Chasing Rainbows and the Paradoxes of the War on Terror

https://www.e-ir.info/2008/09/28/chasing-rainbows-and-the-paradoxes-of-the-war-on-terror/

FEARGAL COCHRANE, SEP 28 2008

This essay argues that the war on terror that followed the 9/11 attacks on the United States is fundamentally misconceived and is actually achieving the opposite to what was intended. The architects of the war on terror have been chasing rainbows since 2001 as the harder they have run towards their goal, the further away it has seemed to move. The central reason for this is that the advocates of the war on terror misunderstood the capacity of military power to deliver success and fundamentally misconceived the security problem for the US and its allies. The paradox at the heart of all this was that the US could only have made gains in the war on terror if it had understood the connection between national security on the one hand, and its own foreign policy on the other. Instead, the war on terror dealt with the symptom, 'terrorism', rather than the cause, namely the world view and political grievances of those who carry out 'terrorist' attacks. The aggressive pursuit of the war on terror by the US administration and its allies in the 'coalition of the willing' served, ironically, to underwrite rather than undermine, militant networks such as Al-Qaeda.

Clearly the 9/11 attacks on the United States have dominated the focus of international relations since 2001 and have been seen as representing a epoch-shifting moment in the international political system. From this point forwards, the emphasis of powerful Western countries and the United States in particular, moved from ethnic violence and intra-state conflict to the perceived scourge of international terrorism. Operationally, this shifted the focus to a strategic pragmatism, where resources, alliances and coercive diplomacy, revolved around the ultimate goal of winning the war on terror.

Politically meanwhile, the developed world which was used to observing warfare at several removes, or through media reportage, found itself directly involved in armed conflict and implicated in violence that was either directed at it, or undertaken in its name. As Roland Dannreuther suggested, the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s allowed people in the developed West to breathe a collective sigh of relief, and apart from those caught up in ethnic violence,

Chasing Rainbows and the Paradoxes of the War on Terror
Written by Feargal Cochrane

the threat of war for most seemed to be contained within a few regional hotspots in less developed areas such as sub-Saharan Africa or less stable locations such as the Balkans. 'Violence and war was, nevertheless, something that happened to "them" and not to "us". The principal impact of 9/11 was radically to subvert this confidence and self-assurance, demonstrating that violence and death could be inflicted on the richest and seemingly most secure parts of the North.'[1] It punctured the self-assurance and confidence of Western countries and frightened people who were not used to being at the centre of violent conflict. The 9/11 attacks were understandably condemned as being a heinous act against defenceless civilians and while the location was the United States, the victims came from around the world. The reaction of the United States was to shape the Presidency of George W. Bush and reorient the institutions of government as well as the foreign policy of the US and its allies.

The war on terror was seen as representing a new paradigm in warfare represented by terrorist networks that transcended geo-political borders and the traditional state system and facilitated by globalisation and digital technology. This Network-Centric War (NCW) required a revolution in how states such as the US, and others who sought to fight the war on terror, organised their military and intelligence communities.[2]

This has been associated with the strategic shift in the US military from firepower and size, to information and mobility, known by the acronym RMA (Revolution in Military Affairs). RMA was a strategy which sought to adapt to the decentralisation of warfare and the perceived need to become more mobile and versatile in the face of sub-state rather than inter-state security threats. RMA was seen as the methodology for dealing with the concept of Network-Centric War. NCW required large-scale monitoring, data-gathering and analysis of communications within civilian populations and the ability to detect (and hopefully stop) terrorist activities of the sort that resulted in the 9/11 attacks. In practical terms this relates to increasing the surveillance of people entering and leaving the country (e.g. through biometric passports, fingerprinting at airports). monitoring communications between people within the country on an ongoing basis, using coercive questioning of suspects (aka torture) to extract information likely to be of use in the war on terror and introducing a raft of new legislation to legally facilitate all of the above on the grounds of national security.

While there has been much discussion about how 9/11 presented a new form of terrorism and re-formulated the response to it within state security services, some fundamental points of continuity can be observed with the violent conflicts that preceded it. 9/11 and subsequent attacks such as the Madrid train bombings in March 2004 and the London attacks of July 2005 were similar in nature (though larger in scale) to guerrilla warfare tactics of previous conflicts. These groups used terror against civilian populations to exert political pressure and leverage upon national governments and transnational organisations. While often opaque, these networks had a rational (at least to them)

Chasing Rainbows and the Paradoxes of the War on Terror
Written by Feargal Cochrane

set of objectives which they pursued through violent means. They sought to achieve these aims through the use of force, surprise no-warning attacks, and by skilfully using the media to create an impact beyond the physical attacks themselves.

In many ways the 9/11 attacks and the response to them by security agencies was very familiar and fits into classic counter-insurgency strategies that have been the stock in trade of security services and national governments for a number of decades which sought to deal with guerrilla armies that were militarily small but politically versatile. The prosecution of the war on terror by the US administration and its allies was based on traditional techniques which combined the primacy of surveillance and military intelligence, with a broader strategy linked to the importance of 'winning the battle of hearts and minds' within public opinion. A major element of this strategy involved demonising and criminalising the enemy, emphasising the illegitimacy of the terrorist act and the extent to which this conflicts with the core values of the civilian population. A key element in this process involves frightening the civilian population sufficiently to enable civil liberties to be curtailed to provide more leeway for security services to carry out invasive surveillance and ultimately arrest, detain and aggressively question those they deem to be a possible threat.

Despite the questionable success of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the central problem with the war on terror was that its advocates misunderstood the capacity of military power. While this was capable of toppling regimes such as the Taliban or Saddam Hussain, it was much less effective in dealing with dispersed adversaries such as Al-Qaeda and the other networks it was seeking to eradicate.

It could be claimed that the architects of the war on terror articulated an ideological commitment to defeating terrorism but in doing so confused the ends with the means. Terrorism is a methodology, not an ideology. It is the means, not the ends. The war on terror was focused therefore on the *symptom* rather than the *cause* of the security problem. For the cause we must look at the structure of the international system, the domination of transnational organisations such as the United Nations and World Bank by powerful Western interests, and the foreign policies of the United States and its allies, especially in relation to the politics of the Middle East. This connection is not the preserve of commentators on the left of the political spectrum and was made by President Bush himself during the war in Lebanon in 2006.[3]

The policy stance of the US and its allies towards the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians became emblematic for many of the hypocrisy at the core of the war on terror. Violence escalated in the region with increasing numbers of Palestinian suicide bombings on the one hand and harsh Israeli government repression of the Palestinian community on the other. While the US administration realised that fighting the war on terror would be made easier by

Chasing Rainbows and the Paradoxes of the War on Terror
Written by Feargal Cochrane

a de-escalation of Israeli-Palestinian violence, this was always seen primarily in security rather than in political terms. Viewed through a non-Western lens therefore, the prosecutors of the war on terror were perceived as being less than genuine, facilitating and endorsing terror tactics by successive Israeli governments against Palestinians in the Occupied Territories while at the same time claiming to be campaigning against repressive regimes in other parts of the world.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the US reaction to the 9/11 attacks failed to adequately understand what the cause of the security problem was, and pursued policies which made it worse. This was wrapped up in moralistic rhetoric which suggested that the war on terror was a battle between freedom and servitude, civilisation and fear, good and evil. While this might have helped motivate people to fight the war, it did not equip them to understand its causes or possible remedies. This fact has been recognised by none other than Zbigniew Brzezinski, former National Security Adviser to President Jimmy Carter and not a figure associated with leftist critiques of US foreign policy.

The "war on terror" has created a culture of fear in America. The Bush administration's elevation of these three words into a national mantra since the horrific events of 9/11 has had a pernicious impact on American democracy, on America's psyche and on U.S. standing in the world. Using this phrase has actually undermined our ability to effectively confront the real challenges we face from fanatics who may use terrorism against us.[4]

'Terrorism' of the type witnessed on 9/11 comes from long-term grievances linked to 'experiences of sustained exclusion'[5] and not (in the main) from opportunist acts of demagogues or psychopaths. Whether or not this explains the mind of Osama Bin Laden or his colleagues in Al-Qaeda, the fact is that the war on terror has widened the space within which they can operate and helped to justify their actions within the Arab world. Rather than defeating terrorism, the war on terror has facilitated and worsened it, presenting a remedy for an illness that risks killing the patient it was designed to cure.

It will only be possible to win the war on terror when the US understands that its homeland security is inextricably linked with its foreign policy and that efforts to 'root out the terrorists' will only succeed in creating new ones. The inherent paradox here for Western policy-makers, is that security measures must be at a level which matches the terrorist threat, yet each increase in security ratchets up that very threat.

It is time to stop chasing the rainbow in the hope that a pot of gold can be found at the end of it.

Feargal Cochrane is Director of the Richardson Institute for Peace and Conflict Research at Lancaster University.

Chasing Rainbows and the Paradoxes of the War on Terror
Written by Feargal Cochrane

This article is based on his new book entitled Ending Wars (Polity Press, 2008) part of a new Polity series 'War and Conflict in the Modern World'. The book examines the various circumstances that have come together to end violent conflicts and the techniques that have been used by internal and external actors to assist the process of ending war.

[1] Roland Dannrauther (2007) *International Security: The Contemporary Agenda*, (Cambridge, Polity) 165.

[2] See D.S. Alberts, J.J. Garstka, & F.P. Stein, (1999) *Network Centric Warfare: Developing and Leveraging Information Superiority*, (2nd Ed.) (Washington, CCRP Publication Series)

[3] President George Bush 'President's Radio Address, White House Radio,29 July 2006. http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/07/20060729.html (last accessed 25/09/2008)

[4] Zbigniew Brzezinski 'Terrorised by "War on Terror"' *Washington Post*, 25 March 2005, B01.

[5] John Paul Lederach 'The Challenge of Terror: A Travelling Essay' 16 September 2001 http://www.nd.edu/~krocinst/sept11/ledtrav.shtml(last accessed 25/09/2008)