

American Thinker

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July 10, 2007

The War About the War

By [Herbert E. Meyer](#)

The 9-11 attacks did more than start a war; they started a war *about* the war. No sooner had the World Trade towers collapsed and the Pentagon burst into flames than two perceptions of the threat began competing for the public's support:

Perception One: We're at War

For the third time in history Islam - or, more precisely, its most radical element - has launched a war whose objective is the destruction of Western civilization. Our survival is at stake, and despite its imperfections we believe that Western civilization is worth defending to the death. Moreover, in the modern world - where a small number of people can so easily kill a large number of people - we cannot just play defense; sooner or later that strategy would bring another 9-11. This conflict really is a clash of civilizations whose root cause is Islam's incompatibility with the modern world. So we must fight with everything we've got against the terrorist groups and against those governments on whose support they rely. If the Cold War was "World War III," this is World War IV. We must win it, at whatever cost.

Perception Two: We're Reaping What We've Sowed

There are quite a few people in the world who just don't like the United States and some of our allies because of how we live and, more precisely, because of the policies we pursue in the Mideast and elsewhere in the world. Alas, a small percentage of these people express their opposition through acts of violence. While we sometimes share their opinion of our values and our policies, we cannot condone their methods. Our objective must be to bring the level of political violence down to an acceptable level. The only way to accomplish this will be to simultaneously adjust our values and our policies while protecting ourselves from these intermittent acts of violence; in doing so we must be careful never to allow the need for security to override our civil liberties.

There is no middle ground between these two perceptions. Of course, you can change a word here and there, or modify a phrase, but the result will be the same. Either we're at war, or we've entered a period of history in which the level of violence has risen to an unacceptable level. If we're at war, we're in a military conflict that will end with either our victory or our defeat. If we're in an era of unacceptable violence stemming from our values and our policies, we are faced with a difficult but manageable political problem.

Splitting the Difference

Since the 9-11 attacks, President Bush has been trying to split the difference. It's obvious that he, personally, subscribes to Perception One. Just read his formal speeches about the conflict, such as those he's given to Congress and at venues such as West Point. They are superb and often brilliant analyses of what he calls the War on Terror. Yet he hasn't done things that a president who truly believes that we're at war should have done. For instance, in the aftermath of 9-11 he didn't ask Congress for a declaration of war, didn't bring back the draft, and didn't put the US economy on a wartime footing. A president at war would have taken out Iran's government after overthrowing the Taliban in Afghanistan -- and then sent 500,000 troops into Iraq, rather than just enough troops to remove Saddam Hussein but not enough to stabilize that country. And a president at war would have long since disposed of Syria's murderous regime and helped the Israelis wipe out Hezbollah.

Study history, and you quickly learn that oftentimes events and the responses they generate look different a

hundred years after they happen than they look at the time. It may be that history will judge that President Bush performed heroically, doing the very best that anyone could do given the two incompatible perceptions about the conflict that have divided public opinion and raised the level of partisanship in Washington to such a poisonous level. Or, it may be that history will judge the President to have been a failure because he responded to 9-11 as a politician rather than as a leader.

Either way, it is the ongoing war about the war that accounts for where we are today, nearly six years after the 9-11 attacks: We haven't lost, but we aren't winning; fewer of us have been killed by terrorists than we had feared would be killed, but we aren't safe.

While experts disagree about how "the war" is going, there isn't much disagreement over how the war *about* the war is going: those who subscribe to Perception Two are pulling ahead.

Here in the US, virtually every poll shows that a majority of Americans want us "out of Iraq" sooner rather than later, and regardless of what's actually happening on the ground in that country. Support for taking on Iran - that is, for separating the Mullahs from the nukes through either a military strike or by helping Iranians to overthrow them from within - is too low even to measure. There isn't one candidate for president in either party who's campaigning on a theme of "let's fight harder and win this thing whatever it takes." Indeed, the most hawkish position is merely to stay the course a while longer to give the current "surge" in Iraq a fair chance. Moreover, just chat with friends and neighbors - at barbecues, at the barbershop, over a cup of coffee - and you'll be hard-pressed to find a solid minority, let alone a majority, in favor of fighting-to-win.

However it's phrased, just about everyone is looking for a way out short of victory.

Overseas, public opinion is moving in the same direction. For example, in Great Britain Tony Blair has stepped aside for Gordon Brown, who in the midst of the recent terrorist attacks in London and Glasgow has ordered his government to ban the phrase "war on terror" and to avoid publicly linking the recent, mercifully failed attacks in London and Glasgow to any aspect of Islam. The current leaders of Germany and France are less anti-American than their predecessors, but no more willing to help us fight. Down under in Australia John Howard - blessed be his name - is holding firm, but for a combination of reasons may be approaching the end of his long tenure; none of his likely replacements are nearly so robust. And the Israelis - who are facing the triple-threat of Hamas, Hezbollah, and before too long a nuclear-armed Iran - are going through one of their periodic bouts of political paralysis.

A Second Attack

It's possible that something horrific will happen in the immediate future to shift public support here in the US, and throughout the West, from the second perception to the first. When asked by a young reporter what he thought would have the greatest impact on his government's fate, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan responded cheerfully: "Events, dear boy, events." One more 9-11-type attack - biological, chemical, or nuclear - that takes out Houston, Berlin, Vancouver or Paris, and the leader of that country will be overwhelmed by the furious public's demands to "turn the creeps who did this, and the countries that helped them, into molten glass and don't let's worry about collateral damage." (This will sound even better in French or German.) Should the next big attack come here in the US, some among us will blame the President but most won't. The public mood will be not merely ferocious, but ugly; you won't want to walk down the street wearing an "I gave to the ACLU" pin in your lapel.

Absent such an event in the near future, it's likely that over the next few years the war will settle into a phase that proponents of Perception Two will approve. Simply put, we will shift from offense to defense. The Department of Homeland Security will become our government's lead agency, and the Pentagon's role will be diminished. (Nothing will change at the State Department - but then, nothing ever does.) Most people in the US, and elsewhere in the West, will be relieved that "the war" is finally over.

To preserve the peace we will have to be more than willing to make the occasional accommodation to Moslems. If they ask us to put more pressure on the Israelis - well, we can easily do that. If Moslem checkout clerks at our supermarkets don't want to touch pork - by all means let's have separate checkout counters for customers who've bought those products. And now that we think about it, "Happy Winter" will be as good a greeting, if not a better one, than "Merry Christmas." Won't it?

Of course, there will be the occasional terrorist attack. Some, like the recent ones in London and Glasgow, will fail. Others will succeed, but guided by the mainstream media we will view them with the same detachment as we would view a meteor shower that brought flaming rocks crashing randomly into the Earth. Most will land harmlessly in fields, some will land on houses and kill those few residents unlucky enough to be home at the time. Once in a while, one will crash into a crowded shopping mall or, sadly, into a school packed with children. These things happen - alas - and while it's riveting to watch the latest disaster unfold on television there really isn't much one can do about it. Life goes on.

In the long run, history always sorts things out.

If it turns out that Perception Two of the threat is valid, then over time we will become accustomed to the level of casualties caused by the terrorists. After all, more than 40,000 Americans are killed each year in traffic accidents and we don't make a big political issue out of that, do we? Our attitude toward death-by-terrorist-attack will be the same as our attitude toward deaths on the highway: a tragedy for the victim and members of the family, but nothing really to fuss over. And if Perception Two is valid, it's even possible that the terrorist threat eventually will ease. Can you even remember the last time anyone got bombed by the IRA?

But if those of us who subscribe to Perception One are correct, then it's only a matter of time before something ghastly happens that will swing public opinion throughout the West our way - and hard. Whether this will happen in two years, or five, or in 15 years, is impossible to predict. All we can know for certain is that if Western civilization really is under attack from Islam, or from elements within Islam, then they will not give up or be appeased. At some point they're going to go for the knockout punch.

Fighting, Finally, to Win

The pessimists among us will argue that by this time we'll be too far gone to save; that years of merely playing defense and of making concessions to the sensitivities of our enemy will have eroded our military power, and sapped our will, to the point where *de facto* surrender will be the only option.

We optimists see things differently: For better or worse, it's part of the American character to wait until the last possible moment - even to wait a bit beyond the last possible moment - before kicking into high gear and getting the job done. It's in our genes; just think of how many times you've ground enamel off your teeth watching your own kid waste an entire weekend, only to start writing a book report at 10:30 Sunday night that, when you find it on the breakfast table Monday morning is by some miracle a minor masterpiece.

However horrific it may be, the knockout punch won't knock us out. Instead, it will shift us from playing defense back to offense - and this time we won't hold back. The president will ask Congress for a declaration of war and he, or she, will get it. We'll bring back the draft, send our troops into battle without one hand tied behind their backs by lawyers, and we won't waste time and energy pussyfooting with the United Nations. And if we've closed GITMO by this time - we'll reopen it and even double its size because we're going to pack it. All of this will take longer to organize, and cost more, than if we'd done it right in the aftermath of 9-11. That's unfortunate, but that's the way we Americans tend to do things. And when we do finally start fighting for real -- we'll win.

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