



NEWPORT PAPERS

A Series of Point Papers
from the Naval War College and the
Navy Warfare Development Command
For Senior Leadership
In Response to Critical Issues

Strategy / CONOPS / Doctrine / Decision

United States Naval War College
Navy Warfare Development Command
Newport, Rhode Island

Contents

Newport Papers

<u>No.</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Points of Contact</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Page</u>
<u>Strategy and Policy</u>				
<u>01</u>	Strategy and Policy Considerations: The Terror War	Prof. George Baer Prof. Andrew Ross CAPT Robert McCabe, USN	24 Sept 01	1
<u>02</u>	U.S. War Objectives	Prof. Tom Mahnken	24 Oct 01	4
<u>03</u>	U.S. War Objectives: How Narrow or Broad?	Prof. Andrew Ross	25 Oct 01	7
<u>04</u>	U.S. War Objectives: Near, Medium, and Long Term	Prof. Peter Dombrowski	12 Nov 01	10
<u>05</u>	Terror War: Is a Formal "Declaration of War" Needed?	Prof. Nick Rostow COL Fred Borch, USA	12 Oct 01	14
<u>06</u>	What Is The Kind Of War Upon Which We Are Embarking?	Prof. Bill Fuller Prof. Mac Owens	22 Oct 01	16
<u>07</u>	The Terror War: Perspectives on Coalition Issues	CDR Stephen Kenny, RN Prof. Christopher Bell Prof. Bruce Elleman	28 Nov 01	20
<u>08</u>	Enemy Objectives	Prof. Ahmed Hashim	11 Dec 01	23
<u>09</u>	The Strategy of Usama bin Laden and <i>Al Qaeda</i> Annex A: The Worldview and Motivations of Usama bin Laden	Prof. Ahmed Hashim	19 Dec 01	26 31
<u>10</u>	Potential Adversaries in the Terror War: Individuals, Groups, and States	Prof. Ahmed Hashim Prof. Geoffrey Wawro	1 Feb 02	36
<u>11</u>	Russia and the Terror War	Prof. Lyle Goldstein	11 Dec 01	42

<u>12</u>	China and the Terror War	Prof. Jonathan Pollack Prof. Bruce Elleman Prof. Lyle Goldstein	4 Jan 02	46
<u>13</u>	Japan and the Terror War	Prof. Bruce Elleman	4 Jan 02	50
<u>14</u>	The Terror War: Alternative Futures	Prof. Peter Dombrowski	14 Feb 02	54
<u>15</u>	Pakistani Militant Groups: Policy Challenges and Solutions	Mr. Owen Sirrs	20 Feb 02	58
<u>16</u>	The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Terror War	Prof. Geoffrey Wawro	14 Mar 02	62
<u>17</u>	Setting Our Course in the Terror War: Symposium Executive Summary	Prof. Lawrence Modisett	2 Apr 02	66
<u>18</u>	Central Asia and the Terror War	Prof. Lyle Goldstein	1 May 02	75
<u>19</u>	NATO and the Global War on Terror	Prof. Catherine McArdle Kelleher	21 May 02	79
<u>20</u>	Grand Strategy for the Terror War	Prof. Mac Owens	22 May 02	84
<u>Operational Concepts</u>				
<u>21</u>	Maritime Homeland Security: Concept of Operations	CAPT Michael Critz, USN	25 Oct 01	88
<u>22</u>	Homeland Security: Maritime Command and Control	Prof. John Ballard, USN CAPT Michael Critz, USN	23 Oct 01	92
<u>23</u>	Maritime Homeland Command and Control: Teaching an Old Dog New Tricks	LCDR D. Scott Bauby, USCG	23 May 02	96
<u>24</u>	Employing Aerial Coercion to Combat Terrorism: Recommendations for the Theater CINC	MAJ Mark T. Damiano, USAF	23 May 02	102
<u>25</u>	Terrorist Application of Operational Art	LCDR Marc E. Tranchemontagne, USN	23 May 02	111

National Security Decisions

<u>61</u>	Navy Decision Making in the Terror War: "Home Games" vs. "Away Games"	Prof. Jim Giblin	26 Oct 01	124
<u>62</u>	Justice as a U.S. War Aim: The Legal Implications	COL Fred Borch, USA	14 Nov 01	131
<u>63</u>	The Use of Force in the War on Terror: A Legal Perspective	COL Fred Borch, USA	05 Dec 01	134
<u>64</u>	U.S. Naval Reserve: The Navy's Team for "Home Games"	Prof. Jim Giblin	16 Dec 01	136
<u>65</u>	How Are We Doing? Assessing Progress in the War on Terrorism.	Prof. Tom Mahnken	16 Dec 01	140
<u>66</u>	Military Support to Civil Authorities: "Navy Roles and Responsibilities in Domestic Support Operations"	CAPT Steve Morris, SC, USN	18 Dec 01	144
<u>67</u>	Carrier Deployments: One Option (Classified paper, view on: www.nwdc.navy.smil.mil)	Prof. Jim Giblin	17 Dec 01	NA
<u>68</u>	Economic Dimensions of the Terror War	Prof. Peter Dombrowski	1 May 02	152
<u>69</u>	Technological Mobilization for the Terror War	Prof. William Martel	21 May 02	157
<u>70</u>	Pakistani Madrassahs and the Spread of Militant Radicalism	Mr. Owen Sirrs	22 May 02	162
<u>71</u>	How Now Shall We Fight? The Relevance of the Law of Armed Conflict to the United States and Its Coalition Members in Light of the Terrorist Attacks of 11 September 2001	LCDR Tony F. DeAlicante, JAGC, USN	23 May 02	165



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**U.S. WAR OBJECTIVES:
HOW NARROW OR BROAD?**

Purpose: To examine the implications of formulating U.S. war objectives narrowly or broadly.

Background: Ensuring the security of the United States, its interests and forces abroad, and preserving international order and stability requires that the perpetrators of the 11 September attacks be held accountable. In his address to the nation on 20 September 2001, President Bush declared that "the only way to defeat terrorism as a threat to our way of life is to stop it, eliminate it, and destroy it where it grows." The specific objectives of what the President called "our war on terror" may be formulated narrowly or broadly. How narrowly or broadly has implications for U.S. strategy and policy, the resources that must be brought to bear, the development and maintenance of needed domestic and international support, and the prospects for victory.

Discussion: The case can be made for formulating U.S. aims in the war on terror narrowly or broadly. Broad, grand objectives akin to those adopted during the two world wars and the Cold War provide a cause around which to rally domestic and international support. More narrow, limited formulations of objectives, such as guided DESERT STORM and OPERATION ALLIED FORCE, may prove less problematical—diplomatically, economically, and militarily. As a rule, the broader and more ambitious the objectives, the more difficult it will be to accomplish them and the more protracted will be the effort required.

Decision makers must be aware at the outset of the possible implications, and potential complications, of embracing either narrowly or broadly defined objectives. The potential risks and unintended consequences of either narrow or broad formulations of war aims must be systematically considered.

There are risks in attempting either too little or too much. The adoption of limited but achievable objectives could result in a meaningless victory; the pursuit of ambitious but unattainable goals could entangle us in an unwinnable war. Accomplishing narrow, limited aims may leave unfinished business that obliges us to remain engaged in a holding or containment operation for an indefinite period of time and imposes an ongoing resource drain. Overreaching could find us abandoned by coalition partners who did not share our ambitious aims and result in a protracted effort in which not only international but also domestic support erodes, from which there is no apparent exit, and which requires that ever greater resources be applied to the pursuit of elusive goals.

Two key choices illustrate the dilemmas confronting the United States:

(1) Eliminate Al Qaeda vs. eliminate all terrorists with global reach. Terrorism is a global problem. The disruption and defeat of transnational terrorist networks would be an invaluable contribution to world order. Yet policy makers must decide if the United States is at war with the perpetrators of the attacks of 11 September or with terrorists generally. In his speech to the nation the President proclaimed, "Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done." Those responsible for the attacks of 11 September must indeed be brought to justice. The costs and risks of bringing that particular set of villains to justice, however, are likely to be dwarfed by the costs and risks of bringing all terrorists and their supporters to justice.

Finding, stopping, and defeating Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda involves a different level of commitment and effort than finding, stopping, and defeating *all* terrorists with global reach. The challenges of apprehending or eliminating bin Laden and disrupting and defeating Al Qaeda, which should not be underestimated, are relatively straightforward in comparison with the challenges that will be encountered if the objective is to disrupt and defeat all terrorist groups with global reach. Not all terrorists with international reach currently pose a clear and present danger to the United States. Not every fight against every terrorist is necessarily our fight. Coalition partners and their publics, as well as our own, who enlist in a campaign against bin Laden and Al Qaeda may well become increasingly unwilling to tolerate the costs and risks of a broad, protracted campaign against all transnational terrorists and their supporters.

(2) Topple the Taliban vs. topple all regimes that support terrorism. The elimination of regimes that aid and abet terrorism would make the world a decidedly better place. Ridding the world of not only transnational terrorists but also their state supporters would enhance the security of the United States and its allies and friends. The Taliban regime has given Al Qaeda refuge and has allowed Al Qaeda to use its territory as a staging ground for attacks on the United States. Thus the case for toppling the Taliban is strong. It is, however, one thing to bring down the Taliban and contend with the consequences of doing so. It is another thing to declare that it is a U.S. war aim to topple all regimes suspected of "sponsoring and sheltering and supplying terrorists." Doing so may well oblige the United States and its coalition partners to engage in multiple simultaneous nation-building operations from which there may be no easy exit. Decision makers must determine how many enemies they want to engage simultaneously, or even sequentially. It may not be prudent or feasible to wage a campaign against Al Qaeda, all other terrorist groups with demonstrated or latent/potential global reach, *and* the regimes that sponsor, shelter, or supply them.

The more aggressively we act to terminate state support for terrorism, the more likely it is that we will be effective in preventing states from supporting terrorism in the future. But the more aggressive we are now in eliminating state support for terrorism, particularly by overthrowing regimes other than the Taliban, the more follow-on problems we may create for ourselves and others, particularly Arab and/or Islamic states that explicitly or implicitly back us. Toppling regimes, particularly those aligned with Islamist forces, is fraught with peril. Our enemies will portray a campaign against particular Islamist militants and their state supporters as a U.S.-led, Western crusade against Islamic

fundamentalism, and indeed Islam, generally. Such a clash would not be in the interests of the United States (or its allies and friends).

The United States must be wary as well of allowing its objectives to be determined or shaped by the tools at its disposal. Those tools are better suited to doing battle with states than with terrorists. The United States has a hammer in its tool kit, but not everything is a nail. War aims should be determined by U.S. strategic interests, not the tools it does or does not possess.

Recommendations/Actions: Decision makers should carefully consider the strategy and policy implications of narrowly or broadly formulating U.S. war objectives. The potential risks and unintended consequences of embracing either narrow or broad objectives must be carefully considered from the start.