

*On the evening of November 21, 2002, Professor John J. Mearsheimer spoke at the Conference on Religion and Terrorism on the topic of U.S. foreign policy and the war on terrorism. His prepared speech took as its basis his piece on "Hearts and Minds" that was in the Fall 2002 issue of The National Interest, which follows.*

---

"Hearts and Minds," The National Interest, No. 69, Fall 2002

by John J. Mearsheimer

The central purpose of American power is to provide security for the United States in a dangerous world. Before September 11, other states, especially other great powers, were perceived to be the main threat to the United States. To maximize its security, American policymakers worked assiduously to ensure that the United States held a favorable position in the global balance of power.

This template for thinking about American security policy has been altered somewhat by September 11. The United States still has to be deeply concerned with great power politics, particularly with the rise of China. But now it also has to confront Al-Qaeda, which has the United States in its gunsight and is determined to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

President Bush has not yet devised a clear strategy for combating terrorism. Nevertheless, he has been under intense pressure to view September 11 as a transformative moment that calls for the United States to become much more actively involved around the world. Indeed, some conservatives argue that it is time to create an American empire, where the United States dominates the entire globe and shapes it according to its own interests. Presumably, this

ambitious strategy would keep great power rivals at bay as well as eliminate the terrorist threat.

This strategy of empire is unilateralist at its core. It aims to allow the United States to operate as freely as possible on the world stage, unconstrained by allies, multilateral institutions or international law. It also calls for a wide-ranging war on terrorism, which means targeting a broad array of terrorist organizations, host states and states seeking weapons of mass destruction.

The key instrument for winning that war is America's mighty military machine. Proponents of empire believe that if the United States makes clear its willingness to use force and then wins a few victories, other foes will either desist from active opposition or even jump on the American bandwagon. This tendency will be pronounced in the Islamic world, where there is said to be a profound respect for winners. According to Charles Krauthammer, "The way to tame the Arab street is not with appeasement and sweet sensitivity, but with raw power and victory." For sure, there will be incorrigible states like Iraq that refuse to accept the new world order. The United States will invade them, topple their rulers, and transform them into friendly democracies. Such ambitious social engineering would not only eliminate Saddam Hussein, but would also convince the likes of Iran and North Korea that they had better dance to Uncle Sam's tune or be prepared to pay the piper.

There is only one thing wrong with this rosy vision of Pax Americana; it is not going to work. Instead of creating a benign world of pro-American

democracies, such an expansive military campaign is more likely to make the terrorism problem worse. Any strategy that relies heavily on military force to combat terrorism is likely to increase hatred of the United States and complicate the task of defeating Al-Qaeda. One suspects that the Bush team understands this point, since so far it has employed the U.S. military to fight terrorism with great caution and circumspection.

Why is an American empire an unrealistic objective? First, empires are very difficult to build today because of nationalism, which causes peoples and states to fiercely resist domination by others. Palestinian resistance against Israel, Afghan resistance against the Soviets, and Vietnamese resistance against the United States—not to mention the collapse of the British, French and Soviet empires—are prominent examples of this phenomenon at work.

Some argue that the United States is different, because it would create a benign empire. After all, it is a democracy, and most Americans believe that democracies pursue enlightened foreign policies. Unfortunately, large numbers of people outside the United States—even in other democracies—are sharply critical of American foreign policy, which is not always benign toward them. Indeed, for the vast majority of people in the world, benign domination is an oxymoron. Therefore, if the United States pursues empire, even a democratic Pax Americana, it will end up as public enemy number one.

Second, using military force to topple regimes and replace them with pro-American leaders is a daunting task. Sometimes it is easy to eliminate hostile

regimes, as the United States showed in Afghanistan. The difficulty, however, comes with the nation-building that follows; i.e., putting a friendly and stable regime in place so that U.S. troops can go home. This is the problem the Bush Administration now faces in Afghanistan, and surely would confront if it invades Iraq. The United States could eliminate Saddam with relative ease, but then it would be stuck—or have to stick others—with the job of occupying Iraq.

Third, the extensive use of military force is no way to deal with terrorists because they make poor targets for conventional military operations. Terrorists operate in small groups and disappear into cities or the countryside when directly threatened. This is what happened in Afghanistan: when the American military closed in on Al-Qaeda, it melted away. Furthermore, trying to stamp out terrorism with military forces is likely to enrage, not humble, the masses in the Islamic world. That anger will surely translate into resentment against the United States, further complicating efforts to eliminate Al-Qaeda.

The final problem with fighting wars to root out terrorism is that most Americans do not have much appetite for participating in the fight. An example: shortly after the World Trade Center fell, 69 percent of Harvard students favored military action against the perpetrators, but only 38 percent were willing to fight themselves. In a recent survey of college students, 37 percent said they would evade the draft if called today. Also, the American military has shown little enthusiasm for combat when it might involve significant casualties. U.S. commanders were reluctant to directly engage Al-Qaeda at Tora Bora and in

Operation Anaconda, and there is much evidence that senior officers in the Pentagon oppose invading Iraq.

Rather than pursue an empire with the sword to defeat Al-Qaeda, the United States should adopt a “hearts and minds” strategy that concentrates on reducing Islamic hostility toward it. Instead of building an empire—which will increase anti-American hatred and put U.S. forces on the front lines around the world—the United States should seek to reduce its military footprint and use force sparingly.

A hearts and minds strategy contains four main ingredients. First, the United States should not engage in a global war on all terrorist organizations wherever they might arise, but should focus on destroying Al-Qaeda and its close allies. Otherwise, it will squander resources on secondary threats and create enemies out of terrorist organizations that have no special quarrel with America.

Second, the United States should place the highest priority on locking up the fissile material and nuclear weapons in the former Soviet Union, because that is where a terrorist is likely to acquire the ultimate weapon. Some conservatives justify a war on Iraq by claiming that Saddam might give Al-Qaeda or other such groups nuclear weapons if he had them. But this claim is unconvincing, because bin Laden would use them against the United States or Israel, who would almost certainly respond with a nuclear strike against Iraq. Saddam is an aggressive despot, but there is no evidence that he is suicidal. If we are really worried about

terrorists getting their hands on weapons of mass destruction (and we should be), we should concentrate on the most likely source (Russia) rather than on far less imminent dangers (Iraq).

Third, America should emphasize intelligence, diplomacy and covert actions over military force in its campaign against Al-Qaeda. Of course, circumstances might arise that call for large-scale military assaults, but they should not be our preferred method of operation.

Fourth, the United States should adopt policies that ameliorate the rampant anti-Americanism in the Islamic world. If such policies are successful, individuals and states in that region would be less likely to support Al-Qaeda and more willing to cooperate with the United States against terrorism. Furthermore, the pool of potential recruits for Al-Qaeda would shrink substantially.

Some might say that this approach cannot work because the Islamic world hates Western culture, not U.S. policies. In this view, they hate us for who we are, and we cannot change our identity. However, it is clear from recent polls and abundant anecdotal evidence that the root of the problem is not mtv or hip-hop, or even the Western values of freedom and individual liberty. Rather, the problem is specific American policies: U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia; sanctions against Iraq; unqualified backing of Israel; U.S. support of repressive regimes in Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia; and the apparent relish with which the United States uses force against Islamic societies.

Obviously, the United States needs to overhaul its Middle East policies if it hopes to solve the terrorist problem. To start, it should end “dual containment”, which requires a major American presence in the region to contain both Iran and Iraq. Instead, the United States should rely on the states in the region to balance each other. Specifically, it should seek to improve relations with Iran, not Iraq, and rely heavily on Iran to contain Iraq (or vice versa if necessary). That strategy would allow the United States to withdraw its forces from Saudi Arabia and act as an offshore balancer in the region, as it did from 1947 until 1990. It follows that Washington should not invade Iraq. Also, sanctions against Iraq should end, as they are costly and ineffective.

The United States should make a major effort to end the war between Israel and the Palestinians, because that is the only way America can remain close to Israel and still have good relations with the Islamic world. In effect, that means creating a viable Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank, which will require Washington to pressure Israel to remove most of its settlements from those areas. If an agreement is reached, the United States should target aid to Israel so that it can easily defend itself within its new borders. If Israel refuses to end its occupation, America should cut off economic and diplomatic support to Israel. In short, the United States either has to find a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict or distance itself from Israel. Otherwise, the terrorism problem will never go away, and might even get worse.

Finally, the Bush Administration should tone down its rhetoric about pre-emptive strikes. It does not make sense to shout from the rooftops that America is committed to striking out of the blue against any group or state it considers evil. Such a policy alienates allies, tips off adversaries, promotes nuclear proliferation and generally makes states less willing to cooperate with the United States. It makes much more sense, as Teddy Roosevelt said, to speak softly and carry a big stick.

The Bush Administration has made progress over the past year in its campaign against Al-Qaeda. But much work lies ahead. The best way to crush Al-Qaeda is not to build a worldwide empire based mainly on military force, but instead to lower America's military profile around the globe while improving its image in the Islamic world.

---

John J. Mearsheimer, the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, is the author of [The Tragedy of Great Power Politics](#) (W. W. Norton, 2001).