



The Coming “New” War

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By Wade Huntley

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Wade Huntley, Director of the Program on Global Peace and Security at the Nautilus Institute. Huntley argues that the "war" that the US is preparing to fight against global terrorism will be unlike previous wars in that it will be non-territorial and, to a large extent, non-military. He warns that a war designed at eradication of terrorism could have the opposite effect, and that the US thus must address the underlying causes of radical terror networks.

II. Essay by Wade Huntley

"The Coming 'New' War"

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In the days following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the language of the Bush administration's response evolved significantly. Bush's immediate statements on the day of the attacks cast them as criminal acts: the perpetrators would be "punished," "justice" would be served. Subsequently, however, administration spokespersons have emphasized the language of war. President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and other administration officials now explicitly call the attacks "acts of war," and declare that the US is "at war" with the network of agents responsible for the attacks.

The Bush administration's choice to interpret the attacks as acts of war, rather than as international crimes, carries several implications. First, it centralizes the loci of judgment. Criminal prosecutions are pursued in courts using legal procedures that include evidentiary criteria and standards of treatment for the accused. By deeming the attacks as acts of war, the administration reserves for itself judgments over the conclusiveness of evidence, assignments of guilt, and proportionality of response.

Secondly, and more importantly, declaring the attacks to be acts of war allows the administration to escalate the scope of both grievances and responses. Quickly, the matter is no longer simply about finding the specific perpetrators and holding them to account. In the words of Secretary Powell, the attacks represent "a scourge, not only against the United States, but against civilization." Hence, the

US now intends to build "a strong coalition to go after these perpetrators, but more broadly, to go after terrorism wherever we find it in the world." The administration pointedly has ruled out no options and set no limits to the character of the violence it might unleash in this quest. A mandate so sweeping requires the auspices of war.

Yet, this "war" cannot unfold in the ways that we have previously understood war to be. Administration officials have been the first to underscore this point. The "enemy" is not an organized military with territorial location pursuing the understood aims of a sovereign government. Rather, the "enemy" is a network of agents - "non-state actors" - driven by unknown motivations and hiding from both detection and accountability. What can a "war" against such an "enemy" look like?

The most evident characteristic is that this "new war" will be non-territorial. The networks of individuals prepared to commit such acts of violence are global. The Bush administration's determination to target not only the networks themselves, but also those who have harbored, supported or abetted these networks, clearly signals its willingness to hold responsible the governments of any states in which such networks take refuge. This US attempt to retain some semblance of territoriality in its war plans, however, is belied by the growing evidence that a principal state within which the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks planned and trained was the US itself.

Paradoxically, this "new war" will also be in large measure non-military. More so than we have understood war historically, important battles of this war will be waged not only on fields and mountains, but also within the structures of the world political economy, and in the hearts and minds of the world's people. Secretary Powell acknowledges this dimension in observing that this war "may be military action, but it can also be economic action, political action, diplomatic action and financial actions." Nevertheless, the conventional & militarized approach to security problems the Bush administration had been emphasizing prior to the crisis does not instill confidence in its capacity to fully embrace the import of the non-military dimensions of this "new war."

Perhaps most importantly, this "new war" must necessarily be non-ethnic and non-religious. Although the September 11 attacks ostensibly targeted "America" physically and symbolically, New York in fact is one of the world's most "global" cities, and the individuals who died in the World Trade Center represented dozens of countries across the globe - and included Muslims. Many have already observed that the sponsors of the attacks, if they prove to be radical Islamic militants, are not acting in the name of Islamic people - and many Islamic states have themselves been victims of similar attacks. This "war," therefore, should not be a "clash of civilizations." Rather, it should be a clash between, on the one side, small numbers of highly motivated extremists willing to shed the blood of civilians but unwilling to acknowledge their identities or motivations, and on the other side, the vast majority of the world's population struggling - sometimes fitfully - to build a humane and prosperous global civilization.

The US administration, if it is to succeed in building the global coalition it desires, must properly identify the "enemy" and must reach out to all its natural allies throughout the world. If this coalition sets out in pursuit of radical Islamic militants, that coalition must include the peace-loving majority of the world's Muslim community. This inclusion must be genuine, fulsome and apparent both internationally and domestically. The cause must be recognized widely as noble and just.

Without this inclusiveness, the US risks alienating its friends and playing directly into the hands of its tormentors, whose mission cannot have been merely to inflict suffering on Americans, but also to generate an indiscriminate retaliation that would rally millions throughout the Islamic world to the cause of a jihad. Secretary Powell, referring to a "very, very skilled, knowledgeable, thinking enemy," perhaps recognizes this imperative. Nevertheless, the challenge of identifying the right

"enemy" and finding the right "battle lines" will be formidable, and the risks of failing to find it are very high indeed.

With these characteristics of the "new war" in mind, the Bush administration's rhetoric evinces some very un-warlike features. President Bush speaks of a "crusade" to "hunt down" the "evil-doers." Secretary Powell seemingly acknowledges the administration's metaphoric & political, rather than literal, use of the term "war": "[we are] speaking about war as a way of focusing the energy of America and the energy of the international community;" "it is a long-term campaign, which is why we are characterizing it as a war - if not in the technically legal sense of war."

Ultimately, a mission to seek out and destroy terrorists belies description as "war" in any conventional sense for one simple reason: in the end, the object of war is peace. Peace entails some reconciliation with one's adversary, whether in victory or defeat, and an inclusive reconstitution of political community. The twentieth century's absolutist struggles against fascism and communism strained this conception; but in the end, in Germany, Japan, and later the former Soviet republics, the distinction between the objects of war and the people who fight survived. A US-led "crusade" against "evil," seeking to leave behind no enemy with which to build a later peace, would obliterate this distinction. This dehumanization heralds a crusade of extermination, not a war. Such a scorched earth campaign is less likely to achieve Secretary Powell's stated aim to eliminate the sources of extremist violence "branch and root" than it is to spread new seeds widely.

A complete effort to rid the world of this threat would require the US not just to build common cause with the world community, and not just to pursue diplomatic, political and economic measures along with military action. A complete effort would mean examining honestly how US global behavior increasingly gives rise to passionate anti-US hostility. Such an appraisal does not mean kowtowing to extremism: the leaders of the global community should not and cannot change their ways simply to relieve extremists' discontent (indeed, a hallmark of these extremists is their lack of a political agenda per se). However, all those who see themselves as targets and victims of extremism should and can be prepared to step above their short-term parochial interests and recognize their moral and material obligations to solve the trenchant global problems that still relegate many millions of the world's population to poverty and oppression. Such conditions have been the lifeblood of extremism and violence for centuries; in this regard, our new century is no different.

There are thoughtful and even-minded individuals throughout the world who abhor and condemn the violence of extremists operating under cloak of secrecy, but understand and sometimes share the resentment and frustrations the US has increasingly generated in the past decade. These individuals appreciated the World Trade Center towers as symbols of both America's often-admirable ideals and its sometimes-loathsome arrogance. These individuals are the critical constituency. To answer this constituency, the US needs only to take account of the full implications of its actions and the full scope of its world role, and thereby become a leader, rather than an obstacle, to the solution of global problems. Such redefinition of the US self-conception of its role in the 21st century world is essential if the US is to succeed in building the coalition against violent extremism the Bush administration currently envisions.

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, President Bush referred to the coming encounter as a "test" for the US. Indeed, it will be. But one wonders if the administration's leaders fully grasp the scope and terms of this test. For the attacks in New York and Washington also assaulted a global community both literally and figuratively. Hence, the test the US faces will not be only of the resolve and military might the US can bring to bear on its enemies. The test will also be of generosity of spirit and commitment to solving global problems that the US can bring to bear on behalf of the allies and friends it hopes to rally to the cause.

At the dawn of the Cold War, the US faced a similar test: the emergence of a new kind of confrontation, with new weapons and strategies, against an enemy with unfamiliar motives and ideologies. Like the coming encounter with the global network of violent extremists, the emerging Cold War promised to be a long, arduous and complex struggle. At that moment in history, George Kennan - ambassador to the Soviet Union during Stalin's regime - singled out one standard above military prowess which the Cold War would test: "To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation."

Kennan, whose prescriptions became the architecture of the US "containment policy," came to reject the overly militaristic and rhetorically aggressive character that policy subsequently assumed, and regarded US political self-righteousness as "vainglorious and undesirable." Although the US won the Cold War, in many ways it failed the deepest test the Cold War posed.

The "new war" President Bush has now heralded will pose a test similar, if not even more trying, than that of fifty-five years ago. This test will require not just the US government, but also the American people, to find a generosity of spirit and realize a cosmopolitan vision of the US role in the world that has been long wanted. Fair-minded cosmopolitans throughout the world can do much to aid the US to meet this test. Because of the undeniable central role the US today holds on the world stage, much of the character of the coming century will depend upon this outcome.

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org