

## The War on Terror: When the Response is the Catastrophe

Dr. Ian S. Lustick  
University of Pennsylvania  
ilustick@sas.upenn.edu

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It is fundamentally inaccurate and dangerously misleading to think of the War on Terror as a strategy adopted by the United States to defend itself. True, that is how the War on Terror is portrayed. Nevertheless, for the most part, and certainly for FEMA, the War on Terror is not a solution to a problem, or a rational response to a catastrophe. It is itself an immense problem. Overall, the War on Terror is compelling proof of the wisdom of Galen, the Roman physician, who laid down the first law of medicine: *Primum non nocere*.—“First, do no harm.” This injunction, recognizing that misconceived cures are liable to be even worse than the disease, is perhaps as valid for the treatment of threats to the body politic, as it is for treatment of the human body.

We may usefully begin by considering examples of responses our nation could have mounted to the 9/11 attacks that would have been more suitable and effective than the one we chose. For instance, the national leadership could have:

- rallied the country to sacrifice in the solution of longstanding problems as a profoundly American answer to the barbarity of the attack;
- exploited the tidal wave of international sympathy and identification with the United States to address and eliminate the root causes of discontent and desperation within the Muslim world via ambitious, multilateral but U.S. led programs of diplomacy (toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example) and toward democratic reform;
- followed up obviously necessary reforms in our systems of intelligence and law enforcement with disciplined, but discrete work with our allies and friends through the world, pursuing behind-the-scenes efforts to hunt down and destroy, with military means as necessary, the specific networks and individuals within the *jihadi* wing of the *Salafi* movement responsible for planning and executing the 9/11 attacks;
- focused all our national resources and international good will on the reconstruction of Afghanistan after the overthrow of the Taliban to demonstrate that even the most “backward” of Muslim countries could enjoy the fruits of a democratic regime consistent with basic Muslim values.

Instead of any one of these possible courses of action, or some combination, the national leadership chose to mount a global “War on Terror.” What was particularly attractive about this formula to those in a position to implement an American response was that it alone could provide an all-encompassing formula to justify attacking Saddam’s Iraq even though that country was innocent (and known to be so) of any connection to the 9/11 attacks. Thus, according to Bob Woodward, a mere four hours after the attacks, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had already scrawled a question to an aide. How, he wanted to know, can we use the attacks on the WTC and Pentagon to

“hit S.H. @ same time—not only UBL?” He followed that up by asking the Pentagon lawyer to talk to Paul Wolfowitz about the Iraq “connection with UBL.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the origins of the War on Terror lie with the pre-existing agenda of a powerful and well-positioned group. Until September 11, 2001 it had been a very frustrated group—a group of officials and ideologues, who had for years tried but failed to effect a radical change in American foreign policy. Centered around the Project for a New American Century, leaders of this group, including Bill Kristol, Robert Kagan, Richard Perle, Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Don Rumsfeld, Elliot Abrams, and James Woolsey, identified themselves with a “neo-Reaganite foreign policy.” Their objective was to recast the post-Cold War United States as a global “benevolent empire,” organized to destroy the world’s “monsters,” endow foreign policy with a sense of national destiny and glory, and imbue foreign policy and military intervention with a sense of the “heroic.”<sup>2</sup> By exploiting American economic and military ascendancy, they imagined, neo-liberal forms of capitalist democracy could spread throughout the world while Arab and Muslim threats against Israel would disappear. Most importantly, they argued, such a policy would benefit Conservative Republicans by dramatically returning issues of national security, patriotism, and pride in U.S. military prowess to the center of American politics.

My point here is that the War on Terror arose, not as a natural, inevitable, or logical response to the new requirements of defense that may have arisen after 9/11, but to the exertions of a specific group well-positioned to exploit the emotions and political capital created by the 9/11 attacks for its own pre-existing purposes. My further point, and the one that is of most importance for FEMA and others concerned with the difficulty of focusing resources rationally on catastrophic threats that face the country, is how the War on Terror, once launched, has sustained itself. Understanding how it was able to do so means first of all appreciating that the vast panoply of activities funded within the rubric of the War on Terror is certainly *not* necessary to counter actual threats of terrorist activity in the USA. Indeed, there is virtually no evidence of any such threat. Even for War on Terror managers it is puzzling why, despite the ease with which deadly attacks could be carried out, no attacks have occurred. It is just as puzzling why, despite the enormous efforts and staggeringly expensive efforts devoted to finding any hint of terrorist activity inside our borders, no preparations for attacks have been discovered. These facts just sharpen the question: Why do we still have a War on Terror and why is it still expanding?

The short answer to this question, to be elaborated below, is that the War on Terror is sustained by the energetic adoption and promotion of its slogans, fears, images, and expectations, by the media and government agencies, politicians, interest groups, corporations, and universities. In other words, it is sustained by the activities of almost every faction in America as those factions search for, and usually find, ways to advance

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004) pp. 24-25. “UBL” stands for Usama Bin-Laden.

<sup>2</sup> William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, no. 4 (July/August 1996) pp. 18-32.

their struggles for resources, profits, attention, and support by recasting the agendas they were pursuing before 9/11 as precisely the activities that should be considered more important than ever *because* of the War on Terror.

Consider how Congress responded to the War on Terror. In the summer of 2003 a list of 160 potential targets for terrorists was drawn up, triggering intense efforts by Representatives and Senators, and their constituents, to find funding-generating targets in their districts. The result was widening definitions and blurrier categories of potential targets and mushrooming increases in the number of infrastructure and other assets deemed worthy of protection: up to 1849 in late 2003, 28,364; in 2004; 77,069 in 2005; and an estimated 300,000 in 2006 (including the Sears Tower in Chicago, but also the Indiana Apple and Pork Festival).

Across the country virtually every lobby and interest group recast their traditional objectives and funding proposals as more important than ever given the imperatives of the War on Terror. In exuberant press releases the National Rifle Association declared that the War on Terror means that more Americans should own and carry firearms to defend the country and themselves against terrorists. On the other hand, according to the gun control lobby, fighting the War on Terror means passing strict gun control laws to keep assault weapons out of the hands of terrorists. Schools of Veterinary Medicine called for quadrupling their funding. Who else would train veterinarians to defend the country against terrorists using hoof and mouth disease to decimate our cattle herds? Pediatricians declared that more funding was required to train pediatricians as first responders to terrorist attacks since treating children as victims is not the same as treating adults. Pharmacists advocated the creation of pharmaceutical SWAT teams to respond quickly with appropriate drugs to the victims of terrorist attacks. Aside from swarms of beltway bandit consulting firms and huge corporate investments in counter-terrorism activities, Universities across the country created graduate programs in Homeland Security, institutes on terrorism and counter-terrorism, proposals for academic conferences, all raising catcher's mitts into the air for the billions of dollars of grants and contracts just blowing in the wind.

As these and other groups found counter-terrorism slogans effective in raising revenue, they became even more committed to the War on Terror, convincing those who had been slow to define themselves as part of the War, to do so quickly or lose out.

The same imperative—translate your agenda into War on Terror requirements or be starved of funds—and its spiraling consequences surged across the government, affecting virtually all agencies. Bureaucrats unable to think of a way to describe their activities in War on Terror terms were virtually disqualified from budget increases and probably doomed to cuts. At a conference I attended in the fall of 2006 organized by the National Counter-Terrorism Center and the Sheriff's Department of a major US metropolitan area I heard a fascinating presentation from an official from the NCTC. He was explaining his agency's responsibility for producing the NIP (National Implementation Plan). He was careful to say that his agency actually never thought about what should be done, or how to plan. Instead, what was being done was simply to add

together all the plans that every agency and subagency in the government that thought it had something "to throw at the terrorism problem" submitted. And since, he said, there was lots of money around, "every agency was able to find something it could throw at the problem, maybe except HUD." Then he stopped and said, "but actually, give me some time and I bet I could even think of something HUD could do."

Imagine, if *he* could think of something for every agency, how much bureaucrats in those agencies, whose futures and salaries and careers are at stake, can figure out absolutely necessary things in the War on Terror that only they are positioned to do.

Consider the Department of Homeland Security itself and the case of the 15 National Planning Scenarios. With billions of dollars a year in state and local funding to disburse, the Department of Homeland Security devised a list of 15 National Planning Scenarios to help guide its allocations. To qualify for Homeland Security funding state and local governments had to describe how they would use allocated funds to meet one of those chosen 15 disaster or terrorist attack scenarios. What was the process that produced this list? It was, in part, deeply political, driven by competition among agencies, states, and localities who knew that funding opportunities would depend on exactly which scenarios were included or excluded—with anthrax, a chemical attack on a sports stadium, and hoof and mouth disease included, but attacks on liquid natural gas tankers and West Nile virus excluded. Most instructive of all, in this process, was the unwillingness of the government to define the enemy posing the terrorist threat. Why? Because if a particular enemy was identified, certain scenarios, profitable for some funding-competitors, would be disqualified. Thus the enemy, in these scenarios, is referred to as "the universal adversary," in other words, as Satan. That is how the War on Terror drives the country from responding to threats to preparing for vulnerabilities, producing an irrational and doomed strategic posture which treats any bad thing that could happen becomes a national security imperative.

Of course this entire cyclonic dynamic is accelerated by the hallowed principle of CYA, Cover Your Ass. Each policy-maker knows that if there is another attack, no one will be able to predict where and when it will be, but after it occurs it will be easy to discover who it was who did not approve some project or level of funding that could have prevented it. This is not a criticism of you. It is not a condemnation of patriotic and professional officials and bureaucrats throughout the government. It is an analysis of a predicament. In many ways your predicament resembles the problem that afflicts doctors with respect to malpractice lawsuits. Whenever it is much easier to know why something of catastrophic importance happened, after it happened, than to know how, when, or if it will happen, before it happens--and that is true both for surgeons and for War on Terror managers--the likelihood of something seeming to be obvious *after* the catastrophe that was essentially invisible *before* it is extremely high. This set of circumstances creates incentives for doctors to run every conceivable test known to medical science in order to prove, if something bad happens, that they took every possible precaution. For War on Terror managers the same predicament means always feeling pressure to support options and recommendations for protecting against possible threats that are the most expansive and the most expensive, just to be sure one does not end up in the position, *after* a

catastrophe, of being blamed for not approving measures that, in retrospect, could obviously have prevented it.

Finally, apart from the merciless competition among politicians posing as War on Terror warriors—think of the bizarre public posturing about Dubai control of our ports-- there is no more important energy source for the War on Terror than the media. I don't mean just the films and television shows thriving on exciting images of maniacal but brilliant Middle Eastern terrorists ready to destroy the country if not for a few heroes operating in an otherwise incompetent government. I am also talking about the news media.

When a blizzard or hurricane bears down on a large American city the local news media has a field day. Ratings rise. Announcers are barely able to contain their excitement. Meteorologists become celebrities. They warn of the storm of the century. Viewers are glued to their sets. Soon, however, the storm hits and passes, or fizzles and is forgotten. Either way the storm story ends. Ratings for local news shows return to normal and anchors shift their attention back to murders, fires, and auto accidents.

When it comes to the War on Terror, however, "Hurricane Osama" is always about to hit, and never goes away. For the national media this is as good as it gets. Officially, the terrorist threat level is always and everywhere no less than "elevated." Absent any actual attacks or detectable threats, government agencies manufacture pseudo-victories over alleged or sting-produced plots to justify hundreds of billions of dollars worth of mostly silly expenditures. With every lost soul captured by the FBI and presented as the latest incarnation of Mohammad Atta, the news media and the entertainment industry fairly exults, thriving on fears stoked by evocations of 9/11 and the ready availability of disaster scenarios too varied to be thwarted but too frightening to be ignored. Compounded by media sensationalism, these fears then provide irresistible opportunities for ambitious politicians to attack one another for failing to protect the terrorist target *du jour*: ports, border crossings, the milk supply, cattle herds, liquid natural gas tankers, nuclear power plants, drinking water, tunnels, bridges, or subways. The result of such sensationalist coverage, accompanied by advice from academic or corporate experts anxious to sell their counter-terrorism schemes to a terrified public and a cover-your-ass obsessed government bureaucracy, are more waves of support for increased funding for the War on Terror.

These are the vicious circles, the self-powering dynamics, that have produced an hysteria over non-existent " sleeper cells " and vulnerability to bad things happening in America not seen here since the anti-communist frenzy of the McCarthy era. It is indeed humiliating to think of how the country that was able to adjust psychologically, politically, and militarily to the real capacity of the Soviet enemy to incinerate our cities on a moment's notice has been reduced to moaning, wasting resources, and spinning in circles, by ragged bands of Muslim fanatics.

For the country as a whole the War on Terror is a messy maelstrom of waste and worry. For vast numbers of interest groups, agencies, politicians, and inside-the-beltway

hustlers, the War on Terror is either a funding bonanza or the latest set of slogans and sound-bytes that must be inserted into the boilerplate of all budget proposals if those proposals are to have a prayer of success. Indeed the War on Terror thrives because, as I've illustrated, it is so readily adaptable to the needs of countless special interests and agencies able to recast.

FEMA, however, is one agency that is powerfully *disadvantaged* by the rhetorical and political characteristics of the War on Terror. Its disadvantage is associated with what appears to be a profound bias among human beings—a natural and powerful inclination to attribute much greater salience to threats perceived to arise from the malevolent intentions of others than to threats perceived to arise from chance or the unintended effects of natural forces. Hence, politically, it simply does not seem to matter, for budgetary allocations or perceptions of the relative urgency of the different problems, that no Americans have died from domestic terrorist attacks since 2001 while hundreds or even thousands have died as a result of natural disasters and the failure of our responses to those disasters.

Thus, while most agencies are able to re-articulate their organizational imperatives so as to correspond to the War on Terror's demand that resources be devoted to countering the malevolent plans of the terrorists, FEMA is largely paralyzed in this competition because its "enemy" is nature, and nature can't be described as malevolent, only as dangerous. To survive in this budgetary and political environment, FEMA can often do no better than claim that capabilities for responding to catastrophes are similar and overlapping, regardless of the etiology of the disaster.

Accordingly, FEMA may pursue joint conferences, joint budgets, and joint programs with agencies carrying counter-terror banners. Ultimately, however, this strategy is bound to be frustrating at best, and an utter failure at worst. Even if successful in partnering strategies under a counter-terrorism rubric, professionals within FEMA and experts genuinely interested in improving models, practices, training, and/or readiness for hurricanes, floods, tornados, earthquakes, and blizzards, will inevitably be frustrated and discouraged by the pressures they will constantly face to limit their focus to those aspects of the problem that make it somewhat similar to some kind of terrorist attack. At worst, the ability of FEMA to operate on a stable and informative set of institutionalized assumptions and standard procedures will be severely undermined by imperatives to operate "as if" the actual problem is countering terrorists.

This analysis implies that from the point of view of the real and important mission of FEMA it is fundamentally irresponsible to pretend to be fighting the War on Terror. Such pretences, in the name of short-term pursuit of funding and attention, will make it impossible to build the support necessary for the investments crucial to the accomplishment of its real mission. Therefore FEMA and its supporters, and first of all university based experts on catastrophe management, have a responsibility to speak the truth against pretense, to publicly question the rationale for the pouring of national resources into a wholly misguided "War on Terror," and to say, against the grain of public belief and private gain, that the Emperor has no clothes.

