


Interpreting the Attacks: Democracy, States, and Coalition-Building

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By Allen Carlson

I. Introduction

This essay is by Allen Carlson, Assistant Professor in the Department of Government at Cornell University. The essay emphasizes how differing interpretations of the September 11 attacks -- one focused on democratic norms, another focused on the international state structure -- will have broad implications for the type of coalition against terrorism that is likely to form. The essay suggests that current circumstances may require moving beyond conventional justifications for war.

II. Essay By Allen Carlson

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We can interpret the nature of the attacks of September 11th within two conventional frameworks. The first emphasizes the dangers posed to the principles of freedom and democracy. Such a turn signals that while the struggle against terrorism may require the U.S. to use new weapons and tactics, our enemy can still be understood within the context of the familiar language of making the world safe for democracy. On the other hand, we may envision the attacks less through the lenses of western political values, and more in terms of the hazards they pose to the state system.

Within this latter perspective the nature of the threat is two fold. First, the attacks undermine the territorial foundation upon which contemporary international politics is built: mutual recognition and respect for distinct spatial boundaries that demarcate between each state's affairs. Historically states have transgressed their neighbor's boundaries through acts of war. However, the goals of warfare have generally been to alter the distribution of territory within a commonly understood system, rather than directly challenging the notion of territorial boundaries themselves. Second, the attacks raise questions about the state's monopoly over the use of force within the international arena. While violence has long been a prominent feature within the international system, only states themselves have been considered to possess the right to carry out acts of aggression against each other.

The emphasis placed on each of these two interpretations will have profound implications for the type of international coalition that is likely to form in the coming months. Talk of preserving democratic values in the face of unprecedented dangers will appeal strongly to many of those within the west. However, such rhetoric in other parts of the globe will be received far less enthusiastically. At a basic level, it limits the scope of international cooperation against terrorism to those states that share a similar set of democratic political values making the fight against terrorism a more exclusive one. If the struggle is one of democracy, why would the current leadership in Beijing, or perhaps even in Moscow, place themselves within this ideological club? The more inclusive rationale for participation is contained within a state-centered depiction of the attacks. In this case, virtually all states have an interest in the struggle because of their mutual concern with re-inscribing the line between legitimate state actions and those that undermine them.

In considering the merits of these two approaches, it is important not to forget that international politics in the ensuing years will involve more than simply avenging immediate wrongs. Everyone has a specific reason to think that what was done was evil and wrong, but we should consider very carefully whether those reasons are our reasons. Making freedom and democracy the centerpiece of the current fight, while possibly limiting international support, will give the U.S. the space to continue to attempt to influence how other states to deal with their internal struggles against separatist groups. Although far from all separatist groups are bent on subverting the rules of the international system, it is clear that the leaders of many states now facing such insurgencies will increasingly seek to paint their opponents within such lines.

In his address to the joint session of Congress President Bush emphasized that the attacks of September 11th were an affront to justice and freedom, and justified the global fight against terrorism in terms of preserving the place of liberal, democratic principles within international politics. He also asserted that we have entered a new historical period.

We have indeed begun to enter a new world, and it is essential to realize that the transition process is fraught with a number of promises and perils. As the United States begins to cobble together the coalition against terrorism it is imperative to carefully contemplate the foundation upon which such cooperative efforts will be built. While the democratic based argument may on the surface appear to provide the more compelling framework for retaliation, I fear that much of what is to come has more to do with reiterating the status quo within the state system itself.

The problem is that to date there has been little acknowledgement from Washington about just how difficult wrestling with this complex issue will be. There has been even less consideration of the fact that in an interdependent and globalizing world it is readily apparent that neither categorization works. Over the past decade, the old lines between states, and the stable boundaries within which democracy has grown over the last few centuries, have been increasingly transgressed and challenged by the rise of both integrative and disintegrative forces within the international system. To a certain extent the attacks of September 11th may be most accurately seen as the most

prominent, and costly, extension of this process. Therefore, if we are truly to come to terms with the attacks, we must reconsider the validity of both the democratic and state-centric arguments. Instead, we must more directly confront the extent to which boundary transgressing trends require us to develop new understandings of today's changed global terrain. Only within the context of such an innovative approach will it be possible to develop a strategy for ensuring that similar events never again take place.

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