

REFLECTING UPON THE 'WAR ON TERROR' AND ITS GLOBAL RAMIFICATIONS

Dealing with the Unexpected

Daniel Pullin

Publishing Assistant

Gale, part of Cengage Learning

Scaling 104 storeys and reaching over 540 metres into the Manhattan skyline, the new World Trade Center has recently opened for business [www](#). Thirteen years after the fateful terrorist attacks which struck the United States (US) on September 11, 2001, the building's opening is an opportunity for reflection on the 'war on terror' which emerged as a result of the collapse of the twin towers. Using *Chatham House Online Archive*, we can re-examine some of the thoughts of various commentators in the aftermath of the attacks. Politicians and academics speaking from American, European and Middle Eastern perspectives all offered their views on the new threat posed by terrorism. Two of the key strands in their discussions will be examined: firstly the analysis of how a 'war on terror' was adopted and legitimised and, secondly, the implications of this approach. These discussions indicate that implementing a 'war on terror' was a contested process which had many unexpected consequences – especially upon the Middle East. At a time of deep reflection on the catastrophic events of 9/11, there is evidently still much to learn from a re-evaluation of these debates.

Using the *Chatham House Online Archive*, we can re-examine some of the thoughts of various commentators in the aftermath of the attacks.

Chatham House Online Archive reveals a range of interpretations on how the 'war on terror' emerged. British academic, and the then Director of Chatham House Victor Bulmer-Thomas, in his article 'US and



Terrorism: Targeting Terrorism', charted the three-stage response of the US to 9/11. This involved first portraying the attacks as an 'act of war', then linking together those who committed the atrocities with those who financed them, and finally winning international support to its cause [IPG](#). Bulmer-Thomas was particularly critical of the Bush administration's association of the attacks with war, since he saw no evidence that there was an identifiable enemy to fight [IPG](#). His interpretation implied that the sudden nature of the attacks upon the US had clouded the thoughts of politicians, obscuring the purpose of the 'war on terror' which they promptly launched. This led them to identify the means – military retaliation – before defining the ends – a clearly composed strategy [IPG](#).

While this reading of events suggests that the war on terror was a hastily composed response to 9/11, not all commentators were in agreement. Another line of argument emerging from the content analysed is that the 'war on terror' was a more carefully devised strategy. In a discussion paper produced at a Chatham House conference, it is written that the approach of the Bush administration was marked in its initial stages by patience and skill, as the government sought to win international support for its action [IPG](#). In a similar vein, former Head of the NATO and European Policy Secretariat Chris Wright argued in a 2002 Chatham House address that the response of the US was based upon deeply held beliefs of democracy and freedom [IPG](#). The attacks therefore sparked feelings of moral injustice, making the response less a significant break in US policy and more a logical extension of existing ideas [IPG](#). In launching a 'war on

terror', the US government was therefore reinforcing its existing policy direction.

The role of morality in legitimising this response is a recurring theme in the literature, espoused by Saudi Arabian scholar Mai Yamani, British academic Rosemary Hollis and former US National Security Council staff member Dr Gary Sick . These contributors gave great significance to the Bush administration's adoption of 'Wild West' imagery, which elevated the clash between the US and terrorism to one of 'good versus evil'. Bush's sentiment of 'either you're with us or you're with the terrorists' was therefore infused with a new level of symbolic meaning . A further important component of this was President Bush's attempts to group together Iraq, Iran and North Korea as an 'axis of evil'. Given their, according to Hollis, somewhat tenuous links to weapons of mass destruction, these countries were deemed antithetical to the US . It was hoped that this categorisation would support the justice of the US's cause, helping to define who was on which side in the newly-devised conflict .

However, addressing the second key theme in the documentation, there were several unforeseen implications of such an approach. By viewing events from a Middle Eastern perspective, a more rounded understanding of the US's response to 9/11 can be gained. Particularly insightful here are the comments of Yamani, speaking to a Chatham House audience one year after 9/11. She talked of the fear held by leaders of Arab Muslim countries that they would, by association, now become grouped with the 'bad guys' against the US . Hence

the friendship which countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia had previously enjoyed with the US would now come under severe threat. Furthermore, Yamani argued, the attitude of the people within these countries would be profoundly affected; images of 'with us or against us' only sharpened their sense of a divided world .

This sentiment was supported by the American Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, Kenneth Roth, in 2003. He drew attention to the level of ignorance towards the internal dynamics of Middle Eastern societies which the US approach fostered, which had caused humanitarian concerns to be neglected in favour of a short-term fixation with security . Perhaps this is why the 'war on terror' produced consequences which were more extensive than it had anticipated, such as the changing internal dynamics of the Gulf and Middle East . Taking this viewpoint into consideration, the far-reaching ramifications of the US response to 9/11 can be better understood.

The overriding impression from the literature surveyed is that the US response to 9/11 with a 'war on terror' was a highly contested process. While framing the clash as one of good versus evil helped to win the support of sections of the US public to its cause, it's arguable whether this response fully accounted for the realities of the Middle Eastern world. Whether it was in reaction to such a shocking event, or a more logical policy development, this approach has resulted in unforeseen and far-reaching international consequences. As the eyes of the world are once again drawn to the might of the US in its opening of One World Trade Center, now is an ideal opportunity to re-evaluate 9/11 in its global context. [GALE](#)

Read and view extracts from referenced *Chatham House Online Archive* articles

Bulmer-Thomas, Victor. "US and Terrorism: Targeting Terrorism." *The World Today* 57.10 (2001) 

"U. S. Diplomatic Strategy Post 9/11." *9/11 and the Middle East, Proceedings, Chatham House, London, 20 March 2002*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2002 

Wright, Chris, Rosemary Hollis, and Mai Yamani. "September 11 One Year On: An Assessment." RIIA/8/6388. Chatham House, London. 11 Sept. 2002 

Sick, Gary. "The Bush Doctrine." RIIA/8/6405. Chatham House, London. 18 Oct. 2002 

Roth, Kenneth. "The War Against Terrorism and the Dangerous Neglect of Human Rights." RIIA/8/6432. Chatham House, London. 21 Jan. 2003 

Clarke, Michael. "War on Terrorism: Unpredictable." *The World Today* 57.11 (2001) 

 Click to view supporting image on our website

 Click icon to open referenced PDF

 Click icon to visit referenced external website