Forum

Debating Bush's Wars

Editor's note

In the winter 2007–08 issue of *Survival*, Brookings Institution scholar Philip Gordon argued that America's strategy against terror is failing 'because the Bush administration chose to wage the wrong war'. The Bush record is six years of failure, according to Gordon, because of a misdiagnosis of the origins of the problem, too much faith in military force and belligerent rhetoric, alienating friends and allies, conflating America's foes into a single 'enemy', and misunderstanding the ideological fundamentals of the struggle. As the campaign to replace Bush intensifies, *Survival* invited former Bush speechwriter and Deputy Assistant to the President Peter Wehner and Kishore Mahbubani, Dean and Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore, to reflect on Gordon's arguments. Their comments, and Philip Gordon's response, follow.

A Triumph of Ideology over Evidence

Peter Wehner

Philip H. Gordon is an intelligent man and a fine scholar. And 'Winning the Right War' makes some valid arguments (for example, highlighting the 'resource gap' between the rhetoric of the war against militant Islam and the resources devoted to it). But in the main I found his essay to be flawed, simplistic, and in some places even sloppy.

Some of Gordon's criticisms of the Bush administration are legitimate – I have written and spoken about those failures, especially related to Iraq, elsewhere – but he undermines them by presenting what is essentially a one-sided

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and misleading legal brief. It creates a distorted picture of American policy and the state of the war against jihadism. And it advances caricatures instead of deepening our understanding of the grave, complicated issues we face.

Let me cite some specific examples. Among Gordon's six 'fundamental problems' with the war on terror the United States has been fighting so far is 'alienating allies'. Gordon argues that more than six years after the attacks on 11 September 2001, in many important respects 'America is just about the only one left'. He accuses the Bush administration of 'neglecting diplomacy' and that, in an age of democracies, 'global resentment makes it harder for leaders to cooperate with the United States, and harder for America to achieve its goals throughout the world'.

Gordon's 'almost alone' thesis is undermined by stubborn facts. For example, the United States has gained unprecedented cooperation in the war on terror from countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. Traditional allies in Europe have helped in tracking, arresting, and blocking the funding for terrorists. We're witnessing unprecedented cooperation in law enforcement, intelligence, military action and diplomacy.

To take just one example: on 10 August 2006 British authorities, working closely with the United States and Pakistan, broke up a plot by Islamic terrorists to blow up as many as 10 planes in flight from the UK to the United States. The goal was to inflict 'mass murder on an unimaginable scale', according to British police.

More than 70 countries have joined the Proliferation Security Initiative, sharing intelligence information, tracking suspect international cargo, and conducting joint military exercises to deny terrorists, rogue states and their supplier networks access to nuclear-, biological- and chemical-weapons-related materials and delivery systems.

It's worth noting that the build-up of the Proliferation Security Initiative and many of America's multilateral efforts to defeat jihadists happened concurrently with the Iraq War, demonstrating that the United States can handle alliance friction, which is sometimes inevitable, and alliance cooperation at the same time.

In 2003 the United States and its allies obtained a commitment from Libya to abandon its chemical- and nuclear-weapons programmes and, according

to the latest National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), Iran halted its nuclear-weapons programme. (Both happened in the immediate aftermath of the decapitation of both the Taliban and Saddam Hussein's regime. The use of American force seemed to have concentrated the minds of both the Libyan and Iranian leaderships.)

American and allied intelligence officers uncovered and shut down a sophisticated black-market network headed by A.Q. Khan, the architect of Pakistan's nuclear-weapons programme. In addition, NATO has taken over command of international forces in Afghanistan, the first mission in NATO's history outside the Euro-Atlantic region.

For Gordon's thesis to have merit, then, he would have to rewrite most of the history of the past six years. He would have to erase virtually all of the day-to-day activity of the war on terror, which as a practical matter consists of unprecedented levels of cooperation and integrated planning across scores of countries, both long-time allies and new partners.

All of this calls to mind the scene from Monty Python's *Life of Brian* in which the Judean 'guerrillas' debate whether the Roman Empire has brought any good to the Holy Land. John Cleese's character asks rhetorically what good the Romans have done. After his men point out one benefit after another, the Cleese character is obliged to say: 'All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh-water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?'

Apart from the vast number of multilateral anti-terrorism initiatives from 2001 to the present, when has the Bush administration ever worked in partnership with other countries?

None of this is to deny that there have been strains between America and some of its allies. And all of us would prefer comity to acrimony. But Gordon fails to grapple with, or even concede the existence of, tensions that sometimes exist when the choice is between acting in the national interest and gaining higher approval ratings in foreign countries. Sometimes the United States might act in ways that it judges to be right and necessary but alienate other nations. For example, the *New York Times* reported this on 22 August 1998:

> In mosques, on street corners, and from some government ministries, many Muslims voiced fury today over the American missile strikes in Afghanistan and Sudan and predicted that the assault would beget more violence. The condemnations came from around the Islamic world, and were issued by clerics, officials, and ordinary citizens.[1]

Obviously it would be better if America were not the object of fury in the Muslim world – but does that mean that President Clinton, for whom Gordon worked during his employment at the National Security Council, was wrong to strike against what he deemed to be terrorist targets?

It's true as well that when America overthrew the Taliban regime, the United States became more unpopular in the Islamic world. That is regrettable; but even Gordon would agree, I suspect, that America was right to strike back.

And if the situation is as bad as Gordon says, how does he explain the fact that we have seen two strongly pro-American leaders, Nicolas Sarkozy in France and Angela Merkel in Germany, emerge in European nations where the anti-American animus was said to run deepest?

A second example of where I think Gordon gets it wrong: in his essay, he writes that Osama bin Laden remains at large; that the Iraq War has become (quoting bin Laden) a 'golden opportunity' for al-Qaeda to recruit new troops and has 'inspired' them; that al-Qaeda has been handed great gifts by the Bush administration; and that our enemies are stronger and America is less safe. Reading 'Winning the Right War', you would think that for al-Qaeda specifically, and jihadists more broadly, life is now a sail on a summer sea.

This picture is deeply misleading. What you never learn from Gordon's essay is the tremendous damage that has been inflicted against al-Qaeda since 11 September 2001. It has lost a sanctuary in Afghanistan. Most of its leaders have been either captured or killed. Its network has been disrupted. And intercepts indicate that relentless pressure against al-Qaeda is paying off.

In Iraq, the 'surge', by almost every security metric, is succeeding – and succeeding faster than even those of us who advocated it could imagine.

Since General David Petraeus, the commanding general of US forces in Iraq, began putting his counter-insurgency plan into effect in early 2007, we've seen a dramatic decrease in American combat casualties, Iraqi civilian casualties, suicide bombings and roadside bombings; an increase in local population support for US efforts; Shi'ites in Baghdad turning against Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army; 'bottom up' reconciliation between Shi'ite and Sunni; the distribution of oil revenues (even absent laws mandating it); early signs that the huge refugee flow out of Iraq has begun to reverse itself; and a decrease by half in the number of foreign jihadists entering Iraq.

In Iraq, the 'surge' is succeeding

In addition, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia has absorbed tremendous punishment. An October 2007 front-page story in the *Washington Post*, co-written by Thomas Ricks (whom Gordon cites favourably in his essay), begins this way: 'The U.S. military believes it has dealt devastating and perhaps irreversible blows to al Qaeda in Iraq in recent months'.[2]

Michael O'Hanlon, a military analyst and a Brookings Institution colleague of Gordon's, summed things up this way in November 2007: 'These trends [in Iraq] are stunning in military terms and beyond the predictions of most proponents of the surge last winter'.[3]

Iraq remains an enormous challenge. It is a fragile, traumatised, and in many respects a broken country. The central government still needs to do much more to advance political reconciliation. But across the board, repairs are being made.

Perhaps the most important development in the war against militant Islam is the widespread rejection of bin Ladenism among Sunni Iraqis, which started in Anbar Province and has spread to much of the rest of Iraq. Pulitzer-Prize-winning columnist Charles Krauthammer put it this way:

> Having poisoned one country and been expelled from it (Afghanistan), al-Qaeda seized upon post-Hussein instability to establish itself in the very heart of the Arab Middle East – Sunni Iraq. Yet now, in front of all the world, Iraq's Sunnis are, to use the biblical phrase, vomiting out al-Qaeda. This is a defeat and humiliation in the extreme – an Arab Muslim

> population rejecting al-Qaeda so violently that it allies itself in battle with the infidel, the foreigner, the occupier.[4]

In September 2007 we saw another stunning and significant, if largely ignored, development. Sheik Salman al-Awdah, a prominent cleric in Saudi Arabia whom bin Laden himself has lionised, strongly condemned bin Laden in an 'open letter'.[5] Three month later, a senior al-Qaeda ideological and theological figure, Sayyed Imam al-Sharif, harshly criticised bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, saying the attacks on 11 September were a 'catastrophe for all Muslims' and going so far as to recommend a special sharia court be formed to try both bin Laden and Zawahiri.[5] And in a 22 October audiotape, bin Laden criticised his followers for using tactics that have deeply estranged Iraqis. 'Mistakes have been made during holy wars', he said. 'Some of you have been lax in one duty, which is to unite your ranks.'[6]

Not surprisingly, a recent Pew poll revealed that the popularity of both bin Laden and suicide bombings is falling in the Middle East. According to a summary of the 24 July 2007 *Pew Global Attitudes* Project:

> the survey finds large and growing numbers of Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere rejecting Islamic extremism. The percentage of Muslims saying that suicide bombing is justified in the defense of Islam has declined dramatically over the past five years in five of eight countries where trends are available [and declined overall in seven of the eight countries where trend data are available]. In Lebanon, for example, just 34% of Muslims say suicide bombings in the defense of Islam are often or sometimes justified; in 2002, 74% expressed this view.[7]

The Pew report itself states:

> The marked decline in the acceptance of suicide bombing is one of several findings that suggest a possible broader rejection of extremist tactics among many in the Muslim world. In many of the countries where support for suicide attacks has fallen there also have been large drops in support for Osama bin Laden.[8]

What we are seeing, then, is precisely the 'discrediting [of] the extremist ideas of our enemies' that Gordon recommends at the end of his essay, yet he seems wholly unaware that it is happening now. Could this be explained by the fact that it's happening on the watch of George W. Bush, of whom Gordon has almost nothing favourable to say?

On the overall progress in the war against militant Islam, the Iranian-born journalist Amir Taheri has written:

> Algeria, Egypt, and Turkey have effectively defeated their respective terrorist enemies. Yemen has crushed both Sunni and Shiite terrorist groups that tried to create mini-'emirates' on its territory. The Islamofascists have also suffered defeat in Kashmir, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Chechnya.[9]

Many, though certainly not all, of these developments have happened since Gordon published his essay. But nowhere did he acknowledge any of these developments or predict they were possible. The picture he paints is unremittingly bleak – and, it turns out, incomplete and in some instances just plain wrong.

A third area of disagreement: Gordon asserts that 'the Bush strategy is also based on the assumption that the very demonstration of resolve will help deter future attacks'. He goes on:

> It is an odd suggestion that people willing to die for their cause would be deterred by our greater willingness to kill them, but the president and his supporters have often asserted that America's failure to impress the terrorists in this way was what led to the 11 September attacks in the first place. (p. 24)

In fact, one factor that made terrorism a 'growth industry' in the 1990s was the perception by jihadists that they would prevail against the United States by wearing it down and breaking its will. They (not Bush and Cheney) believed America and the West were soft, irresolute, demoralised and decadent. '[Americans are] the most cowardly of God's creatures', Abu Musab

al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian who became (until his death) the leader of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, said.[10]

To underscore this point, here are the words of Osama bin Laden in 1998:

> We have seen in the last decade the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier who is ready to wage Cold Wars and unprepared to fight long wars. This was proven in Beirut when the Marines fled after two explosions. It also proves they can run in less than 24 hours, and this was also repeated in Somalia … [Our] youth were surprised at the low morale of the American soldiers and realized more than before that the American soldiers are paper tigers. After a few blows, they ran in defeat and America forgot about all the hoopla and media propaganda after leaving the Gulf War. After a few blows, they forgot about this title [leader of a new world order] and left, dragging their corpses and their shameful defeat.[11]

American irresolution did in fact embolden jihadists.

Finally, on the matter of sloppiness: in his essay, Gordon cites a story by Glenn Kessler of the *Washington Post*, who wrote a highly critical article on the President's 2006 State of the Union. Gordon writes this:

> In reality, … as Glenn Kessler noted in the *Washington Post*, '[Bush's] description of the actions of "the enemy" tried to tie together a series of diplomatic and military setbacks that had virtually no connection to one another, from an attack on a Sunni mosque in Iraq to the assassination of [a] Maronite Lebanese political figure.'

The problem with this quote is that the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra that was attacked on 22 February 2006 is *Shia*, not Sunni. The difference is hardly incidental; the mosque, after all, is among the holiest sites in Shia Islam (the mosque holds the tombs of two revered ninth-century imams of the Shia branch of Islam, including Hassan al-Askari, father of the 'hidden imam', al-Mahdi). For Glenn Kessler, a reporter, to write that the mosque is Sunni

rather than Shia was sloppy; and for Philip Gordon, a scholar, to favourably cite it is doubly so.

* * *

The core problem with Gordon's essay, I think, is that it is a triumph of ideology. 'Winning the Right War' leaves the impression that virtually everything the Bush administration has done since 11 September 2001 has been misguided, wrong and counterproductive, and that virtually everything has worked to the advantage of jihadists during the last six years. One need not believe that everything the Bush administration has done is right to know that this impression is false. The essay itself has the feel of being written by a scholar who settled on a thesis early on and wasn't about to let contrary facts or reality intrude on it, or on his final judgements. It shows, and Gordon's essay is poorer for it.

Notes

1 See Douglas Jehl, 'After The Attacks: The Reaction; U.S. Raids Provoke Fury in Muslim World', *New York Times*, 22 August 1998.

2 Thomas Ricks and Karen DeYoung, 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq Reported Crippled', *Washington Post*, 15 October 2007.

3 See Cara Buckley and Michael R. Gordon, 'US Says Attacks in Iraq Fell to Feb. 2006 Level', *New York Times*, 19 November 2007.

4 Charles Krauthammer, 'Petraeus's Success', *Washington Post*, 14 September 2007.

5 See Eli Lake, 'Senior Qaeda Theologian Urges His Followers To End Their Jihad', *New York Sun*, 20 December 2007.

6 See Lee Keath, 'Bin Laden Asks Iraq Insurgents to Unite', Associated Press, 22 October 2007.

7 See Summary of Findings, 'Global Opinion Trends 2002–2007: A Rising Tide Lifts Mood in the Developing World; Sharp Decline in Support for Suicide Bombing in Muslim Countries', The Pew Global Attitudes Project, 24 July 2007.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

9 See Amir Taheri, 'What Kind of War Are We Fighting, and Can We Win It? A Symposium', *Commentary*, November 2007.

10 See http://www.cpa.gov/transcripts/20040212_zarqawi_full.html.

11 See interview with Osama bin Laden by John Miller, ABC News correspondent, 28 May 1998.

Strategy and Common Sense

Kishore Mahbubani

Washington's manifest and growing problems with the world seem to have a single cause: America, as a geopolitical actor, has stopped thinking and acting strategically. A combination of military might, post-Cold War hubris, conviction of moral superiority and the absence of an obvious threat probably generated this intellectual laziness. After 11 September 2001, all this should have changed: the United States should have reacted intelligently and thoughtfully to the challenges presented by the events of that day. Instead, as Philip Gordon documents so well in his essay, 'Winning the Right War', America chose the wrong course.

Philip Gordon has emerged as one of America's leading strategic thinkers, and Washington would do well to heed both his analysis and the prescriptions in his essay. I agree with the thrust of his arguments, but believe he could have gone even further with his analysis. My conclusion, though, is an optimistic one: if America could once again begin thinking and acting strategically, many of its problems with the world, including with the Islamic world, could be resolved fairly easily. The strategic thinking of shrewd geopolitical analysts like Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski enabled America to win the Cold War without firing a shot. With the right diplomatic stance, America could achieve similar success with the new strategic challenges it faces.

Instead, the United States continues to pursue a failed strategy. As Gordon says in the opening words of his essay, 'More than six years after the start of the "war on terror", America and its allies are less safe, their enemies are stronger and more numerous, and the war's key geographic battleground, the greater Middle East, dangerously unstable' (p. 17). Even more damningly, Gordon adds: 'In its first six years, the Bush administration's "war on terror" has cost America hundreds of billions of dollars, exhausted the US military, alienated friends and allies, and squandered America's moral

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authority, yet still has made little progress toward its ultimate goals' (p. 18). It would be hard to document a bigger record of failure.

Gordon goes on to cite 'at least six fundamental problems' with the approach taken by the Bush administration in its 'war on terror'. All six demonstrate a keen understanding of current geopolitical realities. In particular, Gordon's point about the 'flawed diagnosis' of the problem of Islamic terrorism is spot on. He is absolutely right to say that the Islamic world does not hate America because of its freedom. Instead, as he puts it, 'In the Islamic world, they harbour enormous resentment about the fate of their societies and their coreligionists, and they feel a great sense of frustration, humiliation and injustice' (p. 21). Gordon is also right to quote the following statement by Osama bin Laden to justify the 11 September attacks, which clearly expresses the sense of abandonment and despair felt by many in the Islamic world:

> What America is tasting now is something insignificant compared to what we have tasted for scores of years. Our nation [the Islamic world] has been tasting this humiliation and this degradation for eighty years. Its sons are killed, its blood is shed, its sanctuaries are attacked and no one hears and no one heeds.[1]

Having rightly analysed Muslim grievances, however, Gordon reaches a surprising conclusion: 'None of this means that the United States should simply change its policies to make potential terrorists happy.' It is true we should not make potential terrorists happy. But shouldn't Washington change those policies that are contributing to the enormous sense of resentment towards America in the larger Islamic world?

The key problem here is that many American thinkers, including leading strategic thinkers, have a fundamentally flawed understanding of the Islamic world. Their minds fill with dark images when the word 'Islam' is mentioned. They believe that Muslims are doomed to pursuing a self-destructive course of endless religious war, with little hope of achieving modernisation or development. The good news for America is that these dark images are false. It is true that fundamentalism is growing in many

Islamic societies, but it is also true that, with the brief and rare exception of the Taliban in Afghanistan, no Islamic society has been taken over by a fundamentalist group. Instead, virtually all Islamic societies are run by modern or modernising elites. Even Iran is a complex story. Americans see Iran only as a strange mullah state. Asians see it as the inheritor of one of Asia's greatest civilisations. Iranian society is deeply imbued with this civilisational sophistication. In my next book, *The New Asian Hemisphere*, I document how 'the March to Modernity' is reaching the Islamic world, including Iran, providing real hope that the world will become safer.

Modern Muslim elites have the most to lose if their societies are taken over by fundamentalist groups. With their lives and futures at stake, they are motivated to fight fundamentalism. The leaders of Morocco and Algeria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Indonesia are acutely aware of the nature of the fundamentalist challenge they face, and are determined to overcome this threat. America too would like to see the world's modern Muslims succeed. Yet, it is American policies that are undermining the standing and credibility of modern Muslim leaders, who are seen to be weak in their opposition to American policies that damage Muslim populations. As Gordon notes in his essay, surveys have documented growing anti-Americanism in the Islamic world, and he is right to conclude that 'in an age of democracies, global resentment makes it harder for leaders to cooperate with the United States, and harder for America to achieve its goals throughout the world' (p. 36). But Gordon fails to mention some key American policies that have generated this resentment.

In the Islamic world, there is near unanimity that US policy in the Middle East is unbalanced, particularly with respect to Israel, and this has generated a great deal of resentment. Yet most American politicians seem scared to propose a more even-handed policy; even Howard Dean's more or less timid suggestion of a balanced approach to Middle Eastern affairs caused an uproar.

The great tragedy here is that such unequivocal US support for Israel could, in the long run, damage the interests of both countries. Perhaps America may only suffer resentment (although further terrorist attacks remain a possibility). Israel, however, could face some real long-term chal-

lenges to its survival. It is simply unwise for Israel to alienate the entire Islamic world. If Israeli leaders fail to take advantage of the unique window of opportunity they now have to work out a two-state solution with the Palestinians, supported by Sunni Arabs (who will in turn bring the support of other Muslim nations), Israel will be condemned to a long-term destructive conflict with the entire Islamic world.

Unequivocal US support for Israel could damage the interests of both countries

The threat Israel faces was illustrated very well by Deng Xiaoping, who once used a simple comparison to describe the folly of Vietnam taking on China after defeating America in 1975. When he was asked how long China could fight Vietnam, Deng replied that when a large rock and a small stone are continuously rubbed together, over time the small stone disappears. Vietnam soon realised the wisdom of Deng's comments. Despite the confidence the nation felt after America's retreat, it sued for peace with China. Vietnam's population is 84 million, while China's is 1.3 billion, meaning there are 15 Chinese for every Vietnamese. The ratio of Israel's population (7m) to that of the Islamic world (1.5bn) is even worse – 1:200. Wisdom dictates that Israel should work for peace.

It is remarkable that even though America has one of the world's most educated populations and a sophisticated elite, it is incapable of engaging in strategic analysis as basic as this. Both Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger would have recognised the wisdom in Deng's analogy. Today, such strategic thinkers as there are in America hesitate to do an objective geopolitical analysis of the Israel–Palestine situation for fear of offending the powerful Israel lobby in Washington. The power of this lobby was demonstrated as recently as December 2007 when the American Ambassador to the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad, had to withdraw an innocuous resolution endorsing the Annapolis Middle East peace conference because of Israeli objections. But it is politically hazardous even to mention the term 'Israel lobby' in the United States. Consequently, no American politician does so. Neither does Gordon in his essay, although to be fair he does say (somewhat courageously) that by 'unreservedly justifying any Israeli military action as a necessary part of

the "global war on terror"… the United States has reinforced the grievances that inspire people to become terrorists' (pp. 23–4).

One simple lesson of history is that 'the correlation of forces' (to use a simple Marxist expression) will always change. At the end of the Cold War, the whole world stood in awe of America's ability to destroy its rival, the Soviet Union, with so little cost to itself. Hence, the rest of the world accepted the assumption – embraced by American thinkers – that the United States was inherently blessed with some kind of geopolitical genius. But after watching a decade and a half of geopolitical incompetence (including the bungling of the 'global war on terror' so well documented in Gordon's essay), the opposite assumption is now widely held by overseas observers. If there is a wrong option to pick, America can be counted on to pick it. As a consequence, America's prestige and standing in the world is truly at a low point.

Gordon quotes President Bush: 'At some point we may be the only ones left. That's okay with me. We are America' (p. 35). Bush is right that America can stand alone in one sense: the country is so powerful that no nation would ever dream of attacking it. Indeed, most world leaders remain aware of the extent of American power and try to stay on the right side of it. While Hugo Chávez and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are exceptions, the global trend remains one of avoiding confrontation with America. Sheer prudence dictates this course of action for most states, which in turn contributes to the artificial sense of absolute security experienced by Washington policymakers. By believing their country is invincible, they demonstrate their failure to learn the most obvious lesson of 11 September: America may be invincible, but it is not invulnerable.

Equally important, no matter how powerful America may be, it is now subject to the same global challenges that confront all of humanity, from global warming to global terrorism, from global pandemics to global financial crises. None of these problems can be solved by the United States alone. A reservoir of international goodwill and respect towards America would help enormously in meeting these challenges. Indeed, for several decades – especially during the Cold War – America accumulated goodwill and a string of tactical allies all around the world. At the end of the Cold War,

however, it dumped many of these allies, including some, such as Pakistan and Indonesia, that it had to turn to again after 11 September.

Worse still, since launching its 'war on terror' after the 11 September attacks, America has squandered even more of its goodwill reserves. Maintaining the Guantanamo Bay detention facility is but one way it has done this. The debate in America has been about the morality of detentions there, and this is an important argument. But even more important is a simple strategic analysis of the gains and losses to America's national interests from maintaining the prison. On the gains side, the best that can be said is that the United States has acquired some marginal intelligence against the jihadists. But the losses have been spectacular. Before creating Guantanamo, America enjoyed great moral authority around the world as the ultimate defender of human rights. After Guantanamo, everything changed. A Chinese intellectual told me that before Guantanamo, even though the Chinese resented American lectures on China's human-rights conditions, they acknowledged in their hearts that America had the moral authority to criticise them. After Guantanamo, Chinese attitudes shifted: 'We beat up people, you beat up people. What's the difference?' Guantanamo is hard to defend on moral grounds; it is even harder to defend on pragmatic and functional grounds. America squandered a precious national asset – moral authority in the eyes of billions of people – for questionable intelligence value. Gordon documents this loss of moral authority well in the section of his essay subtitled 'Squandering credibility'.

What is even more shocking about the Guantanamo episode is how few Americans are aware of the damage it has done. This only confirms how detached American society is from contemporary international realities. There tends to be an incestuous, self-serving conversation among American intellectuals about the state of the world, a conversation that now displays an astonishing degree of ignorance about the real state of things. Neoconservatives, who back current US strategy, try to portray themselves as intellectual giants in American geopolitical debates. Yet, it is these same 'giants' who, despite their obsession with restraining Iran, delivered the country two huge geopolitical gains by removing both the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, the two main strategic thorns in its side.

The time has come for the United States to once again realise the virtues of the pragmatic strategic thinking it displayed in the Cold War. Given the American social and political context, a certain degree of moralising will always be part of American discourse. But to succeed in a complex and globally interdependent world, America must consult history and find out what other great powers did when they faced a similarly formidable array of challenges. Nothing in the world of geopolitics is really new. Ancient Greek and Chinese texts contain more wisdom than most American contemporary strategic discourse does.

America could also use a reminder that diplomacy was invented three thousands years ago *not* to enable countries to talk to their friends and allies – no diplomatic immunity is needed when meeting friends. Rather, diplomacy was invented to enable states to talk to their adversaries. Hence, if America wants to discover the wisdom of traditional strategic thinkers, it should establish diplomatic relations with its adversaries, particularly Iran.

Not a single American strategic thinker would dare suggest this in the current political context. Not even Gordon ventures close to any such suggestion. American strategic thinking is still taking place on narrow fairways with clear 'out-of-bounds' markers that prohibit the entry of plain geostrategic common sense. The time has come for America to ask whether its national interests are furthered when it deprives itself of such common sense. If the United States would once again heed the lessons of diplomacy, it would find that many of its challenges in the international arena would appear less formidable. America succeeded in the Cold War by looking for potential allies and partners everywhere and by being ready to make the right political compromises to keep such partnerships. With a little less moralising and a lot more pragmatism, America may once again find itself on the winning side in the global political arena.

Notes

1 P. 22, quoted from the Associated Press, 'Text of Osama bin Laden's Statement', first broadcast 7 October 2001.

Response

Philip H. Gordon

I am grateful to Peter Wehner and Kishore Mahbubani for taking the time to comment on my essay, 'Winning the Right War'. Their comments are valuable not only because both are prominent and influential thinkers but because their divergent views on the subject help to frame the debate: Mahbubani essentially agrees with me but wishes I had 'gone even further' in my analysis, while Wehner disagrees and complains that I've written a 'one-sided', 'ideological' brief. Standing between them does not make me right, but it does underscore how, more than six years after the start of the 'war on terror', some well-informed observers remain almost diametrically opposed over how to wage it. That, in fact, is why I wrote *Winning the Right War* (the book from which my *Survival* essay was drawn) and why I wrote it now: with six years of evidence behind us and with an American presidential election looming, the time seems right for a serious debate about the nature of the Islamist terrorist threat and the policies most likely to defeat it.

I have no 'rebuttal' to Mahbubani since he agrees with the broad thrust of my essay, but I do have some comments since we hardly agree on everything. He takes me to task, for example, for concluding my analysis of the sources of the terrorist threat by saying that 'none of this means that the United States should simply change its policies to make potential terrorists happy'. He asks whether America shouldn't 'change those policies which are contributing to the enormous sense of resentment towards America in the larger Islamic world'.

I would say of course it should, when it can, and my book gives a number of examples of how it might do so – by banning torture both in law and in practice, closing the Guantanamo prison, changing tactics in and withdrawing troops from Iraq, showing more respect for other countries' perceptions and interests, and doing more to support the Palestinians, to

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take just a few. My point, however, was to note that taking actions to lessen resentment of the United States can not simply mean giving in to extremists' demands. Osama bin Laden wants Israel to disappear, the United States to withdraw entirely from the Middle East, and the region's current leaders to be replaced with an Islamic caliphate that would impose sharia law, but I doubt Mahbubani would recommend supporting such an agenda in the name of reducing resentment any more than I would. The challenge is to address legitimate social and diplomatic grievances that produce terrorism without caving in to an insatiable terrorist agenda.

Mahbubani, like many others, clearly feels that America's strong support for Israel is a major part of the problem. He gives me credit for 'somewhat courageously' noting that by 'unreservedly justifying any Israeli military action as a necessary part of the "global war on terror" … the United States has reinforced the grievances that inspire people to become terrorists'. This is an important point that requires careful attention. As Mahbubani certainly knows, there are good reasons to be sceptical about bin Laden's claim to be particularly interested in the fate of the Palestinians. Al-Qaeda grew and planned some of its most spectacular attacks during the 1990s, while the Oslo peace process was in full swing, and only started to focus on Israel later, as it realised that the issue had some resonance among its potential recruits. Even if the United States could somehow force Israel and the Palestinians to conclude a lasting peace tomorrow, many of the factors fuelling Muslim support for terrorism would still exist.

That said, I agree – and argue in *Winning the Right War* – that the Israel–Arab dispute contributes to the resentment that fuels the Islamist terrorist threat. Just because terrorists and extremists opportunistically exploit the Palestinian issue does not mean that it is not an issue. Indeed, 'opportunism' is possible only where real anger and emotion create an opportunity to exploit. For extremists like bin Laden, of course, even a comprehensive Israeli–Palestinian peace would not be enough, since he also insists that America will not live in peace until 'all the army of infidels depart the land of Muhammad', which may be a long time in coming. But for many Muslims around the world who may be tempted to join, support or sympathise with al-Qaeda or similar groups, the issue of Israel and its relationship with its

neighbours is crucial. And I agree with Mahbubani that pretending that the issue is irrelevant to the 'war on terror' is a critical mistake.

I also broadly agree with Mahbubani that modernising trends in the Muslim world will undermine, more than any US intervention or use of force, fundamentalist Islam, but I have to admit I was surprised by his comments that 'not a single Islamic society (with the brief and rare exception of the Taliban in Afghanistan) has been taken over by a fundamentalist group' and that 'virtually all the Islamic societies are run by modern or modernising elites'. It seems to me that the radicals who took over Iran in 1979 were 'fundamentalist' by any meaningful definition, as is the Sudanese regime today. Moreover, it is more than a stretch to view the current leaders of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran as 'modern or modernising elites'. I do agree that modernisation is going to be a long-term solution to the problem of Islamist terrorism (even though it is also a short-term cause of it) but I wonder if Mahbubani is not being too sanguine about how far along that process has already progressed. Perhaps his forthcoming book will shed some light on this.

Finally, I would like to correct Mahbubani's assumption that in the current American political context 'not a single American strategic thinker would dare suggest' that the United States establish diplomatic relations with Iran. In fact, some of us are recommending just that. I wrote in *Winning the Right War* that

> the United States should agree to talk to Iran about any issue – and even offer to open up full diplomatic relations. America maintained diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War and today it has diplomatic relations with dozens of countries that it does not particularly like; indeed one could argue that such relations are most needed when there are contentious issues to sort out.

This is one of the many areas where US policy must change.

Peter Wehner is apparently less convinced of the need for change. Indeed in his defence of the Bush administration, his main argument is not that fighting Islamist terrorism is hard (which would be fair enough) but rather

that the 'war on terror' is actually going very well. Our cooperation with allies is 'unprecedented', we're thwarting plots, al-Qaeda is on the ropes, the 'surge' in Iraq is succeeding, and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein has persuaded Libya and Iran to give up their nuclear-weapons programmes. His Monty Python citation – 'what else have they done for us?' – implies that the Bush administration's 'war on terror' has had all sorts of benefits for civilisation, and the problem is merely that the locals are unable to see the light. While Wehner is right to insist that not everything is going wrong, I do not share his assessment of progress in the 'war on terror' so far, or his refusal to accept the negative consequences of some US policies.

Take, for example, his rebuttal of my argument that Bush-administration policies have left the United States isolated in the world. I agree that various countries' intelligence agencies have continued to work with our own (out of self-interest) and also that the Proliferation Security Initiative was an innovative and useful initiative for which the Bush administration deserves credit. But does Wehner really want to deny that US standing in the world has fallen considerably over the past six years and that this has consequences for our foreign policy? In Iraq, the always-thin 'coalition of the willing' is shrinking further (the United States now provides 93% of overall forces), and even the British are essentially pulling out. In Afghanistan, NATO allies are refusing to provide adequate forces in part because European leaders find it difficult to persuade their publics to support deployments that are seen as part of Bush's 'war on terror'. In the Muslim world, where the war for 'hearts and minds' is really being fought, resentment of the United States is at an all-time high, even as some of the autocracies Wehner mentions quietly work with the United States.

As I wrote in my article and book, this matters not because we should want to be liked by others, but because millions of people around the world are judging US actions to determine whether they want to be on America's side, fight against it or sit on the fence. If we can't get most of them into the first category, or at least the last, all the military and intelligence cooperation in the world will not make us safe. I do agree with Wehner that there is often tension 'between acting in our national interest and gaining higher approval ratings in foreign countries'. I just think we've gotten the balance

wrong, and that we've failed to realise that 'gaining higher approval ratings in foreign countries' can itself be in our national interest.

Wehner also wants to claim successes in the effort to destroy al-Qaeda and in the war in Iraq, but neither claim stands up to scrutiny. We have indeed killed and captured a number of al-Qaeda leaders, but it is simply wrong to argue that the organisation is on the ropes or that the Iraq War has not contributed to its recruitment effort. According to the July 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate, al-Qaeda has over the past two years 're-established its central organization, training infrastructure and lines of global communication', and used its association with affiliates in Iraq to 'energize the broader Sunni extremist community, raise resources, and to recruit and indoctrinate operatives'. In Iraq, the recent improvement in the security situation is obviously good news, but it is also highly tenuous and so far unaccompanied by the political agreements or ethnic reconciliation that will be required if the United States is going to be able safely to end its costly deployment. In any case, Wehner's conclusion that 'repairs are being made' misses the point: even if Iraq does gradually edge toward the uneasy peace that is now at the more optimistic end of expectations, the war will have proven to be a massive setback in the effort to counter Islamist extremism and stabilise the Middle East. The Iraq war has cost hundreds of billions of dollars, killed tens of thousands of people, displaced millions internally and externally, inspired radical Islamists, strengthened Iran, destabilised Iraq's neighbors, and deeply damaged America's reputation as a competent, respected, and feared world power. It will take much more than a decline in roadside bombs or suicide attacks, however welcome, to compensate for all that.

Toward the end of his response, Wehner points out that I failed to notice a mistake in a Glenn Kessler *Washington Post* article I cited, which referred to a 'Sunni mosque' even though the mosque in question was Shia. I regret not noticing that error (which was surely inadvertent, as the mosque was clearly identified in the speech Kessler was citing as 'one of the most sacred places in Shia Islam') but the point is that contrary to Wehner's claim, the difference in this case *is* incidental. Kessler's point, and mine, was that it is a mistake to view all sorts of different Muslim groups as one monolithic lump, 'a thinking enemy' as Bush put it. This same error is apparent in the

passage from journalist Amir Taheri, whom Wehner cites, claiming that 'Algeria, Egypt, and Turkey have effectively defeated their respective terrorist enemies' and the 'Islamofascists have also suffered defeat in Kashmir, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Chechnya'. Aside from the fact that it would be news to many of these countries that they have defeated their terrorist enemies, is it really useful to lump those enemies all together despite their vastly different aims? That is the sort of thinking that can lead the United States to invade Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a response to an al-Qaeda attack on the United States.

Is it really useful to lump those enemies together?

I have other disagreements with Wehner (for example, I do not see how he can argue that our demonstration of 'resolve' over the past few years has cowed terrorists more than emboldened them), but let me instead end on a point of agreement. In discussing trends in Iraq and elsewhere, Wehner points out evidence of Muslims turning on the extremists in their midst and increasingly rejecting suicide bombing as a justifiable tactic. Like Wehner (and in a way Mahbubani as well), I think these are important developments and that they point the way to a more hopeful future. Al-Qaeda has no positive vision to offer, its tactics are tarnishing the reputation of Muslims everywhere, and it is killing fellow Muslims and civilians all over the world. In the long run, this is not an approach likely to win broad-based support; on the contrary, unless we artificially prolong its life, it will in time be seen as the nihilistic and counterproductive strategy that it is. All this leads me to recommend the grand strategy that I spell out in *Winning the Right War*: contain the threat through intelligence, judicial, police and sometimes military means; address the diplomatic, economic and social sources of frustration in the Muslim world; re-establish America's squandered moral authority and the appeal of US society; engage allies and adversaries alike diplomatically; and seek to diminish our dependence on imported oil which is as bad for oil exporters as it is for us. If we do all that, and stop playing into the extremists' hands, I believe we can have the same sort of success we had the last time we faced a long-term, ideological threat, during the Cold War. And Islamist extremism will end up on the same ash-heap of history that Communism did.