

Mission Accomplished

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JUN 4 2013

President Obama gave a very thoughtful speech at the US National Defense University on May 23rd in which he tried to start a national discussion to redefine the scope and nature of the struggle against al Qaeda and its affiliates, a struggle that has consumed much of America's military resources and many American and other lives in the last dozen years. Although President Obama never named the war which embodies the struggle, he said that it had to have boundaries and, like all wars, must end. Quoting another president, James Madison, he noted that "No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare." We must define the struggle or it will define us, he argued.

He knows what the struggle isn't. It is not a war against Islam as he believes America's opponents want the world to think it is. It is not a war against terror as his predecessor, George W. Bush similarly at a loss for words, called it. And it cannot be the now and forever war as it has the danger of becoming. There are still terrorists out there who want to kill Americans. There are still grievances that various peoples believe they have with America. But al Qaeda has lost most of its leaders and much of its capability to undertake significant attacks. Its several affiliates, although not defeated, have their attention often focused regionally and have not been especially interested in or effective their attempts to reach the US.

In the speech President Obama agonizes about the use of drones, raids, and Guantanamo. Bad things happen in using drones, most especially the killing of innocents he admitted. Many hate what they perceive as the arrogance of America's use of drones. But the president made no promise that he is going to end their use. They are not for revenge, he said, but to eliminate those who have been involved in and are planning attacks against us and who cannot be captured. The alternative to the use of drones are Special Operations raids which are more intrusive, often less precise, and risk encounters with local forces that have no grievance with America. Without drones the stakes can quickly escalate. And contrary to the argument of some critics that drones make going to war too easy, drones are the way out of conflicts like Afghanistan, offering the American public the assurance that pressure on al Qaeda will continue despite the withdrawal of US combat forces. The President can't give up the use of drones unless he wants a bigger war with more, not less, boots on the ground.

Guantanamo isn't going away either. President Obama blamed the Congress for blocking his attempts to transfer the remaining 150 or so detainees out to either release to their home nations or transfer to American prisons. But as a heckler pointed out (amazingly, there was one who managed to gain access to the National Defense University which is on a military base), most of the remaining detainees are Yemenis eligible for transfer to Yemen on the president's own certification that they will be properly monitored there. He has not been willing to do so for over a year because of instability in Yemen and the releasable detainees are at the core of a hunger strike that is currently underway at Guantanamo. There is no will in the Congress to bring the remaining dangerous detainees, most of who cannot be tried in either military tribunals or US courts, to be housed in prison facilities in the US. Like so much related to the war, it is a bizarre situation.

President Obama was unapologetic about the war with no name (minus its Iraq excursion which he barely mentioned in the speech and which he makes clear he believes was wrongly conceived). The overall war is a just one, he said, and one that is "...waged proportionally, in last resort, and in self-defense." America was attacked and is still menaced. President Obama though recognizes that nature of the threat is changing—more diffuse, more home

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grown, less al Qaeda central. He wants now to rely more on intelligence partnership with allies, more focused attacks on terror networks, and more diplomatic engagement and the use of foreign assistance. But much of this has limits of its own. America already has the cooperation of most states. Few want to risk direct US military intervention if cooperation is lacking. The entire drone business is justified in terms of rolling up the networks to prevent attacks. Advocacy for more diplomatic engagement is mainly empty rhetoric. With whom do we need to engage where contact is lacking? And, as Obama admits, Americans are not in a very charitable mood when it comes to lands where terrorists roam. He seeks more foreign assistance by justifying its value as anti-terror tool, surely making recipients even more skeptical than they have been of US motives.

It is a war that will not end and that is already won. The pressure on traditional religion, most especially Islam, by modernization as represented most intensively by America's materialistic culture and democratic political values will continue. So too will be the pointless terrorism of a few resisters. We can stop neither. Those who seek more organized resistance get crushed or live in the guest houses of tyrants whose own days are numbered. Osama bin Laden is dead and so too are most of his co-conspirators. Because of obvious sensitivities we can neither name the war nor declare victory. But it is over whether or not there is a national discussion.

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