

The Word War

Whatever happened to the “War on Terror”?

The word went out four days before Admiral Michael Mullen was sworn in as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. On September 27, 2007, an “all hands” email was sent to the members of the Joint Staff’s J-5 section, its directorate for strategic plans and policy. It read: “Today, we have received clear direction from Adm Mullen (incoming CJCS) regarding the phrase ‘Global War on Terror’. He does not like this reference and we are not to use this in any future correspondence. Review your letters, orders, JSAPs [Joint Staff Action Processing], and presentations to ensure this reference is removed. Ensure strict compliance.”

Perhaps this edict will be overruled; perhaps it will have been overruled by the time this essay appears. But it is notable as one in a long series of examples of prominent Americans’ terminological disquietude with the phrase “War on

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Terror.” In 2005, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld trotted out the phrase “Global Struggle against Violent Extremism” as a replacement before it was struck down by the Bush White House. The usually clear-eyed political reporter and essayist Joe Klein has advocated a “Global Police Action against Terrorists.” Among 2008 presidential candidates, while Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have said that they do believe America is in a War on Terror, former Senator John Edwards has disagreed, decrying the term as a “bumper sticker” slogan. Among Republicans, former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has said it “served its purpose for awhile” but should now be replaced with the infantile “The Terrorist War against Us”—the national security version of kindergarten arguments over “who started it.” Even President George Bush, the leader most associated with the “War on Terror” told an audience at Tiptecanoe High School in Tipp City, Ohio

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in April that: “Now we’re involved in a—I call it a ‘Global War against Terror.’ You can call it a ‘Global War against Extremists,’ a ‘Global War against Radicals,’ a ‘Global War against People Who Want to Hurt America.’ You can call it whatever you want, but it is a global effort.”

The roiling conversation over how to name the conflict that began on September 11, 2001, speaks to an unease that surrounds both nouns in the phrase “War on Terror.” For some, it is the word “terror” that sticks in their craw. It is better to have a “War on Islamofascism,” say neoconservatives like Norman Podhoretz. Other literal-minded souls concur. “Why would we declare war on a tactic?” asks retired General Anthony Zinni, a Scowcroftian realist. But a “War on Terror” is not the same as a “War on Terrorism,” and wars are often named in ways that do not spell out the name of the enemy. What we now call “World War I” was commonly referred to as the “Great War” or the “War to End All Wars” until the early 1940s. Indeed, wars are rarely named in ways that explain every dot and tiddle. One wonders whether some of these same pedants would have insisted that Franklin Roosevelt summon the nation into a “War on Nazism, Fascism, and Imperialism.”

But, more than the word “terror,” it is the word “war” that has been the source of significant discomfort. This is in large part because American leaders continue to depict the war in terms that do not ring true. When Bush discusses the conflict, the historical analogy he returns to most often is that of the military battle waged by Roosevelt and Winston Churchill and armies of millions against

Hitler's Reich and Hirohito's Empire. On the other hand, the Democrats' 2004 presidential nominee, Senator John Kerry, would habitually describe the war as "primarily an intelligence and law enforcement operation that requires cooperation around the world"—something akin to the low-grade efforts against narco-traffickers in the "war on drugs." Neither analogy—nor the policy approaches that stem from them—makes sense.

Despite all the blunders and bluster that have so far surrounded the term, the phrase "War on Terror" is the right one. It is just that the nature of "war" has changed dramatically from that envisioned by either Bush or his critics—and the "terror" we're fighting is not the one that has been conventionally portrayed.

Rightly understood, the War on Terror is not primarily, though it to some extent is, a military conflict. In the Information Age, war is not solely a function of the clash of armies, or is it primarily a test of intelligence-sharing and police raids like the war on drugs. The threat we face is not just from terrorist cells, but from a cancerous worldview. The War on Terror is best compared to the Cold War—a long-term, global, ideological struggle that will be waged on every continent, occasionally flare into armed conflict, and be ultimately won not by imposing our will but by the power of our good works and example in convincing ordinary people around the world that democracy and open markets are a better choice for them than religious despotism and closed economies.

Both parties have mentioned such a foreign policy strategy. But beyond the intermittent rhetorical flourish, neither has embraced its full ramifications.

This should not be surprising. During its 40 years, and since, the nature of the Cold War has been a subject of debate and misunderstanding. Some saw it as primarily a military showdown. This included the conservatives who once rallied around Curtis LeMay's Strategic Air Command bombers and who today believe the Iron Curtain disappeared because of Ronald Reagan's arms buildup, as well as the liberals who believed that the conflict could be eased by arms control negotiations and a nuclear freeze. Others, from Henry Kissinger on the right to George Kennan on the left, viewed the Cold War as a *realpolitik* battle between competing great powers whose diplomacy needed to pay little heed to the moral considerations of those caught in the crossfire. But, ultimately, the Cold War ended on neither the battlefield nor the negotiating table, but at a shipyard in Gdansk, on Hungary's western border, and atop the carcass of the Berlin Wall. It was not Mr. Gorbachev or Mr. Reagan who tore down that wall, but anonymous Germans who believed that democracy and freedom were just and right and would bring them better lives.

Rising out of the cinders of World War II, the Cold War was a harbinger of a

new kind of conflict, one waged with both arms and ideas for both territory and hearts and minds. As such, it was a bridge to the twenty-first century struggles of which the War on Terror will only be the first.

The past six years, however, have seen both progressives and conservatives approach the current conflict with a pre-9/11 mindset, one that, at best, puts the contest of ideas and persuasion on the second tier. One of the most pernicious side effects of Bush's foreign policy disasters is that America has lost the faith of the world just at the moment we need it most. Over the course of this decade, favorable views of America have fallen from 78 percent to 37 percent in Germany, 50 to 23 percent in Spain, 75 to 30 percent in Indonesia, and 52 to 12 percent in Turkey. Yet victory in the War on Terror requires convincing people in these places to embrace America and the democratic values for which it stands. As such, it is representative of many very different kinds of wars that America will face—and it will demand a new kind of foreign policy for a globalized, democratized, Information Age world.

Since the birth of the modern nation-state system with the Treaty of Westphalia 360 years ago, two salient features largely defined the practice of diplomacy. First, in most countries, a small number of people held all power and rationed information. Second, the preeminent threats to a country came from other countries.

These features held true 250, 100, even 25 years ago. They are no longer true today. America, which set out at the start of the twentieth century to make the world safe for democracy, now searches for a safe path in a democratic world. Today, of the nearly 200 countries in the world, 123 are democracies where governments are chosen by the people at large. As the indefatigable bloggers of Beijing are demonstrating, dictatorships have an increasingly difficult time shutting down the flow of free information. And despite terrible bloodshed in many spots on the globe, the most potentially devastating threats in the coming years will come not from marching armies but from dangers that do not know borders and cannot easily be contained in this interconnected world: nuclear terrorism, climate change, endemic poverty, and epidemic disease.

In the old system, war was largely confined to confronting military opponents on a battlefield—the kind we saw in the opening days of the war in Iraq. The work of diplomacy largely meant speaking to other leaders in drawing rooms and embassies. In the new system, the post-occupation war in Iraq or the War on Terror itself are typical of conflicts that cannot ultimately be won only by killing off an enemy; rather they require changing attitudes—convincing a young man that there is a better future available to him than strapping himself to a

bomb. Today, diplomacy takes place not only at summits, but in the valleys where people live. American leaders must convince not only other heads of state to sign treaties or take action. They must be equally able to convince a factory owner in China to switch to energy efficient light bulbs, a taxi driver in Nairobi to use a condom with his girlfriend, and a father in Yemen that his boys—and girls—need an education beyond the medieval mysticism of Islamist madrassas.

When America’s “approval rating” plummets as it has in recent years, it is not merely unfortunate; it is a national security threat as serious as a missile gap or lack of naval strength would have been in years past. To be sure, there might be times when America will have to stay on a course even if there is not a single person in a single other country who thinks we’re right. But, overall, the faith in widely dispersed wisdom that underlies our very democracy should also be extended to what the Declaration of Independence calls “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind.”

Winning back the admiration and allegiance of people around the world will require more than sending Karen Hughes to Cairo and Karl Rove to Hollywood. It will mean demonstrating to people in far-flung countries that America is working to improve their lives and that it believes their future is inextricably linked to ours. It will mean seeing a dictator such as Pakistan’s General Pervez Musharraf as an opponent of America’s work, not an ally. Most importantly, it will require a new approach to our present conflict: an understanding that we won’t be successful until we stop arguing about renaming the War on Terror and start redefining it. The “terror” we should be confronting is not just that which we face from terrorism, but the terror they face from despair. And battling that terror will require every weapon America has in its arsenal for this new kind of war. **■**