

Cold War II

BY

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The first Cold War crept in slowly and was not at all evident to most average Americans when President Truman addressed a joint session of Congress in March 1947. No U.S. forces overseas, much less the United States itself, had been attacked, and Americans were obsessed with demobilizing from World War II and preventing a return of Great Depression conditions. So if Truman were to arouse the nation to resist world communism, he had to do what Senator Arthur Vandenberg recommended, which was to “scare the hell out of the American people”.

The president explained that a moment in history had come when nearly every nation had to choose between freedom based on majority rule and human rights and tyranny imposed through terror and oppression. He declared it the policy of the United States to support all peoples threatened by internal subversion or outside pressure and warned that an American failure to lead might endanger world peace and would surely endanger the welfare of the United States. But the \$400 million in aid he requested for Greece and Turkey was only the ante the poker-loving Truman required to get America into the game. The ultimate cost of calling every Soviet bet and bluff in a game lasting years, perhaps decades, was bound to be immeasurably higher. What is more, this poker game carried the greatest of risks, not excluding that of nuclear war, and offered the American public no instant gratification or assurance of a future catharsis.

Walter Lippmann gave the conflict its name – the Cold War – and a left-to-right spectrum from Henry Wallace to George Kennan to Robert Taft immediately

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warned that a protracted conflict against the Communist conspiracy might draw the United States into unlimited commitments, Machiavellian ploys, and collusion with all manner of foul bedfellows.

But the Congress and public stood up almost as one behind the Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, NATO, and the Korean War.

The second cold war may also have crept up on us slowly. Leaving aside introspective domestic recriminations to the effect that America deserved the attack of September 11 (a matter best left to the Purveyor of “infinite justice”), historians are certain to clash over questions of causality and blame. Did Americans’ energy-guzzling habits, hence dependence on Persian Gulf oil and support for authoritarian Muslim regimes, create fertile soil for Islamic fanatics? Did American disengagement from Afghanistan following the expulsion of the Soviets permit the Taliban to seize power? Did American support for Israel and the 1991 war on Iraq validate in the bazaars an image of the United States as the Great Satan? Did the George H.W. Bush administration’s display of irresistible military might but reluctance to finish off Saddam Hussein all but invite rogue states to wage asymmetrical warfare, including sponsorship of terrorist groups, to promote their agendas? Did the Clinton administration’s penchant for poking, but not killing, the dens of rattlesnakes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sudan only stiffen their determination to show Americans how it feels to be defenseless before random assaults? Were U.S. defense and intelligence agencies just not up to their job, in which case an entirely different set of questions dating back to Vietnam and Watergate needs to be asked?

Whatever the long-range causes of our second cold war, public cognizance of it came in a flash and George W. Bush had no need to scare the hell out of the American people when he addressed Congress on September 20, 2001.

Otherwise he faced the same task as Truman, which was to channel the public’s fear, anger, and vengefulness into reservoirs to be husbanded, replenished in need, and gradually released to sustain public support for a conflict of unknown duration, cost, and risk.

As in Truman’s time the enemy is an abstraction – terrorism in place of communism – but one given sanctuary and support from sovereign states. As in Truman’s time the president prefers not to declare formal war on those states, but rather puts them on notice as to the rules of engagement the United States intends to enforce in the protracted conflict to come.

Truman did not expect to convert the Soviets to democracy, but he put them on notice that subversion and aggression were unacceptable weapons in the ideological contest. Likewise Bush does not expect (as perhaps Clinton did) to persuade our adversaries to love Coca-Cola, Disney, and Playboy. But he put them

on notice that terrorism is an unacceptable weapon in the clash of cultures, estimated that terrorists lurk in no less than sixty nations, named the Islamic fundamentalists the heirs to all the murderous ideologues of the twentieth century, and vowed that the war would not end until every terrorist group of global reach had been crushed.

Bush also specifically condemned neutralism (“Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists”²), implied that all states who practice or abet terrorism are subject to retaliation in times and places of our own choosing, and cautioned that a long, twilight struggle lies before us.

Thus did he conflate in his speech not only Truman’s message, but Eisenhower’s and Kennedy’s as well. Just as in the late 1940s critics across the political spectrum warned that the Bush Doctrine would require the United States to make unlimited commitments, adopt an amoral *realpolitik*, prop up “friendly tyrants,” provoke still more hatred of America, and thus ratchet up the cycle of violence. But again, just as in 1947, the Congress and people declared themselves, almost unanimously, ready to ante up and get into the game whatever the risks down the road.

Cold War II: so many people thought it would be waged against China. But cold wars are not declared against mere geopolitical rivals – hot wars, yes, but not cold ones. Cold wars are fought against nations or movements that pose a genuine alternative and thus a threat to “our way of life” at home.

Communism, with its plausible ideology, moral critique of capitalism, international armies of spies and propagandists, and fifth column of fellow travelers in the United States, certainly qualified. That is why Truman said that a failure to resist communism everywhere would surely endanger American welfare at home.

Americanism, with its powerful ideology of secular humanism, hostility to Islamic customs (e.g., concerning the place of women), ubiquitous economic, cultural, and military presence, and mighty fifth columns of Westernized Muslims, certainly qualifies as a candidate for a cold war from the traditional Muslim perspective.³

From the American point of view, by contrast, terrorism in the name of fundamentalist Islam would seem no candidate at all since it has no plausible ideology or party of sympathizers among American citizens (unless one counts the “blame America” crowd). But Islamic fundamentalism does raise a serious moral critique of the West, does possess an international network of saboteurs, and has

2 . Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, September 20, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

3 . See the still excellent summary by B. LEWIS, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 266:3, Sept. 1990, pp. 47-60.

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shown itself capable of sowing doubt and division among us in ways we are loath to admit.

Thus, however many uplifting and poignant remarks were made by American leaders and common folk in the aftermath of September 11, many stupid and troubling things were said, too. The stupidest remark I heard was uttered by an upscale white, suburban woman who blamed the terrorist attack on Bush's tax cut. "Couldn't that money have gone to the FBI?" she asked.

The most troubling remark I heard was uttered by a downscale black, urban woman who blamed the attack on U.S. meddling in the Near East. "Why can't we just mind our own business?" she asked. My own "man on the street" interviews suggest that as angry and hot for revenge as Americans are, many are prone to look in the mirror, at themselves or each other-and I don't mean at Arab Americans. If the answer to the question "Why do they hate us?" is – as Bush says – that they hate us for who we are, for our freedoms, then it should not surprise us when Americans ask, "who are we?"

"Who are we" is a question I have had much to ponder over this past year as I struggle to write a history of the United States, and if all the varied answers had to be boiled down into two, they would have to be these.

First, we are a people who have made a religion of liberty.

Second, we are a people who, being free, display the whole range of behavior to which human nature is prone, from the noblest to the most sordid. Herbert Croly, the Progressive intellectual and founder of *The New Republic*, wrote in 1909:

(T)he principle of democracy is virtue, and when we consider the condition of contemporary democracies, the saying may seem to be more ominous than flattering. But if a few hundred years from now it seems less ominous, the threat will be removed in only one way. The common citizen can become something of a saint and something of a hero, not by growing to heroic proportions in his own person, but by the sincere and enthusiastic imitation of heroes and saints.⁴

Whether liberty had a future in America accordingly hinged on whether "exceptional fellow-countrymen" would continue to appear to provide the needed "examples of heroism and saintliness."⁵

The cynical H. L. Mencken likewise proclaimed himself a "loyal and devoted American, even a chauvinist . . . contentedly and even smugly basking beneath the Stars and Stripes." But to him American liberty meant little more than the pursuit of happiness, which is to say "well-fed, unhounded by sordid cares, at ease in Zion; full of a comfortable feeling of superiority to the masses of my fellow-men; [and]

4 . H. CROLY, *The promise of American life* (Bobbs-Merrill, New York, 1965), p. 454.

5 . *Ibid.*, p. 454.

delicately and unceasingly amused according to my taste.” Indeed, wrote Mencken, in America more than anywhere else:

the daily panorama of human existence, of private and communal folly – the unending procession of governmental extortions and chicaneries, of commercial brigandages and throat-slittings, of theological buffooneries or aesthetic ribaldries, of legal swindles and harlotries, of miscellaneous rogueries, villainies, imbecilities, grotesqueries, and extravagances – is so inordinately gross and preposterous, so steadily enriched with an almost fabulous daring and originality, that only the man born with a petrified diaphragm can fail to laugh himself to sleep every night.⁶

Croly and Mencken both have it right. The United States is a land of saints and heroes precisely because the people are free: no one can be forced to be either. But the United States is also Vanity Fair, the most profligate, hedonistic, and proud nation that ever existed, again because its people are by far the most free to indulge themselves. To be hated and envied is thus part of the package we have unwrapped and otherwise enjoy, and our image is not helped by the message that the way to confound our enemies is to get out and spend, travel and spend, to sustain the economy.

That was hardly the message of sacrifice our people received in December 1941 or March 1947. But here is an irony. Many Americans did rise to become heroes and saints – not least in lower Manhattan and aboard an airplane near Pittsburgh. So if the terrorists hated us for our cowardly imperialism and selfish decadence, they helped to kill, at least for a season, the very thing that justified their attack. Perhaps that is one meaning of nihilism.

A second cold war which opposes suicidal enemies of globalization but which can only be waged by a coalition of states: therein lies a second irony given how often we were told that the nation state is pass. We cannot begin to predict the course of this conflict precisely because the enemy is so diffuse, the allies so varied and numerous, and the weapons at hand so unsure. The most vociferous hawks want to carry the war not only to bin Laden’s al-Qaeda organization but to all terrorist groups everywhere, and not only to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan but to all terror-friendly regimes everywhere. It would be extremely satisfying, not to say salutary, if the Bush administration could cash in the blank check it has gotten from Congress, and the United States the apparent green light it has gotten from so many states to destroy the gangsters posing as governments in Kabul, Baghdad, and elsewhere. Then, at least, we could comfort ourselves that some permanent good

6. “On Being an American,” in H. L. MENCKEN, *Prejudices: a selection* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1992), p. 92.

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has come out of this evil beyond the mere apprehension of a handful of murderers. But there are powerful limits to what the United States can achieve.

The first limiting factor is that our military capacities are decidedly finite and the risks of ground action amid hostile people in the world's roughest terrain could easily multiply the evil done to ourselves without achieving that permanent good. If the terrorists and their sponsors are so brazen as to inflict new massive attacks, the United States might mobilize fully and rapidly as it did in Cold War I after the 1950 invasion of South Korea. But otherwise we shall have to match the ends of any action we take to our means.

The second limiting factor is that our old and new partners in this second cold war are in for a dime, but not necessarily for a dollar, and in any case are playing for stakes of their own. The Taliban are now lonely, but would Iran, Pakistan, or Russia agree to any U.S. campaign to replace them inasmuch as each opposes the Afghan clients of the other two? If Washington called for a campaign against Iraq, how much of the initial coalition would remain, what prices would our partners demand, and how incompatible would those prices be? Pleasing the Pakistanis would doubtless displease the Indians, and the same would be true with the Israelis and Saudis, Iranis and Turks, and the Russians and everyone else.

The third limiting factor to what the United States can achieve is the impossibility of nation- or state-building in large multi-ethnic, factional, tribal, terror-ridden, backward, and topographically-challenged fastnesses of mountains and desert. Already the calls have gone forth for rebuilding Afghanistan, partitioning Iraq or at least ripping out its Ba'athist regime root and branch, and of course pressuring the PLO and Israelis to complete the "peace process". Some of those calls are made, to be charitable, out of ignorance or a surfeit of hope. Others are just blind and arrogant. If the United States cannot "build" a stable state in the tiny, homogeneous half-island of Haiti, and the full force of NATO cannot plant multicultural democracy in the small shards of Yugoslavia, what are the chances that any combination of states can design, construct, and protect a stable state in the Hindu Kush? As for Iraq, a partition is not in the cards because neither Iran nor Turkey wants to annex more Kurds or see them break free, while nobody – the oil sheiks of the Gulf most of all – would trust the Iranian mullahs with control over the Iraqi Shi'ites in the Shatt al Arab. That means – shades of 1991 – that Iraq would have to survive as a state even if Saddam were removed. But the whole history of Iraq since its invention by the British in 1919 demonstrates that only a thug like Saddam can hold that artificial country together. Is the only possible outcome, then, the installation of "friendly tyrants" in Kabul and Baghdad backed by who knows how much American, British, or Turkish force?

The problem facing the Bush administration is not so much war fighting as war termination, and the prospects as of autumn 2001 are bleak.⁷

One likely outcome is that the bin Laden crowd will be killed, but the alliance will then dissolve and the states harboring terrorists will, after a judicious holiday, hang out their shingles again.

A less likely, but quite possible outcome is that the United States will get sidetracked and bogged down in a peripheral campaign, Vietnam-like, that wastes assets to no strategic purpose. It could happen because of a military blunder, excessive indulgence of an ally's ambitions, perfidy by an ally in the midst of an engagement, or strategic myopia in the White House and Pentagon.

The least likely, but most terrible scenarios are a loss of control over the violence as South Asian states turn to fighting each other, or states elsewhere take advantage of America's preoccupation to launch aggressions of their own, or terrorists succeed in making more catastrophic attacks on the United States.

Might it not, therefore, be most prudent simply to swallow our ire and "mind our own business" in the hope that the terrorists will leave us, our friends, and our interests be? Remember the Twin Towers and ask yourself how likely that is. If the answer is "not very" then all those American officials and defense intellectuals so recently accused of being "nostalgic for the Cold War" can again get up in the morning with a reason for living. And all of us Vietnam veterans and diplomatic historians can leap to remind them of the qualities most needed – but not always present – in our leaders during Cold War I, including determination, realism, courage, prudence, patience, and faith.

Let the saints within us whisper, "Do justice and walk humbly with your God," while the heroes within us shout, "Don't Tread on Me."

7. For a discussion of America's indifferent record of war termination, see my "How – And How Not – To End Wars," in *FPRI Wire*, October 2000.

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