

Clement M. Henry, "Security's Rhetoric," *Northwestern Journal of International Affairs* IV (Winter 2002), pp. 27-31

The shock of 911 produced responses from the Bush Administration that have increased the probability of greater tragedies ahead. By defining the hunt after the alleged perpetrators of 911 as a "war" against terrorism, the Administration made its initial mistake. To be in a real war with a superpower has enhanced the prestige of Osama Bin Laden and the Qaeda in much of the Arab and Muslim world. War dignifies adversaries by putting them on a level playing field. Surely subterranean transnational terrorist networks do not deserve such respect. Those that kill thousands of innocent civilians should be viewed as criminals akin to international smugglers or drug cartels. Like other criminals they should be apprehended, judged, and sentenced by international tribunals. The International Criminal Court of Justice might have been an excellent vehicle except that the Bush Administration has stonewalled it.

The Administration's second series of errors, committed even before 911 and unfortunately not yet corrected, has consisted of its unabashedly unilateral approach to international affairs. Whatever the issue, whether global warming, international trade, land mines, anti-ballistic missiles, or the "War Against Terrorism," the Bush Administration has preferred going it alone to working with treaties, international conventions, and international organizations or coalitions that might constrain its freedom to act unilaterally. "You are with us or against" sums up the black and white world of the Bush Administration. In practice the unilateralists in the Department of Defense seem to be undercutting most of the professional efforts of the coalition builders in the State Department, who are obliged to work with various shades of gray.

Black and white road maps did not help us to navigate through the intricate patterns of Afghani politics and rebuild the country we have now contributed to devastating. A more diplomatic, multilateral response to transnational terrorism might have enabled the Taliban regime to hand Bin Laden and other al Qaeda officials over to an international tribunal. If a serious effort had then failed, the preponderantly US military operation in Afghanistan might have enjoyed greater legitimacy in the Muslim world. As it was, many Muslims, in the so-called moderate countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia as well in Iran, viewed the operations as a rerun of nineteenth century European imperialism using B-52s instead of gunboats. For many, Osama Bin Laden is perceived as a heroic freedom fighter rather than an indicted criminal cult leader on the loose. The political result of the military operation, while temporarily destroying the authority of the Taliban, has been to weaken the authority of the central government of Afghanistan. It can no longer, for instance, exercise any effective control over the production of poppies for heroin production, which the Taliban had attempted with some success to eradicate.

"You are with us or against us" does not recognize the variety of interests and perceptions of other peoples, notably in the Middle East. The Eisenhower Administration committed similar errors in the 1950s when, at the height of the Cold War, it was bullying various Arab countries into joining the Baghdad Pact, one of a

group of military alliances ostensibly to defend the “Free World” against the Soviet Union. The Baghdad Pact in fact served to maintain British influence in Iraq. Egypt, with its recent memories of Anglo-Egyptian treaties legitimating the presence of British forces in the country, rejected any new treaty commitment and was consequently ostracized. The Eisenhower Administration did not seem to appreciate that other countries in the Middle East, as in other regions of the world outside Western Europe, might not always identify their strategic interests with those of the United States, however closely identified we might think these were with those of the “Free World.” Egypt was more concerned at the time with regional threats and opportunities than with taking sides in a distant Cold War.

So also today, “You are with us or against” is hardly a useful guideline for building the coalitions that are needed to round up dangerous networks of transnational terrorists. The Bush mantra assumes that everybody sees right and wrong in the same way. It does not allow that one people’s “terrorist” is another people’s “freedom fighter.” The Reagan Administration had in fact funded or indirectly encouraged the “freedom fighters” in Afghanistan who subsequently became Taliban and Qaeda terrorists.

The contest over definitions, whether the network is “terrorist” or “freedom fighting,” is a political rather than semantic struggle. In any conventional insurgency the incumbent regime attacks the rebels as “bandits,” whereas these try to demoralize and destroy any local authority, by assassinating local notables if necessary, to establish a legitimate counter-authority. The battle for public opinion, for legitimacy or, as Gramsci would put it, “hegemony,” is as important as the military dimension.

The Bush Administration’s unilateral approach takes the political victory over its definitions for granted while implementing measures that have reversed the initial international waves of sympathy for the United States following 9/11. Even a number of our European allies have been critical of our conduct of the Afghanistan campaign and notably of our treatment of the prisoners.

Nowhere are the consequences of “You are either with us or against” more evident than in the Middle East. People in the Bush Administration, notably senior officials in the Department of Defense, have sided with Israel. Immediately following 9/11 Prime Minister Ariel Sharon tried to identify the American suffering from terrorism with Israeli suffering. He tried to persuade the president and American public opinion that America’s War Against Terrorism was identical with Israel’s war against the Palestinian “terrorists.” One measure of his success was the Bush Administration’s decision on October 31, 2001, to name Hizbollah and Hamas as terrorist organizations (along with at least one Jewish extremist organization, Kach).

Hizbollah (“The Party of God”) is a Lebanese political party represented in parliament. Its military wing had waged war in southern Lebanon against Israeli occupying forces and their Lebanese allies. Most Lebanese and other Arabs view Hizbollah paramilitary forces as freedom fighters, not terrorists. So also Hamas, created with the encouragement of Israel in the mid-1980s as a counterforce to Yasser Arafat’s Palestinian Liberation

Organization, is perceived by most Christian and Muslim Middle Easterners as a national liberation organization rather than a terrorist cult. Neither Hizbollah nor Hamas have any known ties with Qaeda. Nor do they constitute transnational threats aimed at the United States although Hizbollah did attack US marines and civilians in the mid 1980s when the United States had sided with a Lebanese government that represented an extremist minority of Christians.

The Bush Administration seems in part, at least, to have accepted Sharon's argument that our War Against Terrorism is equivalent to Israel's war against an illegally occupied people. Before 911 the Administration had unwisely decided to steer as clearly as possible away from the growing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rather than continuing President Clinton's valiant efforts to make peace between the two sides. While involvement was bound to carry domestic political costs, inaction has compounded the difficulties of building effective coalitions to combat transnational terrorism. The inaction of the Bush Administration was already viewed in most of the Arab world as complicity in favor of Ariel Sharon's brutal occupation and promotion of illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. President Bush's ineffectual, ambiguous, and halfhearted responses to Israel's destruction of the Palestinian Authority in the major urban centers of the West Bank have further enraged Arab opinion. Illegal uses of Apache helicopters and other American military equipment do not go unnoticed either. To return to parallels between the unilateral moralizing of the Bush Administration and that of the Eisenhower Administration, there was also one very sharp contrast. When Israel, France, and Britain attacked Egypt in 1956, Eisenhower forced them all back with threats of economic sanctions.

The hardheaded realist in pursuit of the US national interest may retort, so what about Arab "street" opinion? The simple answer is that successful pursuit of our "War Against Terrorism" requires various forms of cooperation with all of the governments in the region. These regimes lose their legitimacy to the extent that they are viewed as pawns of the United States. By our one-sided pro-Israeli policies we are weakening the political fabric of important allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, there is a vicious parallelism between the present conduct of our War Against Terrorism and Israel's war against the Palestinian people. Just as Israel is destroying the Palestinian Authority that was supposed to help them police the Palestinian people, we are undermining the legitimacy of responsible Arab regimes protective of American interests. We also risk falling out of step with our important European allies and Russia, all of whom are needed to impose any peace on the region.

While the proposed foreign ministers' meeting to be held in June 2002 is a step in the right direction, it is not likely to produce fruitful results unless the United States puts as much pressure upon the Israelis as upon the Palestinians (with help from Egypt and Saudi Arabia) to stop the violence and implement a fair two-state political settlement. The Bush Administration needs to be ready to support international implementation of the Saudi peace plan, the details of which remain to be worked out. Any solution deemed reasonable to the rest of the world and to the Israeli peace camp will still have to be sufficiently acceptable by Israeli and Palestinian public opinion to enable their respective

leaders to cut a deal. And if the Sharon government remains recalcitrant, we should do all we can to persuade the Israeli people that it is in their vital national interest to replace it.

If the Bush Administration continues to see our War Against Terrorism in primarily military terms and equates it, as those consistently one-eyed rightwing conservatives will have it, with Israel's war, then it is unlikely to be willing to lean hard on Israel, especially not in the face of a pro-Israeli lobby that has brainwashed the US Congress. Supporting rather than helping Israel by vetoing United Nations Security Council resolutions would be another step in the right direction. Unfortunately, as these lines are written (May 4, 2002), the United States has failed in the face of Israeli government opposition to support Secretary General Kofi Annan's implementation of a watered down Security Council resolution to send a fact finding commission to Jenin, where Human Rights Watch alleges that the Israeli army committed war crimes.

It is difficult not to conclude that the Bush Administration, despite some last minute efforts at diplomacy, is leading the country toward a series of catastrophes in the Middle East. Sharon's war has seriously compromised the United States' "War Against Terrorism" by weakening the cooperation we need from Arab and Muslim governments and by creating rifts between the US and most of our European allies. Usama bin Laden (or his successors) must be grateful for the climate of opinion that Israel's actions against the Palestinians are cultivating in the Muslim world, and even in Europe, as it may support a vertiginous expansion of transnational Qaeda networks directed against the United States. I am deeply concerned that our present policy course is unnecessarily fomenting enmity among Muslims around the world and fostering support for additional assaults on our citizens and our national interests.