

The War on Terror: Why Do We Fight?

Written by Ian Lustick

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IAN LUSTICK, JAN 14 2008

With recession in the wind neither Democratic nor Republican presidential candidates are talking much about the misbegotten war in Iraq. Even less, however, far less, do they talk about the root of that disaster—the “War on Terror.” Until the real but complex relationship between these two self-inflicted wars is understood, Americans, and the rest of the world, will be afflicted with the economic, political, and psychological burdens of both of them.

The question can be posed as follows. The United States went to war in Iraq to destroy Weapons of Mass Destruction that did not exist, and we fight a War on Terror now despite virtually no evidence whatsoever that a serious terrorist threat to the American homeland exists. “Why,” then, “do we fight?”

The official mantra is that we fight in Iraq because it is the “central front in the War on Terror.” The exact opposite is the case. We are trapped in fighting an unwinnable and even nonsensical “War on Terror,” *because* its invention was required in order to fight in Iraq. After years of slaughter in Iraq, the neocon fantasy of a series of cheap, fast neo-imperial victories, is dead. But the War on Terror, fashioned by the supremacist hawks to enlist the American public in their adventure, lives on, stronger than ever.

How did the War on Terror take on a life of its own and trap the entire political class, and most Americans, into public beliefs about the need to fight a global war on terror as our first priority, even when there’s no evidence of an enemy present in the United States? What accounts for more than \$800 billion worth of expenditures, along with baseless cycles of terrorist “sleeping cell” hysteria and McCarthyist policies of surveillance and “pre-emptive prosecution” not seen in this country since the early 1950s?

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? Widening definitions 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. 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

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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, all raising huge catcher's mitts into the air for the billions of dollars of grants and contracts just blowing in the wind.

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. With billions of dollars a year in state and local funding, 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 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 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.

The dimensions of the War on Terror are still expanding rapidly in the face of a small, if not entirely absent domestic terrorist threat. But politicians, forced into playing Chicken Little to avoid seeming to suffer from a “pre-9/11 mentality,” can offer no break on spending or War on Terror rhetoric. In all the debates that have been held among the presidential candidates, hardly any attention, certainly no critical attention, directed to the War on Terror. Far from posing the obvious question of what attacks have not occurred despite the obvious ease with which Americans can be killed by malicious gunmen, the most common comment made on the subject of terrorism is criticism of the prosecution of the War on Terror as less aggressive, less well-funded, and less comprehensive than it should be—think, in particular, of Rudy Giuliani.

But leave aside the politicians. What about those protected bastions of critical insight in American life—universities and the press? Forget about it. Neither has been willing to question the justification and expansiveness of the War on Terror. Universities rush to the counter-terror trough, where funding abounds for research on terror, on Muslims, on ever more elaborate security devices, and on degree programs in Homeland Security. For the press, it's as good as it gets. “Hurricane Osama,” the real storm of the century, is always just about to hit and never goes away. Every false alarm of another 9/11 attack on the way sends the news media into paroxysms of sensationally foreboding, emergency-mode coverage, helping enliven the credibility of countless television shows, films, and potboiler novels with the same plot line—maniacal but brilliant Middle Eastern terrorists poised to strike but for the heroic exploits of a few bold souls operating within a generally incompetent government.

Most Americans have learned that the Iraq War was a mistake, a disastrously counter-productive mistake. They have yet to be able even to imagine the truth about the War on Terror more generally—that it is a self-perpetuating machine of fear and profit that serves no master and no one's interests, ultimately, but its own. As long as politicians and pundits compete to be tougher-than-thou against terrorist enemies American voters have been trained to assume are lurking everywhere, discrete programs to deal with real security threats will be endangered, while the United States will remain, as Bin Laden himself gleefully observed in his November 2004 videotape, trapped in a

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maelstrom of waste, worry, and witch-hunt, that “bleeds America to the point of bankruptcy.”

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