

# *Long wars and long telegrams: containing Al Qaeda*

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# Long wars and long telegrams: containing Al-Qaeda

PATRICK PORTER\*

When your enemy is making a very serious mistake, don't be impolite and disturb him.  
Napoleon Bonaparte

## War without history

There is nothing so unfashionable as the recent past. In American politics, it is now a slur to accuse one's opponent of a 'pre-9/11 mentality'. Senators Barack Obama and John McCain both played this card in their race for President.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the 'war on terror', defined as a war like no other, is a denial of history.<sup>2</sup> It treats history as something to be contrasted with and reacted against. The Bush administration may invoke Churchill and Hitler in its moral language; but its strategic language speaks of 9/11 as a rupture with the past. For President Bush, after the onslaught on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, 'night fell on a different world'. He declared war on 'every terrorist group of global reach'.<sup>3</sup> This was a 'unique war', a struggle against terrorism itself.<sup>4</sup> As this suggests, the notion that the war is exceptional has encouraged another idea: that it is a war without limitation. On both sides of the Atlantic, leaders pronounced visions of open-ended conflict. After 9/11, Britain's prime minister Tony Blair identified a new struggle in maximalist terms. 'This mass terrorism is the new evil in our world today ... we, the democracies of this world, are going to have to come together to fight it together and eradicate this evil completely.'<sup>5</sup> At his party conference that year, Blair declared: 'Let us re-order this world.'<sup>6</sup> The radical nature of the threat pervades the TV series *24*, which

\* I am very grateful to Rob Dover, Theo Farrell, Hew Strachan, Alex Marshall, Chris Tripodi, Katherine Brown, Andrew Bacevich, Robert Saunders and the anonymous referee for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Whitelaw, 'McCain, Obama trade jabs on terrorism and national security: McCain's campaign accuses Obama of having a pre-9/11 mindset', *US News*, 18 June 2006 and Nick Juliano, 'Obama, McCain camps spar over who has "pre-9/11 mindset"', 17 June 2008, <http://rawstory.com/newso8/2008/06/17/obama-mccain-camps-spar-over-who-has-pre-911-mindset/>, accessed 14 October 2008.

<sup>2</sup> As Adam Roberts also argues: 'The "War on Terror" in historical perspective', *Survival* 47: 2, 2005, pp. 101–30.

<sup>3</sup> President George W. Bush, address to Joint Session of Congress, 20 Sept. 2001.

<sup>4</sup> For Bush's comments on the 'unique war', see 'President Bush discusses the global war on terror in Tipp City, Ohio', 19 April 2007, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/04/20070419-3.html>, accessed 15 October 2008. As the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States declares at p. 5, 'The enemy is not a single political regime, or person, or religion, or ideology. The enemy is terrorism.'

<sup>5</sup> Michael White and Patrick Wintour, 'Blair calls for world fight against terror', *Guardian*, 12 Sept. 2001.

<sup>6</sup> 'Labour conference: full text, Tony Blair's speech', *Guardian*, 2 Oct. 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2001/oct/02/labourconference.labour7>, accessed 30 June 2008.

lawyers designing American interrogation techniques quoted more than the US constitution.<sup>7</sup> The show's fictional chief of staff sees the constitution as unsuited for an age of mass terror. 'George Washington's enemies wore bright red coats and marched in a straight line. The Founders could not have conceived of a stateless enemy hiding among us, that targets not our soldiers but our civilisation.'<sup>8</sup> In high politics and popular culture, three ideas became intertwined: that the new terrorism is a super-threat; that the war against it is exceptional; and that it must be waged with countermeasures of almost unbounded scope and ambition.

This notion of exceptionality underpins the 'Bush Doctrine' and its planks of unilateralism, pre-emptive war and democracy promotion. In its embrace of the new, it has little time for the Cold War. The National Security Strategy of the United States of 2002 mentions it often, but mostly as a legacy to be relinquished.<sup>9</sup> Central to Cold War strategy was the doctrine of containment, formulated in 1946–7 by the professional bureaucrat George Kennan (1904–2005). In his 'Long Telegram', Kennan argued that the hostility of the Soviet Union derived from intrinsic tendencies that could be countered only with 'patience and firmness'. Anonymously in 1947, he argued that the Soviet Union could be contained by 'adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points'.<sup>10</sup> Kennan's containment was a long-term application of American staying power, economic investment, military deterrence and the creation of power balances. It would limit Soviet expansion and prevent an imbalance of power in Eurasia. By expansion, Kennan meant particularly the subversion of dislocated populations by local communists. This problem was primarily a political one, to be addressed mainly by political means. Because of its internal weaknesses, the Soviet Union would eventually fail, or mellow out. America could prevail without exhausting itself or losing its soul. This proved to be a protean concept capable of wide interpretation.<sup>11</sup> Yet containment was the idea around which American grand strategy against the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1990 was debated.

The shock of mass-casualty terrorism on American soil spread doubts about this strategy. Many concluded that containment cannot work against today's wilder threats. As they saw it, such a strategy entails unacceptable risks against 'irrational' adversaries, conceding them time and initiative by leaving them in the field. Bush claimed that 'after September 11, the doctrine of containment just doesn't hold any water'.<sup>12</sup> Senator Obama agreed. The Soviet Union was 'operating on a

<sup>7</sup> Dahlia Lithwick, 'The fiction behind torture policy', *Time*, 26 July 2008.

<sup>8</sup> 24, season 6, episode 7.

<sup>9</sup> President of the United States, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, Sept. 2002), pp. 13, 15, 27, 29. The Bush administration may revere Kennan, but only for general political inspiration, not as a source of strategic insight. See Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, 'Remarks on the occasion of George Kennan's centenary birthday', 4 Feb. 2004, at [www.state.gov/secretary/rm/29683.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/29683.htm) (20 Sept. 2004), accessed 1 August 2008.

<sup>10</sup> [X], 'The sources of Soviet conduct', *Foreign Affairs* 25: 4, July 1947, pp. 566–82.

<sup>11</sup> See John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of containment: a critical appraisal of American national security policy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. ix.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in David Dunn, 'Myths, motivations and "misunderestimations": the Bush Administration and Iraq', *International Affairs* 79: 2, 2003, p. 292 and James Bone, 'Ministers united over Saddam's defiance', *The Times*, 7 Feb. 2003.

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model that we could comprehend ... they don't want to be blown up, we don't want to be blown up, so you do game theory and calculate ways to contain ... [but] certain elements within the Islamic world right now don't make those same calculations.'<sup>13</sup>

In many respects, the standoff between America and the Soviet Union was clearly different from that between America and Al-Qaeda. John Gaddis, doyen of Cold War historians and admirer of Kennan, warns against plagiarizing strategy from another era.<sup>14</sup> Al-Qaeda does not deploy massed forces along frontiers, convene summits on arms control or jostle for prestige in hockey matches.<sup>15</sup> Today's terrorists, with their violent jihadi extremism, far-flung networks, unlimited aims and deadly weapons, are not our parents' terrorists. 'Containment' may have been appropriate against visible, territorially defined and predictable enemies. But what good is it against stateless 'nowhere men' inspired by apocalyptic religion who inflict megadeath without a return address?

These arguments are consciously forward-looking. But they promote an ahistorical reductionism by dismissing the past. While the *outward forms* of the Cold War are different, some of its logic is not. The Cold War was not just a chess game between superpowers. It featured debates over transnational terrorism, a contest over ideologies that transcended formal boundaries, tradeoffs between civil liberties and security, and the problem of competing without conventional war. Containment need not presume a predictable enemy within a delimited geopolitical space. It can be tailored to a reckless enemy too. It can mean limiting capabilities instead of ambitions, isolating the enemy politically as well as confining it geographically. Al-Qaeda may be distinctive in its scope, structure and methods, but it should not be endowed with too much mystique. As Audrey Cronin notes, it is subject to similar dynamics and vulnerabilities as historical movements that wage terror to pursue political objectives.<sup>16</sup> It is not a purely stateless force. It needs and seeks the sanctuary or material assistance of states, whether Sudan, Afghanistan or Somalia.<sup>17</sup> And it can suffer if it misdirects its violence or fails to offer a viable political vision.

This article makes four arguments. They are: that the United States has a strategy deficit; that a modified doctrine of containment can help fix this, by getting the United States to change its calculus of risk versus cost; that even though this strategy of lowering unacceptable costs entails risks, these would be more bearable than present burdens; and that more incremental efforts will suffice because the enemy is ultimately self-defeating.

<sup>13</sup> David Mendell, 'Obama would consider missile strikes on Iran', *Chicago Tribune*, 25 Sept. 2004.

<sup>14</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, 'Strategies of containment, past and future', *Hoover Digest*, 2001, p. 4, observes, 'anyone who might see that strategy ... as a blueprint for what the United States should do as we enter the second decade of the post-Cold War era should ... proceed very cautiously.'

<sup>15</sup> The Cold War comparison is considered also by Ehsan M. Ahrari, 'Why the Long War can and cannot be compared to the Cold War', *Comparative Strategy* 26: 4, 2007, pp. 275–84.

<sup>16</sup> Audrey Cronin, *Ending terrorism: lessons for defeating Al Qaeda*, Adelphi Paper 394 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Evans, 'Al-Qaeda finds three safe havens for terror training', *The Times*, 2 July 2008.

## The strategy deficit

Skilful strategy defines problems in small enough ways to manage. But the vision of the 'war on terror' grew more as a theology than a strategy. It declared an existential struggle to destroy an abstraction ('terrorism'), proclaimed a historical mission to spread democracy and recognized few limits on American power. It stressed willpower above capacity. It urged Americans to keep shopping while its military transformed the world. Above all, it was vague. Even as the Bush administration articulated world-historical aims, it was ambiguous on detail and almost silent on the acceptable price of victory.

America's initial response to the 9/11 atrocities focused on the nightmare of zealots armed with biological or nuclear weapons, the confluence of lethal technology and terrorism. It was a counter-proliferation agenda. But this vision grew symbiotically with the pulse of the battlefield. In post-conquest Iraq, WMD arsenals were not found, swift invasion turned into protracted occupation and America's new regency faced an insurgency of unexpected resilience. The Bush administration ramped up a more ambitious rhetoric, a 'Strategy of Freedom', that was already present in declaratory documents such as the National Security Strategy (2002) and the National Strategy on Combating Terrorism (2003). The theology saw the spread of political freedom as the antidote to transnational terrorism. It aimed to alter the condition of the Arab Islamic world and drain the swamp from which Al-Qaeda's toxic ideology had come. Reaching beyond Al-Qaeda's network, the war proliferated into multiple conflicts. A war ostensibly embarked upon to abolish terrorism became engulfed in a blizzard of different agendas, such as pre-emption, stabilization, counter-insurgency, the war on drugs and democracy promotion. Al-Qaeda became one of a mosaic of enemies alongside warlords, Sunni supremacists and Iranian theocrats. Some commentators announced World War IV.<sup>18</sup>

The long-term outcome of this project is unknown. But five years after the invasion of Iraq, and seven years after the 9/11 attacks, we can draw up a balance sheet. The war can report gains. It has struck hard against Al-Qaeda's network, which now finds the world a vastly more dangerous place than before 9/11. Al-Qaeda's strategy was to export a civil war in the Islamic world to the 'far enemy'. Its spectacular violence would inspire a mass uprising of Muslims against the 'near enemy', corrupt 'apostate' regimes at home.<sup>19</sup> The United States was weak and vulnerable, and if terrorized would abandon the region and its client states. So far, Al-Qaeda has failed to create this political response. America is still there and those regimes have held on. The mass uprising is the dog that hasn't barked. An international coalition of states has curtailed the militants' ability to operate. In the First World, attackers continually fail or are intercepted. In a major theatre of Al-Qaeda's war, Iraq, the movement has been bloodied by a revolt against its overreaching brutality, a blowback with wider ripples. Al-Qaeda's despairing theorists speak of a great reversal.

<sup>18</sup> Eliot Cohen, 'World War IV: let's call this conflict what it is', *Wall Street Journal*, 20 Nov. 2001 and Norman Podhoretz, *World War IV: the long struggle against Islamofascism* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Peter Bergen, 'What were the causes of 9/11?', *Prospect*, no. 126, Sept. 2006 and George Friedman, *America's secret war: inside the worldwide struggle between the United States and its enemies* (London: Doubleday, 2006), p. 332.

Rumours that America is finished are overheated. They come less from sober assessment and more from declinist ideology with a poor record of prediction.<sup>20</sup> The sky has not fallen on America's alliances—despite the frictions in American–west European relationships over the invasion of Iraq in 2003. There are strongly Atlanticist, pro-American governments in Paris, Berlin and London. The United States has strengthened its ties with states across Asia, from India to Japan, from Singapore to Vietnam. Despite problems such as a weakening dollar, the stock market and banking crash and high oil prices, the United States is likely to remain the world's largest economy, with potential rivals still heavily reliant on American investment and consumption. It remains the principal guarantor of international trade, the indispensable actor in fields ranging from humanitarian intervention to science and technology, and will sustain the largest, most potent military at a modest fraction of GDP. Its likely competitors face serious internal problems. Multilateral institutions of the international community can still be paralysed by the jealous interests of their members. Predicting the rise and fall of great powers is an inexact science. Nevertheless, America will probably remain a superpower for decades to come.

But something, nevertheless, has gone wrong. As its critics note, the war on terror has proven strategically illiterate.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not the costs borne are worth it is always a value judgement. But relative to the mixed results, the resources and energy spent have been heavy and the cost unsustainable. America is now engaged in two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, trying to support new and fragile state apparatuses in deeply unfavourable circumstances. War in Afghanistan toppled an oppressive regime that harboured Al-Qaeda. It offered an end to gender apartheid and led to the return home of millions of Afghan émigrés. But the war has failed to marginalize or outgovern the Taleban, which has been able to recover and return, posing as a force of order and alternative government against a corrupt state. At present, the extent of the Taleban's presence in Afghanistan may be as high as 72 per cent, and it threatens most major highways.<sup>22</sup> War in Iraq removed a genocidal tyrant and serial aggressor. But it resulted in horrific communal and sectarian bloodshed, rampant criminality and a refugee exodus. Conservative estimates put Afghan deaths in the tens of thousands, Iraqi deaths in the hundreds of thousands.

Operations in Iraq alone are running at a cost of \$2 billion a week. When one factors in added indirect costs, such as care for the wounded and long-term support for veterans, interest on money borrowed to pay for the war, maintaining and restoring military capabilities frayed by Iraq and even higher oil prices partly

<sup>20</sup> See Robert J. Lieber, 'Falling upwards: declinism, the box set', *World Affairs*, Summer 2008 and Fareed Zakaria, 'The future of American power', *Foreign Affairs* 87: 3, May/June 2008, pp. 18–43.

<sup>21</sup> For critical assessments of the war on terror, see Daniel Byman, *The five front war: the better way to fight global jihad* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008); Philip H. Gordon, *Winning the right war: the path to security for America and the world* (New York: Times Books, 2007), pp. 1–37; Charles Pena, *Winning the un-war: a new strategy for the war on terrorism* (Washington DC: Potamic Books, 2006); Hew Strachan, 'The lost meaning of strategy', *Survival* 47: 3, 2005, pp. 33–54 and Stephen D. Biddle, *American grand strategy after 9/11: an assessment* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, April 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Jon Hemming, 'Taliban in 72 percent of Afghanistan, think-tank says', *Washington Post*, 8 Dec. 2008. Presence is defined as an average of one or more insurgent attacks per week over the entire year.

boosted by the war, the bill rises considerably, even as high as \$25 billion per month according to Joseph Stiglitz, the former chief economist of the World Bank.<sup>23</sup> While the defence budget as a share of GDP remains low relative to Cold War levels, the unanticipated fiscal drain of the war could retard economic growth, run up unsustainable budget deficits, exacerbate the balance of payments imbalance and weaken America's overall ability to balance economic expenditure with military power. Putting America's economic viability and social fabric under such strain is a heavy sacrifice for gains in Iraq that even General Petraeus acknowledges are fragile. As a measure of how misallocated these resources have been, two weeks of operations in Iraq cost more than it would take to triple the Nunn–Lugar nuclear weapon control programme in the former Soviet Union, the kind of scheme that would help forestall nuclear terrorism.<sup>24</sup> Across the board, this burden on resources reduces America's capacity to respond to long-term problems and sudden contingencies, from the political situation on the Korean peninsula to climate change. To this extent, Al-Qaeda can congratulate itself on drawing its adversary into crisis.

As well as misallocating wealth, this state of affairs has sobering political costs. By expanding the lineaments of a police state, through torture, prison colonies or extraordinary rendition of suspects to dungeon states, America stains its legitimacy. It is not the moral equivalent of Al-Qaeda. But these policies make it harder to make that argument. And by inflaming international tensions, the war creates fresh dangers. Large-scale military occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan feed crises on the flanks. Even if Afghanistan were to become a tranquil democracy tomorrow, the occupation could spill over into a wider conflict and radicalize politics in Pakistan. Assassinations, postponed elections, riots and rising militancy in tribal lands suggest a dangerous volatility. If such instability translated into a revolution, the nuclear power could go theocratic, or descend into civil war with untold consequences.<sup>25</sup> Even if the 'surge' dramatically succeeds and Iraq were to become a Switzerland of the Gulf tomorrow, the occupation would still have radicalized Iranian politics. America did not create the aggressive religiosity of Iran's President Ahmedinejad. But with forces in two neighbouring states, it made Iranian politics hospitable for him by encouraging fears that America is encircling Iran. The theocracy in Iran could go nuclear. Even if this war smashes Al-Qaeda, it raises the risks of dangerous unintended consequences while shrinking America's capacity to deal with them.

These errors since 9/11 can partly be traced to failures of competence and capacity. But they are also due to conceptual confusion. The 'war on terror' is a war declared on a tactical method rather than an identifiable group, for cosmic rather than achievable goals, with little grasp of ends, ways and means or weighing of vital versus peripheral interests. The official documents of this war conceive of

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes, *The three trillion dollar war: the true cost of the Iraq conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Amy F. Woolf, *Nunn–Lugar cooperative threat reduction programs: issues for Congress* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2002); also cited in Biddle, *American grand strategy*, p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> Pakistani politics has become more volatile, although, as I illustrate below, support for Al-Qaeda has reportedly fallen sharply.

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it as a 'battle of ideas' as well as arms, a campaign against a murderous ideology as well as those who espouse it.<sup>26</sup> Unless this approach identifies the war of ideas tightly with particular physical and political entities, it takes an undifferentiated view of a universal battlespace and is open to entanglement anywhere within it. Imprecise vocabulary tends to conflate rather than distinguish. Ignoring the discipline that strategy requires, it fails to circumscribe the war within manageable boundaries and to direct resources towards the pursuit of precisely delineated interests.<sup>27</sup> The confusing number of simultaneous conflicts within Iraq is a symptom of this problem. An unfocused approach also overlooks the mutual dynamic by which policy ends must be compromised to fit military means, as well as vice versa. Instead, the architects of the war presumed America to have almost infinite capacity. And they did not articulate a convincing 'endgame'. Beyond a bid to make America safe by giving the Muslim world a new birth of freedom, and a rhetorical pledge to 'stay on offence', there is no theory of victory.

One response to this analysis is to question whether we need grand strategy at all. Some argue that the very concept of war in this context is outsized. It exaggerates threats, concedes an inflated status to insurgents/terrorists, permits human rights abuse and entails endless conflict.<sup>28</sup> Yet Al-Qaeda in reality is global in its breadth of operation, its vision of world conflict and its international profile, even as an umbrella 'brand' that attracts local struggles to its banner. It may not mobilize armies of millions like the Axis powers or the Soviet Union; and its ability to acquire weapons of mass destruction is in doubt.<sup>29</sup> But it has struck blows which, if serially repeated, would threaten social cohesion and undermine confidence in government and the integrity of the state. And in an economically interdependent world, few are beyond the crosshairs, as the millions impoverished in the Third World by the 9/11 strikes and the ravaged economy of Bali suggest.<sup>30</sup> Al-Qaeda also poses a more indirect, insidious threat. Its attacks can cause panicked reactions and inflame other crises. Like Serbia's Black Hand movement in June 1914, Al-Qaeda's outrages can tempt America into dangerous mis-steps. If America responds, and if its response has weighty consequences, then it needs a strategy.

There is much literature devoted to this problem. But most focuses on developing new descriptive language for the conflict, new futurologies or new organizational reform. Important as these are, they are not strategy.

<sup>26</sup> The White House, *US National Security Strategy* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, March 2006), p. 9; and The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, Sept. 2006), p. 7. See also Antulio Echevarria, *Wars of ideas and the war of ideas* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, June 2008).

<sup>27</sup> On this point, see also Jeffrey Record, *Bounding the global war on terrorism* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Dec. 2003), p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Lustick, *Trapped in the war on terror* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) and John Mueller, *Overblown: how politicians and the terrorism industry inflate national security threats, and why we believe them* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> Robin M. Frost, *Nuclear terrorism after 9/11*, Adelphi Paper 378 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> 'World Bank says poor nations will suffer worst economic toll', *New York Times*, 2 Oct. 2001. Bali's tourist trade was devastated by bomb attacks in 2002 and 2005. See Rita A. Widiadana, 'Terrorist bombings have crippled tourism in Bali', *CDNN*, 29 Dec. 2005, <http://www.cdnn.info/news/travel/to51229.html>, accessed 1 June 2008.



Both the US government and its critics call for a new vocabulary to define today's monsters.<sup>31</sup> Rarely are wars so often rebranded. Labels, from the 'war on terror' to the 'long war' to the 'global counterinsurgency', are used and then rejected for being too ambitious, too incendiary or too open-ended. Political leaders reformulate the war to stress its complexity and time horizon; but the same leaders also, contradictorily, declare victory, turning-points, clean-up phases, 'last throes' and 'Mission Accomplished'. Language with a short lifespan suggests a void of strategic thought. And new labels are no shortcut for coherent strategy. This poverty of thought is compounded by politics and the short-term tempo of the voting cycle. As George Bush instructed, 'I don't want to see anyone commenting in the press about an insurgency. We have an election to win.'<sup>32</sup>

Military discourse offers much futurology but little strategy. Some foresee a future of newly powerful insurgent-terrorists or wars between modern states and primordial Others.<sup>33</sup> Some visions are shallow, such as the view that wars 'will be fought over ideas and values not territory', as if Afghan fighters did not covet soil.<sup>34</sup> To stress the non-linear complexity of future war may be usefully descriptive. But this tells us about the skills we need to conduct the war, not when or how to use them.

And then there is organizational reform. Within government, there is much jargon about organizational flexibility, 'capabilities organised cross-enterprise, adapting dynamically to uncertainty and turbulence in a multi-dimensional, nonlinear, competitive environment'.<sup>35</sup> This too is no substitute for strategy. Without a common conceptual ground on which to plan policy, the state cannot fix its polycratic interagency mess with organizational tinkering alone.<sup>36</sup>

Some argue that the United States needs to revive its public diplomacy (as embodied by, for example, the US Information Agency) to win the war of ideas.<sup>37</sup> Valuable as this activity is, messages and images are not free-floating commodities. They rely on actions for their currency. Statements of good intentions have limited value if they clash with behaviour. Military occupations provide the enemy with propaganda opportunities that even sophisticated public diplomacy

<sup>31</sup> Ten days after 9/11, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called for a 'new vocabulary' to define the new war against terrorism. Donald Rumsfeld, 'Pentagon briefing on aircraft deployment', *Washington Post*, 20 Sept. 2001; James Fallows, 'Declaring victory', *Atlantic Monthly*, no. 298, Sept. 2006, pp. 60–73; George Packer, 'Namecalling', *New Yorker*, 8 Aug. 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Linda Robinson, *Tell me how this ends: General David Petraeus and the search for a way out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas X. Hammes, 'Fourth generation warfare evolves, fifth emerges', *Military Review* 87: 3, May–June 2007, pp. 14–23 and Montgomery McFate, 'The military utility of understanding adversary culture', *Joint Force Quarterly* 38, July 2005, pp. 42–8.

<sup>34</sup> Lamont Kirkland, 'Future challenges for land forces', *British Army Review*, 142, Summer 2007, pp. 10–13 at p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Brian McAllister Linn, *The echo of battle: the army's way of war* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Corn identifies this problem of government dysfunctionality without a shared strategic vision as 'Operation Infinite Conversation'. 'World War IV as fourth-generation warfare', *Policy Review*, Jan. 2006. Online at <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/486838.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Owen Barron, 'A new approach: engaging the Muslim world through public diplomacy', *Harvard International Review* 28: 4, Winter 2007, pp. 30–34.

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would struggle to negate, such as the continued deaths of Afghan civilians from coalition air strikes.

To adapt, the American military is reforming itself. During its extraordinary efforts in Iraq, it ransacked the 'small wars' of European colonial empires for the new US COIN field manual.<sup>38</sup> Yet this renaissance in counterinsurgency technique represents an organizational and operational panacea for a 'dangerous strategic vacuum'.<sup>39</sup> Without an effective strategy, efforts to refine the military instrument prepare America to fight the wrong wars well rather than pick the right ones.

There is mischief in the notion that old strategy is dead and that we face unique threats. It encourages the pursuit of 'absolute security', with even remote risks deemed unacceptable and required to be eliminated at all costs. Vice-President Dick Cheney's '1 per cent doctrine' insists that the most improbable risks must be swiftly destroyed rather than merely managed, without undue worry over standards of proof, because the risks of inaction outweigh the risks of action. Iraq was the laboratory for that doctrine. The results are not encouraging. The idea that today's threats are stupendously deadly has also led to contempt for constitutional liberties. Some American officials claim that new terrors make the Geneva Convention or the Constitution obsolete.<sup>40</sup>

Reductionist views of history also underpin a growing conventional wisdom in US defence policy. Reformists urge militaries to de-emphasize the task of deterring and responding to state aggressors. They argue that armed forces must overhaul their doctrine, planning, force structure and acquisition programmes to become an imperial constabulary, continuously engaged in 'lesser wars', nation-building and policing.<sup>41</sup> This presents great risks. It could create a capability trap that deludes policy-makers. It conceives of the military not primarily as an insurance policy but as a surgical tool to be routinely used in a militarized foreign policy. It also wrongly implies a view of the security landscape as an objective reality 'out there' with given tendencies that must be uncritically accepted. Left untempered by strategy, this could loosen healthy restraint, dilute critical capabilities and turn a future of attritional wars into a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>42</sup>

## **Cold War visions**

Some observers, unimpressed with rhapsodies about the new world, argue that the war on terror is best served cold.<sup>43</sup> How can Kennanism be applied today?

<sup>38</sup> US Army Marine Corps, *FM 3-24: counterinsurgency field manual* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2006), foreword by David H. Petraeus and James F. Amos.

<sup>39</sup> So Alex Marshall argues in 'Imperial nostalgia, the liberal lie, and the perils of postmodern counterinsurgency' (forthcoming), p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> R. Jeffrey Smith and Dan Eggen, 'Gonzales helped set the course for detainees: justice nominee's hearings likely to focus on interrogation policies', *Washington Post*, 5 Jan. 2005, p. A01 and David Nason, 'Secret trials for terrorists, says US judge', *The Australian*, 29 June 2007.

<sup>41</sup> This internal debate is anatomized further by Andrew J. Bacevich, 'The Petraeus Doctrine', *Atlantic Monthly* 302: 3, Oct. 2008.

<sup>42</sup> As Michael J. Mazarr suggests, in 'The folly of "asymmetric war"', *Washington Quarterly* 31: 3, 2008, pp. 33-53 at p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> Andreas Herberg-Rothe, 'New containment policy: a grand strategy for the twenty-first century?',

Even if containment can be transposed from the Cold War to the war on terror, there are substantial contextual differences. Kennan's containment was a highly geostrategic concept. He prioritized the defence of the industrial–military centres of western Europe and Japan, and the lines of communication that linked them with the United States.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, a containment strategy against Al-Qaeda must aim primarily at limiting its capabilities and following, minimizing its capacity to attack the way of life and vital foreign interests of the United States and its allies, from sea lanes to population centres to key resources. A territorial element will always be present with Al-Qaeda. But this is an enemy that must be contained as a dispersed force—part ideology, part armed movement.

Containment in the Cold War addressed an overriding objective of US policy. The Soviet Union was a heavily populated state with an east European empire. To make it a secondary consideration was not realistic. By contrast, containment strategy now should aim to relativize Al-Qaeda among other dangers, including the enduring reality of great power competition, preventing it from becoming the consuming preoccupation of American foreign policy.<sup>45</sup>

There are many versions of Kennanism. Jay Carafano's *Winning the long war* is a sunny interpretation that embraces the Eisenhower–Dulles version of containment, the 'New Look' that sought a balance between military commitments and economic resources.<sup>46</sup> If Americans hold dear their liberal values, sustain their economy, tighten homeland security and maintain pressure, ultimate victory is assured. But this manifesto leaves one question unaddressed. Why should we be confident that this approach will work? Other than a full-throated confidence in American free-market democracy, there is little analysis of the causal links that will lead to eventual victory.

By contrast, Ian Shapiro and Nicholas Thompson present Kennan as the antithesis to President Bush and his disastrous military adventures.<sup>47</sup> Both are incisive, but both offer liberal internationalism instead of Kennanist realism. To them, containment today means affirming diplomacy. Shapiro stresses international law, arguing for restoration of the United Nations as the sole legitimate authority for military force. As Shapiro recognizes, Kennan had little faith in the UN's writ, calling this approach a 'sterile and cumbersome international parliamentarianism'.<sup>48</sup> While this is not entirely fair, the people of Rwanda, Darfur, Zimbabwe and Burma could be forgiven for agreeing with him. Kennan focused on the exercise of geopolitical power rather than the authority of institutions.

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*RUSI Journal* 153: 2, April 2008, pp. 50–54; Ian Shapiro, *Containment: rebuilding a strategy against global terror* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Nicholas Thompson, 'A war best served cold', *New York Times*, 31 July 2007 and Jay Carafano and Paul Rosenzweig, *Winning the long war: lessons from the Cold War for defeating terrorism and preserving freedom* (Washington DC: Heritage Books, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, 'Containment and the logic of strategy' *The National Interest* 10, 1987–8, pp. 27–38 at p. 32.

<sup>45</sup> However, as Barry Buzan indicates, this difference has not informed grand strategy: 'The Cold War pretty much was US grand strategy in a deep sense; the GWOt is not, but, as a brief glance at the USNSS of 2006 will show, is being promoted as if it were.' Barry Buzan, 'Will the "global war on terrorism" be the new Cold War?', *International Affairs* 82: 6, November 2006, pp. 1101–18 at p. 1102.

<sup>46</sup> Carafano and Rosenzweig, *Winning the long war*.

<sup>47</sup> Shapiro, *Containment* and Thompson, 'A war best served cold'.

<sup>48</sup> Cited in Gaddis, *Strategies of containment*, p. 28.

## *Long wars and long telegrams*

With regard to force, Kennan's ideas were complex.<sup>49</sup> He became aghast at the overmilitarization of containment, signalled in the unmeasured rhetoric of the Truman Doctrine and the extravagance of NSC-68. He also distanced himself from the doctrine in his Vietnam-era memoirs. At the time he formulated the concept, though, he believed military power had a limited but definite role. Foreign policy and military power were part of a subtly graded continuum. Military power was a tool of deterrence, a way to signal US interests and induce allies' confidence, a power to be wielded sparingly in small theatres and in the last resort as a means of countering a Soviet invasion. Skilful diplomacy was enabled by 'a little quiet force'. To deter the Yugoslav ruler Tito during the Trieste crisis, Kennan urged the quick reinforcement of Anglo-American forces in the Adriatic. He also gave qualified support for US military assistance to Greece in 1947 and Korea in 1950. So Thompson exaggerates when he describes Kennan's containment as 'wholly political'.

To make containment relevant, Shapiro draws a parallel between Al-Qaeda and the Soviet Union in one respect, as a force that can be rationally conciliated. He suggests that bin Laden wages only a 'defensive jihad' against American and Israeli domination of the Middle East.<sup>50</sup> This therapeutic vision reduces Al-Qaeda to a contemporary form of anti-colonial resistance whose behaviour is largely a by-product of western encroachment. This is a long way from Kennan, who argued that the enemy of his time, the Soviet elite, was driven less by legitimate security considerations and more by inherent hostility, which came from the built-in Soviet practice of creating internal legitimacy through the fiction of external threat.<sup>51</sup>

Al-Qaeda's actions and statements suggest there is much more to its jihad than waging a reactive war to defend the *umma*, or Muslim world, from western interlopers. It is more than defensive to proclaim that 'Muslims are obligated to raid the lands of the infidels, occupy them, and exchange their systems of governance for an Islamic system.' It is more than anti-colonial to insist, as bin Laden did in a letter to the Saudis, that people 'either submit, or live under the suzerainty of Islam, or die'.<sup>52</sup> When Al-Qaeda banned women from buying cucumbers in Anbar because they are suggestively shaped, or amputated the fingers of smokers, they probably had more in mind than Palestinian suffering in Gaza.<sup>53</sup> Al-Qaeda's communiqués list specific policy grievances against America. But its other literature calls for indiscriminate war against infidels. It declares and conducts wars against Muslims of many kinds and expresses hostility towards Hindus, Jews and homosexuals. Its declared enemies are multiplying, including the United Nations, France and

<sup>49</sup> See David Mayers, *George Kennan and the dilemmas of US foreign policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 122–3; George Kennan, 'Measures short of war', in Giles D. Harlow and George C. Maerz, eds, *Measures short of war: the George F. Kennan Lectures at the National War College, 1946–47* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), pp. 3–21, 13–16.

<sup>50</sup> Shapiro, *Containment*, pp. 43–44, 80.

<sup>51</sup> See John O. Iatrides, 'George Kennan and the birth of containment: the Greek test case', *World Policy Journal* 22: 3, 2005, pp. 126–45, 130–31.

<sup>52</sup> Both are cited in Raymond Ibrahim, *The Al Qaeda reader* (New York: Broadway, 2007), pp. 51, 19–20.

<sup>53</sup> 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq alienated by cucumber laws and brutality', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 Aug. 2008 and 'Al Qaeda's brutality alienates Iraqis', Reuters, 11 Aug. 2008.

India.<sup>54</sup> Al-Qaeda and its affiliates have carried their offensive to many fronts, among them Nigeria, Bangladesh, East Timor and China. Beyond defensive jihad, it is the will to power of a movement rooted in existential fury.

But if Kennan's admirers are sometimes mistaken historically, they are right on the main question: that the enemy can be contained. Recent developments show why.

## A self-defeating enemy

Al-Qaeda ('the base') is a militant Islamist movement that seeks to enforce a dogmatic version of the Qur'an and Islamic law, purify Islam and restore a lost empire, the caliphate. It represents a shift in strategy towards long-range jihad, to take local wars to the 'far enemy', the United States. It is a dynamic phenomenon, and its exact shape and morphology are still hotly debated.<sup>55</sup> If it is a cadre of well-organized and hardened activists, it is also a system of franchises with worldwide affiliates and self-mobilizing 'bunches of guys', some of whom obtain expertise, training and finance from the network. Operationally, it is an adaptive movement that has shown the capacity to regenerate itself. It continues to find new safe havens and to recast its ideological messages. It adds fresh grievances to its list, from American bases in Saudi Arabia to the Kyoto Treaty to headscarves in French schools.

In the long run, Al-Qaeda tends towards self-destruction. Majority world opinion is that the war on terror has not weakened Al-Qaeda.<sup>56</sup> But there is impressive evidence that Al-Qaeda is discrediting itself. Surveys such as the Pew Poll and the Simon Fraser study of terrorism suggest a sharp worldwide decline in Muslim support for Al-Qaeda and its methods.<sup>57</sup> In Pakistan, according to the poll conducted by Terror Free Tomorrow, public opinion has shifted against Osama bin Laden, falling from 33 per cent in August 2007 to 18 per cent in January 2008. In Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, support for bin Laden fell from 70 per cent in August 2007 to 4 per cent in January 2008.<sup>58</sup> In Saudi Arabia, his homeland, only 10 per cent now express support for him. Within the United States, the overwhelming majority of Muslims reject terrorism and extremism.<sup>59</sup> Al-Qaeda's

<sup>54</sup> In September 2006, al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda's number two, announced an alliance with the Salafist Group for Teaching and Combat in Algeria against 'French crusaders'. 'Al Qaeda issues France threat', BBC News, 14 Sept. 2006. Zawahiri has declared the UN the 'enemy of Islam'. 'UN enemy of Islam: Al Qaeda deputy', *The Australian*, 3 April 2008. On 8 June 2007, Abu Abdul Rahman Ansari, who claimed to be the spokesperson of 'Al Qaeda Hind', declared war on India: *Stratfor*, 8 June 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Elaine Sciolino and Eric Schmitt, 'A not very private feud over terrorism', *New York Times*, 8 June 2008; Bruce Hoffman, 'The myth of grass-roots terrorism', *Foreign Affairs* 87: 3, May/June 2008, pp. 133–9.

<sup>56</sup> "War on terror" has not weakened al Qaeda: poll', Reuters, 29 Sept. 2008.

<sup>57</sup> The 2007 Global Opinion Trends Survey, by the US Pew Research Center, found that support for suicide bombing had fallen across the world since 2002, although it had risen among Palestinians. BBC News, 25 July 2007 and Simon Fraser Human Security Report Project, <http://www.sfu.ca/sfunews/Stories/sfunews061208015.shtml>, accessed 15 October 2008.

<sup>58</sup> Terror Free Tomorrow, the Center for Public Opinion, 'Results of a new nationwide public opinion survey of Pakistan before the February 18th elections' (Washington DC, 2008) and figures on the North-West Frontier cited also in Fareed Zakaria, 'The only thing we have to fear ... If you set aside the war in Iraq, terrorism has in fact gone way down over the past five years', *Newsweek*, 24 May 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Alexandra Marks, 'Radical Islam finds US sterile ground', *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 Oct. 2006.

stock has also plummeted in countries as dispersed as Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia. These signs support CIA director Michael Hayden's claims that Al-Qaeda has been wrong-footed by a 'blowback'.<sup>60</sup> None of these patterns of opinion are irreversible. But together they demonstrate that where Al-Qaeda takes its methods, people become hostile to it.

Most strikingly, Al-Qaeda has alienated what it once saw as its most natural constituency, the Sunni heartland of Iraq. Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, anointed by bin Laden as the 'Prince of Al-Qaeda in Iraq', represented Al-Qaedaism at its most barbaric extreme in his career of beheadings, murder and intimidation. His atrocities, such as the bombing of a Palestinian wedding in Jordan in November 2005, drew angry international protests. His death was celebrated in Baghdad. In Iraq, former allies—even those Sunni supremacists and crime lords who once spear-headed resistance to the American occupation—have now turned on Al-Qaeda with ferocity. This is not to mythologize the 'surge' or prematurely declare victory. The realignment of forces in Iraq may be temporary and has many causes. The restraint of the cleric and power figure Muqtada al-Sadr, the results of prior communal violence and an opportunist 'pause' in the conflict may be factors.<sup>61</sup> And the surge might itself be corrosive of America's long-term objectives of fostering a strong central state by strengthening local forces, it could ultimately undermine this effort. The evidence remains, though, that Al-Qaeda created new enemies because it failed to bridle its members' behaviour.

Revealingly, this happens in places the United States has not invaded militarily, such as Algeria, Morocco and Saudi Arabia. In Algeria, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat began a wave of suicide bombings after it formally affiliated itself with Al-Qaeda in September 2006. An audiotape of Al-Qaeda's own recent 'open meeting' in April 2008 indicated an audience increasingly hostile to its methods of killing innocent Muslims, such as the assault of December 2007 in the Islamic Maghreb.<sup>62</sup> As one supporter asked, 'Who is it who is killing with Your Excellency's blessing, the innocents in Baghdad, Morocco and Algeria?' In Libya, former leader of the Islamic Fighting Group Noman Benotman persuaded his successors to enter peace talks with the Libyan government in January 2007 and called on Al-Qaeda to abort its operations both in the West and in Arab countries.<sup>63</sup> Benotman's alienation from Al-Qaeda did not happen because of its activities in Iraq or Afghanistan. It began earlier, in 1998, where he resigned after warning bin Laden that attacking the United States would result in disaster and that the jihad in Algeria had destroyed local support. His falling out with Al-Qaeda was independent of America's later war. In Saudi Arabia, Al-Qaeda's prestige and credibility has collapsed, partly as a result of Al-Qaeda's attacks there.<sup>64</sup> Other contributory factors are state measures, from rehabilitation techniques seeking to cure young

<sup>60</sup> Joby Warrick, 'U.S. cites big gains against Al Qaeda', *Washington Post*, 30 May 2008, p. A01.

<sup>61</sup> Steven Simon, 'How U.S. strategy is hastening Iraq's demise', *Foreign Affairs* 87: 3, May–June 2008, pp. 57–76.

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Tankel, 'Spinning Al Qaida', *Guardian*, 22 April 2008.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, 'The unravelling: the jihadist revolt against bin Laden', *New Republic*, 11 June 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Bobby Ghosh, 'Jihad waning in Osama's homeland', *Time*, 12 Sept. 2008.

men of 'deviant' beliefs to new regulations on formerly unmonitored religious charities and King Abdullah's public campaign against Al-Qaeda propaganda.

Bin Laden's movement also undergoes internal splinterings. Some prominent jihadists and authorities have now broken with the cause. In May 2008 India's authoritative Deoband movement, which once endorsed and gave religious instruction to militants from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq, issued a *fatwa* against terrorism. Earlier, in October 2007, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia issued a *fatwa* forbidding Saudi youth from waging jihad outside the nation while another Saudi cleric once praised by bin Laden, Sheikh Salman Al Oudah, publicly denounced Al-Qaeda's violence. Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, also known as Dr Fadl, was formerly the leader of the Egyptian group Al-Jihad and one of the founding fathers of Al-Qaeda. This veteran now renounces Al-Qaeda's ways as both doctrinally wrong and politically futile, favouring instead more limited jihad. He has also challenged Al-Qaeda's religious authority.<sup>65</sup> His disavowal follows previous schisms within Egypt that emerged particularly among imprisoned activists, such as the revisionism and non-violence initiative that split the Islamic Group in 1997. The Gama'a al-Islamiyyah, the ally of al-Zawahiri's Islamic Jihad, has lost many of its leaders, who have published around 20 'recantations' that interpret the Qur'an as a text of peaceful activism. As Juan Cole observes, an ironic outcome of 9/11 has been 'to turn one of the major Egyptian fundamentalist organisations into a peace movement'.<sup>66</sup> In London, meanwhile, the ex-militant Usama Hassan, who had trained in Afghanistan, was alienated by Al-Qaeda civilian attacks and the July 2005 bombings and now preaches against radicalism.

All this is ominous for a terrorist movement. History suggests that the public renunciation of terrorism by influential former members and the failure of the cause to make the transition over generations, can damage the movement's legitimacy and following.<sup>67</sup> Not only does Al-Qaeda generate antibodies outside itself, it creates a revolt from within. It generates its own counter-radicalization programme.

How can we explain this broad pattern? It grows from vulnerabilities both ideological and structural. Ideologically, Al-Qaeda suffers from a fatal contradiction. It claims to be the knight of Islam; yet it persecutes and impoverishes Muslims. Its actions undermine its claim to represent Islam, its interests, grievances and ambitions. Contrary to some analysis, it is not only a rebellion against western norms or American influence. It is part of a civil war within Islam to purify the faith against secular modernity, heresy and corruption. It espouses a doctrine of *takfir*, whereby it claims to pronounce on who and what constitutes genuine Islam. This literalist, narrow ideology warrants aggression against anyone who fails to meet its rigid standards. While it seeks to inspire ordinary Muslims

<sup>65</sup> Lawrence Wright, 'The rebellion within: an Al Qaeda mastermind questions terrorism', *New Yorker*, 2 June 2008.

<sup>66</sup> Juan Cole, 'On the seventh anniversary of September 11: time to declare the original al-Qaeda defeated', <http://www.juancole.com/2008/09/on-seventh-anniversary-of-September-11.html>, accessed 11 September 2008

<sup>67</sup> Audrey Cronin, 'How al-Qaeda ends: the decline and demise of terrorist groups', *International Security* 31: 1, 2006, pp. 7-48 at pp. 20, 22.

to join its struggle, it regards as enemies any Muslims deemed impure or un-supportive and declares whole groups of Muslims to be unbelievers.<sup>68</sup> Its ideology of excommunication undermines its capacity to include. Unlike more hybrid, part-militant, part-governing movements such as Hezbollah or the Taleban, which base their legitimacy partly on their role as welfare providers or on local nationalism, Al-Qaeda offers little philosophy of government beyond violence and repression.

In terms of structure Al-Qaeda is a loose network rather than a unitary nation-state. This makes Al-Qaeda more vulnerable. Its fluidity may make it harder to cripple or destroy; but this is a weakness as well as a strength. As a 'big tent' that attracts localized struggles, Al-Qaeda exerts only limited control over its adherents. It draws to itself forces that it may not be able to discipline. Abu Turab al-Jazairi, an Al-Qaeda commander in Iraq, complained to the Qatari newspaper *Al-Arab* that only a third of his fellow jihadists in Mesopotamia were reliable and that 'Al-Qaeda has been infiltrated by people who have harmed its reputation'.<sup>69</sup> It suffers the drawbacks of a 'franchise' operation. Hence the dilemma faced by al-Zawahiri in his open meeting. Confronted by a local affiliate in Algeria murdering Muslims over which he has little control, he defended its activities after the fact before an audience of dismayed fellow believers. *The Economist* warns that Al-Qaeda can change this easily: 'It just needs to kill more Westerners and fewer Muslims.'<sup>70</sup> It lacks, however, the top-down command structure and organizational unity to make this change.

Some caveats are important here. Al-Qaeda has rational, subtle minds in its ranks who think about the goals and effects of violence. As its chief theorist Ayman al-Zawahiri pronounced, its violence is instrumental and has a purpose.<sup>71</sup> Thinkers such as Abu Musab al-Suri and Abu Bakr Naji know that brutal methods can alienate wider Muslim opinion. The title of Naji's book, *The management of savagery*, is instructive. And jihad is not reducible to irrational fanaticism. There is such a thing as a calculating terrorist or terrorist sponsor—think of Libya or Hezbollah—approaching violence as a measured tool of coercion. And suicide bombing, a collective and organizational phenomenon, should not be reduced to a manifestation of an individual's psychological deformity. There is also much more to this than religion. Jihadi extremism also revolves around crime. The Taleban incorporates gangsters who reinvent themselves as holy warriors while the revolt by Sunni power-brokers against Al-Qaeda was partly triggered by competition over bandit fiefdoms and smuggling routes.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, allowing for these

<sup>68</sup> Mary Habeck also identifies this contradiction. *Knowing the enemy: jihadist ideology and the war on terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 166–7.

<sup>69</sup> *Al-Arab* (Qatar), 12 Feb. 2008, cited in MEMRI (Middle East Media Research Institute) Special Dispatch Series 1866: 'Al-Qaeda commander in northern Iraq: we are in dire straits'.

<sup>70</sup> 'A radical new strategy: kill fewer Muslims', *The Economist*, 5 June 2008.

<sup>71</sup> 'If the successful operations against Islam's enemies and the severe damage inflicted on them do not serve the ultimate goal of establishing the Muslim nation in the heart of the Islamic world, they will be nothing more than disturbing acts, regardless of their magnitude, that could be absorbed and endured.' Cited in Thomas G. Mahnken and Joseph A. Maiolo, *Strategic studies: a reader* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> 'To win favor with the Taliban, the criminals grow their hair and their beards, and join forces with the militants, they said. In this way, the criminals get protection from the militants for the money they give to the Taliban from their extortion rackets.' Jane Perlez and Pir Zubair Shah, 'Taliban imperial Pakistani city, a major



qualifiers, Al-Qaeda cannot but attract the kinds of actors who practise violence indiscriminately.

Then we come to the domestic context. In western Europe and the United States, there are small and often fleetingly existent 'cells'. These are eminently containable. Too much can be made of the legions of potential terrorists estimated by Britain's domestic intelligence services.<sup>73</sup> However strongly motivated they may be, Al-Qaeda's budding fifth columnists are often downright amateurish. Clearly there are still exceptions, where luck, skill and neglected vulnerabilities can result in a spectacular attack. But incompetence is the norm. As Rod Liddle points out, many years hence the terrible destruction of the twin towers will still be lodged in our minds, the image of the buildings crumpling, the video of Osama Bin Laden sniggering in his cave. But a similarly iconic image would be of the moron Richard Reid trying desperately to set his training shoe on fire on a plane, having forgotten to bring a lighter.<sup>74</sup>

Two factors help to explain this disjunction between perceived and actual threat. First, the state takes the danger seriously: 9/11 and subsequent attacks got the authorities' attention. Despite the accompanying incompetence and heavy-handedness, the focus and energy of the state have helped to make the environment harder to operate in. Second, terrorism is harder than it looks. Mohammed Atta, the 9/11 ringleader, was a highly talented engineering student with meticulous ways. He is atypical. Most would-be Islamist radicals in the First World seem flustered and indiscreet. As well as focusing on the sociology of radicalization, states should continue limiting the ability of radicals to obtain operational training.

## Policy implications

Al-Qaeda's tendency towards implosion—its alienation of opinion, its internal schisms—does not need to be directed by the United States. Its talent at self-destruction can and does operate independently of American military might. Some of the atrocities that offended Islamic sentiment happened outside America's area of major military operations. Even in Iraq, as David Kilcullen stresses, America did not initiate the Anbar Awakening. It abetted what had already erupted as an authentic revolt 'from below'. 'We should remember that this uprising against extremism belongs to the Iraqi people, not to us—it was their idea, they started it, they are leading it, it is happening on their terms and on their timeline.'<sup>75</sup> If the enemy is ultimately the agent of its own gradual failure and collapse, the United States can limit its efforts as Al-Qaeda, its offshoots and imitators fall out among themselves and indiscriminately offend others.

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hub', *New York Times*, 28 June 2008. On criminal markets and the Anbar awakening, see Austin Long, 'The Anbar awakening', *Survival* 50: 2, April–May 2008, pp. 67–94 at p. 77. See also Carter Malkasian, 'A thin blue line in the sand', *Democracy* 5, Summer 2007, p. 55.

<sup>73</sup> In November 2007 the Director-General of MI5 identified over 2,000 al-Qaeda-inspired terrorist suspects on UK soil. 'Thousands pose UK terror threat', BBC News, 5 Nov. 2007.

<sup>74</sup> Rod Liddle, 'Either Allah isn't on their side, or jihadis are just plain useless', *The Times*, 25 May 2008.

<sup>75</sup> David Kilcullen, 'Anatomy of a tribal revolt', *Small Wars Journal*, 29 Aug. 2007, at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/08/anatomy-of-a-tribal-revolt/>, accessed 30 August 2008.

### *Long wars and long telegrams*

Though a containment strategy counsels patience, containment is not the same as passivity or neutrality. In terms of active measures, there is a menu of more modest steps that it can take. In a sense, a multinational containment strategy already exists. It disrupts and interdicts terrorist networks by attacking the flow of finances, restricting the movements of militants and tracking down principal leaders.<sup>76</sup>

Stealth power is another tool. A limited, targeted and dextrous use of force against Al-Qaeda is part of the solution. Contrary to critiques that dismiss any kind of coercion, there is a utility to killing and capturing Al-Qaeda agents. Israel's controversial history of targeted assassinations shows the damage that can be done by such means to the capability of an irregular enemy like Hamas.<sup>77</sup> Applied to Al-Qaeda, such a policy limits the organization's capability, minimizing the mayhem it can inflict within its lifespan. It also has more immediate effects. First, it drains talent. Skilled terrorism is a learned and hard-won practice. The pool of talented bomb-makers, organizers, fundraisers and document-forgers is limited. Of 10,000 would-be bin Ladens, most lack ability. Continual erosion of experienced practitioners makes it harder for terrorists to operate. It also forces them to spend time trying to stay alive, fleeing from location to location. The death or disappearance of members can also foster internal paranoia and division. Suspicion of internal treachery can minimize communication and slow down recruitment. The loss of critical personnel can stimulate internal power struggles to replace them. Cumulatively, this might not prevent all attacks, but it can reduce their number and make them less effective.

This is not a political solution. And a kill/capture policy can energize an enemy. But if the United States can eliminate Al-Qaeda personnel within a context where broader political currents undermine its appeal, it can bound terrorism within acceptable limits, keeping the movement off-balance, paranoid and distracted. And the continual molestation of a group like Al-Qaeda can have desirable political effects by undermining its credibility, which rests partly on its ability to inflict blows on America. Here is an instance where physical success (the disruption of terrorist capability) can assist the 'war of ideas'. It is not without problems. A targeted assassination policy invariably kills innocents. This would be a lesser evil, though, and more acceptable to public opinion, than the deaths of thousands resulting from military occupation.

To shape an environment that is inhospitable to Al-Qaeda and its ideology, there are other measures vastly less expensive and risky than major military operations. New US military doctrine recognizes the power of altruism.<sup>78</sup> By using its humanitarian muscle, America can underline the moral distance between itself and Al-Qaeda. The Berlin blockade of 1948–9 offers a suggestive parallel. This

<sup>76</sup> As Antulio Echevarria argues, in *Fourth generation warfare and other myths* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 2005), pp. 5–6.

<sup>77</sup> Gal Luft, 'The logic of Israel's targeted killing', *Middle East Quarterly* 10: 1, 2003 and Patrick Bishop, 'Has Israel beaten the suicide bombers?', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 May 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Bryan Bender, 'Pentagon flexes its altruism muscle: aims to win trust with soft power', *Boston Globe*, 28 July 2008.

moment, as Kennan agreed, fixed the world's attention on the contest between a Stalinist siege and the heroic relief work of Anglo-American air power. Swift humanitarian assistance undercuts the image of America the imperialist predator. In 2005, polls showed that earthquake relief work doubled the percentage of Pakistanis with positive views of the United States, from 23 per cent to 46 per cent.<sup>79</sup> American relief efforts after the tsunami devastated the Asia–Pacific strongly improved opinion towards the United States in nations including Indonesia, the largest Muslim society.<sup>80</sup> With its maritime power and reach, the US military is well placed to assist this kind of activity. And it can achieve this effect at a fraction of the cost of operations in Iraq. This is not to suggest that the military be transformed into the armed wing of the Red Cross. But humanitarian work has strategic dimensions. It represents the kind of incremental, low-risk and affordable step in the propaganda war that nudges Al-Qaeda towards its demise.

A framework of Kennanist realism also values divisions that isolate the enemy. Kennan favoured using economic investment to sharpen divisions within international communism. Because Al-Qaeda has a propensity to implode and tends to make new enemies, the United States should remain alert for points of polarization. The separation of militant jihad from the masses can be encouraged, for example, by more constructive narcotics policy in Afghanistan. States could buy the crop from farmers rather than burning down the economy and creating a dispossessed class for hire. This would not win the war on drugs. But it would follow the logic of the Marshall Plan, of isolating the irreconcilable core from the wider populations who might provide material support. There are also promising fissures within the Taleban coalition, such as the divide between Mullah Omar and his rival Siirajudin Haqqani. It is even possible that Al-Qaeda in its international jihad has fallen out with the Taleban and its local war. Unspecified elements from the Taleban are reportedly negotiating through Saudi mediation to break with Al-Qaeda.<sup>81</sup> Even if this is unfounded, there are online feuds between Taleban leaders and influential Al-Qaeda sympathizers over Mullah Omar's stated willingness to negotiate with the Karzai government and his expressed sympathy for Iran over sanctions.<sup>82</sup> The United States should remain open to opportunities to split the Islamist coalition in Afghanistan and Pakistan, another step in the slow strangulation of the movement. Such forces are not conveniently liberal. But criminal elements are already on the US payroll in Iraq. We need not react to unsavoury partners like a virgin confronted by a man in a dirty raincoat. And separating Al-Qaeda from other monsters is better than driving it into their arms.

In Afghanistan, the chances of bringing to birth a strong, liberal constitutional government with a functioning modernized national military and police

<sup>79</sup> Lisa Curtis, 'America's image abroad: room for improvement', Heritage Lecture, 31 May 2007, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/hl1027.cfmp.4>, accessed 8 October 2008.

<sup>80</sup> The Pew Global Attitudes survey reported that 79% of Indonesians say they have a more favourable view of the United States as a result of the relief efforts.

<sup>81</sup> Nic Robertson, 'Sources: Taliban split with al Qaeda, seek peace', CNN Asia, 6 Oct. 2008.

<sup>82</sup> Ron Synovitz, 'Afghanistan: Al Qaeda bloggers' sparring with Taliban could signal key differences', *Eurasia Insight*, 12 March 2008, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp031208.shtml>, accessed 13 October 2008.

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force are insufficiently high for the resources that will have to be sacrificed in that cause. And we cannot afford the accompanying risk of escalating a ground war in Afghanistan that is already expanding and intensifying across the border, fomenting ever greater volatility in Pakistani politics with unknown but surely dangerous consequences. The goal should be scaled back to a more modest but realistic one: to leave Afghanistan as a tolerably stable state that is hostile to Al-Qaeda. After all, this was the aim of the US-led war in the first place. In its efforts to combat Al-Qaeda and its network, Kabul can be internationally supported in other ways short of prolonged large-scale military presence. These would include providing Kabul with the cash to exert its presence and attempt to broker a coalition of any provincial commanders or powerful figures in insurgency areas strong enough to deny sanctuary to Al-Qaeda, as well as providing indirect advisory support, special forces training mission, moderation of internal dissent between warring factions and a scaled down military presence to curtail Al-Qaeda's freedom to operate and to prevent it fully reconstituting. This approach will have a downside. It will probably entail the need to give qualified support to an indigenous regime bartering with warlords and other local elites, and to a persistence of corruption. Such a strategy would prefer stability over the anarchy of an escalating war or the utopianism of demanding impeccable standards of governing. But in the long run, that path would be less dangerous for both the region and for American interests than the current gamble.

A containment strategy places a ceiling on the threat while awaiting its eventual internal collapse. Against this, it allows more time to jihadists, possibly on a generational timescale, for further atrocities. But a hyperactive strategy of 'rollback' risks the more likely outcomes of financial haemorrhage, the erosion of constitutional liberties and the inflaming of other world crises. Consider this in blunt policy terms. An Al-Qaeda at large, trying full-time to stay alive, pursued by an ever-growing set of enemies, even with the remote chance that it inflicts a terrible blow, is less dangerous than wars with Iran or Pakistan, an emptied treasury or a shredded constitution. Trading off time and conceding longevity to the enemy for the sake of lowering the war's costs is worth it. This is because Al-Qaeda's capacity to hurt America is less than America's capacity to hurt itself.

Though Al-Qaeda tends towards self-destruction, this process may never be complete. The idea of militant jihad, implied within some forms of Islamist politics, will probably be reinvented and recast. A realistic strategy should set itself the target not of absolutely eradicating this threat, a goal which itself creates other crises, but reducing it to a manageable risk. Containment becomes a process not only of restraining the enemy but of restraining the action–reaction cycle of war.

But does containment ignore the underlying political swamp that created Al-Qaeda? One line of criticism asserts that only a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict can resolve the 'root causes' that nourish Al-Qaeda's ideology. A new drive to end this tragedy is vital in its own right. A peaceful settlement will help arrest the radicalization of Palestinian and Israeli politics. But it is also one of the world's most intractable conflicts. The United States has made several

imperfect efforts to broker a resolution, from the Oslo Accords of 1993 to the Camp David talks of 2000. The conflict is rooted in irreconcilable disagreements, the role of rejectionist 'spoilers' in domestic Israeli and Palestinian politics and the destabilizing efforts of external parties. It is too fragile and labyrinthine to be the central focus of a containment strategy. Moreover, the notion that this is necessary to defeat Al-Qaeda is factually flawed. Islamic audiences worldwide are not waiting for a settlement of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to turn away from Al-Qaeda. The evidence shows that they are capable of rejecting barbaric methods independently of this issue. Diplomatic miracles are not a precondition for Al-Qaeda's defeat.

The war in Iraq was itself an attempt to address 'root causes'. Before 9/11, according to President Bush, America's bargain with Arab autocracies created a monster; the only way to defeat the menace was to end the accommodation with tyranny that hatched it by introducing a democratic alternative. Four considerations throw doubt on this. First, we have learned the limits of American power. There is evidence that the democratic impulse, constitutional governments and open societies are not the minimal long-term antidote to the threat. The presumption that Afghanistan must become a liberal democracy to be hostile to Al-Qaeda is unfounded. Evidence from Saudi Arabia suggests that more limited measures within authoritarian states can go a long way in curtailing it. But even if it were true that jihadi extremism, or this wave of it, could be killed off only by profound changes in the international system, Washington cannot afford to force this change at its timetable, especially as the attempt breeds collateral crises abroad and authoritarian misrule at home. Second, this policy kills hundreds of thousands of bystanders. Vietnam shows how such a policy can poison and polarize domestic politics and demoralize the nation. Third, 9/11 was not just a profound existential crisis in the Third World. It was also a failure of homeland security. Addressing those vulnerabilities is an achievable step that denies Al-Qaeda status. Finally, Al-Qaeda cannot address the complex problems of modern governance. Even societies that see the United States as the problem will reject Al-Qaeda's claim to be the solution. Most Islamist politics is primarily local. Even if there is an Islamist revolution in Lebanon, Egypt or Saudi Arabia, it is unlikely that Al-Qaeda would be invited into any cabinet. Its war now tastes of ashes.

It is too early to know the exact approach of the new US administration. But there are firm indications that although Barack Obama and his advisers regard the Iraq war as a dangerous diversion from the war on terror, they also accept a central premise of the theology. This is the belief that the essence of the solution lies in the long-term military occupation of the right place—in Obama's view, the true front is Central Asia—in support of political and economic reform. Here is continuity rather than change. But while targeted military force has a role in curtailing Al-Qaeda, it is military occupation that lacks utility. Historically, it is shown to be radicalizing, volatile and expensive. Only in exceptionally permissive and unusual geopolitical contexts, such as an exhausted and malnourished postwar Japan, can it succeed. By contrast, the omens in Afghanistan are less favourable.

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An increased military occupation in support of a weak state will struggle to win legitimacy in the eyes of the region, especially as it will almost certainly sustain the 'war on drugs', with its destabilizing results. And this issue will surface beyond Afghanistan. In future, there will be the temptation to occupy 'failed states' and law enforcement vacuums to combat terrorism. Unless the chances are excellent of military occupation succeeding with benign effect, it is more prudent to use more limited measures in pursuit of more achievable goals.

## **Conclusion**

History is a treacherous guide to the present and future. But it is the only guide we have. To abandon history is to abandon proportion. Visions of the war on terror as an unprecedented, all-consuming struggle for absolute security have proven exhausting. While it has had successes, it has spawned other crises. George Kennan's vision offers a better compass. As he warned, we should be wary not only of failure but of the price of victory lest we 'allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping'.

America's aim should be to sustain its open society while Al-Qaeda becomes an increasingly discredited and isolated nuisance. With measured attrition, America can limit Al-Qaeda's capabilities and encourage its implosion. America cannot easily remove anti-Americanism. Any propaganda strategy to 'sell' a narrative about America to the Middle East will struggle because it is mediated by an autocratic political order that deliberately transmutes public discontent into anti-Americanism. This will only be compounded if the United States remains a military occupier. But by restraining itself and making Al-Qaeda's brutality the focus of opinion, the United States can assist the process whereby anti-Americanism is disentangled from Al-Qaeda-ism.

The greatest demand posed by containment is on leadership. A policy of restraint needs statesmen or -women who appeal to a public spirit of patient resilience. This is not easy, and the state's reflex just to 'do something' in reaction to terrorism is tempting. But the idea of endurance is not unknown in American cosmology.<sup>83</sup> If Al-Qaeda does get lucky and sinks a warship or lays waste a city, America needs leaders who urge their citizens not to despair of the Republic.

<sup>83</sup> Stephen E. Flynn, 'America the resilient: defying terrorism and mitigating natural disasters', *Foreign Affairs* 87: 2, March–April 2008, pp. 2–9.

