruthlessly retaliate, which appears the only alternative. As US military commanders are now learning, it's extremely difficult to get rid of those who harbor terrorists and virtually impossible to hunt down the masterminds themselves.

When a project doesn't go too well, it's destined to lose public support. And to prevent that from happening, you change its face by drawing in others. The European Union is a good economic example of this: even within the union, public support is waning fast. Many believe that a number of nations would now opt out if specific votes on the subjects were held. So what are the Eurocrats in Brussels doing? They're trying to aggressively expand the EU. The message to its current population is clear: this is a juggernaut no one can stop and proof of our legitimacy is that so many others are eager to join. I view America's growing military alliance in similar terms. At first, the Anglo-Saxon world was drawn in: the last time I wrote to you, only the US, Britain, Canada and Australia were part of the military action. Now, those with doubts within the broad coalition must be reassured about the campaign's wisdom and the enemy must be shown that the military alliance can grow at will. The token commitment by Turkish special forces draws in the Middle East; the substantial pledge of German troops, continental Europe.

A new type of war

Even so, the reality remains that the Western military alliance is strong because of its technological prowess and its arsenal of state-of-the-art hardware. But whether the world's best aircraft carriers, jetfighters and stealth bombers can win against someone who's practically invisible and retreats into mountain caves in unmapped territory is questionable. The fact that the enemy also operates "behind the lines", and can attack shopping malls, football stadiums or theme parks, complicates things further. Terrorism's greatest advantage is the very thing that we in the West value most: our free and open society.

So how exactly will it all play out? The truth is that nobody knows. Maybe the US-led alliance will prevail and make a major dent in terrorism's cause. Bin Laden may even be killed. But if that happens, it'll just be a plug in a dam that's ready to burst. Let's not forget that tens of thousands of children, taken from their homes at age 5, have been brought up and indoctrinated in the terrorist training camps of Fatah, Tanzim and Islamic Jihad. Kill Bin Laden and six of his lieutenants will spring up, we're told; eradicate his organization and a dozen other groups will fill the void, armed with methods as vicious as Al Qaida's. A few weeks ago, former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu observed that the terrorists had the will to destroy our way of life, but not the means. We Westerners, in contrast, had the means to destroy the terrorists, but whether we had the will had yet to be determined.

That's where we stand. Where we go from here is a question of resolve and character. I see all kinds of flaws in the current US policy, but I admit I don't have a better solution. When we don't know where events are taking us, and when ordinary pursuits like going to work or to play become potentially dangerous things, the challenge becomes how to survive--how to survive in economic, philosophical, social and cultural terms. And, if things deteriorate further, how to survive as a society, as a neighborhood, a family, and even as an individual. Most of us haven't had to confront these issues before, which is why it may be right to say that on September 11 the world may have changed forever. To many, this is a frightening idea, especially because dramatic change is underway on so many fronts.

Changes on every front

Public confidence. Let's start with the economy, where the shift in consumer confidence strikes me as more than the adjustment that occurs as part of each business cycle. This time, a substantial decline in wealth, economic conditions and job security is accompanied by something most people have never experienced: a lack of certainty what the next day might bring to their regular lives. Most analysts tell us that the drop in consumer confidence is temporary. Personally, I don't understand how they can be so self-assured.

Inflation. Another major inflection point may be near on the inflation front. The low inflation environment that was ushered in by Fed Chairman Paul Volcker has now been with us for two decades. Global interest rates have been lowered aggressively, while money supplies have exploded—so far, with no visible economic improvement. I believe that the stimulus needed to simply keep things on a stable economic course will prove enormous. Protecting against and fighting an enemy we can't see and who seems capable of striking anytime and anywhere will further add to the financial burden. It would be a miracle if we didn't come out of this with far poorer budgets and a serious bout of inflation.

Financial markets. A number of beliefs held by the financial media and the investing public have been shattered. Three years ago, everyone heralded the advent of new demographic realities, which would boost stocks forever and leave those too conservative to take bets in the dust. Two years ago, the tech bubble was roaring towards its zenith, while banks and brokers promised eternal prosperity due to the “wealth effect”. We all know what happened next: trillions were lost and the wealth effect turned into a poverty effect, although I'm still waiting for someone on Wall Street to use that term. What I find amazing is that most analysts think that investors will simply shrug away the bitter pill they've just swallowed and line up three deep to buy more of the same medicine. I'd bet against that. Stocks will not be a popular word for some time and multiples will have to shrink in order to reflect that.

America the oasis. The US has for some time been a cultural model: America's icons are the icons of the world and America's ways are being copied everywhere. From an economic viewpoint, the USA has long been viewed as an oasis: its free markets and low tax regime created unprecedented opportunity, which in turn attracted huge investment flows and drove up prices. Falling stock markets had already started to reverse investment flows when September 11 approached. What's happened since may well fuel the reversal. If repatriation of capital accelerates further, there could also be a considerable weakening of the dollar, which, in turn, would damage US financial markets further. At times like this it pays to remember that the US continues to depend to a huge degree on foreigners to finance its debt.

Different heroes. In social terms, too, a huge adjustment is underway. The past two decades have been the era of the corporation. Public servants were shunned, while people like Bill Gates, Jack Welch and a host of others achieved cult status and analogous compensation. The faltering economy and the devastating decline in stock prices are changing that, causing people to wonder why they found corporate leaders so dazzling in the first place. At the same time, the reality of a more dangerous world has helped choose a logical successor class. The high approval rate of recent government action illustrates that the US public is once again willing to embrace whatever big brother decides—all in the hope of a return to a regular life. This is regrettable, not because the corporate sector has done a superb job of serving society (just look at the disastrous performance of almost any deregulated industry), but because government has failed us with great consistency, as well. It's ironic that it was a colossal failure of government (i.e. the intelligence and law enforcement branches of government) that permitted the September 11 tragedy while, at the same time, igniting a renaissance of trust in the state.

Assault on our liberties. How fast government has acted to restrict our liberties is astounding. Within slightly more than a month after the terrorists struck New York and Washington, the key industrialized nations had new laws designed to curb terrorism. It's important to realize that, sooner or later, circumstances will tempt government to use these same laws against others, as well. In Canada, for instance, the new terrorism laws permit the government to act against anyone who represents a threat to public order. Any thinking human being can readily identify all kinds of circumstances under which such powers can be abused.

While in Europe, I've also taken a look at new terrorism laws there. In France, the police will now be able to enter anyone's house and search it, whenever it feels terrorism might be involved. No warrant is needed. Britain, meanwhile, proudly points to its more than one million video surveillance cameras, which have so far been installed across the nation, and promises to set up more. It's easy to see what's happening: September 11 ushered in a period of sharp curtailments on our individual freedoms.

Cultural adjustments. The reaction to the assaults on New York and Washington by the US government was almost incomprehensible. As Canadian columnist George Jonas wrote, any observer from another planet would have concluded that the US had just attacked the Middle East, such was the stream of statements designed to pacify the Muslim world. This strategy served two purposes: to contain a popular backlash against a growing Muslim population in the US and other Western countries, and to make sure the confrontation would not be interpreted as a religious war. I imagine that Bin Laden would have liked nothing better than if the West had reacted with its own declaration of *jihad*. If such a goal existed, the US government ably shattered it.

Even so, it's too early to predict that the current conflict will not escalate into a much broader war that's understood, at least by the other side, as a religious one. It's also difficult to say what cultural realignments will result. A simple diagram in one of Switzerland's newspapers showed two possible outcomes. The first, a failure or sizeable escalation of the war and continued terrorist strikes, is predicted to isolate America and eventually cause an introversion of US politics not seen for many decades. The second, success in eliminating terrorist infrastructure and preventing future large-scale assaults on Western targets, would boost US prestige and credibility, particularly in Europe, and isolate the Muslim world. Which way it goes will, to a large extent, be co-determined by the terrorists, especially if they're as resourceful as the September 11 attacks suggest.

Who will lead? Arguably the most effective result Osama Bin Laden has achieved is that he's put the world's leader, America, on probation. Whether it will come out of the current political, military, social and economic crisis with the will to continue to lead and whether its actions during the process will be regarded as worthy of a leader's are two questions which no one can answer.

One thing is certain: during the past 57 years America has had it easy. The Second World War bought Washington enormous goodwill, and once that was spent, the Cold War threat left Western powers little choice but to stand behind American policy. When Communism finally collapsed, the US ended up with unprecedented prestige—this time not only in the West, but equally in the former Communist orbit. We should also not forget that during the past thirty years, America has often looked better than it deserved, simply because other powers were beset by major problems or committed major errors. I remember writing extensively about the explosive US social problem, especially in the 1970s. The nation's inner cities seemed on the verge of exploding. Now, years later, US racial tensions appear insignificant when compared with those in Europe, where migration from North Africa and the Middle East has created a crisis of far greater proportions. It's important to recognize that the US didn't solve its problems; it's just that difficulties elsewhere make them look small by comparison. In economic terms, also, America has often blundered, but nowhere as much as a chronically mismanaged Japan and a bureaucratized, interventionist Europe.

None of which is to suggest that it's luck or circumstance alone that's kept America on top in almost any field of endeavor. Fukuyama was right in at least this regard: the US political and economic systems, which both feature immense freedom, are the best. And when, despite this, things have gone wrong, America has invariably resorted to another capacity: its flair for reinventing itself.

In one of his essays, the US futurist David Gelernter says that “other nations sit back and let their futures happen; we construct ours.” It’s this capacity that leads me to believe that the American era is far from over. The only question is this: *what kind* of an America will emerge from the current mess? □

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